

Twenty-Five. Absence

Even the morning was hot. Even in Lukan's sleep he could feel a warm draft coming in through his window. It fueled the dreams that were a result of his turbulent mind. But the dreams that Lukan had, where he found himself alone in a world as harsh as it was, did not feel like mere dreams. They felt like visions. Premonitions of what's to come. A foreboding sense of imminence. Lukan wanted such concepts to be nothing more than that: concepts. Dark concepts that he wanted to strive to avoid at all costs. Lukan was barely conscious when he found himself falling out of bed due to the discomfort of tossing and turning as he unconsciously protested against the concepts he dared not even name, but still found himself thinking about nonetheless. Lukan instinctively growled to himself as his mind was jolted back into consciousness, the haunting images of his nightmares permeating in his barely active head.

The raccoon thought it pointless to attempt to go back to sleep, and he didn't want to risk the chances of those dreams coming back. Why would he have them though? The otter was his. Lukan wasn't alone. Lukan was happy! He had everything he wanted! Life was back under control and the storm was over! And yet... why were there still clouds in his sky? Both his mother and Klaus were at work, and Lukan knew he was due for another day of as such himself later that day. The following day, August 22, was going to be the start of a brand new school year. Lukan couldn't believe that it was only the previous two years since he had graduated high school. Some creatures wondered why the raccoon was so impatient. Time moving as fast as it did was the culprit as to why.

The temperature outside was an inferno. There was no other way for Lukan to describe it. Lilac Grove never experienced these kinds of temperatures before; only ever breaking triple digits a seldom few times a year, and usually only just as well. What was this later summer nonsense? Lukan felt sweat soaking into his short, summer fur, electrolytes evacuating his body, and leaving behind a drained raccoon. The heat, the very sun, sapped all of Lukan's energy away even with Lukan just sitting idle under its superheated glowing plasma. The orb of concentrated heat nearly a hundred million miles away seemed to declare war against the poor procyon. Lukan longed for the days of winter to return, even though he spent the majority of the previous one all alone and without the otter by his side. However, the days as of late since the eighth month of the year had begun, Lukan hadn't seen the mustelid nearly enough. Lukan hated their work schedules. It was a conspiracy against them both, he knew it! What with all seven days of the week having at least one of them working! Lukan even went to the theater to see the otter only to be met with his manager saying that he was too busy to be seen. Lukan had tried the otter's lunch break and couldn't

find him at any of the nearby restaurants. It had seemed the otter had completely vanished off the face of the Earth.

Lukan breathed a sigh of relief as he found himself in his workplace, an air conditioned, wondrously cooled, and unfortunately noisy store. A plethora of young adult creatures were scurrying about, grabbing last minute back to school snacks and supplies for their cubs, who attempted to follow, many of them whining about things that Lukan didn't tune in to find out about. Lukan padded past the produce section. Eira was already there, working through the rotations fruits and vegetables often needed. The vixen looked over to Lukan, and only held a gaze for a few brief seconds before turning away. She was still not happy with how Lukan told her off that time ago. Lukan felt she had it coming, but not in the way that it had happened. Lukan knew she needed to know when to back off, but... Why did he still feel guilty about the whole situation? Lukan only let out a sigh as he went into the backroom to cement the start of his work day via the time clock.

Yet another quiet and uneventful day, despite the last minute back to school chaos that radiated throughout the building the entire day. Lukan never understood why so many creatures waited until last minute for everything. Then he remembered how he was in school. Procrastination, the devilish mental inhibition that it was...

Lukan looked towards the theater in the distance when he left the building and mentally debated whether he should attempt to see the otter again. Was it worth it now? The otter was never there, and going over there only lengthened the time the raccoon remained in the abhorrent heat. When the temperatures had reached such record levels, Lukan especially found it hard to muster desire to try again. Such a feeling incited guilt inside the raccoon's gut. And that was the deciding factor that convinced Lukan to go to the otter's workplace.

The temperature remained hot as the afternoon even as the sun started to go into the horizon. The concrete and asphalt were uncomfortably hot on Lukan's pads; their roughness was the least of his worries. Lukan thought he was startling to walk on hot coals the second he stepped on the roads. Lukan crossed the street that intersected his path between his and the otter's work. The boulevard curved around the city and then went through the east side just as it did on the west side where he and the otter lived. It was a useful road for crossing the city and not having to deal with downtown's traffic. Lukan remembered having to go that way with his mother to take his therapy sessions. He was glad he no longer needed them.

The theater manager, a large and imposing stag, anticipated the raccoon's arrival. "Klaus isn't here right now," he said gruffly before Lukan could even open the door.

"Again?" Lukan sighed in dismay.

"I was wondering if you had seen him. He hasn't come in to work today," the stag continued. What the-? That was new.

"Didn't show up? N-no sir, I haven't seen him at all. I wish I have though," Lukan added under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I-I just hope he's okay. Sorry," Lukan said, turning back, eying one of the movie posters. He couldn't bring himself to give the deer eye contact. The poster was of a romantic comedy that had a leopard couple on it.

"Nothing to apologize for, son," the deer replied. "It's Klaus who owes an apology right now. I had to call in another creature who was supposed to be off to cover his rudder tail. And let me say that when you do that to hyenas, they are not very happy creatures."

"I-I can imagine! I-I gotta go. The heat's killing me. I'll see if I can get in contact with Klaus to find out what the hell is up with him."

"Sounds like a plan. Good luck, raccoon." And with that, the stag strode back inside.

No luck. Lukan figured as much. Although hearing of the otter's truancy from work was news to his ears. What was going on with that otter? It seemed like he was avoiding life again, just like when he and Lukan were still broken up. Could he be... No! Lukan already had to deal with such disgusting concepts in his dreams; he refused to deal with them while awake. Lukan decided that the best thing that he could do was send an email at that otter. So once the raccoon reached home just moment later, as the theater was just around the corner from his apartment complex, Lukan typed with shaky fingers the message he hoped the otter would see.

"Klaus. Where are you? You've been getting so much more distant lately since the start of August. And now you didn't come to see me as you promised last night. Is everything okay? Your boyfriend misses you. You told me to always let someone know when something was up. Will you practice what you teach? I just hope everything is okay."

Lukan hit the send button, clicking the mouse so softly, the computer didn't register at first. Lukan was too tired and too worried to care about shutting down his computer once the message was sent, and immediately sunk into bed, the machine's light illuminating his form that lay hidden under the blankets.

September. Summer's dying breaths. And still no answer from the aquatic creature at all. Email was left unread. The otter did return to work, as Lukan learned from the theater's manager. Lukan figured that Klaus decided that he needed his job if he was going to survive. Klaus, however, never came to Lukan's side when the raccoon attempted to see him. Why was that? Even his boss seemed confused as to why, noting the otter's evasive and unusual behavior. Lukan was becoming anxious over the entire situation, asking the same questions over and over. The questions remained as agonizingly unanswered as ever, and only seemed to allow more questions to pile up.

Lukan had finally had enough. By the time it hit September 10, the day before his mother's birthday, he began to feel he had no other choice but to camp out at the otter's house and find out exactly what was going on. Lukan was off that day, so he could afford to do just that all day if he needed to. Lukan was vaguely aware of just how much of a stalker that made him seem, but he needed to get to the bottom of this. Why was his boyfriend not being his boyfriend anymore again? And without a word this time too!?

Afternoon passed. No one came. Evening passed. No one came. The sun went down. No one came, except crickets. The otter was nowhere to be found. There was no way the otter left his home too! Where would he go to stay if that happened?! Klaus had promised that if that happened, Lukan would be the first creature he'd turn to! The end of when Klaus' shift came and went, and there was still no sign of the otter anywhere. Lukan tried to peer through the windows of the otter's house to see if his stuff was still there, but with the absence of light and the presence of window blinds, it wasn't possible.

Lukan sighed as the clock ticked closer to midnight. There was no way the otter was coming at this hour, he assumed. But where was he? Lukan knew he was okay if he was still going to work, so what gives? None of this made sense. Then thoughts began to cross his head. Ones similar to ones in his dreams. Ones darker than anything he had ever thought of. They sent foreboding shivers down his spine and into his tail. Lukan refused to believe its possibility. He refused to acknowledge their existence.

When Lukan returned home, he was surprised to find his mother still awake. And to his dismay, her first words to him upon his arrival were, "How was your day with Klaus, Lukey?"

Lukan stammered several different syllables as not a single complete word in the dictionary was in his throat, only their fragments. "W-w-, I-I, K-K-"

"Ah no, don't tell me you two broke up again!" Sarah gasped, assuming the worst.

"N-no!" Lukan blurted out. "At least I think we're still together." Another example of beautiful wording. "It's just- Klaus hasn't been around very much. And I dunno why that is." Finally. Something at least competently said.

"Oh. So what were you doing all day?"

"Trying to find him," Lukan replied simply.

His mother's face fell slightly. "I see."

Lukan had a guess as to why Sarah had a reaction like that. "You were hoping I would get something for your birthday, weren't you?"

Sarah nodded. "Would be nice if my son got me at least something for my birthday! You won't have your old mom forever you know!"

Lukan sighed. "I know, I'm sorry. I've just been so worried about Klaus lately."

Sarah hugged her son. "I know. I understand that. I hope everything is alright."

"I do too."

Sarah's birthday began with an unusually cold wind blasting against the buildings that made up the apartment complex. A sign of the season to return. The autumnal peace that Lukan enjoyed thoroughly. Although on this day, it would be anything but peaceful. The weather... It mirrored Lukan's mind almost perfectly. The only thing off was the wind speed was only a decillionth of a percent of what it should be.

"The weather says it's supposed to snow today. Can you believe the nerve of the weather, snowing today of all days?!" Sarah exclaimed in disgust as she pointed to her computer screen. "Unacceptable!"

The weather was indeed bipolar. It was encroaching on triple digits just ten days prior, and now, snow?! "Is it going to be a cold winter this year?" Lukan pondered, silently hoping so.

"It better not be, or we're moving to the southwest!" Sarah exclaimed. "I'm joking," she added when Lukan's face fell. "If anything, Klaus could come with us if he wanted to."

"I dunno, the desert heat and an otter don't sound so good together. I bet he'd hate it there. I know I would!" Luka replied, wide eyed.

"Right. Well, anyways. What should we do on my birthday? Your treat, you know," she added.

"Aggh, yeah I gotcha," Lukan surrendered. Then he had an idea. "How about a movie? It's been forever since we saw one."

"You just want to see if Klaus is there, don't you?" Sarah saw right through his idea.

"Maybe," Lukan replied evasively.

Sarah let out a mall laugh. "Ah I know how it between creatures your age and the whole concept of love. Alright, a movie it is. Which one?"

Lukan racked his mind for movies he's seen around that were playing. None but the rom-com came to his mind. "I dunno. Is there anything interesting playing at all?"

"Let's go ask Klaus that," Sarah offered.

"If he is even there," Lukan muttered under his breath, not feeling confident that Klaus would be there this time.

"What was that?" Sarah's ears twitched.

"Nothing. Let's go," Lukan instinctively replied too quickly.

"Raccoon! It's a surprise to see you here at this time!" Once again, the stag theater manager was there to greet Lukan.

"Yeah, it's her birthday," Lukan replied somewhat awkwardly, indicating his mother. "We're going to see a movie."

"While keeping an eye out for Klaus as well?" How does everyone see right through what Lukan had desired? It creeped him out. "Well, he is here, today."

Hope suddenly flared in Lukan's chest even though he knew that it was premature. "He is?"

"Yeah he is. I'll go and get him if you'd like," the manager offered.

"Th-that would be great," Lukan's eyes widened.

The deer took a closer look at Lukan, eyes narrowing. "You seem rather fixated on this otter, raccoon. I cannot help but be curious." But without another word he turned and walked towards the back of the lobby before rounding a corner and going out of sight.

"You think he knows?" Sarah whispered in Lukan's ear so closely at first Lukan thought he was being haunted. Lukan jumped so high he thought his ears would touch the ceiling.

"Part of me hopes he doesn't," Lukan replied in a low voice.

"Well, even if he does, he can't discriminate against Klaus." Why was Sarah going on about something completely irrelevant to the current situation? Why did she often do that? And why did Lukan have to listen to her while she did that?

The stag returned moments later with a sight for sore eyes, the peanut butter furred, emerald eyed, tail pierced otter himself. "Someone is here to see me? Could it be--?" Klaus stopped the second the emeralds pointed at Lukan, his face turning from excitement, to what Lukan thought was shock. "L-Lukan! I-I-! What are you doing here?!" There was something about the way Klaus spoke that sent shivers down Lukan's spine. It didn't sound like Klaus was glad to see him, but disappointed instead. Or was that Lukan's internal pessimism making things worse than they actually were?

"It's my mom's birthday, Klaus. We're here to see a movie. We thought we'd come see you while we were here," Lukan explained as calmly as he could, trying not to let his concerns be overly obvious. He was certain that his voice contained inflections that indicated that his efforts were not successful.

"I-is it?!" Klaus exclaimed. "I don't think you ever told me 9/11 was your mom's birthday!" It seemed as though Klaus was trying to change the subject. Why was Klaus acting like he was caught with his pants down? None of this made any sense to Lukan. "H-happy birthday, Sarah. I uh, wish I knew that today was your birthday."

"Thank you, Klaus, and don't worry, it's no problem." Meanwhile, Sarah Benka at least seemed oblivious to the entire situation. Lukan wanted to get Klaus alone so he could interrogate him. The thought that Lukan would have to do that sat very poorly with him. But what else was he supposed to do?!

"S-so what movie did you have in mind seeing?" Klaus seemed to shuffle his paws uncomfortably, very clearly not wanting to be where he was. That was when Lukan noticed the otter's scent. It was different. The scent of his beloved otter was still where it belonged, but there was something different about it. Like something was added to it. And it seemed familiar. Why was this? What was this? And why did Lukan always find himself saddled with all these questions that he didn't have the answers to?! Lukan hated that so much. What he hated more was Klaus equivocating from being open with Lukan as to what was going on.

"Yeah what movie are we seeing, Lukey?" Sarah turned her attention to her son, which was not what Lukan needed or wanted, but Klaus seemed to.

"Any of them. I don't mind really," Lukan replied almost immediately to try and get the focus back onto Klaus.

"Really? That doesn't sound like you at all, Lukey. You've always been really picky when it comes to movies," Sarah frowned skeptically.

"I-" Lukan ran out of words again. He didn't want Sarah to know exactly why they were there, nor did he know how to get Klaus on his own without tipping them off about it.

"I'm sensing tension in the air," the deer was still standing nearby. Lukan had almost completely forgotten that he was there.

"Can you?" Sarah replied.

"I can feel it in my antlers. It's between those two right there." he pointed at Lukan and Klaus. "I dunno what it's about, but there's something not right about it."

"You never told me there was an issue with you and Klaus again, Lukey. I thought you said you two were still going alright," Sarah turned her attention back to Lukan, sounding disappointed.

This was not what Lukan needed. Lukan was torn between aborting the entire mission, and continuing through it just to get the closure that he yearned for. "We are! I-I think! A-aren't we, Klaus?" he looked at the otter with pleading in his eyes, begging the otter for confirmation.

The otter's eyes seemed to flash with uncertainty, just like with Lukan, but they quickly flared back to life as he nodded. His voice, though, sounded just as shaky as it

was before, contrasting that flame in his eyes. "O-of course we are! Why wouldn't we be?"

"I think we should leave these two alone for a bit, don't you think?" Lukan heard his mother hiss towards the deer. Lukan felt a small wave of embarrassment wash over him.

"Agreed. I need to make sure the theater is running smoothly too, so I should be off," the cervine whispered back. And without a word from either of them, they dispersed, more than likely out of not wanting to be awkward about it.

Now was Lukan's chance. "Well, you seem to be avoiding me at all costs! You didn't come when you promised, and you've never been around since! I want to know what's going on and that everything is alright, Klaus. I don't even think you read my email, but I'll say it again. I miss you Klaus. I know we can't spend every day with each other like we wanted, but it seems like you don't want to spend any of them with me anymore. What's happened?"

Klaus stared at Lukan for several seconds. The fire in his eyes was slowly waning as those seconds ticked by. "I'm sorry Lukan." And that was the only thing he said and he stayed silent for another several seconds until Lukan broke it.

"But what's going on Klaus? Why have you just, disappeared like that?"

"I've just been... Busy," Klaus replied in a low voice. "Look, I'm sorry Lukan." The otter repeated himself. Lukan didn't like that. "I can't tell you why." Lukan liked that even less.

"You can't tell me why!?" Lukan replied in a strangely high pitched voice that resulted in him wanting to yell, but also trying to keep his voice down. "What's that supposed to mean!?"

"I-I just am sorry, Lukan! I-I promise to try and make more time with you, but between our jobs, when I have to be away, and all kinds of life crap, it's just really hard to!" Klaus replied defensively. Too defensively. Lukan did not want the feelings he was getting now. Lukan wanted to throw each and every one of them away. Suspicion was the last thing he wanted to feel for his boyfriend.

"I hope so Klaus. It's been so lonesome to be without you and it just feels like you're trying to get away from me. I-I hope I don't seem clingy or anything, but it's just how I feel."

"N-not at all, Lukan. I know I haven't been around enough lately. I'm sorry. I want to change that. I'm just not sure how yet. I've been asking my boss if I could change shifts, but he can't. As for life and other things..." Klaus trailed off. It was around now that Lukan debated asking Klaus about why he was never home, even at night. He knew that would make him come off as stalkerish. He did not want that. He knew he hadn't been the greatest of raccoons lately in trying to understand what was

going on with his beloved, but he had no other ideas! And he hated that! In the end, Lukan opted not to tell Klaus about it.

Instead, Lukan sighed, "Okay. I understand that life has been hectic as of late. I shouldn't be so worried. I trust you, you know that right?"

Klaus' short fur shook when Lukan said that, and the otter's voice shook even more. Lukan sighed. "I love you Klaus. I love you so much. I hope you know that. I dunno if I could ever stop loving you, no matter what."

"Lukan..." Klaus started, but Lukan kept going.

"I can't describe how much I feel I need you Klaus. Every moment we're apart, it just hurts after too long. You're the first creature to show me what love was like and that not every creature in this world is untrustworthy."

Klaus looked completely shut down. The otter didn't say a word, only kept his eyes on Lukan, with a look of uncertainty and shock.

Lukan shook his head. "I'll do anything for you, Klaus. I hope you're the same way for me. Isn't that what a good relationship is about?"

Klaus only nodded. "Yeah. You're right Lukan. I'm sorry, again. I want to do better, believe me. It's just gotten harder. I'm sorry. I have to get back to work now." Klaus was repeating himself. Despite what Klaus was saying, Lukan couldn't help but believe that there was something else the otter wasn't telling him. Something major and directly related to why Klaus wasn't around. What he said... It didn't explain at all why he was never home at all, what was different about his scent, why he reacted so differently to Lukan's questions. Lukan's worries were not dispelled. If anything, they had only gotten worse. What was the otter hiding from Lukan that Klaus seemed so guilty about having to hide?