

Twenty-Eight. Rainbow at Sunrise

Lukan had almost forgotten what to do when he had first gotten up the following day. The realization that his message was replied to the night before and the creature who had sent it may have been wondering where the raccoon had gone were not initially in his head. The raccoon was only reminded of it because his computer was still on when he got up, and the notification was blinking at him in the corner of his screen. Lukan took a deep breath as he sat up. It was a new day. A new day to waste trying to find justifications for leaving Lilac Grove. Lukan yawned as he crossed his room to reach the computer, tail slumped right onto the ground, the raccoon making no effort at all to keep it off the ground. Lukan noticed that there was an unusually large amount of light in his room, more than usual, even on days where there wasn't a cloud in the sky. That's when he turned around to see that the outside world had been overtaken by a vast sheet of pure whiteness; the first snowfall of the season was upon them already. Classic Lilac Grove. Although the first snow was usually late September. Lukan shook his head. The weather was of no concern to him at that moment. Reading the response he was given was his priority then. Lukan clicked on it after a moment's hesitation, as per usual when meeting a new creature.

'Hi Lukan! I'm so happy that you have actually messaged me! Nate said he wasn't sure if you would. He mentioned to me that you're going through a hard time. That really sucks. Well, my name is Fidel Skison. I'm a coyote that lives in Salamander. Ya know. Where it's never under a hundred degrees? Yeah. I just wanted to reach out and meet other gays and all. Since I live in a red state, it hasn't exactly been easy. I think Nate said you did too, though not one as bad as mine for LGBTs. I must apologize for rambling. I do that a lot. I just hope everything is okay! Hope to hear from you again!'

-Fidel'

There was something about the way this creature wrote that reminded Lukan a lot about Klaus. The feeling of such familiarity put a tear to his eye. Despite the raccoon's newborn hatred for the otter, he still couldn't help but miss the happy moments they shared together oh so very dearly. But now was the time to get away, not reminisce. Get away to where? That was always the question. Lukan shook his head. He'd deal with that later, like the procrastinator that he loved being so much. For now, Lukan decided to reply to the coyote with a response.

'It's great to meet you too, Fidel! Nate hasn't told me much about you other than you were somehow shier than I am. I find that pretty damn impossible to believe to be honest. I guess it might be because I'm not as shy online or something. Anyways, yeah things are not so good over here. I just caught my boyfriend cheating on me about a couple weeks ago and am still really stinging at that. So sorry if I seem really down for a while. Also yeah, I heard about Salamander. Funny thing. My mom actually joked that she and I move to the area if it's going to be a cold winter up here. I kinda hope that we don't. I love the cold. Can't stand the heat. (Lukan decided not to address the political implications that Fidel added to his email.) Anyways, hope you're doing well today. I'm going to focus on getting myself back together. Somehow.'

Lukan put no signature at the end of his message. And the raccoon meant it when he said "somehow". The creature was still not sure what he needed to do in order to get himself under control. At the very least, time had kept him sane enough to function. But the emotions and his desire to break down again and again persisted despite that progress. Lukan stretched in his desk chair, slowly awakening. The sudden drops in temperature outside had made his joints incredibly stiff, and the sounds of them popping were satisfying to the raccoon's ears. He didn't want to wait around for the coyote to respond, so he opted to get breakfast. The first time he decided to do so on his own in days. His mother had to coax him out of the room 90% of the time. But of course, Sarah Benka was not home, but at work. Lukan felt as though there was an angry monster inside his belly. But he knew otherwise. It was because he hadn't eaten properly since he discovered the true meaning of infidelity. When Lukan checked the fridge and the cupboards, to his dismay, there was nothing. Empty. He sighed. The raccoon was faced with going out into the elements to get food, from the store or a restaurant, and also risk running into either of the cretins, or stay inside and potentially starve. Considering his immediate past, he knew he could brave either with distinct certainty.

Lukan went back to his room to check for a response. He decided that if there wasn't one, he'd leave to obtain sustenance. And when he saw there was none, he sighed and immediately rummaged through his closet for his winter gear. True to Lukan's luck, as soon as the creature had zipped up his thick hoodie he always wore instead of a winter coat, his computer sounded off another ping. Lukan went to check it and nearly smashed his keyboard in rage. It was not Fidel. It was Klaus. Blowing out hot air through his nose, Lukan made no hesitation to block the otter from messaging him again, and tossed out what he managed to send. He wanted no part in whatever the otter had to say any longer. The mustelid forfeited his privileges to Lukan's time and attention. He had decided to leave Lukan's life the moment he chose to be in someone else's.

Once Lukan was outside, the cold temperatures hit him in the face like an overpowered air conditioning unit. Lukan took a deep breath of it, feeling it ebb away his anger and sadness as it had always done before. But it failed to do so completely. It comforted him, but the wound was still open and still bleeding. And Lukan wasn't sure how to heal it.

The raccoon made his usual route to the plaza that held the store he worked at, as well as everything else he'd come to know. He was tempted to take a longer route to completely avoid the otter's house entirely in case he was there. He shook his head. If the otter even tried to garner his attention, Lukan would ignore him. Lukan had decided it best to get groceries, but as he passed the fast food restaurant that he often saw Klaus get lunch at when he worked in the same store as Lukan did, he saw the golden fur and immediately felt compelled to change his mind. Of all the creatures that Lukan had met ever since that day nearly a year ago, he felt that Aero was the only one that was still trustworthy.

After several moments of ordering and waiting for his food, Lukan set his tray on Aero's table to get his attention, as the vulpine was looking away, out the window. The fox's ears perked as he swiveled his long and narrow muzzle to point at Lukan. "Oh it's you," Aero said without identifiable emotion.

Lukan nodded as he sat down. "Yes. It's me."

"I heard what happened. I hope you're okay. I knew something wasn't right after what you said to me before," Aero said sympathetically, sadness in his eyes.

"Someday, I think I will be alright," Lukan replied after a deep breath.

"What's that mean?" Aero scowled softly, ear flicking.

Lukan shrugged. "Well, because I am not entirely sure what to just yet now that things have come to this."

Aero sighed. "In due time, you'll figure it out. Just keep going forward. It's all you can do for now."

"I should have never given that otter another chance. What a fucking mistake that was," Lukan growled.

"Maybe it was a mistake. But use it to learn."

"I will. But one thing I do know about what I want to do, is leave Lilac Grove," Lukan stated in a hard voice.

"Still wanting to do that, huh?"

"Now more than ever," Lukan replied.

"Are you certain that this is the right answer?"

Lukan did not respond immediately. "From what I have seen so far, every answer is the wrong answer. I'm never certain," his voice turned very quickly to pessimistic sadness.

"So why act without thinking first if it may lead to trouble?" Aero pondered.

Lukan found it surprisingly difficult to retain his composure, but he fought hard to do so. "B-because, every decision I make, no matter how hard I think about it, leads to trouble. E-even small ones. Even seemingly good ones. Like-like comforting a sad otter who was just dumped for example!"

Aero sighed as he placed a hand on Lukan's shoulder. "Maybe that wasn't a bad decision. It could be a number of things. Life is filled with so many things, so many variables that constantly change. What is a wrong decision when life's ever changing ways invalidate every decision that someone could make?"

Lukan laughed ruefully. "So does that mean life hates me?"

"I don't think I could answer that question, Lukan. Only you can for yourself. Yes, your decisions are your own doing. And yes, life can construe them in many different ways, but what really matters is none of that. It's how you respond and react to how things change that matters. It's how you roll with what life gives you is what determines a good decision from a bad decision. Your adaptability determines how strong you are. Or, well, that's what I like to think. There are so many ways of thinking. So many that, there is not one single right way to do so. Give it some thought, Lukan."

Lukan nodded. "I understand. I guess I just need a little more time to think."

"I just wish I could get the likes of Will to understand all of this. Some creatures, sadly are beyond help and beyond reasoning because they are so set in their ways, that they can never be convinced. And it's their refusal to do so, that also determines what a true bad decision is. Be careful if you ever meet another creature like Will again, alright?"

Lukan nodded again. "Absolutely. Thanks Aero. I feel a bit better now."

"If you do decide to leave Lilac Grove, Lukan, and we don't meet again, I wish you the best of luck." Aero dipped his head.

"I will do the best I can! I can promise you that!" Lukan nodded for a third time, this time much more firmly. A small spark of confidence flared inside the wound that was inflicted upon his heart. It was a pleasantly warm feeling. While Lukan still wasn't sure what he wanted to do just yet, his confidence grew to where he believed he would find the answer someday soon. After a potential last goodbye to the fox, Lukan left the restaurant and made his way to the store so he could obtain food for the immediate future and thought about what Aero had said. Many ways to think. Many different ways to interpret and take on the storm that was life. Was there still hope for the raccoon? No. There had to be. Somewhere. Still, Lukan was convinced that it would never be found in Lilac Grove. Not with the likes of Will, Klaus, and Platt proving just how untrustworthy they all were. The sad reality hit Lukan, that there were creatures like that all over the world. But now with these experiences, Lukan knew that he could keep his eyes out for them and avoid them at all costs. Lukan hoped he could put his experience to good use.

Once home, Lukan first thanked life for not throwing an otter at him, and second went to his computer to see if Fidel had replied. Sure enough, a message was waiting for him. Lukan did not hesitate this time to act upon the message.

'Holy shit! That really sucks, man. Now I really hope you are okay! Do you need someone to talk to about it? I mean, I get it if you don't. It's because of fucked up garbage like this that I just can't bring myself to trust someone so quickly. I dunno what I would do in your position.

Also, I won't lie, it would be cool to see another gay guy come down here to live here. There really is like, no one here, I swear. They're all on the coast, I swear. It's really lonely here. Well, tell me about yourself if you'd like! It might help get your mind off of everything. Unfortunately there isn't too much I could say about myself. I'm just some dumb coyote who just wants to break out of his 'yote shell and meet new creatures. I like to draw, even though I'm not the greatest at it--'

Lukan then realized just how much the message rambled on about how the coyote liked drawing, movies, going out into the desert, and what he would do if he had a friend close enough to him. Lukan also realized just how alike to himself the creature was. A lot like himself as well as the good sides of the otter. The more Lukan read Fidel's message, the more intrigued Lukan became with him. Lukan began writing back to him, describing how he was the same way, and that the otter had been the one to open up his coon shell as well as how the otter's betrayal momentarily made Lukan feel like shutting it for good. Lukan mentioned his own interests, how he loved the autumnal breezes that should be dominating this time of year, even though they were absent at present. Lukan expressed himself in the reply. Nearly poured his entire heart out, which was easy to do with it cut wide open. The only thing Lukan felt like leaving out was the incident that happened when he was 11. Not only was it completely irrelevant, with him having bigger fish to fry now, but with his coon shell opened, he felt it no longer affected him at all. Once the raccoon had finished, he realized his message was well over double the length of Fidel's. He sent it anyways, after adding an apology for splurging so many words and making the poor coyote have to read it all. As Lukan waited for Fidel to read and reply, he looked down at the necklace that Klaus had given him. Despite everything the otter had done to hurt him, Lukan did not feel compelled to trash the small amulet. No, Lukan decided to give it his own meaning. He wanted to keep it as a reminder of what had happened to let him get this far. He wanted it to be a reminder of the lessons he had learned from every one of the creatures he met. Aero's philosophies, to Klaus' reminder that even though some creatures can be trusted, some also cannot. Platt's message to Lukan was that even though some creatures may seem one way, they may be feeling another. Lukan had

never taken Platt to have been harboring the feelings he had. He always seemed so stern and keeping to very few emotions, but ever since Will had his paws on him... Oh. And there was Will and his twisted views on the world. Lukan had no idea that there could be creatures like him, who had good intentions, but went the wrong way with them. Lukan kept all of what they taught to him in his heart, but he knew that it was time to move on from them. Fidel's reply sent Lukan's mind back out into the world.

'Wow that was quite a read. Could I ask you to keep your replies a bit shorter? I'm not so good at reading like that, honestly, sorry! And it seems like you've seen and been through quite a bit in the past year. It's fucking crazy how life can be, isn't it? Well, at least it's all over now, right? I hope so at least. And I hope I can help heal your heart too in some way. Maybe be that friend that you've been needing. Or has this Aero fox guy got that covered?

Ah, right. So you do have plans to leave Lilac Grove. I wouldn't blame you. I'd want to get away from creatures like that too. It'd drive me crazy. Do you have any idea where you'd want to go? What kinds of things are you looking for? I dunno if you have already asked yourselves these questions, but answering them first is how you'll find a place you'd belong! What do I know though? I've lived in Salamander my entire life. I could never move around as much as you have. Yikes.'

Fidel's message ended there. Lukan wasn't sure how he was going to respond to that response. Come to think of it, had Lukan considered what he was looking for in life? The first and only thing that came to the raccoon's mind was to find someone like how Klaus started out to be, and spend his life with them. Lukan didn't feel like he cared about much else at that point. He just wanted what was cruelly stolen from him. Then he thought about what his own mother would potentially want. He remembered how she said she wanted somewhere warmer, cheaper, and with less crime. Warmer, especially. Was there somewhere that fit such a criteria?

Lukan was out of ideas as to what to reply to Fidel with. So the raccoon went with that response, although he was saddened to see that the coyote wouldn't respond for the remainder of the day.

The following day, the coyote did message back. Lukan was somewhat saddened by the fact that because of work later that day, they wouldn't get to talk very much at all.

'Well the coast fits all of them except for prices of course. Salamander fits all of them pretty well except for number of other gay creatures like me and... well. Crime. But that's going to be true for any big city! Just stay out of downtown and some of the

suburbs and you'd be fine! Sorry, I really dunno anywhere that would fit all these things very well at once. I'll help you do some research if you'd like.'

What struck Lukan as odd was that Salamander was a big city. The population the entire area, city and suburbs included was at least five million. There *had* to be more gay creatures like Fidel in a city that large. Lilac Grove was in the middle of nowhere and had sixty thousand. Lukan shrugged. Fidel had to not have been looking as much as he should be. Was it because he was in an untrusting shell just like Lukan was? Lukan had no way to be sure, so he just accepted the coyote's offer and began to make his way to work. The weather had warmed up considerably after the early season snowfall that was seen the previous day. In fact, the snow was already well over half way melted, the streets and buildings soaked and dripping as if it had just downpoured, but the sky was as blue as can be. The wet ground soaked Lukan's footpaws in moments, which the raccoon did not appreciate. Sadly, the sidewalk that connected Lukan's apartment complex to the rest of the neighborhood was in shadows, where the sun could not reach and still harbored a decent amount of snow that Lukan would have to walk through. Lukan gritted his teeth and trudged on through it as he had to do numerous times the previous season. Lukan wished the weather wasn't going to seemingly skip autumn that year as it often did.

Lukan saw a flash of peanut butter colored fur out of the corner of his eyes. And he knew that it was inevitable. Klaus Richtors. "L-Lukan! Stop!"

Lukan kept walking. He did not have any desire to interact with the creature at all anymore. "Go away!"

"I want to talk to you!" Klaus called after him, following the raccoon.

Lukan picked up his pace, half jogging to get away from the unfaithful creature. "There is nothing left to say! Fuck off!" He felt himself growing angrier and angrier the more steps the otter took to try and keep up with Lukan. But thanks to the otter's body being built for water and not land, Lukan was able to outspeed him. He could hear the otter calling out his name another time before he fell behind. The worst part though, is that Lukan knew that Klaus was going to attempt to track him down at work.

So when Lukan reached work, he requested his supervisors have him work mostly in the backroom if possible that day.

Domin, of course, was curious as to why. "Is there a reason why?"

"Well, there is a creature who I am trying to avoid who wants to talk to me, and I do not want to talk to him. I just know he's going to try and find me when I'm on the sales floor, and I don't want that to happen," Lukan explained.

"Is it a snow leopard? I have noticed your expressions when talking to a specific one I saw from time to time."

"No. It's the otter who used to work here, Klaus."

"Klaus? I thought you two were the best of friends. Had a bad falling out?"

"More than just a bad falling out. I-I'd rather keep the reason private. Just please don't let him have the chance to find me, please?"

Domin scratched his chin, looking skeptical. "I don't think I can. With the recent snowfall, the floors are going to be dirty with all the mud being tracked from our customers, and you're our only guy to address that. I'll let other management know. If Klaus tries to talk to you, just start coming towards the front of the store. Whoever is in charge then will help, alright?"

Lukan nodded shakily. "A-alright. Whatever works. Thanks, sir."

On his way to the sales floor after clocking in, Lukan was face to face with another creature. It was Eira this time. "Ringtail."

"Eira," Lukan replied, still shaky. "A-are you still mad at me?"

Eira shook her head. "I stopped being mad ages ago. I was just a bit afraid of how you really felt. But what about you? I've noticed that you've been sulking for the past two weeks. I-I don't want to pry anymore, but..."

"Yes. Klaus and I are gay. And we were boyfriends. But two weeks ago, I caught him cheating on me. So no, I'm not really okay, but I am getting better. Slowly. But surely."

"Wow," Eira breathed. "Sounds real rough. I had no idea things were this rough for you."

Lukan shook his head. "It's all getting better now. Don't worry too much about me," he said, mostly to encourage himself more than anything.

Eira dipped her head. "Well I hope so, Lukan. Good luck."

"Thanks Eira. You too."

Lukan's work day went on quietly. The otter had not bothered him at all like he suspected. He thought about what Klaus may have wanted to say. Probably wanted closure. Did the otter deserve that closure? Lukan couldn't decide, but his lack of desire to even see him made that decision for him. His focus was on getting better and getting out of Lilac Grove. And there was nothing that otter could ever say to change his mind again.

Once his shift was over, Lukan decided to take the longer way home to ensure that he would successfully evade the otter, who he again suspected was waiting for him. The otter's house being on the shortest route to and from work had now become a curse. Lukan decided that until he moved, this would be the route he would take.

Sarah was awaiting his return. Lukan knew what he wanted to tell her. "I've been doing some thinking. Maybe leaving Lilac Grove is a great idea."

Sarah looked at him, a surprised look crossing the mask on her face. "Yeah? So you do want to leave?"

"I very much do." Lukan nodded firmly.

"Where?" Sarah pondered.

Lukan failed to think when he responded. "Salamander."

Even more surprise flashed across Sarah's face. "A-are you sure?! I thought you hated the heat!"

"I have come to hate Lilac Grove even more than that," Lukan replied firmly.

"Absolutely understandable, but why Salamander specifically?" Sarah asked.

Lukan shrugged. "Just wanted to pick somewhere. Anywhere is better than here."

"A-alright. So is it official?"

"Let's make it so."

"Alright! We'll aim for February. We'll need to prepare to leave, of course,"

Sarah seemed dumbstruck to hear her son agreeing to the idea of leaving Lilac Grove so easily. Lukan knew her disdain for the city and how he didn't understand it at first. Now knowing who he was, changed that. Lukan nodded firmly again as he settled the confirmation with his mother.

Lukan went to his computer afterwards and saw that Fidel messaged him again. Lukan clicked on it almost immediately.

'Sorry Lukan. I found nowhere that was really good for what you were looking for. Rosethorn looked alright. It's between you and me. But the prices for everything keeps rising. So it looks good now, but not later. I'll keep looking, though. Maybe I'll find somewhere I like. Though I don't see myself actually leaving.'

Lukan laughed softly. Wait until Fidel hears about Lukan's new plans. Lukan messaged Fidel one more time before spending the rest of the night just looking into the stars, telling him what his new plans were. He heard the computer ping in response several moments later, not long after the first stars appeared in the sky. Lukan did not run to see what the coyote had said. He knew that it would be of the utmost shock and confusion mixed with probable happiness. Lukan stayed up as long as his body would allow him to, just staring into the night sky wondering what his future was going to hold. Eventually he fell asleep, but it only lasted for a few hours. His dreams were filled with esoteric words and messages that were given to him by the many creatures he had met up to this point, especially from Aero.

Lukan found himself up at sunrise. Just after it as the sun seemed to barely be up at all. Despite the low amount of sleep Lukan received, he felt energetic and eager to see what the future had in store for him. Lukan found himself looking out of his window. To his surprise, to the west he saw dark rain clouds. Thunderstorms? At this time? Lukan wanted to say out loud to himself how utterly bizarre the weather was, but his attention was drawn to the iridescent bow that streaked across the western skies. A

rainbow had formed just as the storm clouds were slowly advancing toward his town. What could all of this mean?

Lukan shook his head as he got up from his bed. He was uncertain as to if it even did mean anything. All the raccoon knew was that for the very first time in a long time, he knew exactly what he needed to do in life.

And he was going to embrace it every step of the way.

-END OF PART ONE.