

Twenty-Nine. Autumnal Pressure.

Being surrounded by the gentle breezes of an autumnal evening calmed Lukan Benka. It comforted him. Made him feel safe. The cool air chilled his senses. Refreshed him. Made him feel at peace. Gave him tranquility. Could even say it made him happy. Lukan needed this environment in order to keep a level head. To keep his mind as much at ease as possible. To even have a hope to think coherently. Lukan needed it when things went wrong or when life gets too tough for him to handle. The twenty year old raccoon found himself coming to this park a lot within the past month. The park had a lot of importance to the ring tailed creature. A lot of things had happened to him here, especially in the past year. The current day, October 28, was the anniversary of the catalyst of all of it. The day that he had met Klaus Richtors. Lukan had witnessed the otter being broken up with his boyfriend at that time, a silver wolf named Platt Rivers. And everything that had transpired ever since Lukan decided to comfort him...

Lukan took a deep breath, closing his eyes. The memories swamped over him once more. Even the calming weather would not allow his mind to rest. He felt tears welling inside his eyes as he recounted all of them. Platt exploding at Klaus. The otter's sadness. The friendship they forged at the very rock Lukan was looking at. Finding out just how close by he lived. Slowly falling in love with each other. Their intimate moments. The arguments over William Perow, a snow leopard with a twisted anti emotional agenda. Their break up. The turmoil that persisted for months afterwards. Klaus asking for a second chance. The hope that flared in Lukan's heart as things returned to the way they were meant to be. That hope becoming jeopardized when Platt confessed his true feelings. And finally, to the very moment Lukan saw the two of them together instead of himself and the otter.

The past year had been a roller coaster. And that was beyond an understatement. Lukan desired nothing more than to escape the tribulations that had become of his life by merely being associated with the creatures he had met the previous year.

Ever since he stopped talking to Klaus, Lukan had been talking to a new coyote friend he had met online that lived three states away in the deserts of the southwest. Fidel Skison was the creature's name, and he reminded Lukan a lot of himself and how he used to be. Shy. Not easy to gain the trust of. Wanting to make new friends but not knowing where to turn or who to say hi to. Even greeting someone could have everlasting consequences, as Lukan has found.

Lukan and Fidel had been getting along very well as the couple of weeks since they started talking to each other had passed. Unfortunately, the coyote didn't seem

very bright. He even admitted to Lukan that he wasn't very good at reading, which was going to be a challenge for Lukan's above average skill in literature.

Lukan and Fidel often discussed what would possibly happen when Lukan successfully arrived in the coyote's home city of Salamander. It would be culture shock for Lukan at first, as the city was many, many times the size of the hamlet that was known as Lilac Grove where the raccoon resided present day. But a city that size would inevitably have a lot more to do than Lukan would be used to. However, Lukan had deduced that what would more than likely happen instead would be the procyonid's unfortunate demise via extremely hot temperatures, even in February, when his mother had targeted their move would be. Lukan wasn't even remotely sure how he was going to handle the end of the cold weather that he enjoyed so much. He vowed that he was going to enjoy the fall and winter currently progressing, as he was sure it was destined to be his last.

It was due to this fact that Lukan had spent more time outside than he ever had before. He wanted to savor as many of the final moments he had in such comfortable conditions that he could before it was time to end his time in Lilac Grove once and for all. Of course, Lukan was well aware that he ran the risk of running into Klaus, Platt, as well as Will, since the three of them were living close by to him. And he knew that Klaus still wanted to talk to him to achieve closure on the entire fiasco. Lukan still did not think the otter deserved it. Lukan wanted the otter to live with the pain of knowing how much he had hurt the raccoon for the rest of his life. Lukan was never the forgiving type, and Lukan knew that wasn't going to ever change, especially since the otter had inflicted upon the raccoon the worst pain he had ever experienced thus far in his life. If there was anything Lukan was ever going to say to the otter, this fact would be the only thing.

Being out and about had another drawback, Lukan found. It reduced the amount of time he would talk to the coyote. There was a familiar sense of friendship that Lukan had with the coyote. It was oddly similar to what he felt when talking to Klaus for the first time. Was it due to how similar the canid seemed to Lukan himself? Lukan wasn't sure. And he wasn't sure he was going to find out any time soon. Lukan was far more focused on leaving Lilac Grove more than anything. He did not want to live in a place where Klaus or Will could exist. The only creature Lukan felt he was going to miss was Aero. The fox who was enveloped in golden fur had helped Lukan so much when all others did what they could to hurt him. That fox was the only creature Lukan felt he could trust anymore.

As the sun set, Lukan realized that the exact time of day that he and Klaus had met had already passed by. The artificial light encapsulated by the lamps on the sides of the path soon flickered to life. Lukan sat on the cold rock and began to think more. He thought of everything again and again. The raccoon often found himself doing as

such each and every day, even before Klaus had cheated on him. The raccoon was surprised and glad at simultaneously that the mustelid was not anywhere to be found that day. Lukan scoffed silently. He was probably at home having sex or something with Platt. Lukan fought with his mind to evade even considering imagining such a horrifying concept. Especially when he felt that it was supposed to be him, and not Platt with Klaus right now. It was simply not a thought that Lukan could mentally handle even after three weeks.

It soon got cold enough for the raccoon to see his breath with every exhale. Were premonitions correct that the coming winter was going to be a much colder one than usual? Since Lilac Grove was already one of the coldest places for its latitude, Lukan dreaded such a season. As much as he loved the cold, there were limits, and Lilac Grove easily reached them even in normal winters. It was because of this that Lukan's favorite season had always been autumn.

Lukan sighed and stood up as the last traces of the sun disappeared out of the sky and were replaced by the other stars that were inconceivably far away. It was getting late. Sarah was probably wondering where he was. So was Fidel, for that matter. Whenever Lukan wasn't at work, outside, or asleep, he was chatting with the young and friendly coyote online. The walk home was just as quiet as the walk to the park. Not a sound to be heard other than the sounds of crickets and the rare car that zoomed past. Lukan briefly paused to look at Klaus' house. The lights were off. The otter's derelict truck was not parked next to it. The creature was not home. Lukan knew what he was doing, but he was more glad to know that there was no chance of running into him.

Once home, Sarah Benka greeted him as always. The mother raccoon was busy with her free time being spent on researching the area that they had set their eyes onto. To Lukan's dismay, she didn't seem to like what she had been seeing. Lukan did not like the implications that that had brought upon. Was she going to change her mind? Was their departure to be delayed? Lukan grew paranoid of any sign that pointed to something potentially negative down the road. Lord knew how many times implications had turned into reality for him. Despite Lukan's concerns, however, he didn't ask his mother about them.

Sure enough, upon Lukan's arrival to his room, his computer displayed that he had messages. Fidel. It didn't take many milliseconds later for Lukan to realize that he had not one, but two messages. Puzzled, Lukan thought of who else had his contact information. Only Nate and Klaus did other than Fidel. Immediately Lukan hoped the other one was going to be Nate-- It was Klaus. Lukan sighed heavily as he read the title of it. "Please". Just one word was all Lukan needed to discern the level of the otter's desperation. That creature was desperate to talk to Lukan alright, but Lukan was still convinced that he deserved no closure. Why should Lukan make any effort if the otter

had shown he didn't want to return it before? And why should that change now that the otter was trying so hard to reach him after his consequences came to fruition? Lukan shook his head as he dragged the message to his trash bin. He was certain he would never be ready to talk to the otter ever again. He already knew what he was going to say.

Lukan, much more eagerly, turned to the coyote's message. He opened it and read every word, not skimming through a single one like he normally would while reading.

'I know I've said this a lot already, but you can't blame me! I can't wait to see your ringed tail down here in Salamander one day! Such a shame there are still four more months until the day finally comes though. So gross! Anyways, how're things going right now? I hope that Klaus guy isn't bothering you too much. God, I would hate it so much if I had an ex like that.'

Funny that Fidel mentioned Klaus. Lukan couldn't help but wonder exactly what the otter had sent to him and what he said. He wondered just how sorry that infidel actually was. Tch. Can't have been all that sorry at all considering the decisions that he had made. Lukan shook his head. There was no point in opening a message he already had at least an idea of what it would say, if not exactly, and would not reply to at all. Klaus broke his heart. And therefore Klaus shall be cast from his life for good. Otherwise, Lukan would have no valid reason to leave Lilac Grove at all, as his endeavors for Salamander were due to his desires to put as much distance as he could between him and the otter. Lukan messaged Fidel with his wary response.

'Klaus had sent me an email shortly before you did. I can't believe I forgot to block his address from contacting mine after what he did. He really wants to talk to me about what happened, but there isn't anything to say! I know he's just going to apologize profusely and I'm not gonna forgive him! Sorry for ranting. But this is just one reason I can't wait to leave this town. The other, of course, so I can see you!'

Unfortunately, Fidel did not seem to be online at the moment. After all this time, the raccoon still hadn't had enough of a grasp on what the coyote's schedule every day was usually like. Lukan, disappointed, instead spent the following few moments to do as he said he should have done: blocking Klaus. Lukan sighed after he did so. He never wanted anything to come to the point where he felt he needed to kick another creature out of his life. Lukan didn't want enemies, as little as he like other creatures. The raccoon couldn't fathom the decisions that they would make that would tempt him into calling them his enemies. He had always believed that it was the other creatures who

decided whether they would be friend or foe to him. It was so unfortunate that many of them decided they would rather be foes rather than friends. But why? Why would they choose to be that way? Lukan could not, and he feared he would never, understand it. He was no psychologist. The only profession Lukan felt he qualified for was for a "professional ignoramus".

Lukan decided to go to bed early. With Fidel not online, Lukan had nothing to do. After the day of walking around the park, the raccoon was left unusually tired by the end of it. It struck him as odd, as even rigorous days of work at the supermarket a mile away never winded him as badly. It most certainly did not take long for Lukan to fall asleep.

Lukan couldn't breathe. The air was hot. The air was moving across his fur at speeds of which the raccoon had never experienced before. The world was completely dark. A deafening roar was all he could hear. It sounded like he was surrounded by the loudest waterfall on Earth. But amidst the chaotic sounds around him, he could discern only a tiny, almost ethereal and alien sounding voice. He could not discern the word of which it uttered, but something about it seemed familiar, and it also seemed distressed. Rain pelted into Lukan's fur like hail. Flashes of lightning were his one and only sole light source. But they illuminated nothingness. Lukan put his hand in front of his face, not to try and see the endless nothingness, but to shield his eyes from the painful weather. It was at that put, the wind shifted from a hindering crosswind, to an immobilizing headwind and began flinging watery bullets straight into his face. Gasping and spluttering for the air that was blowing past him, Lukan tried and failed to take any steps forward. He had to get to the source of that sound. No matter how horrific the weather was. Lukan fought harder, but the wind only pushed him back with just as much effort. Lukan found himself getting down to his knees, reducing the surface area of his body that was buffeted by the beyond inclement storm raging around him. He tried to crawl. It did not work. He tried jumping forward. It did not work. Nothing Lukan did in attempts to move forward prevailed. Still the vocal sounds continued to sound off somewhere in front of him, sounding frantic and frightened. Lukan desperately to both try to reach it, and understand just what it was trying to say to him. Lukan wanted to call out to it, but even opening his muzzle for a split second allowed enough wind and rain into it, that it shut him down immediately. The raccoon was only able to just sit there, completely immobile, completely helpless. Just as Lukan found himself feeling like he was about to cry, there was an immensely bright flash of light, followed by an ear-splitting thundercrack, and a momentary immeasurable searing pain in his shoulder and--

The raccoon sat up, awake. Wide awake. Heart racing and breathing heavily and everything. Despite the coolness of his room, Lukan was drenched in sweat. Lukan looked around his room. There was no storm. There was light filtering in from the morning outside. The voice was gone. But what was all of that?! Lukan had often had nightmares between the time after when Klaus had broken up with him, in the spring. This one did not feel like anything normal, though. It almost felt like, Lukan's conscious itself was transported into his very mind as he slept. But that voice. Why was it so familiar? And why did it seem like it was begging for it to be heard by someone willing to help? Lukan shook his head, trying to clear it all away.

Lukan went to his computer. Fidel had messaged him in the middle of the night. It read that the creature had sent him a message at four in the morning. That wasn't usual.

'Hi Lukan. Hope you don't mind me messaging you this early. I just can't sleep tonight! Guess I've been thinking too much about when I will finally have a friend to finally do a lot of things with someday. Wow, I hope that didn't sound too depressingly lame or anything! Can it be February now? I bet you can't wait for then either, huh? Well, we can only really take every day as they come, you know?'

Lukan's response was simple. He simply responded that he couldn't wait either, even if his reasons for those feelings were completely different, and that he had quite the nightmare the previous night. The whole dream was going to be a predominant concern for his entire day, he could already tell.

Lukan left for that day to work feeling nothing short of worried. Being worried was definitely the thing Lukan was the very best at above all else, but this time, the circumstances behind the feeling weren't the usual suspects. That voice. Who the hell was that voice? Lukan tried to imagine the sound of it without the roaring weather skewing it. He couldn't grasp it.

Lukan passed Klaus' house. Lukan was about to think that it was possibly Klaus' voice in that dream, when he saw it. It wasn't a trace of the otter. It was a "For Rent" sign in the yard in front of it. What the-? Lukan's worry amplified. The otter no longer lived there?! Lukan suddenly wondered what happened to him. Despite the raccoon's newborn hatred for the creature, he didn't want him stuck in the streets or anything of the sort. His worry was quickly extinguished at the probability that Klaus had more than likely moved in with Platt, as the wolf also, apparently, lived somewhere close by. Lukan shook his head as he walked past. At least he wouldn't have to worry about encountering the otter again. At least potentially. He wasn't sure where the wolf lived if he did happen to be nearby. For all he knew, he could have been passing Platt's house every day to and from work without realizing it.

And then Lukan realized he refrained from taking his new path to work, but quickly forgave himself for such a risky mistake as it did grant him the knowledge that his usual path was at least potentially safe now. But, he knew very well that he wasn't in the clear until when he finally leaves behind the town for good.

Once Lukan had made it to the store he worked at, he found it buzzing with more creatures than he had seen it in a long time. With Halloween in just two more days, it was of no surprise that last minute shoppers plagued his workplace once more. Lukan knew that he was going to be responsible for the cleanup when they would eventually disperse, only for the whole thing to repeat the following day. Holiday after holiday, that was the reality for Lukan each and every time. Lukan sauntered to the back, not even remotely ready to repeat yet another day of the same thing over and over and over again. The things he put up with to set his goals into motion. Lukan just hated it.

Eira Tharo, a vixen who worked with the fruits and vegetables, was also at the time clock. She looked equally flustered and not in a good mood. It was rare to see her like that, except for when Lukan accidentally made her upset all that time ago. "Hi ringtail. You don't look so good."

Lukan mumbled his response. "You don't either."

"It's nothing. Just my stupid little brother, Storm. He's in town staying with us. Not fun, I'll tell ya," Eira replied.

"I'd take that over that nightmare I had last night any day, honestly," Lukan muttered, punching himself into the time clock.

Eira looked at Lukan with her grassy green eyes. "Nightmare? That sounds real rough. Lukan, is everything okay? All this month you've seemed incredibly down and depressed. Like, the opposite of last month. I mean I know you told me you were cheated on and all, but-" Eira trailed off.

Lukan sighed. "I know. I'm sorry. Domin and everyone else keeps asking me about it too. Life's just been a hell of a roller coaster lately, that's all."

Eira's concerned gaze was unwavering. "Well, I really hope things get better for you, and stay that way." That was her parting sentence, for she strode out of the backroom to go and do her job afterwards.

Lukan sighed, nose twitching. "I can only hope that'll be the case," he said quietly to no one other than himself.

It was just as Lukan began to walk to do his own job when another creature called for his name. Lukan's ears twitched this time in response. Turning around, Lukan recognized the sight of one of the newer managers to the store, a skunk named Chroma. "I just had an otter looking for someone of your description! Just thought I would let you know that!" And with that, the skunk said nothing else. Oh great. This was NOT what Lukan needed right now. Chroma being one of the new managers

meant that nobody told them about Lukan's desired evasion away from the otter who was so desperate to talk to him.

Lukan thought about talking to Domin about this fact. Lukan thought about doing what he could to evade the otter, and stay in the backroom as much as he possibly could. Lukan even, briefly, thought about giving in and at least hearing the otter out. Part of him wanted to know why. Why did the otter do what he did? What could have possibly driven the traitorous creature to commit such a heart wrecking act? Lukan wanted to know what could possibly allow any creature to think that it was an acceptable thing to do. But at the very same time, the anger that he felt, as well as his decision that the otter deserved nothing resembling the raccoon's attention dominated his mind. Both thoughts quarreled with each other. Lukan sighed. He didn't want to make any decisions anymore. He was fed up with them. He decided it best to leave whatever happened to fate.

Several moments went by, and nothing had happened. Lukan was cleaning fallen products from under the shelves, as he always did weekly, waiting for a certain otter to walk up behind him and start spouting utter nonsense and excuses. Lukan also felt that any justification Klaus would claim to have would be as such. There just simply was no justifying cheating on anybody, no questions asked. No exceptions.

Sure enough, the scent of otter filled the air. That was the first thing to notice. Among the amalgamation of scents of a variety of creatures all around him, otter stood out. It came so naturally to Lukan. It was almost as easy to identify as his own species' scent. So he did not even turn around when he felt someone's presence behind him. But when they spoke, Lukan couldn't help but jump slightly. It wasn't Klaus at all.

"Hi Lukan. Um... I'm a friend of Klaus'."