

## *Thirty. Persistence*

Lukan felt the fur on his tail spike in suspicion as he turned and faced an older looking female otter, probably a quarter of the way to a century old, wearing a long light red dress that almost completely hid her footpaws. Her eyes were just as blue as Lukan's. "Sorry to bother you," she said, looking worried. "Klaus sent me to try and get you to talk, so to speak. My name's Rea-"

Lukan interrupted, angry at himself for being potentially rude, but at the mere mention of Klaus' name let him know immediately the nature of what she was going to say. "I'm sorry. I don't have anything to say for, or about that otter," he said defiantly.

The female otter nodded. "Klaus told me you were probably going to be this way. Don't you want to know why he did what he did, Lukan?"

Lukan still wore his defiant stare as he aimed it at the stranger. "Well, yeah. But I want to disassociate myself away from that otter way more than I want to know why he did it. Because at the end of the day," anger made Lukan's voice go softer than he wanted it to, "it doesn't change the fact that what he did was absolutely wrong."

The otter looked as though she was trying to keep her cool. Lukan understood that his tone wasn't the greatest, but felt no other way to convey just how little he wanted to discuss the traitorous mustelid. "That may be, but we feel it may give you an idea. Help you understand that this was why he did it. Look. I'm just going to say it, whether you want me to or not. Lukan, have you ever had to make a decision so impossible, that no matter what you chose, someone was going to be hurt in the end? Well this was what Klaus was going through, and well, since he had Platt first, for half a decade as well, mind you, AND coming all this way to Lilac Grove for him, don't you see why that decision was particularly hard for him?"

Lukan took in every word. It made sense that such a choice was difficult for Klaus, but... "It still doesn't change the irrefutable fact that Klaus was mine at that time. It doesn't matter how hard it was. It boils down to whether he wanted to betray me or not."

The otter shook her head. She looked like she was losing patience. "You sound as if you don't really care about how difficult this was for him! If you loved him at all-!"

Lukan was thoroughly provoked by that added comment at the end of which he interrupted lividly. "I loved him more than anything else in the world. Don't you dare say anything that makes it seem like I didn't, because that is complete horse shit."

"If it is so true, then why didn't you help him?!" she demanded.

"Klaus didn't tell me how he felt! He just hid from me for weeks until I found him with Platt inside his house, making out and all sorts of horrible shit! Don't you care about what pain he put me through? Are you seriously trying to defend Klaus and his

shitty actions?! You know what? No. I don't have to talk to you. If you don't leave me the fuck alone, I can report that a customer is harassing me." Lukan was furious. Beyond seething. Every breath that left his nose felt thirty degrees warmer than normal on top of being irregular.

The otter glared at him silently, but she didn't move for several seconds until she finally spoke, walking away. "Hmph. Now I can kinda see another reason why Klaus was swayed into the decision he made, considering how supportive his boyfriend was to him. Maybe you'll learn one day, raccoon."

Ouch, that stinger sent reverberating aftershocks throughout Lukan's body that circled through his entire system many times over. Anger didn't begin to describe how Lukan felt about that brash creature's outlandish accusations against him. Lukan knew he did all he could for Klaus, but it seemed like the otter didn't even want to be helped. Lukan wished he remembered to say that...

Despite having Klaus' friend's words stuck inside of his head all throughout the rest of the day, the rest of Lukan's shift went by as normal. It went just with an extra hint of misanthropy that he struggled to hide whenever customers asked him questions, only half of which he could answer. Once Lukan's shift was over, he found himself confronted by his boss, which initially unnerved him, as it often did.

"So I heard you were confronted by some otter lady earlier today? I just want to make sure you are okay; you're not in trouble or anything."

Lukan momentarily wondered how he found out about that. He shook his head. It was probably on camera. "Yeah it's okay. She wanted to talk about Klaus on his behalf. They're determined as hell to get me to talk about what Klaus did to me, him getting some stranger to talk to me. I want none of any of this," Lukan replied firmly.

Domin let out a sigh. "Well, I don't know what any of this is about, Lukan, but we do want to ensure your safety working for us here where anyone from the public is welcome. I can't ask upper management to ban any creature for something like this, you know. Did you feel threatened or harassed at all by these creatures?"

Lukan shook his head. "No it hasn't gotten to that level, though it feels like they're trying to get there." Lukan shook his head. "Don't worry about it too much; it's just some stupid personal drama."

"If you say so, Lukas." Lukan was still not used to being called that by anyone. He didn't think he was ever going to get used to it. "You may go now." Lukan didn't rush out as he wanted to. He didn't have the physical capacity to do so, with all of what stained his mind. The atmosphere around Lukan's surroundings felt different. Lukan felt as though he were only half alive. Lukan wanted to leave Lilac Grove as soon as possible. Sooner than possible. If Klaus was going to be sending friends his way, creatures Lukan never even seen let alone met, then there was no way he was going to

be able to evade it forever. He once again debated on whether talking to Klaus was a valid option for him to go into. Even if it would put everything to rest, Lukan still found it near impossible to convince himself that he should do so. If that otter wanted Lukan to have any peace of mind, he wouldn't do anything anymore. He wouldn't send his cronies after him. He wouldn't have cheated on him. He would have talked to him before it got to this point. But no. He evaded all his chances. Now it was Lukan's turn to be evasive.

It was cold outside. End of November levels of cold, not end of October. The sky was already dark. Stars glittered in the sky. Lukan momentarily wondered what worlds around those stars were like, and if any creatures around them were going through similar situations such as his. Lukan shook his head, breathing in the colder than frigid air, watching his breath float away towards those stars, knowing how far a journey it would be for it to reach them. But Lukan felt that his happiness was now much further away than that. Like it was outside of the observable universe, somewhere where he couldn't see it. Had it flown away from him so fast in just one year? What had Lukan done to his life?

Lukan passed by Klaus' now empty house. The for rent sign was still there, along with a phone number that led to the realtor in charge of it. Lukan sighed. The otter was almost certainly still somewhere nearby, though. He wasn't completely gone from his life yet. That was the purpose of leaving Lilac Grove, now. For the time being, that was all that Lukan wanted. He wanted all traces of Klaus out of his life for good. Sadly, Lilac Grove would bring nothing but constant reminders of his time with him.

Lukan found himself thinking about what that female otter had told him. Lukan understood fully the implications of Klaus' internal turmoil instigated by the idea of having to choose between one or the other. But the fact that Klaus didn't even try to talk to Lukan and instead chose to go behind his back and--! Next thing Lukan found himself doing was massaging his own foot paw in pain as he had angrily kicked the post holding up the mailbox. Fucking traitor. And no one seemed to care about what had happened at all. Except Fidel and Aero. They were the only ones he could trust anymore.

Except Aero was nowhere to be found, and Fidel was over a thousand miles away. Upon such a realization, Lukan felt something he hadn't felt in a long time, not since Klaus first broke up with him, and not since far, far longer before that: loneliness and complete and utter isolation. There was no one in his life anymore. No one that he could care about. No one that he could look forward to seeing everyday, no one to look forward to doing anything with. Despite being more than just content with being a solitary misanthropist before he met Klaus, meeting the otter changed everything. He was no longer the raccoon he thought he was. He was nothing like it anymore. The ring tailed creature still felt hatred and distrust towards most other creatures, but lumped

on top of all of that was the loneliness and desire to have one of them to share his life with. How was this even possible? It didn't make sense and only messed with his head even more than anything William Perow had ever said to him.

With these overwhelming emotions pouring from Lukan, on top of his throbbing paw, Lukan found it next to impossible to keep himself standing anymore and found himself leaning into the mailbox, sobbing quietly, feeling tears dripping from his face, where they would fall, either on the mailbox, or the ground, where they would eventually freeze and blend in with the morning frost hours later.

He also didn't realize just for how long he had spent there. Lukan slumped over the mailbox and just cried. That's all the will he had at that moment. That was all he could do. That's all he wanted to do. No. That was wrong. What he wanted to do was find comfort in another creature's fur. Another, like what Klaus used to be. But realizing that such a thing will not happen. Not anymore. Not again. That only made Lukan cry harder. Hard enough to grit his teeth and clench his fists in pure mental and emotional anguish. He had never felt so alone in his life. And as Lukan felt himself breaking down further and further, soaking the mailbox in his sadness, the reversal of his mind began to take hold. He wanted to find that otter. He wanted to know why. He wanted to know the reasons behind the actions. But more importantly than that, he wanted the otter to know just how much pain and suffering he had inflicted on the raccoon. He wanted the otter to hurt as much as he does, all in regret so that he would never even consider anything remotely resembling what he did ever again. He knew the otter would find him again. All Lukan had to do was wait.

It took Lukan several moments to regain his composure enough to get himself the rest of the way home, his toes still throbbing in pain from kicking the mailbox earlier. Upon returning home, Lukan was surprised to find how numb his arms had become, being exposed to the cold, and resting on the even colder metal mailbox for so long. He had been too lost in thought to notice how cold he had become. Lukan failed to notice it out of apathy towards all else other than his own pain.

With his frozen arms, Lukan found it hard to even use his computer; the numb feeling spread to the muscles in his wrists, immobilizing everything attached to them. He saw that he had another message from Fidel waiting for him to read. As much as the raccoon desired to talk to someone like Fidel right then, he knew the creature was likely not awake. If Sarah wasn't, then Fidel wouldn't be either. He opened it and went to respond to it anyways, knowing full well that the coyote wouldn't answer until the following morning.

*'Hey Lukan! I was wondering if you were going to do anything for Halloween! I can't believe it's already two days away! Crazy right? I'm probably not going to do much. Hand out candy if anyone comes by. I'm sadly too old for the whole trick or*

*treating thing nowadays. Man I wish I was a cub again. But I bet all adults want to, huh? Well, I hope you're doing well. I hope I'll see you later!'*

Lukan smiled softly to himself. Fidel was oblivious to it all. Oblivious to how the raccoon was truly feeling, deep down inside him. Lukan debated on whether to tell the creature how he was feeling. After all, talking to him was one of the only things that made him feel even remotely better, even if it wasn't face to face. Or even voice to voice. Ultimately, Lukan decided to tell the coyote the truth. Just not the entire truth. He wrote to him, stating that his feelings were the same as ever: unable to wait to instigate his endeavors to move to where the coyote would wait for him.

Lukan sent the message with a teary smile on his face. He vowed, no, knew, that someday he will reclaim what was coldly taken away from his heart. He swore he would do whatever it took. Nothing was going to stand in his way.

The next day, Lukan decided to try and hunt down either of the otters who had unexpectedly entered his life. Klaus and-- Lukan realized he did not catch the Klaus' friend's full name as he had cut her off. It didn't matter; somehow he knew he was going to find either one of them, probably the former, before too long without even trying. Klaus wanted to show his persistence? Lukan will answer alright.

Lukan returned to work, as if nothing had changed just as he always did every day of every week, of every month, of every year. Even though he had been working there for only a trifle amount over a year since he graduated high school. The day progressed with almost nothing of value to him whatsoever. It was just yet another mundane, everyday shift. Lukan was almost surprised by this fact. There were a small minority of days where he was left to himself as the otter often interfered with his presence. Lukan went home from work, deliberately stalling time in front of Klaus' house as well as the park where they first met. Still no sign of the tail piercing or the otter it was attached to. It figures. Now that Lukan wanted to give that otter his justification, he would be nowhere to be found. Why would he? It's not like Lukan wanted life to be easier! Lukan was convinced the otter was holed up with Platt, wherever that wolf lived. Probably doing-- No! Lukan was NOT going to think about that again!

Lukan returned home to the same levels of silence that had plagued his day. Sarah was not at her computer, but asleep. Odd, it was still early enough. Lukan dismissed this as he walked to his room. As per usual, there was the message from Fidel. Lukan felt bad. Thanks to the way life was with his daily routine, it was hard to message the coyote more than once or twice a day. Conversations failed to go very far due to that. Lukan hoped that would change, but if it did on his end, would he still have a job at all?

Lukan read the message from Fidel. The coyote still could not contain his excitement for the day that was soon to come. Such enthusiasm from a creature that hadn't known Lukan for a terribly long amount of time. Where had Lukan seen this before? Klaus. Lukan wasn't sure what to think of such a paralel.

Lukan responded as he usually did. Short and sweet. A few short words describing his equal emotions for his future. Lukan looked forward to his future. With his past and present so dark, where else could he look?

Lukan also remembered to send the otter a shout out as well. The otter may not know the raccoon had conceded to the otter's persistence and reconsidered not talking to him. Lukan still wondered if it was the right thing or if the otter did deserve to even hear the raccoon's voice again. But the desire for answers burned strongly in Lukan's cracked heart.

To Lukan's surprise, the otter responded almost immediately. The otter looked like he was typing as fast as he could to make sure Lukan would see it. Lukan could tell as there were many words that were misspelled. The careless otter even failed to realize that he had hit his caps lock while typing. But the raccoon still managed to get the gist of it.

*'Oh god I am spo glad that yopu are wiling to talk now@! I thoguht for s second even REali couldn' convince yopu! OkAY@ iLL SEE YOI AT THE STOPRW TOMORROW ST 6 OLAT'*

The raccoon scowled, looking at the massacre of the English language displayed on his screen. Did the otter intend on typing 6 at all? The raccoon did not even get off work until 6:30 and the otter knew that. He probably meant 7. To be sure, the raccoon asked him to clarify that, as the message was only just able to be discerned.

The otter responded almost just as quickly as before. A little slower, to presumably make sure it wasn't trying to defy the rules of language.

*'Sorry about that. I just wanted to catch you in case you were going to sleep right after that. Yeah I meant seven, oops! We'll walk home together. I hope you don't mind Platt coming too. He owes you an explanation too. I'm sorry Lukan. We both are.'*

With or without an explanation, Lukan was still going to never accept what Klaus did as anything remotely justifiable. Which made Lukan question his decision even further, since because of that belief, what was the point? On top of that, the wolf was going to be there too? Great. It was going to take Lukan all the self control in the world to prevent him from going ballistic on the two malignant creatures. But alas, to get the answers from them that he wants, he'd need to display diplomacy that could

overrule his emotions. Suddenly Lukan wondered what was more challenging in life. Lukan shook off his concern. That was a bridge he was going to cross as soon as time allowed him to travel to it. For the time being, Lukan wanted to focus on sleeping.

Eternal thunder roared in Lukan's ears, and strobe speed lightning blinded him. Neptunian strength winds threatened to launch him into the air. And torrential rain that was more in line with waterfalls drenched him to the bone. Lukan couldn't breathe. It felt like his chest was about to burst. But it wasn't his lungs that ached. It was his heart. That was what suffocated him. Lukan had his eyes shut due to the pain, and due to the wind and rain. The storm overwhelmed each and every one of his senses. But why? Why had it returned?

Lukan tried to open his eyes, and to his surprise, was able to see. Vision was blurry. It was borderline incomprehensible. But Lukan was able to see that he was in a forest. On a hill, overlooking an expanse of trees all under siege by the unfathomably violent. It was dark as night, but there could be a sun behind the clouds Lukan would never know about.

In the distance, Lukan noticed that the forest had ended in a raging sea. But Lukan was not so sure. All his vision could make out beside the shapes and colors of coniferous trees was nothing but water and lightning. Lukan tried his luck further by lifting a leg to take a step forward, but found gravity to be overbearing, forcing him to his knees when the one leg on the ground was not able to support his weight. The split second Lukan fell...

...The raccoon was awake again, laying in bed, breathing heavily, but not as much so as the first time he had such a dream. What was this? It was one thing to have the dream again. But the storm seemed worse. And yet, did not hurt Lukan as badly as the first time. Lukan could not comprehend it.

Lukan looked up at the ceiling of his room. It was still dark. Night still hadn't finished its turn in the sky just yet. Lukan closed his eyes, trying to get back to sleep, but found himself feeling wide awake. He felt more awake than he had during most points of his life. Falling back asleep was a distinct impossibility now.

Frustrated, Lukan swung his legs off the bed and landed his paws onto the floor, stretching. If there was no way to return to sleep despite it being four in the morning, Lukan decided to pass the time by using his computer. He was curious to see if Fidel or even Klaus had gotten back to him despite the hours of the night it would have to be for them to do so. Not to his surprise, the raccoon's messages remained empty. Lukan sighed. For a reason unbeknownst to him, seeing that made him not want to be on the computer anymore. Lukan jumped away from it without a word. And without a thought

in his head, the raccoon found himself readying his body for the chilly temperatures outside of a mid-autumnal morning.

The temperature outside did not feel at all like mid autumn. It was reminiscent of early winter, as if it were just mere days after Lukan's birthday. It felt different being outside in the early morning as opposed to the early night. It was still dark and cold as it always was during such hours. The difference had to be the sheer tranquility and silence the atmosphere provided. It was much more calm than the evenings Lukan used to frequent the park. The lack of other creatures, and the fact that the wind was nowhere to be felt had to be the cause of this. The raccoon was tempted to take walks in the morning more often if not for his sheer animosity towards the mere concept of mornings as a whole.

Lukan found himself standing in the park, once again revisiting the site where he and Klaus had first met. It was almost surreal, seeing the place looking almost identical to when they had first met, the only distinct difference was the lighting. It was strange to Lukan, seeing how so little can change in one place after one year, and in another, absolutely nothing felt the same anymore. Lukan found himself walking toward the otter's now empty house, down one of the streets the park laid adjacent to. The house was still as abandoned and derelict as ever. Lukan wondered if he could spot the otter's just as shabby old yellow truck around as well. Wherever the vehicle was parked meant the otter had to have lived nearby to it. Lukan shook his head. He wasn't so certain he wanted to know where the otter had lived now. Him being close by was enough to give him unwanted chills. However, despite his doubts, there was a small curiosity that could only be described as morbid hanging around his mind telling him to see if he could find it. He knew it was close by, hell, still within the same tiny neighborhood! The neighborhood was bordered by a street that was nothing more than a large circle with only a few smaller roads between it, plus the park. There was also an appendage to it jutting southwards, almost making it shaped like a tadpole from birds eye view, Klaus' old house being at the very start of it. How he, Klaus, and Platt all lived within the same small little slice of Lilac Grove astounded Lukan. But he knew that Klaus had chosen to move as close to Platt as he could, of which he succeeded, and that the raccoon was lucky, or unlucky now, to be close by.

Lukan wandered the neighborhood, walking the unfamiliar roads that cut from the circular road. Lukan kept his eyes peeled for the yellow truck. Lukan rounded onto another street, and then he saw it almost immediately. It was too easy. Too obvious. Too familiar. It was sitting on the right curb, facing him. The truck somehow looked sad, as if it missed the raccoon. Lukan felt a twinge of longing upon seeing the vehicle. Lukan missed the strong smells of otter that flowed from its interior. Lukan missed taking rides with the otter to and from work, or wherever else they ended up going. Knowing the truck now had a new passenger...



No. Lukan did not want to get worked up again. This was now ancient history. This was now his past, no longer his present, no matter how much Lukan wished it weren't the case. Lukan had to focus on the future. To reclaim what the otter had taken away from him. That was his new mission now. That was his only mission now.

Lukan was tempted to stick around, to see if he could spot the otter or even the wolf when they woke up for the morning. Lukan smiled to himself. Lukan knew that he had seen more than enough, and walked away, just as silently as he had arrived.