Vermilion Gate
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Summary

Keith Kogane may seem like your average brooding neighborhood pizza guy, but he knew he was special: he could see creatures regular people couldn't see and had the ability to control fire. Everything changed though when he turned 23 and the creatures became more aggressive and attacked him more frequently. After being saved by a mysterious man named Shiro, he learned he was now being targeted by some powerful force. So to keep him safe, Shiro assigned him a guardian angel.

However, Keith did not know that he was meant for a greater purpose that could mean the salvation or destruction of the angelic realm of Altea. He also did not expect to fall in love with his cocky but lethal blue eyed angel, Lance.

A collaboration with forsakenangel88.

Update: This has been discontinued due to the author leaving the fandom. Deepest apologies.

Notes
Hi guys! *shy wave* It's me again back with another tale, haha. However, unlike Taking Chances, this story will be darker and it is written for a mature audience. I've placed in warnings and tags so you guys will know what you're getting into. Dark fantasy and angels had always been my thing and I love VLD so I created an AU that mixes these elements.

Author's Disclaimers:

-Voltron Legendary Defender is not mine. It is rightfully owned by Dreamworks and the creators and this is just a fanwork.
-English is not my native language so I'd like to apologize for errors I may have looked over.
-All side couples (Shallura, HunkShay) are established so that the main relationship development focus is Klance.

I will do my best to finish this story and I'd like to thank you for checking it out! I hope that you enjoy!

This story is a collaboration with forsakenangel88.
Chapter 1

The room was dark, made to look like an executive’s office except that when one looked out the ceiling-to-floor window, there were clouds instead of the bustling city expected to be seen. The tower was called the Sanctum, an angelic stronghold invisible to the normal mortal eye unless they possessed the ability to see what walks on the other side of the spectrum.

A woman stood by the window which she watched the sea of clouds. Her skin was dark as polished ebony and her hair was the color of celestial starlight which was a silver cascade down her slender back. When she moved, the light caught a ripple behind her that shifted like colorful prisms against her royal blue gown that formed the shape of wings. But just as soon, they were gone.

A knock came on the twin wooden doors.

“Enter.” She said without turning around. The hinges creaked when the doors parted and then clicked when they closed once again. There were quiet footsteps that sounded behind her and then a male voice.

“You called for me, queen Allura?”

Allura turned around to face the new comer who knelt before her on one knee; dark brown hair, rich tanned skin and casually dressed in dark green leather jacket. When he lifted his head to look at her, they flashed in the darkness like sapphires ringed with silver on the irises. A small but cool smile played on his lips and when he tilted his head slightly, a single teardrop shaped earring that hung on his right ear swayed.

“Lance,” Allura smiled. “Thank you for heeding my call so quickly.” She waved her hand elegantly in a gesture. “Please, stand.”

Lance did so and got up to his full height. “How may I serve you?” He asked.

After a brief silence that passed by between them, Allura finally nodded. “Shiro found a human in
the mortal realm. He is a Vessel whose powers have started to rise.” A pause and her inhuman eyes, a mixture of blue and lilac, stared intently into Lance’s. “You have been assigned the task of guarding this human until we decide what to do with him.”

Lance tried to keep his smile but the corners of his lips twitched down into a frown. “With all due respect, did you just say that I have to babysit a mortal?”

“Yes, if you would put it that way.” Allura replied with certain flatness in her voice. “Is there a problem with that, Lance?”

“Well, if I may speak freely, my queen?” Lance blurted out and he did not attempt to hide the displeasure in his face.

“You may.”

“First of all, humans don’t live very long, not to mention Vessels who don’t even make it past the prime of adulthood.” Lance stuffed his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket as he remained guarded. “So why should we waste our time on a human when we have more important matters to worry about?”

Allura regarded Lance with a single arch of her brow which made the younger angel lower his gaze. In their world, the Queen’s word was as good as law but Allura is a kind ruler and therefore, she listened to what her subjects had to say to be fair.

“Because this human is a very powerful Vessel.” Allura replied. Her hand reached to tuck away a stray lock of her moonlight colored hair behind her ear. “His quintessence is overflowing and his power grows each passing day.” She paused and a shadow crossed her ethereal eyes. “Vessels tend to attract lesser beasts that walk the human realm but with the human’s increasing quintessence, it would most likely attract the demons as well.”

“Lotor?” Lance’s voice dropped an octave lower. The air in the room grew heavy and the queen’s form started to glow with power at the sound that cursed name.

“Yes.” It was a quiet reply from Allura. “If Lotor and the demons he rules manage to get their hands on the Vessel, they will use that power to set an attack on us—Hngg--!” Allura reached up and pressed her fingers against her temple. The skirts of her gown crumpled when her balance wavered.

“Your majesty!” Lance quickly strode to where the queen was and carefully placed a strong arm around her shoulders to hold her up. “Is it---?”

Allura nodded. “My father’s barrier that protects Altea weakens every day. Its power is running out and I can only do so much to hold such a wide force field that covers our realm without having to damage my body in the process.”

“I…” Lance’s tone was quiet. “I’m sorry that you have to suffer like this, my queen. But we and the sire are doing all that we can to protect Altea.”

“I know you are.” The queen smiled as she managed to regain her poise and she stood up to her full height. “But do you see the importance of this mission, Lance? You have to make sure that that human is kept from demonic hands or else they will use that power to invade us.”

Lance stepped back to give Allura some space and because he had kept in mind that she is still the queen of their realm of Altea. He glanced down to his shoes and his eyes that matched the color of the earring he wore, narrowed.
“But why me?” he gritted out. “Are you sure? I don’t think I’m fit for guardianship over a human. I’m… I don’t have…”

“For all that you lack, Lance,” Allura’s tone was gentle and her benevolent smile reached her eyes that twinkled. “You make up with your excellent skills in angelcraft.” A soft chuckle. “Those were my husband’s words.”

Lance reached up to scratch the back of his head at the praise. He liked to cover up his insecurities with a façade by being overconfident and flirtatious, but of course Allura saw through his mask. The queen saw everything, she’s the Divine Overseer, after all.

“Shiro’s just being nice.” Lance shrugged at the mention of his commanding officer who was also mated and married to Allura. Shiro wasn’t as powerful as Allura in terms of hierarchy and power but they are both still lethal archangels who ruled Altea. Allura managed the defensive barrier, the magic of the realm, and the people of the kingdom while Shiro led the armies and headed the security.

After a few deep breaths, Lance calmed himself and prepared to take on the honorable task given to him. “I accept. Just give me a face and a name.”

Allura lifted her hand and a soft white light emanated from her palm. An orb of light appeared and hovered over her hand before it exploded into a thousand flecks of light. The firefly like lights compressed together to form an image which then solidified.

Lance stared at the image young man; pale skin, thick raven hair that fell to his nape, and bangs that framed a pair of amethyst colored eyes. The guy wasn’t impressively beautiful but he still had a level of prettiness that piqued Lance’s interest.

“This is him?” Lance allowed a small smirk to lift his lips and those blue eyes ringed with silver glittered with a hint of mischief. “He’s a pretty one, isn’t he?”

“Indeed, this is the human you will guard.” Allura confirmed with a regal nod. “His name is Keith Kogane.”

*~*~*~*~*

“That would be sixteen fifty.” Keith recited dully at the oily looking man that opened that door of the apartment he knocked on.

The man grunted as reached into his back pocket to pull out a clump of crumpled bills. Keith grimaced when he was handed the bills that were damp and he didn’t want to think what it was wet with. Before Keith even managed to count the payment, the man slammed the door shut on his face and he stepped back wide eyed but frowning.

“You’re welcome, asshole.” Keith muttered. He counted that the man gave a little too much of the amount due with five dollars extra so that meant that he had a tip for the trouble. He pocketed the money and made his way out of the dingy apartment building.

The sun outside was warm against his pale skin. Keith shielded his eyes with one hand and gazed up the clear blue sky. It was already summer and it was only going to get worse in the coming weeks. He needed to save enough by then to pay rent and have extra to get his air conditioning unit fixed by the time the heat waves came in.
Keith made his way to the rickety motorcycle that the pizza shop he worked in used. It was an old bucket of bolts but the owner of the place, Sal, didn’t want to spend money to invest on a new unit. So who was Keith to suggest? He was just the overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated pizza delivery guy.

He fished out the keys from his hoodie pocket and put on his helmet but before he was able to, Keith froze when he caught a movement at the corner of his eye. A shadow darted at the cramped, dark alley across the street from him. Keith’s heartbeat started to get erratic when he the shadow came in closer to the mouth of the alley and six pairs of red eyes snapped open on the mess that was supposed to be its face.

Keith counted to ten to calm his nerves. Ever since he was a kid he knew that he wasn’t like other people because he can see things that were not visible to them. When he told his playmates about the things that watched them from a tree at the playground, they either laughed at him or called him weird and left. The only people who believed him was his late dad, may God rest his soul, and his best friend Pidge who was a genius when it came to supernatural stuff since she came from a family of witches.

The things that Keith saw normally didn’t hurt him but that all changed when he turned twenty three a couple of weeks ago. Coincidentally, Keith’s other gift also got stronger after he turned a year older.

Keith reached behind the small of his back to grasp the handle of a blade that was sheathed and clipped onto his belt.

“Don’t fucking think about it.” Keith breathed out the words slowly while he glared at the creepy looking creature that was across the street and his fingers tightened on the black handle of his knife. “I’ll stab you.”

A groan that sounded like a cross between a goat and a broken bell reverberated from the shadow and its eyes glowed redder in the darkness of the alley.

“Shit.” Keith gritted through clenched teeth. The first thing that crossed his mind was to try and outrun the motherfucker but that never worked because each time Keith tried to run, those things always caught up to his pathetic human speed. The second option is to fight and try to outsmart it that would lead to a clean getaway but that’s going to leave Keith with a couple of scratches and maybe a deep cut here and there.

However, Keith had a third option; he can use his other gift.

Keith’s gift is pretty powerful and it was effective in driving away those things that pestered him but he can’t use it for a prolonged period of time because it took a toll on his body. The aftereffect can either be a simple migraine or a nosebleed to fainting and sleeping for days depending on the intensity and how much he used. That was the reason why his dad told him to avoid using his powers unless it really was needed.

The shadow moved closer to the mouth of the alley and Keith pulled out his blade. It was the size of a large hunting knife and the handle was wrapped in a strip of black cloth until the cross guard. The body of the blade was black with a thin slit of chrome in the middle. The world around Keith seem to halt and he rolled out of the way when the Shadow lunged towards him and large claws slid out of its hands.

“Fuck!” Keith huffed when his back hit a concrete post. He jumped out of the way when the creature went at him another time and while it was distracted to regain its balance, Keith drove his knife into
its back. It gave a shrill cry of pain but reached back to swat Keith away like a fly.

“I am seriously just trying to earn a goddamn living!” Keith was barely able to dodge another attack. “Why do you guys try to kill me every week? It’s not cool!”

Keith darted behind another alley and jumped to hide behind a dumpster. He forced his breathing to be quiet and he held the knife with a white knuckled grip. It was eerily silent in the alley to the point that Keith didn’t hear any dogs barking or birds singing on where they were perched on the electrical wires. He counted to sixty mentally and when nothing happened, Keith dared to peek out from behind the dumpster.

He came face to face with a distorted face with six eyes and a maw of bloody razor sharp teeth dripping with rancid saliva.

Blood drained from Keith’s face and it felt like his heart stopped. He felt too frozen in fear to scream and his legs wouldn’t move while his arms went slack when the monster opened its mouth to bite Keith’s head off his shoulders. There was a loud clang when the creature’s teeth smashed against each other and the next thing Keith knew, a powerful force pulled him back.

He made a soft ‘oof’ when he landed on his ass. When Keith looked up, a man stood before him. He donned a black trench coat that was untied at the front because the edges and the back flap swayed in a wind that didn’t appear to be there. He was broad shouldered with a black undercut contrasted with a white forelock of hair. When the sunlight that pierced through the narrow gap of the alley, Keith thought he saw the shadow of wings on the man’s back.

But what startled Keith was that the man’s right arm was metal and tendrils of electricity slithered on his metal fingers like snakes waiting to strike. The man didn’t give the shadow a chance to move because when Keith blinked, he was gone from the spot where he stood and he was instantly in front of the creature in inhuman speed. He lifted his right arm, the fingers spread like talons and he thrust it through the monster’s tar-like flesh. It screamed when it was electrocuted from within before it exploded with a flash of bright light and dissipated into ash.

Keith’s words were trapped in his throat that had shut tightly with what he just saw. When the black ash disappeared in the wind, the man turned around and Keith’s breath hitched; he was handsome and by handsome Keith meant the rough kind of handsome; his white forelock framed a pair of slanted eyes and his irises were like onyxes ringed with silver on the edges. There was a thin horizontal scar across the bridge of his nose and his chiseled jaw was rough with a five o clock shadow.

“Hi.” He smiled and Keith pushed back on his ass when he came closer.

“Oh, don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you, Keith.”

“Who... Who are you? How....” Keith gulped in air to free his screaming lungs. “How did you know my name?”

The man was quiet for a moment while those dark silver ringed eyes bore deep into Keith’s violet ones. “Let’s just say that I know you situation and I want to help.” He held out his metal arm to Keith. “But to be fair, my name is Shiro.”

Keith looked reluctant to hold Shiro’s hand at first considering he knew what that arm did to the shadow. But he figured out that if Shiro wanted to kill him, he would have done it easily when he had the chance. Keith reached and took it, expecting it to be hot from the burst of power that turned his pursuer into black ash but it was actually cool to the touch.
“Thanks for saving me there, Shiro.” Keith was grateful when Shiro pulled him up to his feet. “But how did you know? I thought not everyone could see those things?”

“Well, I’m not like everyone.” Shiro’s smile made him roguishly handsome. “I’m special just like you.”

“You’re not human, are you?” Keith frowned as he let go of Shiro’s hand.

“Yes. Yes, I’m not human.” Those dark eyes flashed. “But I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here to help, Keith. You need to understand that your life is in danger.”

“Yeah, no shit.” A sour reply.

“That thing that came after you?” Shiro continued as he motioned to where the shadow used to stand. “Those that came after you the past few weeks? It’s about to get worse but we’ll make sure you’re protected.”

“Excuse me, who’s ‘we’?” Keith eyes widened. “Is this like a personal bodyguard? Sorry, buddy. Thanks for saving my life, really. But I don’t have the money to pay you to protect me, hell, I can’t even pay rent in time! I take care of myself just fine.”

“You barely survived that one and you froze in fear. We don’t require payment but what we do want is to prevent you from being captured by the wrong people.” Shiro’s tone turned flat. “And to answer your question, there are many others like me. One of my men will be tasked to guard you.”

Keith’s head spun with so many questions but he was too exhausted and too wary to voice them out right now. Shiro held out his hand towards Keith, palm faced up. Keith’s eyes widened when a gentle light emanated from his palm and a single blue feather materialized in thin air.

“This is a catalyst meant to summon him. When you are in dire need, he will come for you.” Shiro said and he flicked his hand to make the feather float towards Keith who plucked it from the air with shaking fingers. He stared at the feather and noted how it was a pretty shade of blue with a silver tip and it shimmered when it caught the light.

“Wait, who are you talking about?” Keith began to ask but when he looked up, Shiro was gone. “Shiro? Shiro!”

But Keith’s only answer was a silent wind charged with electricity.

A storm was coming.
An Angel Is Summoned

Chapter by plumeriafairy14

Chapter Summary

When the time became right, the heavens opened up and sent down an angel with eyes bluer than the oceans. And with him, a mission, to bring ruthless justice to those who dared to hurt the Vessel of fire.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I have great news for you guys! This story is now a collaboration with the talented forsakenangel88 who would be creating art for each chapter! I'm so stoked about this! Since it will take more effort for a collab, the updates will be slower (We are aiming to update every 2 weeks to the best of our abilities starting chapter 3) but they will also be longer.

Thank you for all the overwhelming reviews in tumblr and the comment section! I hope you enjoy this update because we sure as hell had a great time making it! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2

Three days later, Keith was awake in bed late that morning. He stared at his water stained ceiling and his eyes lazily followed the fan that idly spun in a dull pattern. Since he was off that day, Keith didn’t bother getting up from bed even though he’s been awake for about two hours now.

Keith wanted so much to convince himself that what happened to him three days ago was just a dream. Being three seconds away from death if a mysterious stranger named Shiro didn’t yank his ass back just felt such a surreal close call that Keith was still thinking about it until now. Normally, it wasn’t the first time that he had a dance with death but the last encounter he had left him shaken.

Reaching from underneath his pillow, Keith pulled out the single blue feather that Shiro gave him. He held it above him as he studied it for the nth time and he ran his fingers against the soft edges, each delicate follicle tipped with silver. Keith didn’t want to believe Shiro, but the way that the guy outright blew up the shadow with his mechanical arm that slithered with electricity convinced him that maybe it was worth taking in the warning.

Decided, Keith sat up and swung his legs to the side of the bed. His toes curled when they hit the cold floor then he grabbed some pants and a clean shirt. After he pulled over his ratty red hoodie, Keith grabbed his knife and belted it where it was usually hidden on the small of his back. After heating two slices of left over pizza for breakfast, he pocketed his keys and his wallet before he got his phone to call someone.
Keith hit speed dial and pressed the phone to his ear. First and foremost, he had to puzzle everything together starting with this feather. And if he was going to ask someone’s help then he might as well ask the most talented person he knew and trusted.

“Hello, Pidge?” Keith spoke after the other line picked up. “Can I come over? You’re not going to believe what the fuck just happened to me.”

Pidge leaned against the freshly painted white doorframe, the mint green door opened. They lived in the nicer part of town as compared to Keith since they came from the Holt family, a clan of supernaturally talented people who had been known to produce prodigy mages.

“What’s up?” they asked. Their golden brown eyes that matched the color of their short cropped fly-away hair glittered with interest behind round rimless glasses. They wore their favorite green and white long sleeved shirt but donned a pair of black PJ pants instead of their usual cargo shorts. Keith shrugged and Pidge frowned deeply when they noticed the dark circles around his eyes. “You’re barely sleeping, are you?”

“Well, after a demonic black blob tried to kill me three days ago and Sal pushing me with overtime, yeah, it’s pretty hard to get some sleep” Keith shrugged. He stepped inside the apartment when Pidge opened the door wider to let him in and he glanced at the antique leather bound books that were opened on the coffee table. Several crystals and papers with magical circles scattered on the floor.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Pidge crossed their arms over their chest. “Was it at your place? Didn’t the talismans I made for you work?”

Keith raised his hands and shook them with surrender. “No, they’re great!” he countered then his gaze lowered and a scowl deepened his porcelain features. “I was making a delivery when it happened. It was such a close call, Pidge.” Keith plopped down on the couch and grabbed the nearest throw pillow to which he placed on his lap and he drummed his fingers against it in an attempt to ground himself away from the experience.

“I was too frozen to move.” Keith continued and scooted over so that Pidge could sit beside him. “I couldn’t move my body and I didn’t even think of using the fire even if it was a life and death situation.”

Pidge’s eyes widened and their mouth parted with a silent gape. “How the fuck did you get out, then?”

“Someone saved me.” Keith replied and he faced Pidge now. His eyes were dark with apprehension and worry and it was such a struggle to remain calm. “A man with a metal arm named Shiro. He… killed that thing, Pidge.” He shook his head in disbelief. “He literally had electricity on his right arm like he commanded the damn thing.”

“He’s not human?” A gasp. “Dude, you gotta spill. Tell me everything!”

“Jeeze, calm down first!” Keith threw the pillow at Pidge who caught it and threw it right back at Keith. He swatted it away and hit the floor with a soft ‘puft’. “He told me that the attacks are only going to get worse and some people are after me.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, that’s the point.” Keith sighed in defeat. He reached up to rake his fingers through his raven hair before he tugged on the roots. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I…I don’t
remember offending anyone, Pidge. Since dad died, I’ve been mostly on my own. I kept to myself and I made sure not to use my flames when not needed.” He opened his eyes again and reached into his pocket. “Shiro told me that when I need help, someone will come to help me. Then he gave me this.” Keith handed the feather to Pidge who took it cautiously.

With one glance at their best friend, Pidge studied the feather warily and took note of how the patterns and the very texture of it was different from a bird’s. “I’d have to take a closer look.” With a wave of their hand, Pidge’s fingertips gave a soft green glow before they swiped them over the smooth lens of their glasses. The glasses hazed for a bit before they cleared out and tiny specks of light skittered like fireflies on the surface.

“Let’s see…”

Keith was quiet while Pidge worked but he couldn’t help but feel anxious. He thought back to a couple of weeks ago and wished the he didn’t turn twenty three since having so seem to have done something to him that made unexplainable things want to kill him.

“Holy…shit…” Pidge breathed which made Keith snap out of his reverie. When he looked at Pidge, the light died around their glasses and they jumped up to their feet. Keith caught the feather before it hit the floor when it blew off from Pidge. “Wait here, Keith. Wait the fuck right here.”

“Sure, I’m free the rest of the day anyway.” Keith replied and watched Pidge stride to their bookshelf. With a wave of their hand, a book from the top shelf floated down and Pidge stood on their toes to pluck out of midair when it descended. With one snap of their fingers, the book flipped open and the pages turned rapidly on their own.

“Here.” Pidge turned the book towards Keith and pointed at a mediaeval portrait of a winged man garbed in white robes.

“Angels?” Keith raised an eyebrow and regarded his shorter friend with a look of complete disbelief. “You’re trying to tell me,” he lifted the feather. “That this thing is an angel’s feather?”

“Well, not exactly.” Pidge shook their head, their glasses catching the noon sun that seeped through the leafy toned curtains. “It’s more of a catalyst.”

Keith briefly remembered and he told Pidge about Shiro mentioning something about a catalyst and that if he is in dire need, he should call out for someone.

“He didn’t give you a name?” A frown. “Well that doesn’t make sense at all.”

“My life doesn’t make sense, Pidge.” Keith grimaced with sour look on his face. “It’s nothing new.” He took the book from Pidge and flipped through the pages but the words were in a language he didn’t understand. “Do you have Google translate or something its equivalent for your mage stuff?”

“It won’t be much help at all.” Pidge replied. “Angels are secretive creatures and books about them that are actually accurate are very rare and very, very expensive.” They tapped their index finger on a full colored page. “However, from what I know, they are powerful creatures. They had been at war with demons since before humans walked this realm. There are instances that an angel’s powers evolve and they become an archangel.”

“What can an archangel do?” Keith asked.

“Beats me, man.” Pidge shrugged. “Archangels are said to be more powerful than a regular angel and that their powers are the literal demonstration of overkill. It is said that when an angel is becomes an archangel, a great tragedy befalls the mortal realm because they’re that powerful.”
“That sounds pretty badass.”

“It is.” Pidge paused and their expression held a look of thoughtfulness. “Keith, we’re best friends, right? I can tell you anything?”

“Yeah, of course.” Keith nodded and he suddenly looked worried. “What brought that up?”

Pidge pushed up their glasses up the bridge of their nose, a look of seriousness in their eyes. “You’re dealing with very powerful forces here, Keith. Angels don’t fuck around.”

Keith frowned deeply and his violet eyes darkened. He lifted his hand and stared at his open palm to glare at it. “What could they want with me?” he muttered. He clenched his hand into a fist and when he willed it, tiny red sparks flicked between the grooves of his fingers until his whole hand was engulfed in flames that merely licked his skin but did not burn him.

“Hey, man, don’t use your powers like that all of a sudden.” Pidge placed the book they were looking at on the coffee table along the many others that were already opened there. “You know that’s a bad idea.”

“Nah, it’s cool.” Keith shrugged with a small smile. “This is just a little bit. I’m not going to faint.”

“Like the last time?” A teasing grin from Pidge and Keith flipped them his middle finger that was covered in flames before they died out.

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Keith spent the whole day at Pidge’s place. The two of them had a movie marathon of poorly made remakes and they picked on each film with merciless saltiness while they shared the box of shrimp cracklings that they ordered along with their take-away Chinese stir fry. It helped Keith get his mind off the crazy things that happened to him the past few days but the bliss was only temporary and he found himself thinking about it again while he walked back to his place.

He had so much fun with Pidge that he didn’t notice the way time slipped through his fingers like water. When Keith looked at his phone, he jumped up to his feet in shock when he saw that it was already quarter to midnight already.

Keith’s place wasn’t very far from Pidge’s and it was a good twenty minutes by foot but fifteen if he picked up the pace. It wasn’t really a problem for Keith to walk by himself at night but with the way things had been for him recently, he couldn’t help but look over his shoulder every few minutes to check if anyone was following him.

For a summer night, the wind was pleasantly cool to the skin that Keith didn’t have to zip up his hoodie. His dark hair which he had pulled up into a pony tail swayed gently from the wind that passed him while he walked.

“Maybe I should cut through the park.” Keith muttered to himself while he stuffed his hands in his hoodie jacket. It would save him some time if he took the short cut and right now, he had been a little bit too desperate for sleep because he hasn’t been getting enough the past few days. Since the park was on the boundary between the good side and the bad side of town, no one really risked going to it for a night jog this late in the evening due to muggers and some other insane shit that lurked in the dark corners.

When Keith heard a rustle behind some bushes, he immediately wanted to think that it was some crackhead doing their thing or maybe a couple is being a little too daring and were doing some inappropriate exhibitionism, but the way the hairs on the back of Keith’s nape stood and goosebumps
prickled his arms told him otherwise. Without pause while he walked, Keith reached for his knife and drew it out before he skillfully slipped it inside his sleeve in a way that he can easily slide it out with ease.

Then, Keith froze when he heard the muffled sobbing of a woman. He stopped in the middle of the paved path and looked around. The park wasn’t very well lit because some of the bulbs on the lamp posts were shattered by ungrateful kids who liked to compete on how many bulbs they can break with a pellet gun. Keith spotted a white figure crumpled by the foot of a flickering lamp post.

It was a woman with long black hair. She wore a white dress and she hugged herself while she rocked back and forth. Keith’s first instinct was to rush to the woman to help her. He felt his stomach churn at the idea that this woman was taken advantage by a man or worse, her attacker is actually a group.

“Hey, miss?” Keith approached the woman and a wave of pity came over him when she flinched at the sound of his voice and became very, very still, her back facing him. “I won’t hurt you, I’m here to help. Could to tell me what happened so I can call 911?”

“D…D-De…” The woman’s voice was quiet, a bare whisper in the silence of the park. The lamp post flickered eerily over them. “De…Delicious.”

“Excuse me, what?” Keith frowned.

“Delicious.” She said. “You smell… delicious.”

Keith realized too late that he’d been played and he paled in fear when the woman suddenly turned her head one hundred and eighty degrees as if she didn’t have any bones in her neck. Cold sweat beaded Keith’s forehead and the scream that he wanted to let out was trapped in his throat. The woman’s face was white and her eyes sockets were hollow pits with a single red dot that glowed in the middle. Her jaw hung low to show rows of razor sharp teeth infested with maggots and its corners were turned up into a horrifying ripped grin.

“SHIT!”
Keith didn’t waste any time, he slid the knife out from his sleeve and stabbed it right through the demon’s right temple. It gave shrill shriek of pain but Keith didn’t stay long enough because he bolted the other way.

“Fuck, Fuck…!” Keith huffed in terror as he ran. When he dared to glance on his shoulder, he was filled with terror when he saw that the woman was running after him in a terrifying manner; she moved as if her bones were fluid, twisting in a horrible abnormal manner while black blood dripped out from the wound on her temple where Keith’s knife was still lodged in. Being too distracted, Keith didn’t know that there was glass bottle on his way and he tripped over it.

When he landed on his ass, the demon was almost to him. It was fight or flight now and the flight option was so far from reach. The demon woman lunged towards him, her bloody claws stretched out and her mouth wide with a shrill scream.
Keith held out his palms forward and reached deep into him to tap into his power. Suddenly, bright red flames burst from his hands and threw the demon back before it moved when he willed it to. Keith commanded his flames to form a cube around him and it solidified into a translucent barrier that was licked by fire. While he still had the energy to hold it up, Keith pulled out the feather from his pocket and glared at it.

“Hey!” He snapped, panicked. “Can you hear me? It’s me, Keith!” he jolted when the demon knocked against the barrier before it jumped back when it was burned but the flames; it hissed at Keith.

“Shiro said you’ll come for me!” Keith continued to yell at the feather. “Are you listening? It’s me, Keeeeeiiiiith, I am your—–“ The demon slammed against the barrier and this time, the surface cracked. Keith desperately tried to hold it up some more but then he felt a wet trickled from his nose. He thought that it was just snot but when he wiped it with the back of his hand, he saw that it was blood.

“Dude, come on! I’m about to die here!” Keith barked harshly at the feather. “I don’t know your name, I don’t know how to call you. But please, please help me!” Suddenly, the feather gave off a soft light before it lifted from between Keith’s fingers and hovered in front of him. Finally, a strong wind blew down which made the flames on his barrier flicker and the feather disintegrated into flecks of lights, leaving Keith behind.

“No, wait, come back! Hey!” Keith’s eyes were wide.

The sound of something slamming against the barrier filled his ears and Keith felt dizzy. The moment that his vision started to grow hazy from using too much of his power, the surface of the barrier flickered and the flames faded, leaving Keith out in the open.

Vulnerable and weakened from using his powers, Keith felt himself sink to the ground while he coughed. It felt like his lungs filled with water and his limbs turned to lead. The demon gave a disgusting maggot infested grin before it lunged at Keith again.

A shrilled scream of pain pierced through the darkness of the moonless night when the demon was slammed down against the concrete by the head. A crater formed on the asphalt where its skull smash through.

“Seriously, it just had to be the disgusting ones.” A male voice Keith has never heard before spoke. When Keith managed to lift his head, his eyes widened.

A man, well built with rich tanned skin and dark brown hair to match towered over the demon, the pad of his boot painfully pinned the creature by the head. The hem of his dark green leather jacket gently flapped in a wind that wasn’t there and the delicate teardrop shaped earring that hung on his right ear matched the color of his stark blue eyes ringed with silver.

The demon writhed beneath his foot and the man jumped back when a powerful force erupted from the creature.

“Hey, look out!” Keith managed to gasp breathlessly from the exhaustion that threatened to pull him under. But before he could say anything more, the man leapt impossibly high into the air and landed in perfect balance on top of a lamppost like he weighed nothing.

“Yeah, yeah, I got this, sheesh!” A bright blue light flashed from his hands that hung loosely on his sides and two chrome pistols materialized in his grasps; one was plated in polished ebony and the other in stark white ivory. Both guns were intricately decorated by symbols painted in gold that Keith had never seen before, even from Pidge’s collection of books.
He fired his weapons simultaneously multiple times when the demon made a mad dash towards him and leaped into the air, mouth of sharp teeth wide open and claws spread to snap the man’s neck. As the bullets flew to their target, they left blue streaks of light in their wake.
The demon screamed as hot lead lodged in its body. The body fell to the ground with a dull thud and it twitched while black blood pooled beneath. After the pistols disappeared from his hands in a flash of light, the man jumped down from the top of the lamppost and landed gracefully beside the lifeless body. Keith watched as the other crouched down and grasped his knife that was still lodged into the demon’s temple before he yanked it out.

Keith had to cover his mouth to prevent himself from throwing up when he saw black liquid ooze out from where his knife was pulled and the man wiped the blade against the demon’s stained white dress.

“That was too easy.” Keith heard him sigh. “I didn’t even break a sweat. If it wasn’t Shiro and Allura who assigned me to do this dirty work, I would have been insulted.”

“I…I’d like to have my knife back.” Keith croaked but then he felt his nerves go on full alert when those inhuman eyes locked with his. They stared at each other for a moment that felt like ages but after that, Keith’s blood ran hot in his veins and his heart sped up when the other man gave him a slow, sexy smirk that whispered of sinful promises.

Slowly, the man stood up and dusted off his jacket and his white shirt with one hand while he held Keith’s blade with the other. Keith managed to roll onto his back and mustered the strength to sit up when the man made his way towards him.

“Hey, cutie, this must be yours.” He said as he crouched down. When he did, Keith felt his breath hitch in his throat when he got a good look of the man’s face; those eyes whose shade of blue cannot possibly exist in this world, held him captive to the very core. Keith reached and took back his knife when it was handed to him, hilt first.

“Thanks.” Keith muttered and he quickly sheathed his dagger where it was originally hidden on the small of his back. “Who...are you?”

Those blue eyes bore deep into his violet ones and he gave that playfully sinister smirk again but Keith’s vision had already gone into the abyss.

“The name’s Lance.” He replied with a wink. “I’m your guardian angel.”

“Oh. Okay.” Then Keith fainted and his body fell to hit the concrete if someone hadn’t caught him in time. Then, he heard a distant;

“Well, *fuck*. Shiro’s going to flay my ass.”

Chapter End Notes

Please do not repost art. Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88
Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update!
Lurk

Chapter by plumeriafairy14

Chapter Summary

The barrier... it weakens every passing day. It is only a matter of time before Altea falls... again.

Chapter Notes

EEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!! So much love in chapter 2! The story has already reached quite a following for only two chapters. So without further ado, forsakenangel88 and I proudly present to you Chapter 3! We hope that you like it and please, let us know what you think of the story and the art!

PS: THE SHALLURA ART KILLED ME. I'M DEAD. IT'S TOO BEAUTIFUL.

Chapter 3

When Keith opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was his water stained ceiling while the ceiling fan spun in its usual dull pattern. He sat up on his bed and pressed his fingers against his temples to massage them; they throbbed for a moment, his heartbeats filling the rush of blood in his ears, then it was gone.

Keith looked down on himself and saw that he was fully clothed but his joints ached. He focused his thoughts to recall what happened and he faintly remembered being chased by a rabid demon before an attractive guy in a green jacket and who wielded twin pistols showed up out of nowhere and saved him.

“Must be a bad dream.” Keith shook his head in disagreement with his memories. He got up from his bed and felt a little proud of himself to see that he actually remembered to remove his shoes before he passed out on the bed. Keith’s stomach made protesting sounds as it demanded to be fed and he realized how famished he felt. Keith went to the small kitchenette in his apartment and opened the fridge.

Empty.

“Great.” Keith sighed and sulked towards the cupboard in hopes to at least find some cereal. As if someone from above heard him, there was a box of unopened Voltron Crisps sitting at the back of the shelf. After Keith checked the expiration date to make sure that a box of cereal didn’t get the privilege of killing him, he washed a bowl and a spoon sitting in the sink. But he froze when he realized that he didn’t have any milk.

“Shit. Dry cereal it is, then.” It was better than nothing. To forget the little setback, he thought about
the dream he had and remembered the last words the stranger said to him.

‘I’m your guardian angel.’

“I don’t have a guardian angel.” Keith muttered as he scrubbed the bowl and rinsed it. “Pidge said they don’t meddle in human affairs.”

“We do when it’s needed.” A voice interrupted and Keith was so spooked that he didn’t even think twice; he turned around and threw the bowl at the intruder who caught it easily with one hand.

Keith stared in disbelief and he braced against the edge of the sink to steady himself when he felt his knees buckle. He gulped in big breaths of air in a desperate attempt to piece together what the hell was happening, but to no avail.

“L-Lance?” Keith forced out. The other man smiled at him but his blue eyes ringed with silver appeared distant and cold. “Shit… you’re…you’re real. It wasn’t a dream!”

“Aw, you remember me! I’m touched.” Lance pulled out a chair and coolly plopped down on it. He tilted the chair back and rested his feet on the table, crossed. He motioned at the running faucet that was left forgotten when Keith was startled. “You might want to turn that off. You can’t even make rent on time what more with a bloated water bill?” He placed down the bowl on the table and Keith felt his heart ram itself against the wall of his chest when the porcelain gave of a loud clink.

“How the fuck did you know that?” Keith asked suspiciously after he forced himself to calm down and he narrowed his eyes at Lance.

“The sire told me.” A shrug and those blue, blue eyes watched Keith shut off the running water.

“The…sire?”

Lance rocked on the chair back and forth while balancing his weight on the two back legs of the chair. “I think he introduced himself to you as Shiro.” He replied. “He’s my sire. In human terms, he’s my boss.”

“Shiro’s…your boss.” Keith repeated the words breathlessly while he took that information in.

“You really exhausted your powers that it affected your brain?” Lance’s lips pulled up into a smirk but he looked judgingly at Keith and the raven haired youth did not like it one bit.

“This is just too much for me, okay?!” He snapped at Lance. “What the fuck is your problem? You don’t have to be a dick about this.” Keith found his voice and he pushed off from the sink to stand firmly on his feet. “Shiro said that this is free so thank you for saving me back there.” Keith crossed his arms over his chest. “Now, please leave.”

Lance fell quiet and Keith felt his skin lick with fire with the way those inhuman eyes pinned him on the spot. He felt bare underneath the intensity of that blue stare and it felt as if Lance could see through him. It stirred something within Keith and his stomach coiled hotly at the way his body reacted to that burning stare.

“Lance,” Keith forced out, his voice scratchy from disuse. But before he could continue, Lance interrupted;

“I can’t do that.”

“What?” Keith snapped out of the haze and stepped forward in threateningly. “Why?!”
“I’ve been given the task to guard you by her highness, the queen, and her mated pair, the head of the royal guard.” Lance’s boots landed on the floorboards with a hard thump when he pulled them off the table and he got up from the chair. “I can’t just up and leave. We angelic soldiers have a code of honor to which we are bound to.”

Keith inhaled and slowly exhaled. “So, you’re saying that the two of us are stuck with each other until these things stop trying to kill me or the queen and her…” he paused briefly. “What term did you use?”

“Mated pair.” Lance replied. With a wave of his hand, the box of Voltron Crisps levitated in the air and floated towards him. He started to read the back of the box with a bored look on his face and he added absentmindedly; “Commonly known to you folks as spouse or to get in with the times, ‘Bae’.” He shook his head with an amused chuckle. “You humans and your slangs are funny.”

“Oh, well, whatever.” Keith muttered and watched as Lance placed the cereal box on the table. “Look, man, maybe you can stay on the couch or something. It’s not very comfortable but you’ll get used to it.” That old bundle of springs and leather wasn’t the best in the world, but it still did Keith a good service and if Lance was going to be staying here, then he had no right to complain because this was Keith’s home.

“Thank you but I don’t need to sleep much.” Lance said. “Unless exhausted to my limit, I can stay up for days with only a few hours of sleep.”

Keith stared. “Wow. I didn’t think that was even possible.”

“Keith,” Lance finally looked at him and Keith felt himself being pulled into the blue depths of his eyes again. “I’m not human.”

It was warning but Lance’s tone was languid and his smooth voice caressed against Keith’s skin like silk. He didn’t know if angels had that effect on humans, but Keith didn’t appreciate the way his body responded to the hot primal attraction.

Finally, Keith let it go and gave up on this situation. “I’m going to work.” He muttered. Sal would probably get pissed that he came in late but the pizza place was so short staffed that Sal can’t afford to fire people. He turned on his heel and started for his room to retrieve his phone and his usual belongings.

“Keith,” Lance chuckled in amusement. “It’s eleven thirty in the evening.”

“What?!” Keith’s eyes widened in shock and disbelief. When he realized something, Keith made a beeline to his room and grabbed his phone by the nightstand; the battery was at ten percent with ten missed calls and seventeen messages from Pidge and fifty missed calls from Sal. But what baffled Keith was the date. He had been asleep for three days.

“See?” Lance leaned on the doorway of the bedroom. The amused smile still played on his face but the way he looked at Keith still rubbed wrong and sinfully right at the same time. “Don’t act so surprised, I’m sure that this isn’t the first time.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean that I’m still not freaked by all of this!” Keith hurried and unlocked his phone to send a quick message to Pidge that he was okay. All of Pidge’s messages murdered the caps lock and it was like Keith could hear them screaming at him from the other side of the screen.

‘Dood, made u some new barrier talismans. U free? I can drop them off at ur place.’
‘Jeepers Keefers? Yo?????’

‘It’s been 24 hrs, u ok man?’

‘KEITH KOGANE, RU THERE? IT’S BEEN 2 DAYS. YOU BETTER NOT B DEAD. U STILL OWE ME 20$!!!’

There were similar messages but the last message was timestamped two hours ago;

‘Keith. I dunno if u can read this. But I’m coming over in the AM. If I find u dead, I’m hunting whoever did it. So unless you want me in jail or bathed in demon blood, u better not be. Miss u, buddy. CU soon.’

“Whoever sent those texts,” Lance’s voice was suddenly so close behind him that Keith jumped and glared. It was inhuman and impossible to actually move without making a sound but then Keith remembered that Lance isn’t human. “You mean a lot to each other?”

“Pidge is my best friend and they’re a mage.” Keith replied, barely able to push the words out his mouth. He grabbed his charger and plugged in his phone. “They’re one of the very few people who didn’t shun me out for being the way I am.”

A shadow crossed over Lance’s eyes and Keith felt a wave of dread and confusion wash over him. “But do you know what you are, Keith?”

Dumbfounded at the retorted question, Keith frowned. “I’m a human born with a sixth sense and pyro abilities. You know this.”

But Lance shook his head and snorted arrogantly which made Keith’s blood burn with annoyance. “Of course you don’t, a human like you can’t possibly know.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Keith demanded and faced Lance. He had to trail his eyes up a bit to glare because Lance was about two inches taller than him “Do you think this is funny? Do you think I appreciate being left in the dark about what I am?”

“No. I actually think it’s quite tragic.” Lance shrugged. “You’re not even aware of your true potential.”

“Wow, Lance, you sure are a bag of dicks.” Keith fumed. “If some high and mighty power didn’t order you to be here, then I’d kick you out!”

Lance gave a cool laugh which grated through Keith’s nerves like sharp nails against a blackboard. But Keith stepped back when Lance stepped forward to loom over him threateningly.

“Is that supposed to intimidate me?” Lance breathed into Keith’s ear when he leaned in and it sent a shiver down the other’s spine. Lance pulled back with a smug look on his face; “I don’t care how it goes because I’m doing my job right as long as you don’t die or fall into demon hands. And besides,” Those blue eyes ringed with silver pierced through Keith’s very soul, rendering him motionless like cornered prey. Keith’s survival senses screamed for him not to taunt Lance because the way the angel’s form radiated with power, it was obvious that he was lethal. Lance held secrets of his true abilities and Keith wasn’t sure if he wanted to find out.

“It’s not like I’m bound to you forever, mortal.” And with a blink of an eye, Lance was gone leaving Keith breathless and fuming.
“Keith, over here!” Pidge waved from a diner booth. Keith called his best friend the moment his phone came back to life and told them everything that happened. The two of them agreed to meet for breakfast at their favorite diner downtown a couple of hours before Keith’s shift at Pepperoni Sal’s.

“Hey, guess who’s alive?” Was Keith’s first greeting when he slid into the seat across Pidge.

“That’s not fucking funny!” Pidge snapped. “I honestly thought you died! I called up Matt to tell him to prepare himself to help me hide a dead body or maybe stab some demons.”

“Matt is too pure for this world to assist you in your quest for bloodlust and revenge, Pidge.” Keith managed to smile while he mentioned Pidge’s older twin brother. It felt so refreshing to have some company after locking himself in his apartment all night and it actually touched him that Pidge cared.

“Thanks, by the way, Pidge. I’m sorry I worried you.”

Those golden brown eyes softened behind round rimless glasses. “Hey, man, what are friends for?” Pidge then pulled out a brown manila envelope and slid it across the table. “I’ll never forgive you if you died so here are the protection talismans I said I made for you.”

Slowly, Keith took the envelope and pulled out one rectangular slip of paper with strange hand drawn symbols on them.

“Just put them on your door and your windows.” Pidge continued and they pushed their glasses up the bridge of their nose. “In a worst case scenario and some…something tries to break in, they’ll hold enough for you to escape since Matt helped me infuse some extra spells in them.”

“Wow, Pidge, thanks a lot.” Kith gave a wondered gaze. He didn’t want to burden Pidge and Matt like this, but their friendship had been tried and tested over the year. “I didn’t want to bother you like this---”

“Buuullshit, bro!”

“Where’s Matt, by the way?”

Pidge paused took out their phone to check their messages. “He went out last night, he didn’t tell me where he’s been going lately though.” A troubled look crossed those golden brown eyes.

“Have you asked him?” Keith looked concerned. It wasn’t like older Holt twin to keep secrets from his sibling like this. Pidge and Matt were basically inseparable and they’re able to merge their spells and double up the power like an efficient duo.

“Nah, I don’t want to get into his business. He’s been really tired lately.” Pidge grabbed the menu card that laid forgotten at the edge of their table. “So! Breakfast is on me as long as you spill about your new friend.”

Keith felt his mouth pull down into a frown as he remembered Lance’s parting words to him. “He’s a dickbag.” He replied, deadpanned. His eyes scanned the list his menu card then muttered; “Pretty arrogant too.”

“Well, he is a creature of divinity.” Pidge said. “Angels don’t usually meddle in with humans unless demonic powers are at play.” They looked up from the card. “What’s his name, by the way?”

“I’m Lance. Nice to meet you!”
Pidge almost screamed and Keith fell into his first instinct to defend himself while he reached for his knife when a new voice interrupted and Lance was just there, lounging beside Keith while he idly read through the menu.

“Who…how…what in the holy motherfuck…?!” Pidge stared in shock, eyes wide. Keith on the other hand, snapped out from gaping like a cod fish and glared at Lance.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Keith demanded but then he lowered his tone when that earned him quite a few stares from the other customers.

“I’m working.” Lance placed down the menu card and draped an arm on top of the backrest where Keith leaned. “I’m your guardian angel, remember?”

“Unfortunately.” Keith gritted when Lance gave him a smug look.
When there was a friction in the air that felt like hot and cold battled it out, Pidge pipped up;

“You’re an angel?” They asked but then they stilled on their seat when a pair of deep blue eyes ringed with silver locked with theirs. “As in, legit?”

“Legit with a capital L.” Lance replied. “Nice to meet my charge’s best friend. You must be Pidge.” He held out his hand from across the table and Pidge shook it eagerly.

“Nice to meet you too!” they replied enthusiastically.

Finally, the waitress who glared at Keith approached them. She was a cute red head with big blue eyes and a slender waist. She pulled out a notepad and a pencil from her apron pocket. “Are you guys ready to order?”

Keith wanted to gag when she giggled after Lance winked at her and threw in a charming smile. However, Keith wasn’t going to lie; Lance’s smile really was captivating.

“Hey, beautiful.” Lance’s tone was languid. “Can I have the deluxe breakfast platter?”

“Of course.” The woman giggled and a pink blush rose from her cheeks. “And for your friends?”

“French toast would be nice.” Pidge nodded and handed back the menu card to the waitress who wore a name tag on the left side of her blouse; the name, Florona, catching the light.

“Oh,” Keith glanced at his menu and caught the first thing he saw. “The Happy Breakfast plate, please.”

“Oh, could you switch the glass of milk for apple juice?” Pidge eyed Keith sardonically. “He might die.”

“Sure!” Florona scribbled the orders. However, Keith’s sharp eyes discreetly caught Florona sliding a piece of paper towards Lance before she gave a wink and walked off.

“Oh, sweet, she gave me her number!” Lance beamed when he unfolded the piece of paper. Keith grimaced while Lance wore that gloating shit eating grin on his face. But then, he was surprised when the paper disintegrated between Lance’s fingers with single twitch of his index finger.

“Why did you that?” Keith asked as he turned to face Lance. “I thought you’d be stoked to score a girl’s number?”

“Nah.” Lance shrugged, his eyes closed. But then Keith felt his heart slam against his ribs when those lids slowly opened and a pair of silver rimmed blue eyes pinned locked with his. “I prefer raven haired beauties.”

“Uh.”

“Are you two done flirting?” Pidge scowled. “Because an explanation about all that’s going on would be really nice right now.”

“We’re not flirting!” Keith cleared his throat and gathered his wits to calm himself down.

“Aaw, we’re not?” Lance pouted with a mocking look of displeasure.

“Shut up, Lance.” Keith sighed and turned away. “Pidge is right, we need to know what’s going on.” He lowered his tone. “Who are those people Shiro was talking about? I don’t remember pissing anyone off besides my shitty boss.”
“You’re an angel, right?” Pidge’s eyes suddenly shone with interest. “Are there others like you? What’s your realm like? How old are you? Are you immortal? Do you play the harp while sitting on a cloud?”

“Whoah, whoah whooooaaah!” Lance held up his hands in surrender. “One at a time, guys; there’s only one of me!” he said. Then, Lance looked around the diner to make sure there weren’t any suspicious people around before he sunk to his hunches and lowered his voice.

“You first.” He regarded Pidge, his blue gaze playful. “Yes, I’m an angel. Yes, there are others like me. Our realm is called Altea ruled by our queen, Allura. I’m one thousand and one hundred twenty three years old. Angels are immune to time but they can still get killed. No, I don’t play the harp or sit on a cloud or shoot love arrows to make people fall in love.” Lance groaned, exasperated. “Seriously, you humans come up with the craziest stories.”

“One thousand and one hundred twenty thr---holy fuck.” Pidge breathed. “You’re ancient!”

“Wow, dude, that’s harsh!” Lance’s eyes widened and his mouth was pulled down by a frown. “I’m young and beautiful!” He turned to Keith. “Alright, Keith.” He said “Like the sire, I mean Shiro, said; there are people who are after you.” A grim pause. “Specifically, your power.”

“My power?” Keith frowned. “You mean these flames?”

“Bingo.” Lance leaned back against the backrest of the booth’s bench. “You see, you’re a Vessel, a human with growing power called quintessence that is coveted by both angels and demons alike. If the demon lord gets his hands on you, he will drain you dry and use your power to attack us. That’s why we’re trying to protect you. It’s a win-win situation.”

“Oh my god.” Pidge breathed. “Keith is that valuable?”

“Pretty much.” Lance nodded. “Those things that are attacking Keith? Those aren’t even demons, we call them beasts. Demons are the opposite of us angels; they’re a race with a society and their own realm. We angels live in the realm of Altea while demons live in the realm below that we like to call the Galra Empire.”

“That lady…thing… you saved me from a couple of nights ago,” Keith finally found his voice and it cracked from disuse. He had fallen silent while he absorbed what Lance told him and his whole being shook with confusion and disbelief. “It said that I was delicious.”

“Beasts are mindless like how cattle and wild game are in this world.” Lance replied. “But demons are on the top of their food chain.”

“So, like Mothman?”

“Keith, we’re going to have to get to the cryptids later.” Pidge’s tone sliced through the bubbling argument between Lance and Keith before it escalated. “Right now, you have to listen to what Lance has to say.”

“Fine.”

“Oh, I like you already, Pidge. Thanks!” Pidge just sighed and rolled their eyes and Lance took that queue to continue. “Keith’s quintessence is growing stronger and it attracts beasts like honey attracts flies. Those are manageable but the real problem is that it is also a beacon for demons to find him.”

Keith breathed in and exhaled shakily. This can’t be happening to him but unfortunately, it is. However, Keith was born a fighter and he wasn’t going to back down. “Is there a way to fight
“Prince Lotor?” Lance snorted with distaste as he mumbled the name like a curse. “He’ll flick you away like a fly.”

“Who’s prince Lotor—?” Pidge asked a little too loudly but Lance quickly hissed and pressed his index finger against his lips in a gesture of silence that made Pidge immediately clamp their mouth shut.

“Keep it down,” Lance said a little too hurriedly. “Someone might hear you!” Lance paused and looked around the diner suspiciously before he continued; “He’s the demon lord and he’s a really shitty guy.” He paused thoughtfully like he was decided whether to add the last bit or not; “Also, I’m on top of his kill list so there’s that.”

“How the fuck did you end up pissing off the demon lord?” Keith gaped in shock.

“Eh, it happened about five hundred years ago.” Lance simply replied. “I rather keep that to myself.”

They were interrupted when Florona appeared with a tray of their orders. “Sorry for waiting, here’s your order.” One by one, she placed the plates in front of them but winked at Lance when she placed down his deluxe platter. Then, she slid over a cup of coffee. “On the house.” She cooed to him sweetly while she leaned in, pushing herself forward slightly that the collar of her blouse dipped a bit to flaunt her cleavage. When Lance smirked, Keith wanted to throw up and he started to subtly stab the yolk on his sunny eggs and it ran down to flood his Happy Breakfast platter, making the smiley face of bacon and eggs look utterly miserable.

“Seriously,” he muttered. “I don’t know whether to take this guy seriously or not.”

“I think you should.” Pidge whispered from where they sat across the table. “Right now, this guy’s your hope for survival.”

Keith glanced at Lance and grimaced when Lance started to make lame pick up lines on Florona. “I fear for my life already.”

“You have to trust me, Keith.” Lance suddenly interrupted. “I’d hate to get in trouble with the queen and soil my spotless record.” He shrugged and started to eat his breakfast after Florona walked to cater to the other customers in the diner. “I know we got off the wrong foot but let’s make this arrangement work, alright?”

“Do I have a choice?” Keith sighed sourly. But since he’s desperate not to get killed by these beings that were after him, Keith had to suck it up. However, he didn’t plan to rely on Lance for the rest of his life. He had to learn how to fight back until he can hold his own ground.

“Aww, don’t play so hard to get, sweetheart.” Keith shivered and a wave of heat rushed through his veins when Lance leaned in to smile smugly at him, those silver ringed eyes holding a mischievous glint in them. “I’m actually a pretty great guy once you get to know me personally.”

~

Altea, the realm of the angels; a world above a sea of clouds, proud mountain ranges, lush forests, flowering fields, and crystal clear waters in rivers which flowed to the edge. A translucent blue barrier that twinkled with symbols wrapped around the land like a dome, separating Altea from the world of cloud and mist outside.

In the heart of land was a kingdom bustling with the life of an angelic civilization. A palace of white
marble and crystal stood proudly in the middle of the kingdom like a beacon as it is the seat of power. Within the beautifully manicured gardens and lushly carpeted halls rich with Altean history, Shiro walked. He did not wear a glamor spell today to hide the great arching wings closed tightly against his broad back. The feathers were an inky black peppered with silvery glitters that caught the sunlight and it looked like Shiro wore a cape made out of the night sky.

Having ended up before two ceiling-to-floor twin doors, the angelic guards saluted.

“Sire.” They both muttered and Shiro nodded in acknowledgement.

“Good morning.” Even if Shiro was high on the angelic hierarchy as the head of the royal guard, an archangel, and the husband of the queen, he had retained an air of humility about him because Shiro knew what it was like to have nothing. “Is my wife busy?”

“The queen speaks with the royal adviser, sire.” One of the guards replied.

“Thank you. That would be all.”

“Sire.” A twin response from the guards as they held the doors to part farther and Shiro walked inside the lounge.

“Ah, Shiro!” Coran greeted happily when he looked up from his cup of tea and he placed the elegant cup back to its matching saucer. Coran was one of the Ancient angels that walked Altea but his true age that are too great to count to matter did not faze his friendly attitude. With ginger hair neatly combed back against his head. Coran carried with him the valuable knowledge and wisdom acquired from serving Allura’s predecessor, her father, king Alfor. Unlike Shiro, Coran concealed his wings today with a glamor spell and he would have looked plain if it wasn’t for the molten silver that ringed his irises.

“Good of you to join us, sire!” He optimistically got up to his feet and gave an elegant bow.

“Coran, you don’t really need to do that.” Shiro shook his head with a smile. “You’ve been around far longer than I have.”

“Ah, nonsense!” Coran waved it off with a gloved hand and reached to twirl the end of his neatly kept mustache. “It is common courtesy for the head of the royal guard, yes, indeed!”

Behind Coran, Allura rose from her seat and Shiro’s eyes followed each and every one of her elegant movements. Her wings rustled behind her and the dove white feathers that turned deep lavender at the roots glistened like white gold when it caught the light. Shiro’s felt his breath hitch in his throat when his wife smiled at him and he found himself smiling back, blushing like a fledgeling. Their mating bond, the soul deep connection which bound angels to each other out of love, had formed thousands of years ago during the First Siege of Altea but until now, Allura still took Shiro’s breath away with just a simple smile.

“How did your morning rounds go?” Allura’s tone was kind but when she smiled, Shiro saw that she looked troubled. “I do not feel any presence clawing outside the barrier but I don’t want to let it get ahead of me.”

“Everything is peaceful when I flew around it with Hunk and his squadron.” Shiro replied. “How do you feel today?”

“I’m fine but I could feel the barrier continuing to weaken.” Blue lilac eyes turned their gaze down to glare at the hem of her skirts. “Did Lance…?”
“Keith already summoned him.” Shiro nodded and sat down.

“Keith is the Vessel’s name?” Coran spoke up after quite some time. He took the pot of tea and started to pour the hot liquid into the empty cup in front of Shiro. He shook his head to silence Shiro even before he was able to protest to be served. “This human possess such powerful quintessence that we had to send in one of our best people to protect him?”

“Yes.” Allura replied. She turned around and walked to the large window before she pushed them open. The cool morning air that flooded the room carried with it the scent of the flowers that bloomed on the garden several stories below. “If only we could bring him here, it would make our task easier.”

When the wind blew, colorful petals fluttered in the air and a small, delicate petal flew towards Allura. She reached and caught it carefully between cupped hands. “But to pluck him out of his home would be cruel.” Like taking a bird from its nest to keep in a cage in one’s home.

“His body might not be able to withstand the magical demands of this world.” Coran frowned and he twirled the end of his mustache again while his brows furrowed over his eyes. “No human has ever stepped foot in Altea. With how fragile their bodies are, they will quickly wither to a husk!”

“I’m sure we’ll find a solution.” Shiro attempted to soothe the tension and when Allura looked at him, he offered a kind smile to comfort his wife.

“We have to arrive to one soon, Shiro.” Allura curled her fingers over the folds of her gown to show her uneasiness. “It must---ah!”

“Allura!” Shiro was quickly to his feet and beside Allura. He placed his mechanical arm around her form carefully and supported her until she got her balance back. “Are you alright? What happened?”
“The barrier,” Allura gasped. “Something big is trying to break through!”

“Oh, no.” Coran breathed but he wasn’t able to get time to react when the ground shook beneath their feet. It stopped and repeated as the assailant barged again, trying to break through the barrier.

“Sire!” the two guards by the door entered hastily, panic clearly in their eyes. “We’re under attack!” one of them said.
“The generals are on stand by with their squadrons, sir!” The other huffed out. “Another squadron has gone ahead for the first assault!”

“What are we dealing with?” Allura gritted in frustration and there was a flare of anger in her eyes.

“We don’t know what it is, your highness.” The first guard spoke. “But it’s a big one.”

“Close down the city and fortify the walls.” Shiro’s tone was crisp with authority while he gave orders and the guards hurried off. “I need to go.” Shiro turned to leave but was held back when Allura suddenly gripped his mechanical arm.

“I will secure the city. You be careful.” Her tone was edged with steel yet her eyes held worry in them. “You will come back to me.” It was both a plea and an order. “Do you understand, Shiro?”

“Don’t I always?” Shiro flashed quick grin which made the queen roll her eyes. Shiro leaned in to press a kiss on Allura’s lips before he lunged out of the window and in one swift movement, those majestic wings snapped open and spread to their full length. With one powerful flap and a powerful wind from the force, Shiro shot off into the distance.

“So that’s how he snuck into the castle to see you when you two were younglings.” Coran commented lightly. “Adventurous night escapades, I remember!”

“Coran.” Allura sighed and with a wave of her hand, a flash of white light formed on her right hand and it elongated to take the form of a white staff before as it solidified. The weapon looked like a regular staff with elegant etchings of gold vines and constellations that adorned the shaft. “Let’s just focus.”

This occurrence wasn’t new to the angels. It was just a regular day for a race at war with the demons.

~

As usual, Keith’s shift at Pepperoni Sal’s was eventful as paint drying. Since they were short staffed for that day, Keith had to take in store duties when there wasn’t a delivery to be made. Mostly, it was front lining with one of his co-workers, Laika. With a big boned body built like an Amazonian, a permanent scowl, and hooded eyes, Laika is one of Sal’s longest employed personnel. Keith liked Laika because she was a woman of few words and she was usually straight to the point. Keith didn’t feel obligated to strike a conversation with her and besides her strong but quiet presence, Laika was actually friendly.

“Four slices of Chef’s Supreme, no pineapples, one large Sprite, and a four-piece wing basket?” Keith mechanically read the order when he pulled the readied tray from the small window that led to the kitchen out back. Is this for table 4?”

“Yup.” Laika replied without looking at Keith while she pressed the buttons on the register.

“Do you mind pulling out the next order tray?” Keith wiped his hands on his standard issue Pepperoni Sal apron.

“Nope.”

“Thanks, Laika.”

“Yup.”

Keith took the tray to the table where the customer was waiting and he put on a small automatic
smile. “Sorry for waiting.” He said. “Here’s your order.”

“Thanks.”

The guy who thanked Keith had a lazy charm about him; his bleached hair was flipped to one side while the other side was shaved to reveal tribal patterns etched on his scalp. Dark eyes, tanned skin, and a laid back smile; Keith stared.

“Sure.” Keith replied with a small smile and he prayed that his face didn’t turn on its habit of turning into a tomato whenever he interacted with an attractive person. “Well, enjoy your pizza!”

Keith quickly turned around to go back to work when the customer called him back. “Hey, what’s your name, by the way?”

“Uh, Keith.” Keith blurted out when he looked over his shoulder at the guy who smiled lazily at him. He felt his dark gaze slide up and down his body while he checked him out and Keith felt a strange feeling bubble in him. This guy was really, really attractive but Keith didn’t understand the strange churn in his gut and the way his heart rate sped up. Maybe he was infatuated and he felt awkward about it? However, it didn’t feel the same kind of charm a certain angel had.

“Nice to meet you, Keith.” The other replied as he took a sip from the straw of his drink. “I’m Rolo. Let’s get along, yeah?” a sly wink.

Since there was nothing else to do while Keith was at work, Lance passed his time by trying to do clean up jobs in and around the city.

Gunshots pierced the air and silver bullets flew, leaving blue streaks of light on their trail. Lance leapt into the air to dodge the grimy tentacles that shot towards him. He grinned mischievously when the creature missed. This one was a coward; it hid its body at the bottom of the dirty lake underneath the mud and the garbage.

“I’d have to give you credit for trying.” Lance grinned. He quickly landed on one of the solid black tentacles that attempted to stab him. It was thick like a tree’s trunk but it was fast for its size. Unfortunately, Lance was faster.

“Too bad you’re underwater!” The silver that ringed Lance’s blue irises glowed with power and he ran along the beast’s tentacle towards its body hidden by the water. With a swift movement of his hand and a silent command, the grimy waters obeyed Lance and parted to reveal a huge ball-like creature covered with sickly looking tumors; in the middle of it was a single large eye. Once the creature was revealed, Lance took aim and fired his pistols at the center of the eye where the weak spot was supposed to be.

A shriek filled the air and the creature was pierced with blue lights the imploded within where Lance’s bullets hit before it blew up into chunks of black debris that dissipated into black ash. There was a loud crash when Lance willed the water to close in and he landed on the edge of the lake. He landed on the edge of the lake and when spotted a small black slug that attempted to wiggle away from him so he walked towards it and stomped on it, crushing it underneath the sole of his boot.

“Can’t have you regenerating again, you piece of shit.” Lance muttered as twin enchanted pistols disappeared from his hands. Suddenly, a cold jolt of electricity slid down his spine and he quickly snapped his head up towards the overcast sky as his intuition kicked in.

“Well, well, well,” Lance’s smile was slow but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Looks like one of Lotor’s
pets decided to show up.”

**Chapter End Notes**

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forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my [tumblr](https://example.com)! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update!
Chapter 4

A woman with deep olive toned skin knelt on a pillow cushion in front of a huge crystal the size of a giant boulder. The hem of her earth toned robes pooled around the pedestal where she knelt and her head was bowed, her eyes closed in concentration. Her mint colored wings draped behind her like a pastel cloak and each jewel colored follicle of her feathers caught the flickering torch lights from the walls of the shrine.

Carefully, she reached towards the crystal and rested her palm against the smooth surface. She lowered her head and the veil she wore on her head cast a shadow on her gentle features.

“King Alfor,” she whispered and the crystal began to glow underneath her hand. “Please, hold strong. We need you more than ever, your daughter, our queen… She fights for you as well. Please, help us…”

The light flickered underneath her hand and she lifted her head. As she did, the veil slid back from her head to reveal dark brown hair that was braided and twisted into a bun impaled with a lacquered hair ornament to pin it in place. Triangular gold earrings glinted under the firelight and dark lashes fluttered open when she opened her eyes to reveal a pair of deep topaz colored eyes framed with silver.

“Your majesty.” She whispered sadly. “Your power is running out?”

Silence.
“The battle is over.” She mumbled as the crystal throbbed underneath her palm. “Ten dead…” she continued as her eyes became hooded while the crystal ‘spoke’ to her. “Several wounded including…” Her eyes widened and dread filled her heart when an image of her wounded mated pair flashed before her eyes. “…No.”

Suddenly, the wooden doors of the shrine burst open to reveal her older brother.

“Shay!” he gasped for breath, his mahogany wings dragging behind him. “The wounded are here…!”

“Is Hunk alright?” Shay quickly got to her feet and her eyes searched her older brother worriedly. “Rax, please, tell me!”

“A deep gash on his left shoulder and a broken wing but nothing life threatening.” Rax replied. “His grace, Shiro, is here—” Rax wasn’t able to continue when his younger sibling rushed past him, her skirts brushing against the limestone floor. “Shay!”

Shay burst through the infirmary to see that her acolytes were already on the task of tending to the wounded. Some of them scurried around to gather ceremonial boxes filled with fragrant rosewood shavings for the funeral pyres for the dead and their hearts shattered at the sight of those who died to protect Altea.

“Sire!” she picked up her skirts so that she wouldn’t trip on them when she spotted Shiro in the chaos of the spacious room. “Sire!”

“Lady Shay.” Shiro turned to face her and he caught her by the shoulders when she nearly slammed into him. With one look with those obsidian silver ringed eyes and he knew; “Hunk is alive, don’t worry. I’ll have you know that he landed the killing blow.”

Shay’s heart swelled with pride and a hopeful smile animated her gentle features. “He did?”

Shiro nodded and wordlessly gestured on a cot obscured by a white curtain.

“Thank you, sire! Please, leave the rest to my acolytes.” Shay’s eyes searched Shiro’s form. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Shiro replied and placed his arm on Shay’s shoulder to give it an affirming squeeze. “I need to return to my wife. I’m going to get an earful from her if I make her worry for too long.” A shrug. “You know how she gets.”

A soft giggle and Shay gave an understanding nod. “The Galra Empire hath no fury like a mate scorned, yes? Please put your trust on me and my acolytes to tend to your wounded men and women.”

“You’ve never failed us before, lady Shay.” Shiro motioned at the closed white curtains at the end of the room. “Go. Hunk’s been asking for you.” A sigh. “He refused to be healed by anyone else but you.”

“That stubborn…uhg!” Shay muttered and her hands curled into fists. “I told him not to be reckless!” she turned to look at Shiro once again and dipped her head into a respectful bow. “Thank you once again for making sure nothing happened to Hunk, Sire. Please, send my regards to the queen.” And she darted off.

Shay grasped the curtain and parted it to reveal a large angel on the bed. His wings were broad and the feathers were a warm mahogany flecked with warm sunshine yellow on the tips and bore the
same striations a falcon has. His black bangs were held back by a strip of orange cloth and the white linen of the cot was stained with the crimson of his blood flowing from the gash on his shoulder.

When their eyes met, Hunk cracked a pained grin. “Oh, hey, Shay!” he glanced at his shoulder where the muscle and tendon were already knitting back together by itself but the blood still leaked out, making him lightheaded. “Uh, I can explain! Oh, by the way, could you not tell Lance about this when he gets back? He’s not going to let me live it down.”

“Be quiet.” Shay quickly got to work and knelt beside the cot to carefully peel off Hunk’s bloody shirt and armor. “Let me see.”

Hunk was quiet while Altea’s head priestess and the best healer in the realm assessed his injuries.

“Torn ligaments and a punctured artery. Broken wing, but a sling could fix that.” Shay muttered while her fingers gently brushed over the wet gash. Her blood stained fingers started to glow with a soft warm light and she closed her eyes to focus her magic into closing the wound.

“You should have let the other acolytes render emergency aid, dear.” Shay frowned when she finished her task. The gash was now a tender pink line and she grabbed some herbal salve from the drawer along with some cloth to make a sling for Hunk’s wing.

“Nuh-uh!” Hunk shook his head. “I want the best of them.”

“Do not give me that!” Shay’s voice was soft but it was edgy. Her hands worked nimbly while she bandaged his shoulder. She helped Hunk sit up before she assessed his wing and used magic to reform it where it was shattered to the bone. “You could have bled to death, you stubborn man!”

“Please don’t be mad at me.” Despite Hunk’s size, he seem to shrink when Shay scolded him. “But if I can help it, I rather you heal me.”

“Why?” Shay asked with a scowl but in response, Hunk waved his hand and the white curtain slid shut behind her, isolating them from the chaos of the room. He leaned towards the healer and pressed their lips into a lingering, loving kiss. Shay melted against the warmth of it and her loose sleeves whispered against the air when she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Next time, when you’re bleeding to death, quit being stubborn and let the acolytes tend to you.” Shay breathed between their lips. “Squadron leader or not, you have your limitations. Please don’t worry me like that.”

“Yes, my lady.” Hunk smiled and Shay’s cheeks tinted with a soft pink. She leaned in again when Hunk did but their kiss was interrupted by one of the acolytes calling for Shay for assistance with the others who were brutally wounded.

“Aw.” Hunk pouted and Shay suppressed a giggle and finished bandaging her mate’s wing.

“Oh, shush.” The healer said as she got up. “You need to rest.” She patted his wing which was restrained with a sling. “It’s only dislocation so you’ll be able to fly in a couple of hours.” Angelic bodies had the ability to regenerate rapidly if the injury isn’t grave. However, even if they are immune to the passage of time, they can still get killed as proof of the soldiers who will burn in the funeral pyres tonight, their bodies joining the embers and their souls being carried away into the beyond along with the scent of rosewood.

“But, Shay!” Hunk whined and he took her delicate hand. The pad of his callused thumb rubbed lovingly against her palm.
The priestess leaned in and pressed a kiss on the edge of his lips. “Later.” She promised her mate; when the shrine is quiet and all are asleep, they shall be with each other, undisturbed in their bedchamber. “Now, rest. I need to tend to the others.”

“Okay.”

Shay gave Hunk one last smile before she disappeared behind the curtain.

Hunk laid down on the cot and stared at the wooden ceiling. It took some adjusting so that his weight didn’t burden his injured wing. As he stared at the flickering torch on the wall, his brows bunched over his dark eyes as he recounted the fight with the beast that tried to break through the barrier. He thought about the massive size of the half goat, half centipede creature; they don’t usually get beasts that huge. Considering that the beast bore the Galra emblem etched and glowing on its forehead, it was a sign that the creature was made by dark magic. But to create something that huge would require quite an amount of quintessence.

“Where are the demons getting all this quintessence?” Hunk muttered but the only answer he got was sleep washing over him.

~

The warm water ran down Keith’s naked body and the suds slid on the hard planes and valleys of his torso. He craned his neck up and accepted the warm spray of the water that fell from the showerhead as it loosed his tense muscles. He thought about his day and he thought about tomorrow. He thought whether he should surf mothman.org tonight or do some meditation.

As Keith’s mind wandered his muscles turned lax underneath the spray of the water and he slowly closed his eyes while he ran his hands all over his body to lather it with soap. The touch of his own hands sparked his nerves into life and he bit his lower lip while he felt the tips of his fingers brush against his over sensitized skin. Heat coiled in the pit of his stomach and blood ran south as he started to get hard; he imagined that the water that trickled down his body were hands that caressed him with sinful invitation. Slowly, his hand reached to slide down against the plane of his stomach and his fingers firmly wrapped around his cock. Keith hissed and threw his head back when he squeezed his shaft and stroked slowly, teasing himself into a sexual fantasy. He bent over slightly and braced himself against the tiles with the back of his forearm. The soap and water made it easy to stroke and Keith buckled against the rising pleasure and his eyes slowly opened with his violet irises dark with arousal.

He imagined someone behind him, trapping Keith against his hard body and the tiles while he had his way with him. Keith’s finger momentarily deviated from his member and reached further behind to tease the puckered hole of his entrance. He felt himself loosen slightly and he slipped a finger inside to slightly probe his inner walls before he pulled back and worked his cock again. Keith moaned and felt his blood run hot in his body from the thrill of fucking with a faceless stranger like he did once in a while. Keith tightened his grip and pumped his dick harder in his hand.

“Fuck!” He gasped shamelessly and threw his head back as he cried out. His whole body trembled when Keith came, spilling into his hand, and just as he came undone against the wet tiles, the stranger suddenly had a face; brown hair, an alluring smirk, and blue eyes ringed with silver.

Keith quickly staggered back and his eyes snapped open. “Wh-What… the hell?” His erection slowly died down but the blood rushed to his face this time. He shut off the shower and heaved in a deep breath before he shook his head to clear his mind. Keith didn’t know why it was Lance he thought of automatically and he didn’t want to find out so he shrugged it off.
Steam emanated from the doorway of the bathroom when Keith walked out shirtless and just a pair of sweatpants on while the damp towel was draped over his head like a veil. To help cool down the room down since it was already nearing summer, Keith went over to the window and lifted the blinds so that he can open the window to let the cool night air inside.

But then, the wind blew and Keith caught the scent of the ocean; fresh, clean, and free. He found it strange since he was miles away from the beach but the scent the wind carried relaxed him further and he heaved in a satisfied sigh.

“Did you know that you make the most delicious sounds, Keith?” A purr that caressed the secret corners of Keith’s body that made his blood run hot.

“Son of a---!” Keith was quick to move and the next thing he knew, he had his knife against the tanned skin of Lance’s neck who peeked upside down from the window. His ethereal eyes were wide, nervous sweat beaded on his forehead, and his smile was frozen on his face. Keith quickly pulled the knife back and Lance hopped on to sit on the windowsill.

“Hey, be careful where you point that thing.” Lance gestured at the black bladed knife in Keith’s hand.

“How the fuck do you think I would react?” Keith demanded. “You’re… you’re on my window and I live on the third floor!” When he realized what Lance had said first, his face burst into a deep red. “And you were listening?! Where were you? Were you in there with me, you creep?!”

“No, I was on the roof.” Lance shrugged. “It’s where I’ve been staying since you kicked me out. Also,” he reached to tap his right ear and the single tear drop shaped sapphire earring caught the light when it swayed. “I’ve got keen senses. I can tell you what the couple who lives on the building across the street were fighting about or the dirty things they said while they had sex last ni---”

“No, you can keep that to yourself.” Keith shook his head. “You’ve been on the roof all this time? You sleep there?”

Lance shook his head and smiled. “Nope. Last I slept was before I left Altea to come to you. And well, I’ve been up for a few days and killing things so that they don’t get to you first but it took its toll on me.” He paused and scratched the back of his head awkwardly when he tore his eyes away, looking a little bit embarrassed. “So, I was wondering if you could let me sleep on your couch tonight.”

Keith bit his lower lip because of the guilt that chewed on him. If he only knew that Lance was living on the grimy roof and was in the same equivalent as someone who was homeless, he never would have kicked him out heartlessly.

“Sure, come in.” Keith motioned for Lance to enter.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t stab me with that thing; it’s going to blemish my complexion if that ended up in my neck.” Lance motioned at Keith’s knife as he hopped inside and proceeded to take off his jacket to reveal a simple white v neck shirt with blue three fourth sleeves. He stretched his arms and groaned when his joints gave a satisfied pop. However, the sounds Lance made rubbed against Keith suggestively. “By the way, that knife doesn’t look native to this realm, where did you get it?”

Keith paused and a shadow crossed his violet gaze. “My dad gave it to me and he also taught me how to fight with it. I’ve had it for as long I can remember.”
“Where’s your dad?”

“Dead.”

“Oh.” Lance’s cheery air gloomed a bit from the revelation and when he spoke again, his tone was careful. “Well uhm, I’m sorry to hear about your dad but do you know where he got that?”

Keith shook his head and the angel sighed. Lance took the time to plop down on the couch and he rolled his jacket as makeshift pillow. He bent down to unlace his boots and toed them off. Finally, he stretched and lounged on the couch like a lazy cat.

“I don’t know about you,” he continued. “But I can feel some weird power radiating from that thing the first time I saw you use it at the park a couple of nights ago. It could be that he was involved with higher beings too. Did your mom know about your powers too?”

Keith studied the sheathed blade on his hand with a troubled look in his eyes. “I… don’t know about that. I never knew my mom either.” he admitted. “Dad said she died giving birth to me.”

He would never forget that fateful rainy. That same afternoon, the cops knocked on their apartment door. Keith was only seven when he was told that his dad was found dead. The rest of his childhood was a blur of faces from the foster families that passed him around and he left the moment he turned the legal age to live on his own. Keith didn’t really know what he was or what made him the way he was. But he felt like he didn’t belong here.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Keith shrugged but he felt a pang of loneliness in his chest. “It’s alright.”

There was heavy silence that fell between them but then Lance broke it with a serious tone. “Keith, I felt a demonic presence today.”

“You mean another of those creepy monster things?”

Dark brown locks of hair swayed when Lance shook his head. “No,” he said. “This one is powerful. It’s a demon from the Galra Empire. I need you to be on a look out, okay? I’m not around all the time since part of my job is to clear out a wide perimeter of pests so they don’t up and attack you.”

“I can fight, Lance.” Keith blurted out with reprimand. “I can defend myself!”

“You don’t know what you’re up against here, Keith.” It was obvious that Lance was trying to hold back the tone of argument in his voice. “You can’t just stab this person and run.”

“I’m used to things trying to kill me!” Keith bit back. “It’s been like this way since before you arrived, okay?” Keith knew that he was only human, but he hated that he had to be dependent on Lance. Then he growled under his breath when Lance chuckled softly and rolled his eyes;

“They won’t kill you in one go, Keith.” Those blue eyes darkened and his pupils turned dark. The silver around his irises glowed dangerously. “They will capture you first then drain your quintessence like how you drain the blood of an animal on the slaughtering block. I’m here to keep you safe.”

“Well,” that’s blunt.” Keith forced out but he felt a chill run down his spine from the image Lance planted in his mind. However, coiling heat bloomed in Keith with the way Lance watched him, his blue gaze gliding all over his shirtless torso before it dipped lower, and lower…
“Fine.” Keith finally huffed. He tore his eyes away and motioned towards his room. “I’m getting some shut-eye.”

“Good night!” Lance’s happy demeanor returned as Keith walked away from him and opened his door. “If the bed gets cold, just call on me and maybe we can heat it up.” A wink.

Keith groaned and hoped that he kept his head low enough to hide how red his face was. “Good night, Lance.” Then he closed the door.

Keith pulled off the towel from his damp head and slung it over his shoulder. He knew that he should stay out of Lance’s way right now and not disturb. Keith just hoped that none of those good for nothing creatures get the urge to attack and if ever, for Pidge’s spells to hold while the angel slept. He turned off the lights and used his phone to light his way while he made his way to his bed. He let himself flop down on the squeaky bag of springs before he scrolled through his phone. He would usually feel sleep after a couple of minutes but right now, Keith’s mind was buzzing with life. He had always been headstrong; proud and a fighter. He knew that Lance wouldn’t be there to save him all the time.

Keith thought about the angel asleep on his couch in the living room. He looked so exhausted but still had it to shamelessly flirt with Keith and to openly grate through his nerves that made his body react hotly. However, deep inside, he felt guilty and he hated feeling like a burden.

Finally, Keith’s hand crept underneath his pillow and felt the hilt of his dagger. He gripped the handle tightly and determination was set in him; if he was going to be useful, he would have to learn how to use this knife and how to fight properly with it. Keith told himself that the first thing he’s going to do when he wakes up tomorrow morning is to march up to Lance and ask him to teach him how to fight.

~

Later that night, Pidge smiled on the webcam while they engaged in a skype call with their parents who were currently on a European tour.

“How are you over there, sweetheart?” Samuel Holt asked. The early sunlight shone through the window behind him and Pidge could see the blueness of the ocean against the backdrop of the horizon.

“I’m okay, dad.” Pidge replied with a tired smile. They pulled up their glasses so that they could rub their eyes and they stifled a yawn. “How’s Greece?”

“It’s absolutely beautiful, Pidge!” Coleen piped from where she sat beside Samuel. “I wish you and your brother were here with us right now. Greece is rich in literature and magic. I think you and Matt would have a blast!”

“It’s okay, mom.” Pidge said. “This trip is for your wedding anniversary so you guys should be with each other and not have me and Matt drag you down.”

“Nonsense, honey!” Samuel laughed and shook his head. “Next year, we’re going to Asia and our lovely set of twins will come with us!” Then he paused, confusion in his pale brown eyes. “Speaking of, where is your brother?”

Pidge pursed their lips together and glanced at the clock that hung wall. The whole apartment was filled with the monotone ticking of the pendulum while the hands read 1:45 AM. They turned back to face the screen and forced a smile; Pidge knew better than to tell their parents the truth and ruin
their trip by making them rush back home.

“Matt’s fine, dad.” They said. “He’s already asleep since he’s exhausted.”

“That boy,” Coleen sighed. “Always working himself to the bone that he sometimes forget to take care of himself. I hope that you’re getting enough rest too, dear.” She wagged a reprimanding finger at Pidge. “I know that I’m blessed with geniuses and magically talented babies but I hope that you still remember look after yourselves.”

“We’re fine, mom.” Pidge assured Coleen. “You two better go and get your day started. Send us pics!”

“Will do, sweetheart.” Samuel nodded. “You and your brother stay safe over there.”

“We will, dad.” Pidge nodded and prayed that their smile looked genuine enough. “Have a great day. Love you!”

“We love you too, baby.” Coleen replied sweetly and the call ended with the laptop screen turning black before it slowly faded in to reveal their wallpaper; a picture of her and Matt.

Pidge reached for their phone and fired another repeated message for Matt; ‘Where r u?’

This was the fifth message Pidge had sent in a span of an hour. Matt, of course, did not answer which led Pidge to flood her twin brother’s inbox with the same message.

“Five more minutes.” Pidge muttered. Five minutes and that is when they will start calling but then they were interrupted when the front door opened and Matt walked in, exhausted. His casual clothes were a wrinkled mess and he reeked of booze and the scent of vape flavors that clung on his shirt. His golden brown eyes that matched Pidge’s were half lidded and tired and every movement he made was burdened with fatigue.

“Where have you been?” Pidge demanded and Matt looked at her. “Do you see the time?! Why weren’t you answering my calls?”

“Huh?” Matt blinked once and dully glanced at the clock then he tossed his small bag of belongings on the couch carelessly. “Oh, yeah, well, whatever. At least I’m safe and warm.” He then proceeded to ignore Pidge and half dragged himself to his room.

“Matt!”

“What?”

Pidge got up to their feet and stomped towards their fraternal twin. “Answer me, where have you been?! Mom and dad were asking where you were and I had to lie again, Matt!”

“I was just out with some friends.” Matt groaned with a sigh. “Could you not yell? I have a bad headache but I’m safe and warm. See ‘ya in the morning, squirt.”

Pidge gritted their teeth in frustration when Matt turned his back on them and went inside. But as he did, their eyes widened when they caught sight of Matt’s neck; dark violet veins webbed his pale skin and yellowed bruises peeked out the curtain of dark brown hair that covered his nape.

“Matt…” Pidge began and their voice shook. “Why… why won’t you talk to me?”

“I’m tired, Katie.” Matt grumbled and Pidge frowned; Matt rarely used their birth name and only did
so when he was tired, frustrated, upset, or when the two of them were fighting. “Don’t worry… I’m safe and warm.” He opened the door and a loud bang filled their home when he slammed it shut.

Pidge glared at the closed door and clenched their hands into fists. This has been going on for two weeks now since their parents left for their three month European cruise a month ago. Matt would always come home messed up like this and he had those marks on his neck that made it look like he was injured but he wasn’t. When they saw their brother’s bag on the couch, Pidge went over and started rummaging through. It was filled with Matt’s usual essentials; his wallet, a notebook, his phone, and some magical items he carried around to aid him in the use of magic. However, a piece of paper caught Pidge’s attention. It was crumpled but the paper was glossy like a magazine page. When they unrolled it, the only thing printed on it was an embossed logo and a name of the club;

*The Bakku Garden*

The logo was a Neon pink and green palm leaf and the tip dissipated into colorful smoke. When Pidge tilted the paper, the light caught the shimmer of the mirage of words at the bottom that were faintly printed in silver;

‘Safe and warm.’

~

Keith kicked the back door open since his hands were occupied with carrying two heavy black plastic bags of garbage. He was in the middle of his shift the following day and his back was already aching. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on his day off the following day. He hauled the first bag into the dumpster in the alley behind Pepperoni Sal’s then the other. With those finally in the bin, Keith clapped his hands in a sliding motion before he reached up to wipe away the sweat that beaded on his forehead.

Violet eyes glinted in the early afternoon sun when Keith looked up to survey what part of the sky wasn’t covered by rusting roof tiles and clothes wires. In the distance, he heard cicadas from the few trees that lined the sidewalk. He wasn’t looking forward to the summer and he needed to work extra to make up for the three days that he missed because he passed out from overusing his abilities. His air conditioning wasn’t going to fix itself and that was going to cost him a pretty penny.

“Hey, sweetheart~”

The next thing he knew, he was gently pushed back and he hit the alley wall as he was trapped between it and Lance’s hard body. Keith gulped in a deep breath as he was sucked into those silver ringed blue eyes when Lace’s finger gently tilted his chin up.

“Lance, what the fuck, man!” Keith tugged his chin away and slipped away from the spot where Lance had cornered him. “Have you ever heard about personal space?” Keith planted his hands on his hips and he was breathing had from being startled. However, his face was burning.

“Aw, I just wanted to thank you for being nice enough to let me crash on your couch.” Lance shrugged but the smile that played on his lips was far from innocent. “And for the sweet sounds you--”

“Lance, what are you doing here?” Keith immediately cut the angel off but it didn’t help since his face was impossibly redder now.

“I wanted to check out the place where you work.” Lance replied. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and looked around the alley. “I managed to clean up a good ten kilometer radius
around your home and now I'm moving on to sweep this area out.

“Oh.” Keith muttered. “Well, be my guest. This area has a lot of alleys to escape to.”

“Which could either work for or against us.” Lance contemplated. He reached up to tap the teardrop pendant of his earring out of habit while his eyes scanned the length of the alley. “The surroundings are quiet for now, there’s no need for me to go shoot things.”

Keith thought about the decision he had made before he went to bed the night before and when he did, it felt as if the blade that was tucked away into the waistband of his jeans started to throb with warmth. He was going to ask Lance earlier that morning but when Keith stepped out of his room, he saw that Lance was still asleep on the couch. Keith didn’t really have the heart to wake Lance up considering that the angel was exhausted after days of exterminating demonic beasts that prowled around just so Keith could be safe.

“Uh, Lance?” Keith began and Lance turned to him.

“Yeah?”

“I really appreciate that you’re doing all of this for me---”

“Are you firing me?” Lance frowned and for a moment there the look of disappointment in his eyes truly was genuine.

“N-no” Keith shook his head. “I’m not firing you, heck, I’m not even paying for this. How can I fire you?”

“Well,” Lance’s face fell into a pout and the confidence he wore like a second skin faltered. “I mean, if you’re not happy with my service, you’ll ask Shiro for a replacement.”

“Dude, I’m not saying that!” Keith’s eyes widened and he took an eager step towards Lance. “I don’t want to replace you; you’re great!”

“Really?” The glimmer of mischief returned in Lance’s eyes and his smile became hopeful. “Wow, for a moment there, I thought you’re kicking me out permanently. What was that you wanted to ask?”

“I’d like to ask you to teach me how to properly fight with the knife.”

Lance fell quiet and Keith started to regret whether what he did was right but he had to push the option because he didn’t want to drag Lance back and be a burden.

“Please, Lance.” Keith added after he took in a deep breath. “You did say that you won’t be around all the time and I need to know how to fight back properly.” He pressed his hand against his chest to refer to himself. “I know I’m only human but I don’t want to drag anyone back, especially you since what you’re doing is already dangerous. I want to help you fight too.”

Lance quirked an eyebrow but soft emotion crossed his eyes despite the blank mask he wore. Finally, he stepped towards Keith, reached forward and his fingers tilted his chin up once again. This time, Keith didn’t flinch away when he looked deep into Lance’s eyes because he wanted the angel to see how sincere he was about this. However, the breathtaking sapphire pools made Keith’s heart bang against his ribs and his throat felt dry.
“I appreciate it a lot, sweetheart.” Lance’s languid tone matched the slow smile the lifted the corners of his lips.

“So you'll teach me?” Keith looked hopeful but it only fell when Lance stepped away.

“I wish I can teach you how to fully use that knife’s potential.” He said. “But unfortunately, despite the strange energy I feel in that thing, I don’t even know what it is. I can teach you how to fight with that so you can defend yourself better, but that’s it.” He paused. “I think that fancy knife you got there is pretty special. It’s not a coincidence that your dad gave that to you.”

“So, how can I learn about what this thing really is?” Keith sounded desperate. He couldn’t just run around with an enchanted knife while brandishing it around like an amateur, not being able to wake its full potential.

“I could ask Hunk about it.”

“Who?”

“He’s my best friend.” Lance beamed proudly. “He’s a great guy and a squadron leader. In addition to that, he’s Altea’s weapons master.” He paused and tapped a finger against his lower lip in thought. “Hm, but I’d have to gather some materials to send a message to Altea.”

“Can’t you just fly there?” Keith asked. “You have wings, right?”

He felt the hairs on his nape stand when Lance gave him a long enigmatic look that bore deeply. It was too late when Keith realized that maybe asking about an angel’s wings was a sensitive matter.

“Heh.” Suddenly, the familiar smirk was back on Lance’s handsome face. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Keith was about to bid Lance good bye and head back to work when they were distracted by someone calling;

“Keith! Lance!”

Pidge appeared at the mouth of the alley and ran towards them, waving frantically.

“Whoah, easy there, short stuff.” Lance caught them by the shoulders when they almost tripped on their shoelaces. Pidge was breathing hard and they were gulping in air like a fish out of water. “What’s the hurry?”

“It’s…It’s---!”

“Pidge, come on, you’ve got to get your shit together first.” Keith walked towards them and helped Lance lead them to wear they could lean on the wall. “Now, what’s wrong?”

Fly-way golden brown locks waved when Pidge shook their head and their eyes were wide behind rimless glasses. “It’s Matt. Something’s draining his quintessence!”
It was a good thing Sal was in a good mood and he let Keith off early because what Pidge told him and Lance was something he wasn’t prepared for.

“You’re sure something’s sucking his quintessence?” Lance frowned while he jogged up the steps to the front door of the apartment unit where Pidge and Matt lived.

“Yeah, I’m sure!” Pidge snapped and their hands trembled while they attempted to unlock the front door with their keycard. “Ah, fuck!” they hissed when they kept on missing.

“Here, let me.” Keith pried the card from Pidge’s cold clammy fingers and slid it into the slot to unlock the door. The three of them stepped into the elevator and Keith ran his hand up and down Pidge’s back to attempt to calm them. “So Matt just started acting weird a few weeks ago?”

Pidge nodded. “I noticed a dramatic change in him after he started going to this nightclub called The Bakku Garden.” They paused and fished out a folded piece of paper from their pocket while they stepped into the elevator. Lance took the paper from Pidge and studied it while Keith did the same.

Pidge broke out into a run to the door of their apartment unit. They unlocked it and pushed the door open;

“Matt!” they called throughout the living room but their voice only echoed through the silent walls. “Matt? Matt! I brought people who can help!”

“He’s not here.” Lance said with a small frown. “I can’t feel another presence in here with us.”

“Where did he go?” Keith asked. He looked worried not only for Matt, but for Pidge as well.

“I don’t know.” Finally, Pidge dropped on the couch and their shoulders slumped in defeat. “He was still asleep when I left the apartment.” A pause. “At least that’s what I think.”

“You’re not sure?” Keith scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Pidge, you could have checked!”

“I did!” Pidge snapped back but their eyes were wide despite the glare they gave their best friend. They got up to their feet and ran up to where Matt’s bedroom door was. They stood there and hesitated for a moment before they finally opened the door. Matt’s room was a mess which Keith found odd because between the Holt twins, it was Matt who was the organized one. But the room was literally trashed; the frames on the wall were crooked and books were scattered on the desk. Crystals and spell parchments collected dust in the middle of magical pentagrams like they haven’t been touched for a while. There was a lump on the mattress that made it look like someone was sleeping but when Pidge yanked the blanket off, they found pillows stacked together like a decoy.

“He must have snuck out when you were still asleep.” Keith walked over to take a closer look when they joined Pidge but then they were taken back when Pidge’s shoulders started to tremble and their knuckles turned white as their hands curled into fists. Tears pooled in their eyes and trickled down their cheeks but the gaze they held was filled clashing emotions of anger, frustration, and fear.

“If something…” they hiccupped back a sob. “If something happened to my brother, I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

“No, Pidge, it’s not your fault.” Keith’s violet eyes fell sadly. “Come here.” Without hesitation, he wrapped his arms around Pidge’s small form when the other stepped into his embrace and he pulled them close. “We’ll find Matt. We’ll get him back.” He placed his hand on top of Pidge’s head and
stroked.

“Thanks, Keith.”

Lance stood there in silence and watched the scene unfold between him. He’s never really cared much for humans since he saw them as inferior. All his life, he had always thought that humans were dumb, fragile, and they lived lives as fleeting as fireflies. But now, he took in the sight of empathy between two friends and the steely and stubborn determination he saw from a certain raven haired, amethyst eyed mortal. At first Lance thought that he would be protecting a weakling, but he was wrong. He purposely arrived late to see how Keith would hold his ground against that beast in the park. He had expected Keith to cry, faint, or run away, and well, he did.

But not before stabbing that demonic creature on the temple with a thirteen inch knife and summoning a barrier of flames around himself. Lance was impressed by Keith’s courage and the human intrigued him even more when he told him that he wanted to learn how to fight properly so that he can help him. Now Lance stood there, even more interested in Keith because of the gentleness he showed towards his friend in need.

Lance thought, that maybe, just maybe, Keith is more than Lance thought him to be. However, he felt a strong reluctance stir in him. Because the last time he let his heart take the reins, it got him into a century of scarring misery.

“Alright.” Lance finally sighed and when he did, Pidge and Keith looked at him and broke from their embrace. “If we’re going to get to the bottom of this, we’re going to have to start moving.”

“W-Wait…” Keith shook his head as if he didn’t believe what he just heard. “You’ll help us?”

“Yeah, sure.” Lance shrugged. “Got nothing better to do.” He smiled that charming smile of his. “Besides, I’ve got to make sure that you don’t get your pretty ass killed.”

“Dude, he knows you have a pretty ass now?” Pidge whispered as they removed their glasses momentarily to wipe their eyes with the back of their sleeves. “I know you’re a ho for cryptids but there’s no need to rush things with an angel----”

“PIDGE!” Keith’s voice hit a high pitch out of shock and his pale cheeks bloomed with color. “He can hear you!”

“Loud and clear.” Lance nodded with a smirk. “Now are we going to get your brother back or what?” he lifted the night club flier. “Because I shit you not, this thing is oozing with Galra essence.”

“What?” Pidge demanded and snatched the flier from Lance to glare at it. “This? How could you tell?”

In response, Lance trailed his finger and traced the palm leaf symbol of on the flier. When he did, the tip of his finger glowed and the symbol projected into mid-air, floating in front of Pidge’s face. With a silent command, the palm leaf image rippled like water to reveal its true form;

The insignia of the Galra Empire.

“Pidge, you need to tell me the truth.” Lance said, his eyes ever watchful towards the shorter human. “Did you know your twin was involved with demons?”

“No!” Pidge cried out defensively. “Matt would never get involved with them! It’s not like him to!” they shook their head and their voice quivered with horror and disbelief. “I know my brother, Lance. I know him like he’s my own soul! It’s not like him to have any kind of affiliation with them!”
“I’m backing Pidge up, Lance.” Keith spoke this time but it was obvious that the remnants of shock stained his features. “Matt is a really nice guy and he wouldn’t hurt a fly! Someone must have put that thing in his bag.”

“But you said that Matt showed signs of energy drain.” Lance’s voice dropped an octave while he became thoughtful. He studied the symbol that floated in mid-air with intelligence in his gaze and he reached up out in habit to tap on the teardrop shaped earring.

“He did.” Pidge nodded now and their brows were furrowed over worried eyes. “He had bruises and sickly looking veins on his neck. He looked really pale too and he… he didn’t act like himself. He looked so exhausted, Lance, and he wouldn’t talk to me.” They paused and lowered their eyes to stare at the carpet beneath their feet. “It’s just not like him. There are no secrets between us but whenever I tried to reach out to him, he would brush me off.”


“We can’t tell until we investigate the place.” Lance finally said and with a wave of his hand, the Galra symbol faded away.

“Wait.” Keith’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at Lance. “I know you guys have this almighty deal making or whatever. Do you require payment for this?”

Pidge fell quiet and Lance’s smile became morose but it stayed. Keith knew better than to go around making deals with higher beings and he wasn’t going to get into an agreement where there was a possibility the he could lose a lot in the deal.

“How about your soul?” Lance was suddenly in front of Keith and it was like he didn’t even move from the spot where he stood. “I bet you’re delicious.”

Keith paled and Lance burst out into laughter.

“Nah, I’m just kidding!” Lance wiped the tears from his eyes after he recovered from a good half minute of laughing. “You and Pidge can buy me dinner for a week, how’s that?”

Keith blinked and stared at Lance while the expression on his face was twisted in utter disbelief. “What?”

“You and Pidge buy me dinner for a week.” Lance repeated and he tilted his head to the side in utter confusion. “Didn’t you hear me?”

When everything registered to Keith after he recovered from his shock, he burst; “Lance, that wasn’t funny! I really thought you wanted my soul!”

Keith felt every fiber of his being melt and heat grazed his nerves that made them haywire when Lance smiled that slow, annoyingly irresistible smirk of his.

“Keith, believe me; you make me want everything.”

Lance stepped back and walked towards the window. He parted them and hopped up on the ledge, unfazed of the ten story drop below him. The warm summer kissed wind blew on his face, making the tips of his brown hair sway.

“I’m going out for a little bit to speak with someone.” The angel said. “I need to report this back to home base for protocol purposes.” He looked over his shoulder and smiled at Keith but the other felt like this smile looked different because it held some sort of sincerity in it compared to Lance’s other
smug, arrogant, flirtatious smiles. Keith was in no way stupid or dense and he knew emotion when he saw one.

“Keith, I would be more comfortable if you stayed here with Pidge for the rest of the day.”

“Sure.” Keith found himself nodding. He glanced at his bespectacled best friend who mirrored the same action but nonetheless, said nothing. “Do you need us to do anything while you’re gone? Anything we could do to help you?”

“So thoughtful.” Lance shook his head with a helpless chuckle. “Just take it easy and think of what to wear tonight.”

“Tonight?” Pidge frowned. “Where are we going?”

The playful glint in Lance’s mischievous eyes returned and the silver around his blue irises burned brightly. “We’re going clubbing. Keith, save me a dance?”

A strong wind blew and the scent of the ocean filled the room and in a blink of an eye, Lance was gone.

“You know,” Pidge turned to look at Keith and they crossed their arms over their chest. “I’m pretty sure he’s hitting on you.”

“Shut up, Pidge.”

~

The demon realm was a place where the mist was so thick and miasmic that the trees themselves were just skeletons; spires that reached out to the overcast sky. The demon city in the heart of the realm was the seat of power for the Galra Empire and the inhabitants were different kinds of demons who ran a diverse trade from black magic to illegal goods. It was a dog eat dog world in the Galra Empire; if you can’t manage to make a living, you will surely won’t survive very long. That was the reason why most demons are cunning tricksters and merciless mercenaries.

A figure ghosted through the bustling crowd of the rowdy marketplace. He slipped into a grimy alley proceeded to walk through the immense maze system that connected one corridor to another. The man did not have a shadow that followed him as he walked underneath the dull glow of the shattered moon on the sky. His footsteps were silent and he did not utter a word towards the blind, diseased beggars that touched the hem of his brown leather cloak.

He kept walking until he reached a towering citadel on the edge of the kingdom. The palace was gothic with walls made out of towering black stone enforced with purple crystals that glowed hauntingly underneath the moonlight. Rolo pulled back his hood to reveal his scowling face when he saw that the two guards by the entrance to the castle were snoring.

Rolo narrowed his eyes and at the same time, twin black translucent tentacles snaked out of his back and coiled behind him like snakes before they struck at the sleeping guards; it wrapped around the ankle of one soldier before it lifted him into the air and slammed him at his other sleeping companion.

“How did you manage that?” Rolo’s tone was sly but his eyes were deadpanned. “I don’t think the commander would like to hear about this.”

“V-Vrepit S-Sa!” The guards saluted Rolo with fear in their eyes. “Please forgive us! We were just…! We-We…!”
The excuses were thrown in a flurry of fearful words but Rolo would have none of it since he didn’t want to waste his time. “Shut the fuck up, I don’t have time for this folly.” He pulled back the phantom extremities and they slid back behind him and disappeared. “I’m here to see the prince. Is he currently occupied?”

“We believe that he is in the garden with his harem, sir.” One of the guards replied and Rolo did not regard him as he just walked by.

The garden was a huge greenhouse in the middle of the palace. Prince Lotor treasured beauty and he had requested that his father, the late emperor Zarkon, to construct a greenhouse as a sanctuary to grow the roses that the prince adored so much. Rolo contemplated about Lotor’s predecessor; he was just a youngling who ran barefooted on the streets and scavenged the alleys for food and supplies during the First Siege of Altea in an attempt to expand the Galra Empire.

Emperor Zarkon’s greed had not only broken the alliance between angels and demons which plunged their realm into even more poverty, it also started the war. However, the result of the First Siege was a draw; Zarkon perished in the fight as well as the king who ruled Altea during that time, Alfor. And as fate has decided it, it was their children who stepped up to continue the fight that their fathers begun;

Prince Lotor and Queen Allura.

Rolo ghosted through the dark empty hallways of the castle and followed the way that led out into the garden. When he reached the quadrangle in the middle of the castle, he went to the glittering dome of glass in the middle before he entered.

The inside of the greenhouse was like another realm. It was filled with eerily beautiful white roses that lined the polished stone path which led to a platform in the middle of the sea of flowers. There was a large pavilion tent made out of thick red cloth lined with gold and it stood out strikingly against the haunting landscape of snow white flowers.

Treading on the path, Rolo reached the front of the tent but made no attempt to part the flaps to enter inside. Instead, he merely knelt down on one knee with his hand planted on the ground.

“My lord.” Rolo lowered his head slightly. “I’ve arrived for a brief stay.”

With those words, the flaps were pulled apart to the sides and the scent of incense wafted from the inside. The inside of the pavilion tent was spacious as compared to the deceiving size it showed on the outside.

A devilishly handsome man lounged in a black marble tub. The white rose petals that floated on the water nearly match his long silver hair. His cheekbones were high and his lips curved into a beautiful bow that perfectly fit his artisan features. The upper part of his body which was exposed above the water was a work of art; lithe muscles, pale skin that had an overtone of light purple, and black tribal tattoos speared starting from one shoulder across the horizon of his back to the other.

However, it was prince Lotor’s dark golden eyes that mirrored his cruel soul. They were shrewd and they looked as if Lotor had placed himself on the top of the universe and everything else beneath him as proven by the members of his harem that were present. These men and women, angels and demons, all held beauty but they all had the same look of misery and fear on their eyes. Even if they were dressed in fine white silk togas gilded with gold, it cannot conceal the spiked shackles that closed around their ankles. The spikes that lined the inside latched against the skin that had become raw while the angelic slaves had their wings hacked off, leaving two small bandaged stumps on their back.
“What is it, Rolo?” Lotor asked. He briefly glanced at the demon who knelt before him then his hand lifted from under the water to signal one of the harem girls to hand him his goblet. “I’m trying to relax. The huge beast I sent as a present to the bitch queen did not last very long.” He sighed. “The quintessence wasn’t enough to make it thrive.”

“I’m sorry to hear about that, my lord.” Rolo made sure to keep his head bowed but he saw Lotor take his goblet from the tray offered to him and a male slave knelt on the side of the tub behind him with an ivory comb before. He then began to smooth it down carefully over the prince’s silvery tresses.

“You know that I do not appreciate failure or bad news, Rolo.” Lotor’s voice was laid back and it sounded almost bored but his sharp eyes pinned Rolo on the spot. And even if Rolo didn’t look, he
felt every fiber of his being cringe in fear. “Lift your damn head and speak quickly. I’m busy right now.”

“A new shipment of quintessence will arrive on the fortnight, my lord.” Rolo did as he was told and lifted his head to look upon the demon lord.

“So?” Rolo shooed away the girl who held the tray after he placed back his empty goblet on it. When the slave turned to leave, Rolo saw the two stumps on each of her shoulder blades; bandaged but stained with fresh blood, it was obvious that her wings were cut again when they started to regenerate from the last time they were trimmed off. “That is obvious news, Rolo. Delivering the yields from your sleazy quintessence harvest from capable humans is a requirement not a once in a blue moon surprise.”

“I have also located the Vessel.”

With that, Lotor paused and finally turned his full attention on Rolo. “Pardon, did you say Vessel?”

“Yes, my lord.” Rolo nodded. “A human named Keith. This is the most powerful Vessel that has appeared in the last few decades. To harvest such an amount of power would be enough to give you strength to break down the Altean barrier yourself and with enough to spare to power up half of our army.”

“Show me this human.” Lotor pushed off from where he leaned on the edge of the tub. Rolo created a crystal clear image from the shadows that emanated from his fingers and the picture solidified. “Oh.” Lotor tilted his head out of wonder as he studied the image that Rolo made to float towards him. “Violet eyes; how very rare indeed.” He waved his hand and the image disappeared like fading smoke.

“Bring this thing to me.” He ordered. “Useful as he may be to our cause, I want to play with him first.” Behind him, the male demon with greenish porcelain skin and terrified gray eyes flinched while the angel woman did not move from the cushion she knelt on but her hands shook from where they lay folded on her lap.

Rolo swallowed the hard lump that formed in his throat and lowered his gaze. That was when Lotor frowned;

“Spit it out. What do you want to say, worm?”

“My lord,” Rolo began and he sounded unsure because of how the prince might react. There was no telling Lotor’s mood or reaction to things. “The Vessel is being guarded by an angel.”

That cruel beautiful artisan face darkened when Lotor frowned. Wordlessly, he swatted away the demon’s hands that were working to comb his hair and the man withdrew with utmost haste. Lotor stood up gracefully and water flooded the sides of the platform where tub was as water fell from his naked body. He felt no shame and he radiated with dark power and confidence. What was exposed above the water was a tease but his full nakedness was strikingly beautiful. Lotor lifted his arms slightly and the woman was suddenly up to her feet to fetch him his black and silver robe. As she did so, the chain of her shackles clinked on the hard floor.

“Kill the angel. Is that so hard?” Lotor asked as he tied his robe to conceal his bare front.

“The aura is familiar.” Rolo added respectfully. “It is someone we crossed paths with before.”

“Is it that bitch’s pathetic excuse for a mate?”
“It is not Shiro, my lord. The energy did not carry the power of an archangel.” Rolo shook his head. “I cannot pinpoint exactly who it is. I would have to trail the Vessel to find out who his guard is.”

“Then do it!” Lotor snapped and Rolo in return, flinched. “That Vessel’s life force can triple our quintessence capsules for the druids to use more than your pathetic human quintessence farm can. We’ve waited for decades for a powerful Vessel like this, Rolo. Do no fail me or I will guarantee you a painful death, do you understand?”

“Clear as your radiating power, your excellency.” Rolo quickly lowered his head and avoided eye contact with the obsessive prince but his hand on the ground curled into a fist from the pressure he felt. “I shall return to the human realm immediately.”

“Good. Now get out of my sight!”

The prince then turned to the two of his harem members who served him earlier and his voice turned languid once again; “My darlings,” he cooed but the man and woman knew better than to fall for the false sweetness of the prince’s tone. They knew the bitter truth of what it meant. “Accompany me to my bedchamber and bring more liquor, why don’t you?”

And with a wave of his hand, the flaps of the tent fell back into place and cut Rolo from sight. Without another word, he got up and started his way back into the palace with nothing in mind but the task he was given.

Kill the angel. Take the human. Go home and call it a day.

“How hard can it be?” Rolo smiled to himself and as he passed by a flickering torch, his shadow finally appeared beside him with ten sharpened tentacles writhing behind it. “It’s been a good couple of decades since I’ve torn off an angel’s wings.”

Chapter End Notes

Please do not repost art. Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update!
Chapter Summary

The situation was changing and Lance found himself being swept along the tides. He was burned once, but what if this flame is different?

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! This chapter is massive! It's 30 pages long and the word count is 14k ish! Many of you have been supportive through tumblr, twitter, and the review section despite our creative struggles and we would like to thank you! So without further ado, here is chapter 5 to our epic tale! Please let us know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Allura’s eyelids quivered as the singular drips echoed into the emptiness of her sleep.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

The queen stirred in her sleep and turned to her side to bury herself into the familiar warmth of her mate. As she did so, firm arms wrapped around her waist and tugged her close while the scent of rain filled her nose. Allura mumbled something incoherent in her sleep and the edges of her lips lifted up into a small smile when she felt Shiro send a caress down the mating bond to let her know that he was by her side. In her mind’s eye, Allura caught a glimpse of the soul deep bond between her and her husband. In the stillness of her mind, she saw two tendrils of light; mystical pink and violet threads that were braided with each other and enforced with the love and trust that served as the foundation of Shiro and Allura’s bond.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.
Suddenly, Allura’s eyes snapped wide open and she sat up quickly when she caught a faint scent of saltwater.

“Allura?” Shiro quickly propped himself up on one elbow and turned to look at her with sleepy but confused eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“I can feel a presence trying to be heard.” Allura replied as she tapped on a clear crystal orb which lit up with a soft blue light that illuminated the room. “Someone is trying to reach out to me.”

“Someone we know?” Shiro sat up and black feathers ruffled against the silk sheets of the spacious bed that was made to accommodate wings.

“The ocean.” Allura muttered as she slipped out of the bed and curled her toes against the plush carpet. She stood up and pulled her wings close to her back. The edges of her night gown brushed quietly on the floor while she made her way to her dressing console where there was a large porcelain bowl of water made for washing.

“It’s Lance, then.” It was a statement instead of a question from Shiro when he followed suit and walked over to where Allura was staring at her reflection on the water. He reached and brushed his fingers against the smooth white feathers within the inner flap of Allura’s wing; an intimate touch only allowed for lovers. The queen smiled at her royal guard and brushed her fingertips along the edges of Shiro’s night sky wings.

After the brief exchange of love, Allura turned back to the water bowl. “I only pray that Lance did not bring grave news.”

“Let’s hope for the best.” Shiro looked at the water as well and nodded in assurance. Allura lifted her hand and gently touched her index finger on the surface of the water before it rippled and their reflections changed to be replaced a familiar face.

“My queen, sire…” Lance greeted automatically but then his eyes widened when he saw that it was dark on Shiro and Allura’s end. “I…I’m sorry! I completely forgot that time works differently in the human world.”

“No, it’s fine.” Allura shook her head and looked at Lance expectantly. “What tidings do you bring?”

“Well,” Lance began. “I’ve met the human and I must say that his company isn’t bad. Quite amusing, if you ask me.”

“I’m glad to know you two are getting along quite well.” Shiro nodded. “I hope nothing serious has crossed your path yet.”

Lance’s eyes darkened like the abyss in the ocean floor. “About that, sire.” He said. “I called to tell you that I’ve discovered something.”

“What is it?” Allura frowned and she sent a fleeting worried glance towards Shiro. She saw that the expression on her mate’s face had become sullen with anticipation from the news.

“Keith has a best friend.” Lance replied. “A mage named Pidge recently approached Keith and me to ask for help. Their twin brother has been acting strange and has been showing signs of his energy being drained.”
“Something is draining his quintessence?” Allura was taken back by the news. “Even if they can use magic, they are still human. If this goes on, this boy can die!”

“That’s what I’m worried about too.” Lance frowned. “Pidge showed me a flier from a place called the Bakku Garden. They said that their brother started acting up after he started going to that place. However, I’ve traced the place back to the Galra. I have a hunch that the demons are draining quintessence from these humans for their own benefit.”

The sound of metal gritting against each other filled the room when Shiro clenched his fists. “So that’s it.” He whispered through clenched teeth when he pieced the information together.

“What’s it, Shiro?” Allura’s brows bunched over her ethereal eyes and Lance stared at him from the surface of the water where he was reflected on.

“The beast that attacked the barrier earlier today.” Shiro replied. “bore the Galra insignia on its forehead. That thing was made and to make a beast requires quintessence.” He shook his head. “But to make one that large would require a lot.”

“So that’s how he’s doing it.” Allura shook her head in frustration and clenched her fists on the folds of her nightgown. “Lotor has sunk low to prey on innocent humans like this!”

Lance fell deathly silent but the look in his eyes was those of a man who had seen things and to whom fate had been unkind to. “Lotor is that kind of person.” He said despite the bitter smile he wore. “He takes pleasure on preying on the weak and he takes advantage of those who he knows cannot fight back.”

Allura and Shiro immediately read the restrained anger that made Lance’s tone sound like a honed blade. The queen and her paladin glanced at each other and a silent message of understanding passed between them. Allura turned to Lance and regarded the younger angelic guard with softness in her eyes and kindness in her words.

“But you fought back, Lance.” She said.

Something flickered in those ocean blue eyes that were ringed with molten silver and Lance’s smile got a little brighter and more menacing. “Got me on top of his kill list but at least I’m in a better place.” Lance’s expression became solemn. “Keith and Pidge want to get Matt back. I’m coming with them to investigate too. There might be useful information in there we can use.”

“Do you need back up?” Shiro asked this time. “You’re in one army over there.”

A smirk. “Oh, Keith isn’t helpless.” Shiro caught a glint of interest in Lance’s eyes while Allura tilted her head to the side in a sign of curious interest.

“Understood.” Shiro nodded. “But to be safe, I’ll have a guard on standby if ever you need help so just sent a distress signal.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Be careful over there.” Allura’s wings draped over her back like a cashmere shawl of feathers. “We await your return.”

Lance smiled and placed his right palm over his chest before he dipped his head in a slight bow. “Your highness, Sire…” then, the image vanished.

“That’s new.” Allura held a tone of wonder. She turned around and out of habit, brushed her hand
affectionately down Shiro’s arm. “A few days ago, Lance was just complaining that he had to ‘babysit’ a human.”

“Views tend to change after some time spent together, love.” Shiro smiled. He reached up to tuck a stray lock of starlight colored hair behind his wife’s ear.

“Is that so?”

Shiro nodded. “Remember when I stole your crown when we were children? You called me a ‘dirty street rat’ then you punched me on the face.”

Allura gaped and Shiro chuckled as his tone became playful when he continued. “And then, a few centuries later, you were crying begging me not to die.”

“In my defense,” Allura rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. The feathers on top of the main arcs of her wings fluffed in annoyance. “You courted me in between and you were gravely wounded by a luxite blade and THEN blown off across the courtyard in an explosion.” Her fingers intertwined with the cool mechanical fingers of Shiro’s right arm. She smiled at her mate when his grip firmly enclosed her hand in his.

“Point well defended, love.” He smiled and gently tugged Allura while he led the two of them back to their bed. “Let’s go back to sleep.”

But Allura paused and tugged back in a gesture of refusal. “I may have other plans.” A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes and her lips parted in invitation as she reached forward. Allura took pleasure at the way Shiro’s face instantly went red and his eyes widened when she reached in the inner part of his wings and caressed the sensitive base where they sprouted, the area an erogenous zone in angel anatomy.

“A-Allura… I…” Shiro gulped and the queen laughed softly at how adorable he looked. When she wrapped her fingers around the base, Shiro closed his eyes and exhaled a shaking breath of arousal. They’ve been mated for eons but Shiro still gets flustered the same way he did when they were fledglings. “I’m not complaining.”

“Perfect”

And Shiro willingly found himself pushed and pinned down on the bed.

~

“I cannot believe I’m going to a life force sucking club with smoke, booze, and people getting into my personal space.” Pidge muttered while they pulled out Matt’s clothes from the closet and threw them on the bed. It was a good thing that Keith had a similar build as Matt so that the other twin’s clothes fit just fine.

“Here, try this.” Pidge chucked a black felt vest towards Keith who took a good look at it before he slipped it on to match the simple white shirt he wore whose cuffs were folded up to his elbows. Pidge gave Keith a single look and they strode to Matt’s dresser to pull out a simple dog tag necklace. “Finish it off with this.”

“Since when did you become a fashion expert?” Keith asked as he put on the tag. “I clearly remember you cursing everything that had to do with fashion. You grocery shop in your pajamas, Pidge.”

“Anyone can become at expert in under ten minutes with the power of the internet, Keith.” Pidge
grabbed a small pouch bag and a handful of crystals, a pocket book of spells, and some personal belongings. They travelled light considering that it wouldn’t be practical to bring the whole house with them. And besides, Pidge had to fit in the crowd too so that they didn’t poke out like a sore thumb in a crowd of potential Galra demons.

“Do you want me to fix your hair?” Keith offered after he raked his fingers through his hair to ruffle it. “You look like a middle schooler with that hair.”

“Sure, Keef.” Pidge grimaced at their reflection and decided that what they wore wasn’t really their style; a violet shirt with silver linings and an image of Saturn at the front made out of colorful sequins tucked in high waist denim shorts and to finish it off, low cut boots.

“Sit your ass down, Pudge Bean.” Keith grabbed a brush from the side drawer and went over to Pidge after the other plopped down on the bed with a sigh. Methodically, Keith started to comb through the tangles on Pidge’s short hair. A few strokes in, he started to complain; “And I thought my hair was bad.”

Pidge just snorted. “Beauty care and sleep are at the bottom of my list. Just give me my spell books and my laptop and I can thrive anywhere.”

Continuing to undo the tangles, there was a comfortable pregnant silence that settled between Keith and Pidge. It felt like an odd calm before the storm and Keith slowly felt his own tension being brushed away with every stroke on Pidge’s hair. This kind of platonic intimacy between them was rooted in years of friendship. It started off as a mutual friendship online when they met on mermaidlore.com over their love for cryptids and the mysteries of the world. When they found out that they both lived in the same city, they met for some ice cream and pizza after some skype calls.

When Pidge told Keith about the magical abilities that ran in their family, Keith came clean about his own flames but when he expected rejection, Pidge only showed excitement and acceptance. Matt was the same and even helped make little magic knickknacks that can aid Keith in his struggle to keep his powers in line.

“Keith?”

“Yeah?” Nimble fingers paused over smoothing the tangles on light brown hair.

“I’m scared.” Pidge’s whisper shook. “I’m scared for Matt. I mean, what if… what if he’s…?”

“Hey, don’t go there.” Keith’s response was enforced with stern finality and he squeezed Pidge’s shoulder in an attempt to anchor them away from the bad possibilities. “Matt is a fighter just like you. He won’t give up, okay?”

“Okay.” Pidge sniffed and Keith smiled as finished brushing their hair.

“Do you still have that hairband you used last Halloween?” he asked and when Pidge nodded, he went to the drawer they pointed at. Carefully, he smoothed back Pidge’s hair and put the hairband in place so it doesn’t obscure her eyes.

“There.”

“Nice.” Pidge muttered when she looked at her reflection. “Not bad for someone who isn’t into hair care.”

“Come on, man, you should give me a break.” Keith pouted slightly while he placed the hairbrush down on the console. “Hair care is expensive and I’m broke as fuck.”
Suddenly, they were distracted by a soft tapping on the windows glass. Pidge and Keith glanced at each other then looked suspiciously at the window. Three more taps and Pidge’s hand gave off a soft green light while Keith pulled out his blade from the hidden sheath on the side of his boot before he took careful steps towards the window.

With a single nod from Pidge who was ready to fire her magic, Keith opened the window.

“Alright, are you two ready to go---WHOAH! IT’S ME! IT’S JUST ME!” Lance greeted as he stepped onto the ledge but started to panic and fanned is hands in a motion of panic. “Holy fuck, calm down!”

Keith lowered the knife while the magic that was starting to form around Pidge’s hand faded away.

“Can’t you use the door, Lance?” They asked with a frown. “What’s next, the air vent?”

“In Altea, we rarely use doors, okay!” Lance scoffed. He leaned hopped into the apartment and took a good look at the humans but his eyes lingered little bit longer on Keith than necessary. “Look at you, looking ready to paint the town blue.”

“I think the correct term is ‘Paint the town red.’” Keith corrected him. He crouched down momentarily to sheath the blade back to the side of his boot.

“It is?” Lance asked with playful wonder. “I suppose that does make sense.” He turned towards the door. “We might be painting the town with blood.”

Pidge’s eyes widened and Keith froze in place while they watched the angel by the door. It was like the temperature dropped that a shiver ran down Keith’s spine.

“It never crossed your mind that you might have to get your hands dirty and kill to survive?” Lance’s finger wrapped around the doorknob but made no attempt to turn it. “We’re dealing with the Galra here; there’s no telling what shit they might pull. Matt is hurt right now so he can’t do much without it taking a lethal toll on his fragile mortal body. He might not be able to fight back.”

“I’m prepared.” Pidge blurted out but it shook not with fear, but conviction. Lance looked over his shoulder and those blue eyes locked with golden brown ones. “This is my brother we’re talking about, Lance. I love him and I’m prepared to do anything just to get him back.”

Keith heard Pidge gulp when Lance didn’t say anything and just watched them with those inhuman eyes with a shade of blue that cannot possibly exist in this world. “Fair enough.” He said and that gaze shifted to lock with Keith’s. “You?”

“I’ve fought those things before.” Keith managed to say and his knuckles turned white when he clenched them on his sides. However, he couldn’t look Lance straight in the eyes.

“The Galra are different, I’ve told you this before, Keith. They’re a race of beings just like you and me.”

“I-I know!” Keith snapped back but his eyes were wide despite the way his brows bunched over the violet pools that were filled with conflict. Lance just stared.

“Keith, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to.” Pidge placed a hand on his shoulder but Keith shook his head;

“Pidge, I can’t let you go in there alone. I promised you, man.” Keith lowered his gaze for a bit. He thought about the blade that was hidden on the side of his boot and realized that his father had kept
him in the dark until he died. Keith doesn’t know what he is; he just knew that was called a Vessel and that he was hunted by demons and protected by angels.

“Besides,” he finally said. “Maybe I’ll find out what my knife is.” He lifted his head and those violet eyes locked with Lance’s. “I don’t want to grope in the dark anymore. I want to know who I really am and what I’m meant to do. Also, I’m not about to ditch you or Lance.”

Lance couldn’t believe what he was hearing. This mortal… this fragile mortal who lived a lifespan of a firefly refused to be left behind for the sake of his friend and…him? Lance pursed his lips together, unsure of what to say. He had friends he could trust but besides that, he had always felt alone. Prior to Keith, Lance usually distanced himself from humans because he always thought that they weren’t worth his time and yet, he felt odd. He couldn’t put his finger on it but Lance knew better than to let emotion blind him…

Again.

“Alright, it’s settled.” There was an audible click when he turned the knob. “We’ll come up with a plan on the way there. Let’s get moving.”

The line of patrons waiting to be let inside the club was restless; frat boys, skimpy clothed women, and the opposite but they were all impatient to enter.

The plan the three came up with was simple; Pidge would slip inside the surveillance room to check the video feed to look for anything suspicious through the omnipotence of the hidden cameras while Lance and Keith would do front lines and scour part of the club to collect information and hopefully, find a more direct pathway they can take to get to the heart of the club where the more sleazy businesses were conducted.

“There’s got to be a faster way to get inside.” Keith muttered while his eyes flitted around for any way to get past the line.

“Every second we waste out here costs Matt.” Pidge agreed with a sour look on their face. “We have to get inside.”

“You got a plan for that?” Keith turned to Lance and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Sweetheart, you can’t rush creativity.” Lance rolled his eyes and looked over the crowd. “Most of these people are human.” He added “but I feel something more… strange inside.”

“Like demons?” Keith’s voice dropped to a whisper but he knew Lance could hear him with his keen hearing.

“Yeah and something else that’s not human.”

“Pidge, maybe you have a handy spell?” Keith asked. “Maybe mind control?”

“You and I both know that manipulation is unethical and taboo.” Pidge hissed in shock. “My parents did not raise me that way.”

“Unless…” Lance’s eyes lit up. “We are willingly let in.”

Up front, they spotted a group of people talking to the bouncer. With Lance’s sharp eyes, he saw one of them slip a crisp hundred dollar bill. “Keith, do you have any human money with you?”
“Uh.” Keith’s hands suddenly reached into his pockets then one of them slapped his forehead when he remembered that these were Matt’s clothes and he left his wallet back in the apartment. “Fuck!”

“By the name of the queen.” Lance sighed then turned to Pidge. “Please tell me you have a nice fifty in there or something.”

Pidge shook their head. “Matt and I live off credit card so we can monitor the stuff we buy when the bill comes in. I’m not about to give a sweaty, greasy looking bouncer my credit card pin.”

Keith heaved a small sigh and tried to look around again. The line was moving at an achingly slow pace and he was about to open his mouth again to speak but then he got distracted when Pidge tugged on his shirt.

“Look!”

Lance was on the front of the line acting smooth with the bouncer. He coolly leaned against one of the posts that held the red velvet rope that blocked the entrance.

“What is he--?” Keith was about to ask but his question was answered when Lance lifted a crisp one hundred dollar bill between his fingers. Not far from them, Keith noticed a guy rummaging through his pockets as if he lost something and the guy’s date was glaring with their arms crossed over their chest. After a moment, the guy’s date stomped away and left him behind just as the bouncer unclipped the rope to let them pass.

“Did Lance just…?”

“Who cares, come on!” And Pidge dragged Keith inside.

The Bakku Garden wasn’t like any other club in town. Its theme was more like an underwater paradise with walls made out of hollowed glass filled with water, corals, and exotic fish. The inside of the club was just as alluring as it looked outside and it was nothing short of what one would expect. Blue, green, and red lights flashed and music thumped in the electrified air that made the walls pulse. There was a bar made out of glass and the long island table was transparent with jellyfish swimming around the lit water. But the highlight of the whole place was the elevated dance floor in the middle; bodies swayed and grinded with each other along with the music. Four capsules filled with water hung on thick chains over the dancefloor and all four had plasglass tubes attached to the back that were connected to the wall.

But it was what was inside those capsules that made Keith’s eye widen and his mouth drop in shock.

“Damn, those dancers are pretty good to hold up the mermaid act.” Keith couldn’t believe this and beside him, Pidge stared in utter awe as well. “I wonder where their oxygen tank is?”

Lance looked up. “Oh,” he said. “No, they’re definitely real; they’re real mermaids.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.” Pidge gasped then they turned to Keith; “Have you seen a mermaid before?”

“Not until now.”

The two of them were distracted when Lance chuckled. “I think the correct term is ‘merfolk.’ He pointed to the capsule on the far left. “That one is male.”

Lance found it amusing that Keith and Pidge looked like children who were sucked in the wonder of seeing something for the first time. However, he kept an easy going mask to hide the turmoil of
memories that were replaying in his mind like a silent movie.

“Lance, hurry! They’re almost onto us! The prince might be with them.”

“W-Wait, what about you?”

“Don’t mind me, you need to go!”

“Plaxum!”

A ghost of a smile on dainty pale lips that had a stark bruise on the corner of her scaly cheek.

“Follow the path of the water and you will find yourself in the middle of the forest. Go on by foot from there and you will find the Obsidian Sea.” Cold, trembling fingers on his clammy cheek.

“Lance, I’m glad that you became my friend. If you manage to make it back, please tell my mother that I am sorry and that I love her very much.”

“Let’s get started.” Lance shook his head to clear away the memories that threatened to tear him away from focus. “Do you remember the plan?”

“I’ll go to the surveillance room and try to find anything fishy.” Pidge answered.

“And I’ll go with you to scour the club for a more direct approach.” Keith followed attentively.

Lance nodded and grinned. “Make it look good. Most of these people are human so don’t make a commotion by freaking them out with magic; not all humans are supposed to know it exists.” He glanced at the mermaids who were swishing around in the water filled capsule. “They think those people are in costume. However, I can feel Galra energy darting around so be careful, it’s not friendly.”

Pidge and Keith nodded and Lance fished out a small black earpiece which Pidge handed each to them and slipped it into his ear. “Test?”

“My piece is on.” Keith confirmed and Pidge gave them a thumbs up.

“Let’s go.” And the three of them dispersed.

~0~

For all that Lance is flirtatious, he extremely disliked being touched by strangers or when he doesn’t initiate it first. The sticky, electrified, sexually charged atmosphere of the club was tame compared to what he had gone through when he was a young, naïve angel. He heightened his senses and tried to make sense of the white noise of conversations over the thumping music. A guy in a tight cropped top and hip hugging pants caught his eye and smiled at Lance.

However, Lance observed the strange haze in those eyes. They looked back at him with a strange emptiness which his smile did not light up at all. From the flashing lights from the ceiling and the beams of lasers that darted around, Lance saw that the guy’s neck was covered in webs of purple veins and bruises.

Quintessence drain.

“Pidge, where are you?” Lance spoke on the Bluetooth earpiece.

“Hallway…” Pidge replied quickly but it was followed by a loud thump then a grunt from Pidge.

“You’re not leaving a trail of dead bodies, are you?” Lance heard Keith’s voice intervene in the
conversation and his body went tight, the way it always did whenever he would hear Keith’s voice. It rolled against the underside of his skin with heat and teased him. Lance felt drawn towards the huskiness of it like how a moth was drawn to the flame.

“No, they’re just unconscious.” Pidge said and Lance heard the sound of a door being opened and closed. “I’m in the surveillance room. What do you have, Lance?”

“There’s this guy here giving me the sex look and he has the same symptoms your brother has. Lance turned around and coldly dismissed the guy who looked at him across the room. He wasn’t the least bit interested in him.

“So we’re in the right place?”

Lance nodded at Pidge’s dark inquiry. “Yeah. The lead we got was right.” A pause. “Keith? Are you there?”

Silence.

“He’s at the bar.” Pidge said after a monotone tapping on the keyboard. “I’ll start looking for any video leads. You should go join him.”

The line went dead and Lance pushed through the grinding bodies with a look of disinterest on his face. His movements mirrored the confidence of a lethal predator and some heads turned towards Lance’s direction, but when he reached the bar, he paused and his eyes narrowed at the sight that greeted him;

Keith sat on the bar with an untouched glass of whatever he ordered. Across him was a douchebag looking guy who spoke as if he owned the world. Keith looked genuinely annoyed and his eyes darted from side to side. Now if to look for a way to escape the conversation or to scan for anything suspicious, Lance didn’t know. What he did know is that he didn’t appreciate this dickbag trying so hard to flirt with Keith.

“Come on, beautiful,” Lance heard the man say and he wanted to wipe away that shit eating grin with his fist. “Why not come to my condo? 56th floor, prime penthouse, nice view, expensive champagne?”

“Thanks, but no. I came here with someone.”

The corners of Lance’s lips tugged up into a smirk but it was gone as soon as he noticed that the douchebag wasn’t giving up.

“They’re not a very good date, now are they? A lovely sight like you shouldn’t be left lonely and alone.” He lifted his hand to twirl a lock of Keith’s raven hair around his fingers. Lance felt a vein throb on his temple with a surge of… jealousy? He had no idea why he felt that way but it felt like there was nothing better that moment than to put a bullet through that guy’s filthy hand.

Lance was about to move when Keith roughly slapped away the man’s hand with a blank look on his face and a dark light in his eyes. “Don’t touch me.”

“Why you---!”

Lance made his move.

Keith couldn’t pick a better time to get hit by shitty luck. He was sitting by the bar and minding his own business while he scanned the crowd and the whole place to try and look for anything
suspicious when they sleazy looking asshole decided to sit beside him and started to shamelessly flirt with him. Keith tried to look interested at first but he studied the guy to see if he was one of them. Fortunately, this Fuckface McGee was human and Keith allowed the dude to buy him a drink to try and blend in and because he didn’t have any money. However, a snail’s socialization skills was way better than Keith’s and he was so busy trying to find a lead that he failed to comprehend that the stranger preferred another mode of ‘thanks’ for the expensive drink he bought for Keith.

Telling him that he had come here with someone was meant to discourage the guy but that didn’t really go well. Keith prepared to defend himself if the guy decides to make a scene but then he felt a strong arm drape over his shoulders. Keith’s heart slammed against his chest while hot gritted words filled his ears and the coolness of the ocean filled his mind.

“He said ‘No.’” Keith could feel the ice in Lance’s voice and raw power radiated from the angel. “Leave.”

“You heard him.” Keith’s smirk was sly and he settled in Lance’s arms and leaned his head on the other’s shoulder. “Oh,” Keith reached for the drink and slid it towards the guy. The glass bumped the man’s hand and spilled, getting on his expensive cufflinks. “Thanks but I don’t like my drinks spiked.”

Lance raised a questioning brow and glared menacingly at the man who had become pale and wide-eyed.

“What, you think I wouldn’t notice?” Keith’s tone was innocent but the intensity of his glare told otherwise. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s people assuming they can outsmart me.”

“Alright, buddy.” Lance finally interrupted. “I’m going to give you three seconds to get your ass out of my sight.”

“Oh what?” The guy challenged but he gave out a startled yelp when the overturned glass Keith slid back towards him suddenly shattered without being touched. He tucked tail and quickly strode away until he disappeared in the crowd.

“Glad that was over.” Keith sighed and lifted his head from Lance’s shoulder. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get into your space.”

“I’ll consider it fair trade since I enjoy getting into yours.” Lance’s tone was languid and Keith shivered with the way his voice caressed his nerves and Lance’s lips barely were centimeters from the lobe of his ear. “I also asked you to save me a dance?”

“Lance, we’re… we’re on a mission.” The words were a struggle to get out with the way Keith’s body perked up at the tempting invitation.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun.” Lance smiled. When the angel pressed his lips on Keith’s temple, all reason went down the drain as he was dragged to the elevated dancefloor.

At first, Keith felt awkward; he had danced before but it wasn’t very high on his list of hobbies on a Friday night. It took some encouragement and Lance didn’t force it upon him as he offered his hand to Keith in an invitation.

“Come on,” Lance’s smile was a playful one and his eyes were iridescent in the dimness filled with flashing lights. “I’ll show you a good time.”

“Alright.” Keith gave in. He took Lance’s hand and their fingers intertwined.
It was one of the most memorable dances of Keith’s life. He rarely went to clubs to go dancing but tonight literally dethroned the times he did. The music was loud and the air was electrified with the pulse of sexual tension. Bodies moved around them to the rhythm that thumped against the walls Lance’s strong body was behind Keith and his hands rested on his slender hips as they swayed together suggestively with the beat.

“Go loose for a little bit, don’t be so stiff.” Lance whispered and Keith closed his eyes to savor that husky voice lick the most secret parts of him. Keith took a deep breath and allowed the music to pump through his veins while being guided by Lance’s hands. He leaned against the other, resting his head back on Lance’s shoulder to expose his throat and Lance automatically swooped in to take the invitation as he leaned in to press his lips on the soft, sensitive skin on the side of Keith’s neck.

“Mm, that’s right, sweetheart.”

“You’re an angel.” Keith’s words were barely audible over the loud music his tender body. “You’re not supposed to lead me to sin.”

“I’m not leading you into sin.” Keith shivered when he felt Lance’s lips curl into a smile against his neck. He sucked in a deep breath when Lance got carried away and one of his hands moved slowly but firmly across Keith’s thigh. Lance moved his head and trailed his lips up Keith’s neck to whisper; “I’m leading you into pleasure.”

“Lance…!” Keith gasped when Lance’s fingers hooked themselves on the waistband of his jeans, caressing the sensitive skin of his navel. His name upon his lips sounded like an airy moan and Keith pressed his body against Lance’s as they swayed even more, their hips grinding against each other. Keith was blinded by the flashing lights when he opened his eyes and his body turned molten against Lance’s hard body. The energy in the air made his nerves haywire and Keith’s body pleaded for a more intimate touch.
“Hm?” Lance hummed against his ear and Keith rolled his head to the side until he came face to face with him. Lance’s eyes were dark with wanton that the silver ring around his irises glowed with power. Keith was sucked in and he drowned in those stark blue pools. When he started to lean in, Lance’s eyes became hooded and he leaned in as well. Their lips were a hair’s breath from each other and their breaths mingled hotly between them. Finally, Lance closed the distance between them for a kiss but;

“Guys, weird shit at your three o’ clock.” Pidge’s voice snapped them out of their heated reverie and Keith groaned in frustration when Lance pulled back with a soft curse in a language Keith didn’t understand.

“This better be good.” Keith gritted and Pidge scoffed on the other side.

“It’s legit, alright.” Lance frowned when he turned to the direction Pidge and saw the same guy in the cropped top who was trying to flirt with him before he headed to find Keith at the bar. The web of veins on his neck looked sickeningly worse than how it was when Lance saw him an hour ago. “We’re going to trail that guy.”

“I’ll guide you through.” Pidge confirmed on the other line and Lance gave a single nod. “Keith, are you ready?”

Keith met Lance’s gaze head on and even his heart was still running laps in his head from the intimate dance he shared with him. He nodded. “Yes.”

“Alright.” Lance turned and Keith followed. He felt all his senses perk up and adrenaline rushed through his veins from the thought of diving into a life threatening situation.

However, as Keith was walking off, he felt the hairs on his nape stand as if someone was watching him. He looked up to one of the water capsules and the mermaid inside has stopped dancing in her own confined space. Now, she had her hands pressed against the glass and those glassy blue eyes stared at Keith. Familiarity kicked at his gut but he just couldn’t put his finger to it; he’s seen her before.

The mermaid twirled in the water and her fiery red hair blazed around her like fire underwater. She looked at him again and shook her head.

“F-Florona?” Keith muttered in shock when he recognized the waitress at his favorite diner. “You’re a---“

“Keith!” Lance called. “You coming or what?”

“Ah, yeah, just a sec!”

Keith looked up again at Florona and mouthed; “We’re here to help.”

Florona nodded and she swam through the transparent tube that was connected to the wall before she disappeared.

~

The two of them slipped into a backdoor behind the bar guarded by a sleeping bouncer so it was easy to bypass him. Lance and Keith ended up in a long stretch corridor and followed the wobbly footsteps of the guy they spotted on the dancefloor earlier. Keith had withdrawn his knife from the sheath on his boot and he gripped it while he glanced behind him to see if they were being followed.
A turn on the corner and Lance halted. Keith bumped on his back and hissed when he staggered back but Lance did not budge.

“What’s wrong?” Keith whispered and his knuckles turned white when he gripped it harder.

“Galra.” Lance replied and with flash of blue light, his twin pistols materialize in his hands and he pressed himself against the wall by the corner. He angled his head to peek on the other side. “Ten guards; we’re close.”

“You’ll make too much noise!” Keith’s eyes widened when he saw that guns. “You’ll draw more attention!”

“You have a better idea?”

Keith clamped his mouth shut.

“Thought so.”

Keith rolled his eyes but there was obvious annoyance in his features. But then Lance smirked at him playfully.

“Did you know that they call me The Sharpshooter back home?”

“Oh, yeah?” Keith crossed his arms over his chest and he quirked an eyebrow at Lance.

“Yeah.” Lance lifted the pistols to ready himself and his weapons gleamed menacingly under the artificial light of the hallway; one, polished ebony and the other a stark ivory white.

Keith nodded. Lance closed his eyes and took a moment to take in a deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, Keith gave a soft gasp upon the sight of those blue pools ringed with silver glowing dangerously with power.

“Don’t blink, sweetheart.”

Lance stepped out into the open and lifted his weapons in front of him. Once the guards spotted him, Lance wasted no time in making it rain. Two guards immediately went down with a bullet between the eyes. Three went after him and Lance planted a bullet in each before he ducked quickly to avoid the butt of a rifle coming for his head from a fourth. The angel thrust his right leg and spun on the floor, tripping the demon with a sideswipe kick. He quickly regained his footing and kicked down the guard before he shot him with one pistol while the other lifted to fire twice at two guards who lunged at him.

Six down in less than five minutes.

Keith watched, frozen in place at the inhuman speed of which Lance moved. The angel was so graceful in his movements like it was second nature for him to commit such a bloodbath like this. A guard came at Lance with a huge curved blade but Lance parried it with the butts of his pistols, sparks flying at the contact. He pushed back and when the guard staggered back, Lance took the opportunity and rammed the bottom of his gun at the guard’s temple as hard as he can and Keith cringed when he heard something break in his skull and he fell dead. The moment Lance spotted the next guard lifting his gun, he grabbed the other guard and gripped him by the neck to use him as a shield when bullets were fired at him. The guard with the gun froze when he realized that he had killed his own comrade and the moment he let his guard down, Lance shot him on the face and he fell back on a pool of his blood.
One more.

Clang! The sound of steel hitting the floor as Keith’s blade fell on the floor.

“Don’t move, angel scum!” The sound of labored breathing and the reek of fear in the air. When Lance turned around, his eyes narrowed when he saw the last guard holding a pistol against Keith’s temple and his arm around the Vessel’s neck, strangling him. Lance didn’t yield and he kept his guns aimed at the Galra.

“Taking a hostage,” Lance’s tone was laced with disgust. “Have you no honor?”

“All honor to the demon lord!” The Galra cried but his sickly yellow eyes were wide with fear. “This is the Vessel, isn’t it? He smells delicious. Prince Lotor will reward me handsomely if I were to hand this human to him.” A nervous laugh. “Hehe, he might even honor my services and give me Rolo’s position in his army!”

Lance gritted his teeth and he felt a vein throb in irritation with the surge of dark, painful memories that came from the mention of the demon lord’s name. So, Rolo was here. That bastard probably ran the show too. Keith cringed when the Galra flicked out his forked tongue and licked Keith’s cheek. The air became cold and the tips of Lance’s hair waved with a surge of invisible power that emanated from him.

“I’m going to give you one chance, you son of a bitch.” The edges of Lance’s lips tugged up into a cocky smile but it didn’t faze the anger in his eyes. “Let him go or I’ll kill you.” Each word was pronounced with a quiet threat.

“I can kill this human faster than you can shoot me!” The guard screeched and pulled back the hammer of the gun while his finger quivered over the trigger. “Disengage, angel!”

“Lance.” Keith forced out but when Lance saw the look in those violet eyes, he understood and finally yielded. With a flash of light, the twin pistols dematerialized in from his hands and he raised his hands in the air in surrender.

The demon cackled. “That was too easy! Does this piece of shit fleshling mean that much to you? These humans are weak! They are fodder and quintessence surplus like this one is just extra juice to feed us!”

“I wouldn’t say that if I were you.” Lance’s smile was smug. “Keith’s pretty hot.”

The demon blinked in confusion but realized too late when his whole body burst into bright red flames. Keith broke his hold and ducked to grab his knife on the floor and he rolled out of the way unscathed from the flames that materialized from his own body. The Galra screamed in horror and unimaginable pain until he was reduced to a burnt husk as he fell lifeless on the ground.

Keith stared, frozen. “I…I did that…” It was a statement filled with shock. “I killed him.”

“You did.” Lance nodded. “It’s kill or be killed.”

When Keith didn’t move, Lance sighed and approached him. He carefully placed his hands on Keith’s shoulders and gently spun him around so that they faced each other. “And because of what you did, we’re both still alive.” He reached up and carefully cupped the smoothness of Keith’s pale cheek and brushed the pad of his thumb of it twice. Keith closed his eyes and anchored himself to Lance’s gentle touch to keep the horrors at bay.

“If you don’t want to continue, turn back and wait for us outside.”
Keith shook his head and when he opened his eyes, they burned with dedication. “No.” It was a soft but edgy reply. “I promised Pidge I’ll help them get their brother back. And I’m not going to leave you behind, we’re in this together, right?”

It took Lance a moment to reply because he was taken back by Keith’s statement; To have someone ‘not leave him behind’ is such an alien statement but it made something miniscule kick inside of Lance.

“Right.” Lance nodded with a smile and pulled his hand away from Keith’s cheek. Then, he smirked; “I don’t know if it’s our dance earlier but you must really like me, huh?”

“Aw, come on!” Lance whined as he walked after him. “I thought we bonded!”

Keith brushed past him.

“Keith? Buddy? My man?”

“Quit making so much noise, Lance.” Keith sighed, his back turned at Lance so that the other didn’t see the pink hue that tinted his cheeks.

The two of them got to a second hallway and this time, it was unguarded but Keith and Lance remained alert. As they walk, Keith decided to tell him what he saw earlier just as he was leaving the dancefloor;

“Lance, Florona’s here.”

“Florona?” Lance glanced over his shoulder. “The cute waitress from the diner? The one with the cherry red hair? Blue eyes, nice boobs, a charming smile?”

“Yes, yes, her.” Keith said with slight annoyance. “She’s a mermaid. She was in one of those capsules that hung over the dancefloor. I mean, holy shit, Lance. Florona’s been serving me pancakes once a week for about a year now and she had two legs!”

“That’s not new.” Lance replied as he led the way and Keith followed, closely watching behind them. “Beings who are capable of magic can use a glamour spell to conceal a feature of theirs and blend in the human realm for an amount of time.”

“How long?”

“Depends on how strong the caster is.” Lance shrugged. “Some can keep up a glamor spell for a few days while some can only do it for a few minutes.”

Keith thought about the first time he met Shiro and remembered how he saw a ghost of wings on his back but it was gone as soon as he noticed it. “So, like how you’re hiding your wings right now so you don’t catch any attention here?”

No answer.

“Lance?”

“Someone’s nearby.” Lance changed the subject almost immediately but Keith took the later part into account and lifted his knife as the two of them hid behind in the shadow of a large steel maintenance cabinet. When Lance peeked from behind, they saw Pidge knelt by a door and their hand glowed
“Pidge?” Keith stepped out. “Oh my god, Pidge!”

The bespectacled girl looked up from their task and their eyes widened. “Keith! Lance!”

“‘Sup, short stuff.” Lance gave a small wave and followed Keith who had already approached Pidge. “What are you doing?”

“Something’s behind this door.” Pidge frowned and stared at the half melted doorknob. “I’m trying to break in; it might be Matt.” They were about to return to do their former task before they were interrupted but then Pidge gave a startled yelp when Keith stepped forward and kicked the door open.

Lance whistled in admiration. “Whoah, Keith. And to think you’re the one who was complaining earlier that I’d draw attention to us.”

“Hey, it worked, right?” Keith shrugged then he carefully pushed the door open. It was dark and cold inside but a rancid smell of something rotting filled their noses. “Fucking shit, what’s that smell?”

“Here, let me put in a light.” Pidge waved their hand in the air and an orb of green light materialized. But when Pidge made it float forward into the dark to illuminate the room, they stumbled back and the shrill scream of terror was muffled when Lance caught them and covered their mouth with his hand before he forced Pidge to look away.

“Son of a bitch.” Lance gritted, anger bubbling in him. But Keith just stared, wide-eyed and his buckled;

There in the room, were about a dozen corpses that had turned into dried husks. Their eye sockets were empty and their mouths hung open in silent screams.

“They’re, they’re dead…!” Keith forced out. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked away. He braced himself against the opposite door and focused not to throw up his lunch but he gave a dry hurl.

“Keith!” Lance became concerned while his hand smoothed down Pidge’s back to comfort them.

“What…How?” Keith gasped between anxious breaths but he couldn’t get the rest of the sentence out.

“That’s what happens when a creature is completely drained out of quintessence.” Was Lance’s grim reply. “But from what I saw, Matt’s not one of them.”

“How could you tell?” Pidge looked up to the angel now. “They don’t even look human anymore!”

“They’ve been dead for a while now.” Pidge finally steadied on their feet when Lance helped them up. “You saw Matt last night and it hasn’t been a full day yet. What I can’t assure is whether he’s still alive at this point.”

“He is!” Pidge barked angrily and clenched their fists. “I know he is!” One hand reached up to press itself against their chest, right over their heart. “I can feel it. I know my brother is still alive.”

“Then, let’s keep moving.” Keith nodded with steely resolve. “There’s still some time.”

~
The three of them arrived at the end of the hallway and Keith felt the hairs on his nape when he sensed a dark aura sucking him in; he was human but he knew bad juju when he felt one. Beside him, Pidge pursed their lips together and exhaled a shaky breath before they fetched a piece of clear cut crystal where in some quintessence was stored for extra power.

Lance aimed one of his guns on the doorknob to shoot it open but then they were distracted by a metal bucket that fell to the floor from top of a maintenance shelf. Florona wobbled on shaky knees and she braced herself against the wall while she forced herself to walk.

“Please,” she pleaded. “Please, don’t kill everyone behind that door. Our queen is innocent!”

“Florona?” Pidge’s eye widened in shock and they quickly went over to help the woman to steady herself. “Oh my god, what are you doing here?”

“My full time job, Pidge.” Florona mustered a weak smile and she trailed her blue eyes to lock with Keith’s. Unlike earlier, Florona had taken in her usual human features and her body was dressed in a thin white dress that clung onto her wet body and around her lush womanly curves. “Keith knows.”

“She’s a mermaid.” Keith confirmed and Pidge flashed a look of shock at him. “I saw her in one of those decorative capsule things over the dancefloor.”

“Are you serious?!” Pidge gaped in disbelief.

“Yeah but we’ll get to that later.” Lance interrupted and regarded Florona. “You said your queen is here?”

“Y-yes.” Red locks appeared auburn as they stuck onto Florona’s sickly pale forehead. “But she is not herself; she hasn’t been for many moons now. That Galra man, the one with the white hair and who commands the shadows, he’s controlling queen Luxia’s mind.”

Lance’s hands went slack beside him. “Luxia?”

“Do you know her?” Keith turned to ask.

“No.” The angel shook his head but the reply came in too rushed; Keith let it go but it was obvious that Lance was lying.

“So, this Galra is controlling your queen?” Pidge frowned and when Florona lifted her head to look at them, she nodded.

“She owns this club, you see.” The mermaid began to explain. “Right after we defected from the demon realm years ago, we came here to conduct a different business to earn so that we may survive. This club is our latest business and it used to be so fun but this man, Rolo is his name, I believe. After he conducted a meeting with our queen, she was never the same. She changed club operations and lured in humans that have a good amount of quintessence and---“

“I think I get it now.” Keith muttered grimly as he remembered those dried out corpses in the other room. “And Rolo, I’ve met him before at the pizza place.”

“So that’s why that guard knew you were a Vessel.” There was a slight drop of temperature as Lance’s mood got darker. “If Rolo knows about you then it’s highly likely that Lotor does too.”

Florona cringed at the sound of that name like it was a curse but she handed something to Pidge. It was a puffer fish.
“Uh?” Pidge looked confused but took it anyway. “What is this?”

“It contains a special gas that would snap anyone out of a reverie.” Florona explained. “I never got a chance to use it on queen Luxia before because Rolo had always kept her locked away. Now is the best time to use it.” Carefully, she wrapped Pidge’s fingers around the fish. “I will secure an escape route to our sanctuary while you get our queen and the remaining prisoner inside.”

“Prisoner?” Keith repeated.

“You don’t mean---?” Hope glimmered in Pidge’s eyes and they held Florona’s gaze.

“He looks like you. It is strange.”

“He’s my twin brother!”

“Ah,” Florona smiled. “So that explains it.” Then the softness disappeared. “But you have to go now; he is alive but very weak. He won’t be able to withstand another extraction.”

After Florona left, Keith picked the remaining of the lock that wasn’t melted off. Lance and Pidge stood ready and when Keith slowly opened the door, Lance stormed in, guns raised.

“Matt!” Pidge cried when he saw their twin laid back on a lazy boy chair. His eyes were empty as they stared on the ceiling and his lips were parted, gasping for air. The web of veins and bruises on his neck looked sickly and his whole body was slicked with sweat. Beside him, a beautiful woman sat on a stool. She was garbed in deep blue robes adorned with silver thread and small Swarovski jewels. When she opened her eyes, a nictitating membrane slid back to reveal beautiful dark blue eyes framed with silk black hair held back by a string of shells and crystals.

But queen Luxia’s movements were oddly mechanical and her eyes were void with any hint of glimmer that came with conscious life. She reached out to wipe away the sweat from Matt’s forehead with the back of her webbed fingers, her glamor spell obviously starting to wear off. The queen opened her mouth and started to sing.

The moment that her beautiful voice created a haunting tune, Matt made a choked sound and a neon gold tendril of light snaked out of his mouth to a large vial where Luxia guided it to pour.

“No!” Pidge cried and without a second thought, they rushed forward and yanked Luxia away and she fell on the floor where in Pidge pinned her down the chest by their knee. They took out the puffer fish and a strange scent of disinfectant and seawater filled the air when Pidge squeezed it over the queen’s face.

“Huh?” Luxia blinked and sat up to look at the people around her in confusion. “What’s…who… who are you people?” she turned her head but when she saw Matt and his condition, her eyes widened. “What is the matter with this youngling?!?” she quickly rushed to his side. “What did you do to him? Where is Florona? Where…Where is my handmaiden?!” she demanded.

“She really doesn’t remember anything.” Lance shook his head and took a moment to lower his head to a bow. “You’ve been mentally controlled, your highness. This human’s condition is due to your quintessence extraction. I’m afraid that it’s gone long enough that there were some who died from it already.”

“We’re here to help.” Keith said this time. “I’m Keith and this is Pidge.” He quickly motioned to their short friend then to the unconscious one on the lazy boy chair. “And that’s their brother Matt.”

Queen Luxia stared in utter shock. “I would never… “ she shook her head in disbelief. “I vaguely
remember meeting this merchant from the Galra empire to settle a price on traded goods but then… then I… I have no memory of what came next.”

“Well, that guy brainwashed you into doing this.” Keith interjected with a hard tone as he watched Pidge go to their brother and administer emergency first aid. “But we need to get out of here before he comes back. Florona said that she will clear an escape route for us.”

“Ah, so Florona is well.” Luxia smiled and Keith noticed the way Lance briefly tore his gaze away. “Come with me. We need to avoid the front or else the innocent club patrons will get involved.” She glanced at Matt with a pity in her eyes. “This is all my fault.” she whispered sadly. “If only I was more alert to Rolo’s tricks.” She stared at her hands webbed with a think pale membrane between her fingers. “I…I’ve taken innocent lives…”

“You can mourn them later, your grace.” Lance strode over and helped Luxia up while Keith helped Pidge carry Matt by slinging one of his arms over his shoulder while Pidge took the other.

“Queen Luxia,” Keith began. “Are you sure that the club patrons won’t be harmed?”

The mermaid queen glanced at the wall clock over the door and regarded that it was already two thirty in the morning. “The place is closing for the night.” She replied. “As long as Rolo returns to an empty place the patrons will be safe and besides, if I deter everything is correct, he is only after humans with a handsome amount of quintessence which most of the people don’t have.”

“Good enough.” Keith sighed.

“Follow me.” Luxia wobbled to her feet but Lance continued to assist her. “We’ll go to our sanctuary deep beneath the city so that we may cure this poor human and your injuries.”

~

It was absolutely difficult hauling dead weight like Matt around especially that time was not on their side. Lance kept his eyes forward while his hand locked around Luxia’s waist to keep her trembling legs steady all the while heightening his senses so that he also knew that Keith was safe.

“We’re almost out of here.” Luxia’s voice was soft.

“Yes, your grace?” Lance’s reply was curt and polite. He wore a small smile to lighten the situation and so that he didn’t appear rude. “Just down this corridor, then?”

Midnight tresses waved when Luxia nodded. “Beyond here to the second to the last door to the right is a janitor’s closet and within there, a trap door. It’s a maze underwater but the current will take us so that we do not have to waste our energy swimming.”

“Uh, did you say underwater?” Pidge was hesitant. “We can’t breathe down there.”

“The bubble coral will help you breathe.”

Suddenly, there was a loud explosion that came behind them and they all ducked to avoid the flame. Lance slid on his back and shot at the familiar black tentacles that attempted to stab him.

“GO!” the angel grabbed Luxia and they bolted while Keith grabbed Matt and hauled the other over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Go, go, GO!”

Another explosion greeted them at the front and Pidge thrust their magic forward. When they did, thick green vines sprouted from the enchanted circle that spun beneath their feet in a display of
power and they weaved together to create a barrier to keep the flames at bay. Pidge yelped when sharp black extremities stabbed through the wall they created and they stepped back.

“Just one more corridor!” Luxia cried as she pushed forward. When three Galra guards suddenly appeared, the queen was quick to react. At her will, pressurized water shot out of the light the glowed within her hands and sliced the three guards in half.

“Move, move!” Keith barked in panic. With Matt on his shoulders, he had to rely on the others to protect him because he can’t move to defend himself without leaving Matt vulnerable.

“There’s the door!”

But then, they were wood crashing and being blown to pieces as Pidge’s shield was wrecked to pieces by blood thirsty tentacles that were sharp as blades.

“Luxia, take them. I’ll hold Rolo back!” Lance shot at the fury of tentacles that came at them.

“Lance!” Keith cried out but Pidge was already pushing him away.

“I said, go!” Lance snapped and when he thrust his fist against the floor, a bright blue magical circle appeared beneath his feet and a wall of ice emerged from the blue mists of light that emanated from the incoherent Altean symbols that spun.

Keith forced himself to move and followed Luxia to the door. Once inside, Florona was waiting for them with a conch in her hands and without wasting a second, held it over each of the human heads where a bubble squeezed out to wrap around their heads as an air supply. Luxia kicked the carpet and pulled open a trap door where dark water sloshed below.

“Jump!” Florona exclaimed and when she leapt, her body was covered in a bright cocoon of light and her true form appeared as she swan dived into the water. Luxia did the same and soon, her fins replaced her legs in a flash of light as she hit the water.

“Throw your brother in!” She opened her arms.

Pidge hesitated.

“We have the bubble things, Pidge, we won’t die!” Before Pidge could protest, Keith dumped Matt’s limp body into the water. “Now you!” He said and guided Pidge down as the other leapt in as well.

“Keith!” Florona called in panicked haste. “Jump!”

“I need to wait for Lance!” Keith protested.

“Goddammit!” Pidge snapped. “Come on!”

Just as Keith was about to snap back, the door burst open and Lance skidded in before he slammed the door shut. “Keith, blaze it!”

Keith thrust his arm forward and shot a stream of flame at the lock to melt it against the door frame and he cursed just as two black blades stabbed through the wood. But then, Lance hissed when two gruesome eyeballs materialized at the tips. It gave a disgusting sticky blink before it stared at them but Lance shot it with two bullets each. There was a rancid smell as the tentacles screeched and withdrew.

“He saw us!” Lance said through gritted teeth.
“Who saw us?” Keith asked but Pidge yelled from the water underneath the flooring.

“Hurry the fuck up!”

Without wasting another second, Lance grabbed Keith by the collar and threw him into the water before he jumped in himself.

“Lance, wait! You don’t have the bubble, you won’t be able to bre—aahhh!” The moment the trap door shut them into darkness, Keith felt himself being thrust underwater and they were pulled by the current into parts deeply hidden under the watchful eye of the world. The moment they did, the room was sucked into a vortex and it disappeared as if it was never there to begin with.

~

Rolo stood in the shadows of the burning club and watched with a blank face as the city’s fire department doused the flames. From where he stood, he was able to remotely manipulate his extremities to attempt to kill those who freed the queen and disrupted his profitable business.

But it was the matter of the ‘who’.

The demon clenched his fists, his head lowered as the shadows of the alley concealed his face. His whole form shook and a broken sound escaped him.

Then, he burst into manic laughter. Rolo took his time as he cackled with glee at what he saw in his mind’s eye via his tentacles; the demon lord would surely be pleased.

When he had laughed enough until his stomach hurt, he leaned against the grimy brick wall and wiped away the tears from his eyes as his laughter died into breathy chuckles.

“And here I was looking forward to ripping off an angel’s wings.” He laughed as he remembered the intense gaze from those familiar blue eyes ringed with silver before the visual feed was cut. “But there’s nothing to rip off in the first place!”

~0~0~0~0~

The world was a blur of rapids and the dark depths of the tunnel of which they were pulled. Luxia and Florona flanked them to make sure that they don’t get separated while Pidge held on to Matt. Keith however kicked his legs to try and fight the current so that he’d spin on his back to get a better look behind them; Lance was being thrown around along the current but then he noticed that along the brief flashes of light, the angel appeared like he was struggling for air.

“Florona!” Keith kicked to propel himself towards the red haired mermaid and when she looked at him, he pointed at Lance frantically. Fortunately, Florona knew what Keith was talking about so she swam towards the angel with the conch and squeeze out a bubble that wrapped around his head. Lance coughed as he gasped for air and gulped it all in to ease his screaming lungs.

Keith thrust his hand towards Lance to reach him so that he doesn’t get separated in the pull of the water and Lance reached forward.

They stretched and stretched, their finger’s brushing against each other’s desperately.

Finally, their fingers intertwined and Keith yanked Lance towards him. “Are you hurt?” Keith asked, his voice muffled by the bubbled that contained his head.

“No.” Lance managed to flash a grin. “You?”
Keith shook his head and smiled hopelessly. “That was some crazy shit you pulled back there.”

“Told you not to blink, didn’t I?” Lance said and willingly swam closer to Keith. “Wasn’t I cool?”

“Yeah, you were.”


“Now, you’re just pushing it.” Keith rolled his eyes but their little teasing was interrupted when Luxia called out from the front.

“We are here!”

The water spout spat them out and as they hit the air, the bubbles around their head popped. Luxia and Florona gracefully dove back into the water while the others cried out in startled unison. But once gravity worked against them, Pidge manage to summon their magic to break their fall with the still unconscious Matt. Lance, however, caught Keith in his arms and landed gracefully on his feet with the other cradled in his arms like a bride.

“Lance, why do you have to be so extra?” Keith kicked his legs until Lance set him down on the smooth limestone floor.

“Extra?”

“It’s human slang for show off.” Pidge answered this time while they carefully laid Matt down.

Keith was about to add to it but then he was distracted with where they are; it was a gigantic cavern of glittering limestone. He stood on a carved stone walkway which led to an empty stone cabin carved into the cave wall. The cave wall look like an alien counterpart of the night sky from the flecks and spots of algae that glowed with variations of neon blue, green, and yellow.

“The rest of our people live below.” Queen Luxia emerged from the water but Florona was now here in sight. “I’ve sent Florona ahead to tell the others that we have guests and fetched the healer.” She motioned towards the cabin. “This is an accommodation for air breathing guests such as yourselves so please, make yourselves at home.”

“So there’s a whole city down there?” Pidge asked, completely astonished. “A whole civilization of merfolk?”

“Indeed, you are correct.” Luxia nodded and smiled. “You are more than welcome to submerge below. You will be welcomed and I can assure you that my people are peaceful.”

Later, the healer was a kind old man who donned a dark brown robe. The merfolk, as Luxia briefed them, are a proud race of artists. They mostly channeled the use of their magic through song which the healer did now. Matt’s breathing became even and the sickly web of veins and bruises on his neck started to fade away as the healer’s baritone voice sang a lovely, soothing lullaby in a language only Luxia understood.

“He is safe.” The old man sighed and pulled the blanket up to Matt’s chin. He looked back to normal now but Pidge wasn’t so convinced until their twin woke up. “You brought him here just in time; his body was broken in places and his quintessence is near gone. He would’ve died.”

Keith reached forward and placed a strong hand on Pidge’s shoulder when the other released a broken sob. “He’s okay, Pidge. He’s going to be okay.”
“Thank you so much.” Pidge pulled their glasses away and they covered their face to hide the tears of relief that fell from their eyes. Keith sighed with a small smile and took his best friend into his arms in a comforting embrace.

“We owe you dinner for a whole year, Lance.” Keith lifted his gaze as he rested his chin on top of Pidge’s head. “Thank you.”

“I owe you dinner for the rest of my life!” Pidge hiccupped but they were smiling.

Lance, who leaned against the wall while he kept guard by the door, shrugged and grinned. “Hey, it’s no big deal. I’m more than happy to help someone in need and piss off Lotor at the same time.” His gaze settled on Keith and he felt a strange warmth bloom in his chest at the sight of him. Lance knew that he was gravitating towards Keith; Keith with that dumb wet mullet flat against his head
and those haunting violet eyes that drew Lance in like a moth to a flame... that smile...

Luxia turned to look at Lance and the angel froze before he cleared his throat and bowed his head. “Thank you for your hospitality, your highness.”

“Please,” The loose silver lined sleeve of her sapphire robes ghosted in the air when Luxia waved her hand. “It is the least I can offer you after you saved me. I wish there is more I can give.” She glanced at the healer who had already packed up his toolbox studded with seashells after he packed up his salves and seaweed bandages. “Rest, dear guests. I will have food delivered up here and if you would like to explore below the water and meet some of the people, then you are welcomed to do so; there is a conch by the door.”

Luxia smiled at them one last time and with silent footsteps, she left the cabin. For a moment, she stopped the door where Lance was like something passed between them before she left without a word.

~

That night, Keith stirred in his cot and slowly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the stone ceiling flecked with glowing algae then he noticed the cool air that came through the square hole on the wall that served as window. Keith sat up and out of habit, reached for his knife which rested over the bed and his feet hit the wooden floor. Florona brought them dry clothes while the current ones they wore on the way here hung outside to dry. They were simple clothing; Keith now wore a black v neck t-shirt similar to his favorite ones, jeans, but no shoes. He didn’t really expect merfolk to provide them with something that’s not really necessary for people who had fish fins as their lower halves.

After he exited the hall he made sure that Pidge and Matt were safely tucked in before he went outside. It was quiet but the darkness wasn’t threatening at all because with the way the walls were blotched with spots and collections of tiny lights, it looked like Keith was in an enchanted fairy world; the only things missing were those giant neon mushrooms.

Curious as to what the world below was like, Keith went to the porch and true enough, there was a conch there like Luxia said. A bubbled blew out and wrapped around Keith’s head, then feeling totally free, he ran to the edge of the limestone walkway and cannonballed into the water.

Keith’s eyes widened as he floated down to the seafloor. “Damn, the little mermaid ain’t got no shit on this.”

It appeared more like a small village than an actual kingdom but it looked very humble to Keith; cottages carved out from natural formations. The streets were illuminated by crystals attached on poles like lampposts; the crystal giving off a natural glow. Strange fish with huge alien eyes and sharp teeth swam across the dark alleys, the striations and dots in their bodies glowing like beacons. Windows were closed and the remaining shops pulled down their tents to retire for the night and Keith realized that he managed to drop in at a really inconvenient time.

When a merman saw him, he gasped. “An air breather!”

“I…I don’t mean any trouble, mister!” Keith shook his head. “I’m just looking for my friend.”
“Trouble?” he was a burly man with eyes like polished plates and his bear was green. Keith hoped that was fake seaweed else he never would want to touch it while his tail resembled the patterns of an orca. He laughed heartily and smacked Keith on the back with a beefy webbed hand. “Word in the village is that air breathers and a sky dancer saved out queen.” Sadness flickered in his eyes for a moment. “For many moons, she had been acting strange. She never joined the last festival we celebrated and she didn’t talk to us but instead, just stared into nothingness.”

Keith caught a shy head pop out from behind a crate and the man perked up. “Ah! Dezri! Come here and say hello to the air breather!”

The head revealed to be a little mermaid girl with a tail similar to her father’s but her eyes were bright aquamarines that matched the color of her hair. She swam towards Keith and shyly held out a round, green fruit that Keith had never seen before.

“Sea apple, air breather?” she offered a kind smile.

The sight of how adorable the little girl was poked at Keith’s heart and he smiled. “Thank you, Dezri.” He took the fruit from her tiny webbed hands. “My name is Keith, by the way.”

“Keith?” Dezri rolled the name on her tongue. “Keith.” She beamed. “Keith!” she giggled. “Air breather Keith!”

“That’s right.” Keith stood up straight after he bent to match the girl’s height. “It’s Keith.”

“How rude of me,” the merman cleared his throat and offered a webbed hand towards Keith. “I’m Varo.”

“Nice to meet you.” Keith shook his hand firmly then he looked at the sea apple. “I’m afraid I don’t have any money for this though.”

Varo laughed heartily, the sound booming across the empty street. “It’s on the house, Keith!” he placed a hand on his daughter’s small shoulder. “Ah, would you like to come with us to dinner? My nest mate is an amazing cook!”

“And I can sing for you!” Dezri offered cheerfully. “I’m the best among the village fingerlings!”

Keith was taken back by the hospitality. Being along most of his life, he didn’t have many friends and because of his powers, he avoided too much social contact because they either thought he was crazy or that he was afraid that he’d hurt them with his flames.

“Thank you very much but I have to decline.” Keith smiled apologetically. “You see, I’m looking for my friend. I think you called him ‘sky dancer?’ He’s an angel.”

Father and daughter glanced at each other. “Oh that one?” Varo confirmed. “The one with the earring?”

“Yes, that’s him.” Keith nodded eagerly.

“Yeah, I saw him pass by. He headed to the queen’s home.” The merman replied. “It’s down that path over there. It’s got a blooming garden maze and guards by the gate, you can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, Varo.” Keith said after he memorized the directions.

“If you and your friends are free, you are welcome to our home.” The merman nodded before Keith waved them goodbye and he swam down the path towards the mansion with a huge garden.
Lance refused when Luxia offered him a full course meal but as to not to appear rude, he ate the platter of sliced sea fruit that Florona had brought in. It was already late that night but Lance needed to speak to queen Luxia so when he was sure that Keith was asleep, he snuck out. Now, he sat in the queen’s study, surrounded by scrolls and enchanted books immune to the erosion of water. Strange instruments were propped against the wall and there was an easel whose canvas was covered with white cloth.

“You wish to speak in private, Lance?” Luxia broke the silence and the angel stiffened.

“I never told you my name.” Lance’s tried to keep his tone from sounding rude but he was actually surprised. Keith and Pidge introduced themselves earlier while they said Matt’s name but Lance had been keeping a discreet distance from the queen.

Luxia was silent for a moment and she spun gracefully in the water to face Lance. She studied him with enigmatic eyes that sparkled like the strings of shells and jewels against jet black hair. “You’re right, angel. I do know who you are; blue eyes the color of sunlight through water, hair and skin the color of summer moss, a smile that can cheer up a broken heart.”

“Wow, that sure is a creative way to put it, your grace.” Lance flashed a quick smile. “I’m very much flattered.” But those eyes were humorless for Lance only knew one person who described him exactly that way; a person he considered a very dear friend, almost like a sibling in the dark madness they both shared. “But that is only reserved for my friend. She only spoke those words to me so how did you know?”

Luxia took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Wordlessly, she swam to the easel and pulled back the cloth. Lance’s eyes widened and a flurry of memories threatened to cave him in when he saw the beautiful portrait on the canvas; long hair pulled into twin ponytails adorned with polished shell pins and clear azure eyes.

“Plaxum is my daughter.” Queen Luxia finally said and her voice fell into a pained whisper. “She… She was taken by Prince Lotor when he raided our kingdom many centuries ago.” Her hands clenched into fists and her eyes reflected a mother’s heartbreak. She managed to send out a letter to me in secret with details about her escape and that she was bringing a friend.” With a wave of her hand, a small piece of parchment materialized in her hand and she began to read;

“…I am bringing a friend of mine. He may not look like it, but he is an angel. He has eyes the color of sunlight through water and hair and skin the color of summer moss. He is Lotor’s favorite but he is not spared from the prince’s cruelty and sadistic coupling to which I believe, he gets the worst out of all of us. However, Lance makes silly jokes that get me and the other harem slaves through the day and yet for the smile he wears that can soothe heartbreak, he masks a very deep pain.

I cannot save everyone, mother, but I cannot leave Lance behind. Not when he has done so much for me like the brother I never had.’’ The details followed. “We will escape using the sewers where I can move through the water. Meet us at the shore of the Obsidian Sea and avoid the stone forest. The prince will be there on this fated night to deal with the Galra Rebels; an order called The Blade of Marmora...’’”

Luxia ceased to read when she was interrupted by a broken sob. Lance’s head hung low and he was breathing hard to try and suppress the sobs that choked him along with the pain in his heart. There were no tears; no, Lance hadn’t felt tears in centuries for he had already cried until there was nothing more that came.
“I’m so sorry, Luxia.” He whispered brokenly. His hands clenched on his lap and he bent his head to avoid the mermaid queen’s gaze. “I’m so sorry.” He was vulnerable and his own darkness engulfed him in his personal abyss.

“What happened to her, Lance?” Luxia’s voice was quiet but it held plea. “Please tell me what happened to my daughter.”

“Plaxum…” The name shook upon Lance’s lips. “...There was change in Lotor’s plans. We were already halfway through when we heard guards coming after us.” Lance needed to pause so that he could collect himself and he finally lifted his head to look Luxia in the eye. But when he saw the look of heartbreak in her eyes, he knew that her heart was crying for her daughter.

“Is-Is she alive?” The queen was desperate but Lance shattered Luxia’s hope with the bitter truth.

“Yes. She stayed behind to hold them off so that I may escape.” Lance couldn’t lie; he owed Luxia the truth. “You daughter was one of the people who saved me...Me,” he gritted and spat out the words; “…A failure.”

“Enough!” Luxia snapped and Lance froze. “You are alive today because of Plaxum. Do not dishonor her memory by calling yourself that!”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“And never apologize for something that you cannot control.” Luxia’s tone softened. She swam towards the broken angel and took his hand into her webbed ones. “I now understand why an angel trained in the erotic arts and favored by the demon lord himself became an exceptional Altean Paladin.” She cooed. “You wish to protect those who cannot fight back?”

Lance nodded. “Lotor’s done enough. It doesn’t matter whether he falls by my blade or not, he will fall. And he will never hurt anyone ever again; not my people, not yours, not Keith…” He trailed off as he caught himself.

“Ah.” A twinkle in the queen’s eye and her smile became kind. “Now there’s a thought, yes?”

“It was a slip of the tongue.” Lance managed to chuckle but his mind was confused as to why he just said that. Didn’t he mean humans in general? The slight smile faded away once again but Luxia reached to tilt up the bubble coral so that Lance’s head was towed along.

“Thank you, Lance.” She said softly. “The fact that you picked yourself up and strived to become better despite the suffering you went through? I know that Plaxum’s death was not in vain.”

“I meant to tell you,” Lance closed his eyes momentarily as he recalled the memories that were vivid as day. “Plaxum asked me to tell you that she is sorry and that she loves you very much.”

It took a moment of silence as Luxia collected herself. She placed her hand on her chest and exhaled slowly like she attempted to manage the pain but then, her eyes turned kind and soft. If she had a glamor spell on and they were above water, Lance was sure she would be crying.

“Thank you, Lance.” She said. “Painful as this may be, it has brought me closure. Now, I’m more determined to help out in the fight to get that rotten carcass off the Galran throne.”

There was a knock on the door and with Luxia’s word, a guard swam in.

“My queen,” he saluted. “One of the air breathers is here. He came to see to the sky dancer.”
“Which one?” Luxia asked.

“The one with eyes the color of freshly bloomed night flowers, my queen.”

“That would be Keith.” Lance sighed. “I guess he woke up to see that I was gone.” When the guard swam out, Lance stood up to his full height and very intricately, placed his palm over his chest where his heart and lowered his head before he elegantly waved the same hand to the right; the traditional Altean bow.

“Thank you for the audience and for the warm hospitality, queen Luxia.” Lance smiled at her. “Once Matt is healed and able, we will be on our way. We cannot risk the safety of your people by having Rolo track us here.”

“Where will you go?” Luxia’s frown was most curious. “Obviously, you cannot return to the human realm. Rolo will find you and kill you.”

Keith appeared on the hallway and dipped his head in a quick bow when he remembered his manners and Lance flashed him a bright smile.

“To the only place where they can’t touch us,” Lance turned back to face the queen. “Altea.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 6

Exhaustion was like a parasite in Keith’s bones as he floated aimlessly in the confines of his mind. Snippets of his memories played themselves, throwing Keith into a dream.

At first, he saw a window; the sun was shining outside and birds were faintly chirping in the distance. Then, a woman’s voice floated in the air and Keith saw the ceiling as a baby would when he was being rocked to sleep. She began to hum a lovely but sad lullaby. Keith knew it was his mother or perhaps, it was how he wished it was his mother since she died just to give him life in this world.

“Keith.” She said after she finished her song and Keith reached his tiny hand out to clutch a bundle of her raven hair that matched his. “My beautiful boy. You are destined for great things. Remember that I love you even if I’m not with you. I will always love you, my son…even when I’m not with you.”

The next thing Keith knew, he was sitting on the living room couch as a seven year old. His feet
dangled over the floor while he stared at the two faceless cops who stood before him. Thunder rolled after a flash of lightning illuminated their empty faces.

“Son,” one of them knelt before Keith but his fingers turned white as he gripped the handle of his knife. “Your dad’s not coming back.”

“What did you do to him?” Keith demanded and his small voice shook. He didn’t believe any of this lie; who dies buying eggs and cereal from the store? Heis dad said he’d be back within the hour; he always came back.

“What DID YOU TO HIM?!”

When lightning flashed again and illuminated the cops’ faces in the dark living room, their faces became the same ones Keith saw in the dried up corpses at the club; shriveled with their mouths open in silent screams and their eyes hollowed out.

“You are meant to die, human!” They sneered, their voices echoing the numerous disembodied voices within. “Your fate is sealed… You will die!”

Struck with fear, Keith withdrew the blade and slashed it on the monster’s neck with an anguished cry.

A void sucked him in and Keith found himself in the middle of nothing. But despite the darkness that enveloped him, he could see himself.

“What the—“ He was astonished that he sounded like his regular self now. Keith lifted his hands to look at them and saw that there was a faint red aura glowing around his whole form. “What’s happening to me?”

Keith caught something at the corner of his eye and when he looked up, there was a faint blue thread of light floating. It looked like a luminescent ribbon that was frayed at one end whereas the other stretched out and disappeared into the darkness. Out of curiosity, Keith reached out to touch the frayed end but when his fingers brushed against it, a strange feeling reverberated through his soul; loneliness. Pain. Regret.

Keith knew that these emotions were not his for they felt like they rushed into him when he touched the frayed end. But as to what this strange ribbon of light was, he didn’t know so he followed the length of it in hopes that he would find something at the end. Keith kept walking and walking in the darkness with nothing to guide him but the blue ribbon he was following. When he touched it again, it felt as if his own heart was breaking. Keith didn’t know how long he was walking but he still hadn’t reached the end.

“Who are you?” he muttered softly but only silence answered him.

Keith’s eyes snapped open and he pushed himself up from the table he fell asleep on with his head bent down on his arms. His knife was in front of him with the piece of cloth he was using to clean and polish it earlier before he fell asleep. As he blinked into consciousness, he noticed a weight upon his shoulders and saw a familiar green cropped jacket draped over him for warmth. Heat bloomed on Keith’s cheeks and he closed his eyes briefly as he caught a whiff of Lance’s scent; the ocean.

With a sigh, Keith got up from the chair after he folded Lance’s jacket to place it on the table and he went to the small kitchenette to wash his face on the sink. He hated getting nightmares and they always felt so real that it was terrifying to go to sleep sometimes but the recent events had taken a
huge toll on his body that he fell asleep for hours when it was just meant to be a short nap.

Now fully awake from the splashes of cold water, Keith checked the bedroom to see if Lance was there only to be greeted by the sight of empty twin beds on both sides.

Just as he was about to call for Lance, Keith heard voices from the next room.

“So, you’re telling me…” Matt began with a frown on his face. “That I was hypnotized by a mermaid and my quintessence was almost drained?”

“Pretty much.” Pidge nodded.

“And we’re in an underground mermaid sanctuary?” Matt pushed on.

“Yep.” Pidge nodded again.

“And that you,” Matt looked at Lance who leaned on the wall by the door with his hands in his pants pockets. “are an angel and you’re guarding Keith?”

“Bingo.” Lance replied. It was amusing to watch Matt looking all confused but he had to be briefed with the recent events that he barely remembered. They had to tell every important detail especially now that the Holt twins had found themselves thrown in the middle of this mess.

“But if you’re an angel then where are your wings?”

Lance felt a vein throb in his temple out of irritation but he kept up a smile. “They’re not meant for mortal eyes. If you saw them, your eyes will melt out of their sockets before you burst into flames.”

Matt’s eyes widened and Pidge gaped.

“Are you serious?” the twins asked in unison and he nodded. Lance felt a glum sense of satisfaction; that’ll keep those two from asking.

When the door opened and Keith walked in, Lance felt a strange kick in his chest. It was like a breath of fresh air for him whenever Keith walked into the room. When their eyes met, Lance found himself gulping down the words he was about to say.

“Hey,” Keith greeted. “Are you feeling okay?”

Lance managed to nod. “Yeah, of course I am. I feel great!” he leaned in a bit closer towards the other. “I take my fiery liege is as well?”

“I’m okay. I’m still trying to accept all of this but I’m getting the hang of it.” Keith closed the door behind him. He paused for a moment and Lance noticed the way he nervously chewed on his lower lip. “Oh, by the way,” Keith looked up at him. “Thanks for the jacket.” Lance glanced to his side where Keith reached to pat his shoulder. “You’re uh, you’re doing a great job.”

The angel frowned. “Oh. Thank you.”

On the bed, Pidge and Matt glanced at each other before Pidge rolled their eyes and Matt palmed his forehead. Even though they whispered almost inaudibly to each other, Lance caught their words well;

“Are they…?” Matt began and his sibling leaned in slightly to whisper back.

“Lance is hitting on Keith but Keith has the flirting skills of a Pepsi bottle.”
“I think Keith’s just shy.”

Pidge snorted softly at what Matt said. “Matt, if you saw how Keith was so deep in that dance he and Lance had in the club, you’d be surprised; our shy Keef was doing the sex eyes!”

Lance felt a smile tug up the corners of his lips when he remembered the way Keith’s body moved with his on the dance floor. His fingertips twitched at the memory of the soft skin underneath the waistband of those jeans and the way his body swayed like a seductive courtship. And that almost kiss…

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Matt.” Keith grinned as he plopped down on the bed with the twins.

“I’m sorry I got us all into this.” Matt lowered his gaze to the floor. “I never should have let my guard down like that.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Pidge shook their head and leaned it down on his shoulder. “They were targeting mages in the first place. You couldn’t help it.”

“What’s important is that you’re alive, Matt.” Keith said and gently bumped his fist on Matt’s arm. “We were really worried.”

“Aw, you guys!” Pidge and Keith were snuffed when Matt hauled them into a tight hug. Keith groaned and rolled his eyes while Pidge flailed. Lance watched from the corner where he stood and he felt a pang of pain poke at his heart. He wondered what Hunk and Shiro were doing back home but he figured they were probably busy protecting the kingdom and coming home to warm hearths whose fires were kindled by their loving mates.

Lance liked to flirt and he had an extensive knowledge about the erotic arts but he believed that he would never find a mate to spend the rest of his life with.

How could he? No one would want to be with an angel who was born without wings.

“Lance?” Keith’s voice sliced through his thoughts and Lance lifted his gaze to find that Keith was standing in front of him while the twins watched him for a reaction, waiting. Lance was so deep into his own thoughts that he hadn’t even notice Keith move from the bed. “Are you alright?”

There was genuine concern in those amethyst eyes and Lance felt one of the many layers of the wall he had put up to protect himself all these centuries, crack.

“I’m just trying to think where we’ll go from here.” Lance shook his head and smiled down at Keith. “You need to stop worrying about me and worry more about yourself, Keith.”

“Well, worry about yourself too, Lance. Don’t make me do all the work.” Keith crossed his arms over his chest and the way his lips drooped into a slight pout along with the way his brows furrowed over his eyes gave Lance the strange urge to lean over and kiss him.

“You know, if you’re trying to win me over, it’s working.” Lance smirked and Keith’s eyes widened before he rolled them and glared. On the bed, Matt cooed a sound of awe and Pidge snickered.

“Dude, just… just tell them what we planned to do!” Keith forced, irritated but his cheeks appeared to have gained a gentle red tint on them.

“Alright, alright, calm down!” Lance chuckled then he quieted down and took a deep breath as his blue eyes pinned Matt and Pidge on the spot. “For your protection, we’re going to Altea.”
“What?!” Pidge suddenly jumped up to their feet, eyes wide and mouth agape. “The realm of the angels?! We’re human, we’ll shrivel up and die!”

“Pidge is right.” Matt joined in. “And what about our parents? What if they got back and we’re nowhere to be found?”

“We can’t just go up and call them like…” Pidge mimicked putting a phone on their ear. “Oh, hey, mom and dad! This and that happened and now we’re going to the angelic realm of Altea! We’ll get you souvenirs!”

“Okay, let me address those one by one.” Lance grabbed a wooden chair from the small writing desk by the window and flipped it around before he straddled it to sit down. “First,” he regarded Pidge. “Yes, you will shrivel up and die if you go to Altea.” He tapped his chin as he side-commented; “And I also imagine that it’s going to be a slow and painful death but it won’t happen in five seconds. Remember, Matt didn’t die immediately when his quintessence started to get drained and that could give us a limited time to figure out something. Besides, it’s not proven yet; no human has been there before so you three will the lucky ones first. Second,” he briefly held up two fingers. “Time works differently between your world and mine, the Galra empire included.”

“You mean like time zones?” Keith asked. “GMT, PST, that kind of confusing shit?”

“Pretty much.” Lance replied with a nod. “But unlike here where your gaps are only a matter of hours, one month here is one year in my world.”

“Time moves so much faster there!” Matt exclaimed. “That’s why you’re old!”

“Touchy subject there, Matt, very touchy.” Lance held up a hand and Matt immediately clamped his mouth shut. “But, yes. When are your folks scheduled to come back?”

“It’s a three month cruise.” Pidge said this time. “A month’s down so that’s about two left.”

“Two years if we leave now.” Keith breathed out in disbelief. “Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.”

“Rolo knows about the both of you and how we ruined his black market quintessence gig.” Lance continued and he flicked his teardrop earring out of habit. “Even though you’re not high on his kill list, you’re still there. Altea is the only place where they can’t touch us and we can either wait it out or do something about it.”

“But our parents…” Pidge began but they paused when their brother placed a hand on their cheek to console them.

“Pidge, were you followed home?” He asked and when his younger twin shook their head, he smiled. “Then it’s okay as long as you put up our barrier spells, alright?”

When Pidge nodded, Matt smiled and ruffled the top of his sibling’s head affectionately. “That’s my little twin gremlin.”

“We’re born on the same day.”

“I’m fifteen minutes older than you and I resent your tone.” Matt chuckled jokingly and Keith snorted at the soft retort.

When a small smile from the twins’ banter lit up Keith’s porcelain features, Lance couldn’t help but stare and secretly wished that he was the reason for the smile.
Then, a knock came at the door and when they all fell quiet, Lance opened it only to see Florona in her human form standing on the hallway.

“Good morning.” She said with a warm smile. “I hope you are all feeling better!”

“We are, thanks!” Pidge piped up when the mermaid entered the room. Today she was dressed in a fine yellow silk dress the fell gracefully around her calves.

“You must be Matt.” When Florona smiled at him, Matt quickly flashed a flustered smile. “I’d like to apologize for what you have been through. I also speak for my queen; she wasn’t herself when it happened.”

“I’ve been told.” Matt replied, still astonished that he was speaking to a real life mermaid. “It’s alright, I’m alive.”

“And so is our queen and the others who worked at the club.” Florona dipped her head slightly in a bow of gratitude and fiery strands of her red hair fell to the side of her face like a crimson curtain. “My people who worked there managed to escape unscathed thanks to you.”

“But you lost the place.” Keith frowned. “What will you do now?”

“It’s not a problem. I still have my waitressing job and we have enough to start a new livelihood.” Florona headed towards the door and opened it before she gestured for everyone out to follow her. “Queen Luxia has extended an invitation for all of you to dine with her at her mansion. Please, follow me.”

“Oh my god.” Matt breathed in disbelief. “We’ll meet the queen.”

“Actually,” Lance intervened. “You’ve already met her but you probably just don’t remember.”

~

The dining table was long and grand and the chairs were carved from thick dark wood adorned with polished shells and pearls that were a stark contrast to it. The bowls of food on the table were filled with colorful dishes that did not look familiar to Keith but their presentation drew him in like those that were served in the fancy restaurant not far from where he works.

Well, the right term now was probably ‘worked’ considering that he had suddenly disappeared without a trace and Sal had probably fired him. Just a couple of weeks ago, he was living a normal life delivering pizzas but then it changed the very minute the clock hit his twenty third birthday. He knew how to brandish his knife around to defend himself but he can only do so much before he runs away afterwards when the thing trying to kill him just wouldn’t die.

Then, he came into his life.

When Keith’s eyes flickered across the table, he saw that Lance was merrily chatting with Matt and Pidge with a wide grin on his face. Keith wasn’t entirely sure but it was like there was something that nagged at him that Lance was just wearing a mask. He had noticed the way that smiled disappeared almost instantly once Lance turned his back.

Keith’s thoughts wandered to the strange dream he had. Most of it were familiar as he had always dreamed the desire to know more about his mother and the day his father died left him with a searching, distorted feeling within him. However, the later part was new; he had never dreamed of frayed ribbons of light and the strange loneliness that flooded his heart whenever he touched it.
It was like... It almost felt like...

“Keith, you’re spacing out.” Lance’s voice interrupted his thoughts and his voice echoed within the bubble of air around his head. “Are you okay?”

“Is the food not to your liking?” This time, queen Luxia looked up from her plate.

“You’re feeling sick?” Matt asked with a concerned look on his face but Pidge gave him a sly mischievous look partnered with their teasing gremlin smile before they whispered quite obviously to their brother;

“Love sick.”

Lance paused with the fork halfway to his mouth and slightly lowered it to give Keith a questioning look. “Left someone special up on the surface?” He forced a smile but his eyes searched the depths of Keith’s.

“What? No!” Keith quickly countered. “There isn’t anyone.” When Keith said that, he wasn’t sure if he was seeing things but it looked as if Lance’s shoulders relaxed and he continued with eating.

“I just didn’t expect myself to end up eating dinner with an actual mermaid queen underwater.” A soft ‘heh’. “But after all that’s happened I guess anything is possible now.”

“Humans had always been restricted to many things.” Luxia said with the most utmost care. “Magic and the possibilities that come with the existence of our realms have been wiped away from the memories of your ancestors.” She explained as she looked at Keith, Matt, and Pidge while Lance leaned back to poke on his food as if deciding which piece of sea fruit to eat next.

“You mean to say that humans knew about these things before?” Keith’s voice fell to a whisper of disbelief.

Luxia nodded. “Yes. Your ancestors used to possess the knowledge about angels, demons, fae, and merfolk. They used magic and were known to be clever mages to make up for the lack of wings, tails, and near-immortality. Gifted mages as you were, your heart remained human and fickle to temptation.” Her gaze fell sadly. “They started to make competitions out of it; barbaric entertainment in which they made mages battle each other. Innocent creatures of the land, sea, and air vanished because they were hunted down to be used as ingredients in potions. Such are acts of selfishness without any regard for the consequences.”

“But we can use magic.” Pidge spoke up and they glanced at Matt. “Why?”

“Because the existence and the laws of magic must continue to exist and be regulated in every realm for balance.” Luxia explained. “After the memories of your ancestors had been wiped clean, only a handful of clans and families were chosen to be the keepers of magic upon careful deliberation that their actions and desires lie loyally in using it for good.”

“The Holts are one of them.” Keith said, his eyes were wide with astonishment. When he looked up, Pidge and Matt were staring at him, looking equally amazed about the piece of history Luxia had told them. Then, he asked; “But what about demons? The Galra aren’t exactly using it for good.”

“Their former king got a bad case of god-complex and became greedy.” Lance interjected coldly. “But unlike humans, the Galra are far stronger. It’s a prime example of what happens when near immortals are blinded by power. The humans were easy to regulate but the Galra aren’t like that; they are capable of brutal horrors. The reason we’re fighting them is because Lotor’s predecessor desired to expand his influence and power to the point that he wanted to claim Altea as his.” His tone
became dark and his next words were gritted. “Lotor is the same, even worse, actually. Who am I kidding? The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

A soft creak of metal and Keith immediately reached across the table and covered Lance’s trembling hand with his. “Lance.”

When the angel looked down at their clasped hands and became aware of the warmth of Keith’s fingers, his trembling hand relaxed and released the fork which he had accidentally bent with his inhuman strength.

“Whoah, would you look at that!” Lance’s cheerful demeanor returned but his eyes looked troubled. “I got carried away; probably tired from all the fighting.” A troubled frown. “Uhm, I’m sorry about the fork. Do I have to pay for this?”

“That’s quite understandable, Lance.” Luxia nodded and she placed her knife down to gesture at the door. When she did, an attendant swam over with a tray of dessert. “Maybe something sweet will help you feel better. Please, help yourselves.”

After Matt and Pidge said thank you and Keith nodded thanks when a saucer of what looked like colorful gelatin with pieces of fruit was placed before him, Lance shook his head when it was his turn.

“I think I’ll pass.” He said then turned to Luxia and offered a polite smile. “Thank you for the lovely dinner, your highness, but I apologize that I must excuse myself early.” he glanced at Keith and the others. “I must make the preparations for our departure to Altea.”

“Of course, sky dancer.” the queen returned the gracious smile which reached her eyes. “If you have the need to rest your tired bones, there is hot spring on the surface. It is not far from your lodging so you can go back and sleep if you need to.” She turned to the humans. “The same goes for you.”

“If I may be excused, your grace?” Lance asked.

“Yes, you may.” Luxia nodded. “Thank you for joining us.”

When Lance stood up, he placed his right palm over his chest and dipped his head into a bow in the traditional Altean curtsy. Keith looked up at him and his breath caught momentarily at the gracefulness of his movements before he turned his back and skipped out, gliding through the water without a single look at Keith.

But before Lance disappeared in the hallway, Keith caught the look of sadness in his eyes. It felt familiar like Keith had encountered it before. He understood that as an angelic soldier, it was Lance’s job to fight the Galra but with the way he spoke of them earlier, Keith saw hatred in his eyes and he heard it in Lance’s tone. There was something deeper than the duty of fighting the Galra.

While Pidge and Matt were busy chatting up with the attendant who appeared to be very happy in answering the twins’ questions about the merfolk culture, Keith glanced at Luxia but found that the queen was already staring at him with an amused look in her eyes.

“Go.” she told him gently over the cheerful chatter as she motioned towards the door with a knowing smile.

Keith gulped, how could the queen possibly know? Maybe it was part of her queen powers? Keith started to panic internally; what if the queen could read his thoughts?

“Keith?”
“Ah, yeah?” Keith nodded quickly and discarded those silly thoughts. “I’m sorry, queen Luxia, but I hope you don’t mind if I need to head off to make sure Lance is okay.”

“Not at all.” Luxia chuckled. “Your friend needs you.”

“Thank you.” Keith quickly bowed his head and he pushed himself through the water and glided out of the room.

~

Keith ascended to the surface and his air bubble helmet popped once his head hit the cool air of the cave above the underwater village. He hauled himself up on the stone walkway and he rung the edges of his shirt dry but he knew that that wasn’t going to help much since he’s still pretty wet. However, he didn’t mind because he was set on finding Lance. He followed Luxia’s directions and walked to the other end of the cave where the walkway led him to an entrance of a smaller cavern hoping to find Lance at the hot spring.

Steam emanated from the inside and true enough, there was a pool of hot water framed by large boulders. Luminescent mushrooms stuck on the walls in clumps of different colors that glowed softly. The spring was hidden behind a curtain of vines and leafy tendrils with hundreds of tiny white flowers that caught the light.

“Lance?” Keith called out. He admired the little cave with the hot spring and as beautifully secluded it was, it was not his object interest. “Lance?”

No one answered back and Keith’s voice merely echoed against the damp cave walls. He pursed his lips together and he frowned; it appeared that Lance didn’t go here after all and that he really did go off to start the preparations for their trip. Finally, Keith gave into the welcoming temptation of the spring and he found himself removing his vest and his shirt. After he glanced on both sides to make sure that no one really was there, Keith removed his pants and draped it along with the rest of his clothes on a nearby rock.

Dipping his toe first to test the water, Keith then carefully stepped into the spring while he held on the side of a boulder for balance. A soft sigh escaped him as his naked body was slowly submerged in the hot water until he ended up sitting with the water up to his chin. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the stone edge of the pool as he blew silly bubbles into the hot water. Keith lifted his head for air and rested his head against a smaller rock.

It was nice to relax even for just a little while after all that’s happen and Keith figured out that he needed to be well rested if they were going to flee to Altea. They were still going to discuss that plan and Lance said that he will make the arrangements. Now, by arrangements, Keith absolutely had no idea what kind but he trusted Lance.

And Keith wasn’t the type to trust so easily.

He and Lance haven’t known each other very long, but Lance had saved his life several times now and Keith did his best to return the favor. However, he knew that he had limitations and Keith admitted it to himself that he still had ways to go before he can call himself a worthy fighter.

‘I can’t give up.’ He thought to himself as he glided around the pool before he ended up on a another boulder that sparkled as it caught the light from the mushrooms. *If I fuck up, people can get hurt. I need to get stronger. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.*

“God, now I feel anxious.” Keith voiced out softly into the emptiness of the cavern. He heaved a
deep breath and pressed his forehead against the side of a rock. Underneath the water, his fingers twitch from the absence of his knife and he decided that he should do some knife drills before bed. However, the anxiety from the pressure of having such a weight placed on his shoulders made him edgy. Keith knew that he couldn’t blame anyone; he was born like this but he wished he was normal.

Whenever Keith was feeling negative in any way, he would sing to himself. He’s always liked music and it always soothed his nerves and helped him think or calm down.

“Count the years on one hand that we’ve been together.” Keith sang softly as he started to splash water on his head to wash his hair. “I need the other one to hold you, make you feel better.”

He turned around, his back to the curtain of willow leaves that served as a drape to hide the pool from the outside. Then, Keith waded around the natural pool with his eyes closed and his nerves started to relax when he felt the tension being lifted from them. He hummed the next few chords to the song and continued;

“It’s not a walk in the park to love each other.” He sang more confidently now. Keith didn’t like to show it off but he actually had a good voice for singing. “But when our fingers interlock, can’t deny, can’t deny that you’re worth it.” He felt free now to the point that Keith drummed his fingers against the jagged surface of the rock. “Cause after all this time, I’m still into you.”

Keith took a deep breath to dunk his head underwater for a brief moment and when he bolted up from the water, he gasped for a breath and ran his hand over his face to remove the excess water.

“Why did you stop singing?” Lance suddenly spoke. He leaned coolly against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. There was a smile on his lips and the ring of silver around his sapphire irises glowed dully in the illuminated cavern. “Is it a love song? No one’s serenaded me before.”

If Keith wasn’t able to hold on to his cool, he would have blasted a fireball at Lance’s face.

“Jeeezus!!” Keith almost screamed and sunk deeper into the water since he was completely naked. “Lance! I’m fucking bathing!”

“Two guys chilling in a pool, what’s wrong with that?”

Keith felt heat explode on his face and he gave an angry gape. “Wh-What? I mean… dude, come on---! I…!”

“Relax, will you?” Lance removed his jacket but made no further advances until he asked; “Is it alright with you that I join in?”

“U-Uh, sure, man.” Keith quickly averted his eyes and turned around to give Lance the privacy to strip. His heart pounded against his chest in wild reverie and he counted the nooks and crannies on the boulder in front of him. Every gentle flap of clothing and the grate of zippers made butterflies slam themselves on the wall of Keith’s stomach. When there was a splash and the water dipped along with a small wave that gently moved Keith, he was close to yelling all the names of all the cryptids known to man.

“Come here, Keith.” Lance’s tone was soothing and the smoothness of the invitation rolled off his words. “The rock here’s pretty smooth so you can lean on it without hurting your back.”

Clearing his throat, Keith gathered his wits and put on the straightest face he could but deep inside, he was combusting. Lance’s clothes were on the rock where Keith’s were and the angel was submerged into the water from the torso down. But what was revealed above water was something Keith didn’t expect.
There were scars that crisscrossed Lance’s back and there, between his shoulder blades was the Garla insignia burned onto his skin like he was branded cattle. Lance didn’t look at Keith but the other can’t find it in him to look away.

“Do you like what you see?” Keith was suddenly pinned on the spot by those inhuman sapphire eyes. A small smile played on Lance’s lips but it appeared more as a bitter one which did not light up his face like his usual smiles did.

“No!” Keith immediately replied and the next thing he knew, he was beside Lance in the hot spring. “Who…Who hurt you?!”

“Who do you think?” Sarcasm.

Keith clamped his mouth shut. He knew he Galra were vile considering the quintessence farming gig back at the club that targeted clueless and innocent humans. But to discover that Lance obviously experienced torture made Keith’s shock burn into a slow bubbling rage.

“I’m going to, to---!”

“I’ve been around for quite some time, Keith.” Lance shrugged but his eyes appeared distanced as he stared across the cavern. “But I don’t remember if I was ever happy with it. I was blinded by the desperation to make people proud of me; to be accepted for who I am. In turn, I made some decisions that I deeply regret.”

Lance had no idea why he was saying all of this to Keith right now but the words poured out of his mouth willingly. Only a handful of people knew his past or what happened to him because everyone else was too caught up in the judgement that he was an angel who survived into adulthood without wings.

“But who are you, Lance?” Keith’s voice was a tad whisper. “Why are you so desperate for validation? You’re amazing! You’re talented and you’re skilled; that’s why Shiro chose you to be my guardian angel, right? You’ve saved my life a couple of times already!”

There was a moment of silence in the cavern and only the gentle slosh of water that gently lapped against their bodies was the only sound besides their breathing. Lance turned to face Keith but he was surprised that the other stared at him intently with disbelief and his eyes held a fiery violet flame.

“I don’t really trust anyone with that kind of information yet.” Lance finally said and he noticed the way Keith’s pale shoulders slumped while his eyes flickered away.

“I respect that.” Keith replied with a nod of understanding. “If you ever decide to tell me, I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

“Well, I say, you’re a little bit rude for not letting me finish.” Lance half smiled and closed his eyes when he leaned his head back against a rock. He gave off a deep sigh and after he did, he slowly opened his eyes and he stared at the glowing spots on the ceiling. He heard Keith’s breathing catch in his throat and his heartbeat raced in his chest.

Finally, Lance decided to trust Keith.

“You keep asking me about my glamor spell.” The angel said and his words faltered for a moment. “Contrary to what I’ve said, I’m not using one.”

“You mean you don’t have wings?” Keith’s eyes widened and his whole body stiffened from shock. Despite the heat of the water, cold churned in the pit of his stomach when a thousand possibilities as
to the reason why swirled in his head. Under the water, Keith clenched his fists when he pieced the
puzzle together with the Galra brand on Lance’s back as the final piece.

“They…” Keith forced out and Lance lifted his head from the quivering rage in the other’s voice.
“They cut off your wings, didn’t they?”

“Keith, calm down.” Lance said when he noticed that Keith’s body started to glow with a faint red
aura and more steam hissed from the water. “They didn’t; I didn’t have them to begin with.” He
finally admitted and the glow around the human faded away.

“You were born without wings.”

Lance nodded with a sad smile. “Got a whole lot of bullshit for it too.” He didn’t flinch when Keith
waded towards him and leaned beside him against the rock Lance rested on, their bare shoulders
gently brushing each other’s. “No race is perfect and it seems that they all have an issue when one of
their own is different.”

Painful memories of those years growing up in a secluded village while living through rejection
played in Lance’s mind. He told Keith about the faceless figures that towered over him as they
judged, the way his family couldn’t even look at him, or the way the room went silent whenever he
walked in. Him playing by himself because the other children wouldn’t, earning stares from the other
villagers, and being completely invisible whenever he would try to interact.

“Questions and rumors started to pop up when I got older because I was still alive.” Lance
continued. “Apparently, angels born without wings are not supposed to survive into adulthood. The
village shunned me and my parents had fingers pointed at them because their son was ‘cursed’. So I
left the village and I manage to find a secret passage past the Altean barrier and ended up outside the
realm.”

“Then, what happened?”

“I ran away.” A bitter laugh from the angel and Keith frowned. “They’re better off without me,
right? I found myself in the stone forest which is a gray area between the Galra empire territory and
Altea. I thought that maybe my fate laid somewhere out there and that there was a place where I can
be accepted. I’ve never been such a bigger fool.”

“The Galra caught you.” Keith said. “And they did this to you.”

“Slavers.” Lance agreed.

Carefully, Keith lifted his hand and reached out towards Lance but then he hesitated and asked;
“May I?”

“Sure.” Surprised at the gesture, Lance couldn’t believe it that all these cringe worthy scars as well as
the brand on his back did not repulse Keith. He closed his eyes when Keith’s fingers gently traced
the twisted patterns on his skin. It felt strange, but soothing. Lance had never let another soul touch
him this way and to allow Keith to do so made his heart flutter like a bird set free from its cage.

“Sold to who?” Such gentle words.

That was when Lance felt a chill slither on his skin from the familiar, unwelcome memory despite the
heat of the water and he studied Keith while the human pulled back his hand. When Keith shifted
uncomfortably, a smile broke out from Lance’s face. “That’s a closely guarded secret, Keith. Maybe
I’ll tell you someday but right now, it doesn’t matter anymore.”
“Well, that village didn’t accept you but the queen certainly did.” Keith offered a small smile. “I won’t ask you to tell me anything that you’re not willing to say. But you know what? I think you’re really strong to have gotten through all of that.”

“Nah,” Lance snorted. “I’m just one lucky bastard, I guess.”

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence and they watched the patterns of glowing fungi on the walls. Despite the treacherous path that they will undertake at dawn, Lance felt at ease like a huge burden was lifted from his shoulders. He had expected Keith to judge and recoil just like how the people from his old village did but instead, he didn’t question nor did he push Lance into telling him anything that he was uncomfortable with.

“Thank you for telling me, Lance.” Keith broke the silence and when he turned to face him, Lance’s breath caught in his throat at the beauty of him. “I understand; I was told not to use my powers because I might hurt people. Those who I told about it only thought I was crazy until I showed them and they ran away screaming. I’ve always been alone too but I guess I learned to live with it.” A sad sigh. “After dad died, all I had was myself and my knife before I met Pidge and Matt later on.” He lifted his hand from under the water and watched the droplets catch the soft lights on the wall.

“I never asked for any of this to happen to me.” Keith’s next words were hushed and the droplets on his hand hissed before they evaporated quickly when he played with his abilities for a bit but made no attempt to summon a flame. “I’m not the kind of person who accepts things like these without a fight but I’ve been thinking, what if I’m meant to do something?”

“Well if you are, you won’t be alone.” Lance said. “You’ve got Pidge and Matt with you.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“And me.”

Keith lifted his eyes and they locked with Lance’s deep blue ones. The way the silver glowed dully against his sapphire irises reminded Keith of a halo. “What?”

“I’m your guardian angel, remember?” Jabbing his thumb proudly at himself, Lance gave a smug grin. “It’s my job.”

“Oh.” Disappointment in Keith’s voice. “Uh, yeah. It is, I guess.”

But then there was splash when Lance moved and leaned forward to tilt up Keith’s chin with his slender fingers. Keith looked up, eyes wide while his heart started to get erratic in his chest as he found Lance’s face inches from his but then the whole world spun when Lance pressed their foreheads affectionately.

“But you know,” He smiled gently and the breath of his words mingled with Keith’s. “I just love my job.”
“Lance…”

The angel closed the distance between them and his lips hovered Keith’s which the other had parted after he closed his eyes. But Lance just smiled and he pulled back. He wanted to claim those pretty lips and press their naked bodies together but it would most likely lead to something they might not be ready for. He didn’t want to be selfish and take advantage of the situation especially now that the two of them opened up about the deep hurts in their souls. It would seem like a pity fuck and even if Lance trusts Keith, he felt like it wasn’t the right time to get physically intimate yet.

“Get some rest, Keith.” Lance released his gentle hold on Keith’s chin. “We have a big day tomorrow.”

Speechless, Keith just stared at Lance with his face beet red. When Lance chuckled and turned to haul himself out of the water, Keith quickly averted his eyes as his lithe nakedness was revealed but
it wasn’t fast enough that Keith still caught a glimpse of that shapely ass along the blur of the water’s steam and the dim illumination in the cavern.

~

Keith laid awake late that night; Lance wasn’t back yet after he told him that he would attempt contact with his superiors in Altea to give a status report. So since he wasn’t sleepy yet, Keith decided to wait for Lance to return. However, he found his mind wandering back to the hot spring. Lance had never opened up himself like that to him before and Keith could tell that despite his cocky, laid back nature, Lance had been guarded.

*Had been.*

Until he told Keith the truth about him and his past.

It had taken Keith by surprise but he didn’t judge Lance for what he was and what he’d been through. Instead, he felt a sense of pride that Lance was able to overcome those and come out better. He served directly under the order of the queen of Altea herself and that was a big thing for someone who was cast aside for being born without wings.

He killed nine demon guards back at the club for crying out loud!

Keith was distracted when he caught the sound of footsteps shuffling from the other side of the door and he threw the blanket over himself and curled up facing the wall with his back to the door to pretend that he was asleep. When the door opened and the familiar scruff of Lance’s boots scraped the wooden floor, Keith closed his eyes for good measure and tried to even out his breathing.

The sound of fabric sliding off his arms and thumping on the mattress where Lance tossed it, the creak of the springs when he sat down to remove his boots, then finally, a soft and tired sigh as Lance’s head softly hit the pillow.

Keith laid very still and made sure not to make any unnecessary sounds. He was only able to relax when he heard Lance snoring softly on the other side of the room. After a few more minutes for good measure, Keith finally turned around and sure enough, Lance was there sprawled on his bed with his limbs spread out.

‘He didn’t even bother to use his blanket.’ Keith thought hopelessly. The air passing through the cave was cold considering that they were deep underground and the tips of Keith’s toes felt the chill even though he already had his feet tucked underneath his own blanket. He then remembered how Lance’s jacket was draped over him when he woke up from his nap earlier and thought that he should return the kindness.

Keith got up and with the utmost care, padded as quietly as he could towards Lance’s side of the room. He took the folded blanket which had fallen to the floor and draped it over Lance’s sleeping form after he flapped it open a little bit. With only the soft light from the lamp in the room, Keith noted the shadows that danced on the angles of Lance’s handsome face. Like this, Lance looked so peaceful that he looked innocent. An urge tugged at Keith’s heart and he carefully brushed away the short dark brown bangs from Lance’s forehead.

“You push yourself too hard, idiot.” Keith mouthed silently and giving in, he bent down to gently brush his lips on Lance’s forehead in secret kiss. “You have me so you can count on me too. Good night, Lance.”

Sleep washed over Keith after he went to lay down and he fell into a dreamless slumber as his body
gave into exhaustion, unaware of how his guardian angel was only pretending to be asleep. Lance opened his eyes and stared at Keith from across the room before he reached up to touch the spot on his forehead that throbbed with the heat of Keith’s lips.

Those quiet words, Lance heard them all and they sent his heart racing in his chest in such a manner that it was a struggle not to grab Keith, pin him down on the bed, and kiss him until their bodies were molten. He turned around and stared at his side of the wall to distract himself from such thoughts.

There was a storm inside Lance’s mind even if his heart fluttered with emotion he had not felt for centuries. Lance swore to never again leave his heart vulnerable so that he can avoid repeating the same mistake he made when he gave his heart to someone he thought he could trust.

And yet, here he was, trusting Keith with his broken heart, his dark past, and his shattered self…

Falling in love with him and every facet of him to the intensity that Lance would destroy anyone or anything that dared to harm his beautiful human.

~*~

One of the things Allura did not enjoy was going through the numerous documents, books, and treaty scrolls. After Lance had contacted them a few days ago, Shiro had been busy making preparations and when her husband needed to rest, she was the one who took over for him while he stayed at the palace to do the more easier, laid back tasks.

Today, she sat in her grand study with books and scrolls laid out on the table while her fingers glided over the projected holographic map of the kingdom in front of her. She could feel the pulsating life of the Altean barrier, the shield which her father gave his life to form. But King Alfor’s quintessence could only last so long to continue to protect Altea from the forces that were trying to invade it.

A knock on the door distracted her and Allura lifted her head briefly but she lowered her gaze towards what she was working on again.

“Enter.” She said, her voice distant but kind. She couldn’t afford to get distracted right now considering that she had to find a way to stop the quintessence of her human guests from disintegrating. When one of the double doors was pushed open, Allura’s handmaiden entered.

“I’ve prepared some tea for you, your highness.” Blonde hair pulled up into an elegant, twisting ponytail, violet eyes that were the same color as hyacinths, Nyma carefully made her way towards Allura with a tray of hot tea along with fine chinaware. “Chamomile to relax your uneasy nerves.”

“Thank you, Nyma.” Allura placed down her pen and sat straight as she watched Nyma. The other woman’s silken skirt brushed against her long shapely legs and the dark gold tips on her dark green wings hovered over the floor. “I need that.” She motioned a hand over the chaos on top of her desk. “Look at this mess,” she sighed. “I’ve been queen for eons but my duties become more challenging every passing day.”

“The more it must drive you on to persevere, my queen.” Nyma chuckled softly as she laid the tray down on a round console table. Her long, elegant fingers wrapped around the porcelain handle of the teapot and she carefully poured the beverage in one of the cups. “Honey or sugar, my queen?”

“Honey sounds nice.” Allura nodded with a kind smile and she motioned to the tea set Nyma was preparing. “You’ve brought my favorite set.” The cups were red with the bodies blown from within and the rims masterfully curved to mimic rosebuds in mid bloom. The handles were dark gold which
matched the lining on the rims and the saucers were deep green like leaves with the sinewy details hand painted with care.

“You’ve been quite uneasy for days now so I thought this would cheer you up.” Nyma smiled as she pouted the honey then took a gold plated teaspoon to mix it. Placing the spoon down, Nyma carefully handed it over to the archangel. “Please, enjoy.”

“I’m sure I will.” Allura closed her eyes and inhaled the calming scent of chamomile. Blowing on it once to cool the steaming liquid, she lifted it to her lips and took a sip. “This is lovely, Nyma. Your teas are the best.”

“Your words honor me, your highness!” Nyma’s eyes perked up and her smile grew wide. “If you ever need anything to be done, please let me know.”

The queen took her time to enjoy her tea but not so long as to leave her dutiful handmaiden in uncomfortable silence. “There is one thing,” she finally placed the empty teacup down. “Kindly prepare the guest rooms, Nyma. We are having guests.”

“Oh?” Curiosity. “Are they emissaries from the Fae?”

“No.” Allura shook her head. “They’re human.”

When Nyma’s eyes widened and her lips parted slightly in a gape of disbelief, she said; “But your highness, no human has ever stepped foot within the Altean barrier. Their weak bodies will dry up and crumble like leaves in the fall.”

“That’s why I’m trying to look for a way to prevent that.” Lowering her head to an antique leather bound book, Allura ran her nimble fingers along the ancient script. “That is what they say but those are just assumptions since we take humans as weak fleshlings. But as you said, no human has ever stepped foot in Altea even during the times when their race wielded magic so openly back in the day. We’ll never know until we find out but I’m taking precautionary measures just in case the assumptions are true.”

Nyma carefully took the cup from Allura’s desk and prepared to pour another serving but stopped midway when Allura shook her head. Placing the cup back on the tray, Nyma’s wings shuffled slightly behind her. “I wonder if the Altean barrier would allow them passage.”

The barrier, as Allura knew, is alive But Alfor’s quintessence can only do so much with the passage of time and how limited it was. When the former king of Altea sacrificed his life to create a shield to protect his beloved land, it had been strong. But now, it flickered like a dying firefly and the once perfect surfaced started to become brittle. If one knew where to look, they would find certain flaws that can serve as secret passages into the kingdom. That was why over the centuries, Shiro became even stricter with the security of the realm especially the capital where his beloved queen resided.

“Lady Shay is making preparations as well.” The head priestess of Altea is the only other person capable of opening a passage on the barrier but it was with difficulty. “Poor things; dragged into a mess they shouldn’t be in. But one of them is fated to be in this.”

“The rumors are true, my lady?” Nyma had a concerned look on her face now, her hands clasped in front of her lap. “The Vessel?”

Allura nodded. “I sent one of Shiro’s best soldiers to guard him but the Galra are relentless. They always take what they want.”

“You are truly kind to care for this human and their companions.” Nyma smiled. “I’ve always
admired you for it, my queen.”

“Nyma, such flattery—” Allura was about to reply but Nyma quickly shook her head and then bit her
lower lip when she realized that she had interrupted the queen.

“Please forgive me, my queen!” Those light violet eyes widened. “I…I only meant to say that I’m
not trying to say senseless flattery. I only meant to say that I admire your kindness and I do not mean
those as empty words at all; I’ve always looked up to you. Please, I didn’t mean to interrupt you
rudely.”

“I’ll let it pass, Nyma,” Allura felt a smile lift the corners of her lips. Being a ruler was hard
e specially when she had to keep up a strong front to boost the morale of her people. But people such
as Coran and Nyma, who saw her unravel behind closed still appreciate her efforts; they are the ones
that make Allura feel like she is appreciated. “but thank you. Your encouragements do my heart
well.”

“My queen.” A murmur as the handmaiden dipped her head. She took the tray and dipped into
respectful curtsy. “I shall carry out your orders immediately.”

Allura watched Nyma turned and leave. Once the door clicked shut, she closed her eyes and in her
heart, searched for the luminescence of the mating bond which connected her to the head of the royal
guard. Allura sent a single telepathic touch along the forged chain of pink and violet light and it
reverberated along the darkness to the other end which she could no longer see. Moments later, the
bond reverberated back and the feeling made butterflies flutter in her stomach while her lips tingled
warmly; a gentle kiss.

Her husband was well and safe and that simple fact in this chaotic time of war with the Galra was
enough to lessen Allura’s worries. When she opened her eyes, it was like the world spun and Allura
raised a hand and massaged her temple. She was feeling more and more exhausted lately but she had
to keep up to offer what support she can to strengthen the weakening barrier. Her tongue suddenly
felt thick and a bitter taste filled her mouth as her head started to pound.

“Maybe just a wee nap.” Allura yawned and she lowered her head down over her folded arms on the
desk while her dove white wings drooped behind her. And as the sun climbed higher into the sky, the
queen fell into a slumber.

~

“Here is the armory!” Florona said cheerfully with her tone laced with pride as she encoded a
number code on a hidden keypad. There was a soft beep in the safe house she led the others into at
the other side of the cave surface. With a click, Florona pulled the vault door open and the lights
inside automatically turned on. “Please feel free to take would you think would suit you the most.”

“Oh MY GOD!” Pidge gaped. Mounted on the walls were glass cases and containers of various
weapons; firearms, blades, swords, and knives. There were crates of ammunition, pocket explosives,
navigating devices, and many more behind locked cases. “Hey, Matt!” Pidge quickly turned to their
twin. “Isn’t this cool?” they quickly strode towards a case and took out a pair of katars, elaborately
decorated with silver vines and strange symbols.

“Pidge, I think you should leave the fighting to me, okay?” Matt frowned and went over to his twin.
“Give it here.” He gestured for Pidge to hand over the blades.

“What? No way, dude! Find your own pointy thing!” Pidge brandished the blades with the ease of
an expert as proof from the training sessions they have with their uncle. As one of the chosen
families tasked to protect the sanctity of magic in the human world, the Holts are not only talented in that department, but they are well equipped with skill that would aide them in a physical fight.

Lance whistled in awe and Florona’s eyes widened with amazement.

“Oh, it’s good to know that you can use that.” Lance grinned. “We should totally spar sometimes.”

“I’m not going to back down from that.” Pidge chuckled menacingly. “I’m also a master of bets if you want to test that out too.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.” Lance grinned at the challenge.

“Lance, don’t.” Keith quickly shook his head. “They’re not lying; I lost a lot of the deals I struck with them.”

With a glance at Lane, Keith, and Florona, Matt cleared his throat. “Pidge, can I have a sec?” he gestured to the side as he asked to get a moment alone with his sibling. Pidge rolled their eyes but went otherwise to where Matt led them.

“Pidge, I think you should focus on the defensive just like when uncle trains us.” Matt said when they were alone in the corner while Keith flittered from one blade closet to another like an excited kid in Disneyland. “You’re really good with magic.”

“I can do offensive just fine, Matt.” Pidge scowled now. “You’ve seen me; I’m your sparring partner.”

“But, Pidge…”

“Matt,” Pidge cut off their brother immediately. “Stop. Just stop right there, okay? I know I’m your ‘little’ gremlin.” They did the quotation finger gesture. “But we’re twins. I’m just a few minutes younger than you, we’re the same damn age so please stop treating me like a kid.”

“I’m just trying to protect you.” Matt struggled to keep his voice from rising. Instead, the words rushed out with his frustrated huff. “I’m only agreeing with this plan because there are people out there who wants to kill us.” Matt clenched his fists from where the hung loosely by his lap. He felt responsible for all of this; had he’d been more alert, he never would have lowered his guard so easily when he was brainwashed by the then-brainwashed-queen-of-mermaids. “And if they find out, mom and dad can get hurt too.”

“I can protect myself just fine, Matt.” Pidge didn’t buckle under their brother’s gaze.

“Pidge, please-----“

“Why can’t you believe in me more, Matt?!” A hiss in their quiet corner and Matt quickly clamped his mouth shut when his sibling glared at them. The intensity in those eyes burned with the golden embers deep within. “I’m not little anymore! You and I both know that with our family’s history, we’re bound to face something like this; that’s why they prepared us!”

Before he could even say anything back, Pidge brushed past him and joined Keith and Lance while Florona conversed with them. With one final sigh, Matt grabbed a short baton like weapon that rested against three others that were the same. When he willed his magic through it, the weapon elongated into a staff with both ends slithering with electricity. With silent approval, Matt deactivated the weapon and it reverted back to its dormant state.

He didn’t care what happened to him but if anything happened to Pidge, he would never be able to
live with himself.

“You need a distance weapon, Keith. Your blade won’t do on its own.” Lance advised while Keith marveled at the overwhelming number of state of the art weapons; both modern and magical, in queen Luxia’s armory.

“You’ll be surprised at what my dad taught his kid, to be honest about it.” Keith replied with an edge of distance in his voice. He took a handgun, a waist holster, and three spare magazine clips to fill up the slots. “I never quite understood why he taught me how to fight like this just like how I didn’t understand my flames before. I guess he knew something like this would happen to me.”

“Yeah, life is full of surprises.”

Keith saw the flicker of a shadow in Lance’s eyes and decided in the secrecy of his mind he didn’t like it. But even if Lance was usually the cheerful type, Keith had come to learn that even someone who smiled like the sun existed within them, had their own storm.

“If you’re ready,” Florona interrupted Keith’s thoughts. “our queen awaits you at the exit of the cavern. We prepared a vehicle for you to escape in.” The mermaid lowered her head and her eerily beautiful features were framed by locks of fiery red hair. “I’m sorry we can’t offer more.”

“No, No!” Keith quickly interrupted, wide-eyed at the show of humility. He’s met rude people throughout his life and a job in the pizza delivery business opened him to even more rude. “This is all great! You’ve done so much for us already and asking for more would only be imposing.”

“I can only wish you the safest journey.” Florona smiled when she lifted her head from where it was dipped in apology.

Afterwards, Florona led them to a natural archway of limestone that was modified by a thick vault-like door. Just like Florona said, Luxia was there, regal in her human form. Guards flanked her along with some of the villagers to see them off.

When she smiled at them, Keith felt a pang in his chest; they hadn’t stayed here for long, but these people who were already struggling underground in efforts to keep themselves safe from the tyranny of the Galra empire, sheltered them and offered what little they had. It touched a part of Keith and opened his eyes that not all that are strange are bad.

“Thank you.” He said. “For everything.” He paused and glanced at the twins. “My friend would have lost their brother if it wasn’t for your help.”

“It is my fault that he was hurt in the first place.” Luxia turned to Matt and Pidge. “My deepest apologies.”

“It’s alright.” Matt chuckled almost bashfully. “Uh, it’s something to look back to and besides, you were being controlled. Thank you for helping me.”

“Yeah, thanks for helping my brother.” Pidge agreed. “Sorry I tried to attack you back at the club.”

“All is forgiven.” Luxia nodded and approached the door to input a code on the keypad. There was a soft beeping before an internal lock gave an audible click. “Once you go past this door, you will end up in an abandoned scrap yard.” She turned to Lance this time. “It’s the closest exit to the highway where you’re headed, just like you asked.”

“We appreciate it, your majesty.” Lance’s tone was languid which was no surprise since he was used to court etiquette and dealing with royalty.
“Stay safe, you lot. And if you ever need assistance in your fight against prince Lotor, all you have to do is ask and we will aide you with all that we can afford. The merfolk’s alliance lies with the Alteans.”

Keith watched the exchange and with those parting words from the queen did he realize how great the situation was. He felt his very core shake; this wasn’t just a fight. It was a full blown war.

When Lance turned to face them, he asked with a playful grin that lit up his charm;

“So, do you guys like ships?”

~

“Are we there yet?” Pidge groaned from the back seat of the Escalade. They idly kept track of their location in the GPS while Matt monitored the aura reading of their surroundings with some crystal runes and a steady stream of magic.

“Why the old pier, Lance?” Keith asked as he peered through the maw of the darkness of the wide open road ahead of them and he gripped the steering wheel. The headlights were turned up high in an effort to light their way through the pounding thunderstorm that fell that night. It made travelling more difficult since Keith had to keep a steady speed but he hoped that the downpour would wipe away their tracks and help conceal them.

“Because that’s where the nearest portal is located.” Lance replied simply while he gazed out on the other side of the window. His tone was relaxed but his eyes were alert with the way the silver ring around his irises glowed brightly.

“And how are we going to open it?” Matt asked. His attention deviated from the runes that were spinning and levitated over his glowing palm. “You said that you got here with a feather Keith used?”

“The barrier is more complicated than that, actually.” Lance sighed. He shifted on his seat, pulled down the sun visor, and then the little pocket flap that concealed a mirror. Even in the darkness of the vehicle and the blackness of the rain, he could see every detail of Matt’s face when his eyes stared at him through the mirror. “That feather is known as a catalyst. It’s like…how do I explain this; a key.” The angel paused for a bit and reached up to flick his sapphire earring once as he thought. “To pass through the Altean barrier from the outside, you will need a lot of pure quintessence and by pure I mean untainted. It must come from an unsullied source and that’s pretty hard to come by when you’re coming from the outside.”

“That’s why,” Pidge pieced in the clues. “This Lotor guy uses force to break through instead because the quintessence accessible to him is tainted.”

“Right on the money, Pidge!” Lance grinned and passed a wink when his luminescent eyes shifted to look at their reflection. “Now, that feather contains a small but powerful amount of pure quintessence to create a passage but since untainted quintessence is a resource that Altea greatly values, protects, and preserves to keep our realm alive, the portal can open only lasts for a few seconds so we have to hurry through.”

“But what about the opposite?” Keith asked this time while he eased the car towards an exit from the freeway. His eyes flickered towards the angel beside him and it was clear that he was talking about how the passage would be from the inside. The memory from the hot spring briefly flashed in his mind when Lance confided his past in him; an act of trust between them.
“I wasn’t born yet during the First Siege when the barrier was first erected.” Lance replied, his tone cool and distant. Keith felt a pang of irritation when Lance shifted to avoid eye contact and instead, stared back outside once again. So was he going to ignore what happened between them now like it was nothing? Keith had to make an effort to focus on the road and restrain himself from speeding up the car to vent the tension that bubbled in him. Lance was sending in mixed signal and Keith didn’t know which one to buy.

“It’s easy to exit Altea but difficult to get back in without a catalyst or any form of pure quintessence.” Lance continued. An air of gloom filled the car and only the quiet hum of the engine and the metronomic rhythm of the windshield wipers were heard. Then, Lance said again in tone that echoed some sort of sadness; “But with how the barrier’s quintessence is running out, it is also weakening. Small crevices and thin passages started to appear; you can get through if you know where to look.”

“So you have a catalyst with you, right? That feather thing?” Pidge asked with a desperate hope.

“Of course I do.” Lance scoffed. “I have one remaining so we can’t waste it.”

When Keith turned on an intersection and entered an empty street, the rain was pounding harder than ever against the windshield. The shadows on their faces were illuminated by the flash of lightning that webbed the dark clouds. Pidge saw a sign that read ‘Gen. Iverson Pier’ and when they passed by it, Matt’s attention immediately shifted to the runes that were over his palm when the crystals started to darken in color and the spinning became slow and labored.

“Guys, this place isn’t registering as safe.” He said and beside him, Pidge muttered something under their breath to reinforce the barrier talismans they placed around the car.

“So does that mean they’ve beaten us to this place?” Keith scowled and he stepped on the breaks when they pulled over on front of tall twin gates that were chained shut. “Fucking great.”

“Matt, how bad is it?” Lance asked from the shotgun seat and Matt waved his fingers with a silent spell to do another reading. When the levitating crystal spun then started to shake, he replied;

“It’s bad. About to get really bad.”

“How much time before it becomes really, really bad?”

Matt turned to Pidge without saying a word, the twins having a connection so deep that it only took a single look to pass a message.

Pidge reached into their satchel and pulled out their spell book. With a snap of their fingers, the pages automatically flipped to the spell they needed. When they cupped their hands around the floating runes on their brother’s hand and muttered some incoherent words, the inside of the car lit up when a holographic map that displayed the aura reading of the vicinity formed from the millions of firefly like lights that burst from the crystals.

Lance narrowed his eyes when he saw numerous red dots blinking around. “This place is crawling with beasts.”

“Well, this place is abandoned after all.” Matt replied with a worried scowl. “And since there is a gateway here that leads to Altea, we can expect it that beasts would gather here to try and claw their way in.”

“Good one, Matt.” Keith said. “Now that I think about it, it does make sense.”
“Any other weird aura shit, Pidge?” Lance asked again with unease. “Any signs of demons?”

“Well, let’s see.” The younger twin waved their fingers and strange lines and when symbols floated around, their brows scrunched over their eyes in utter confusion. “That’s weird.”

“Yeah,” Matt breathed as if to complete Pidge’s sentences. “It’s saying that… there’s a Galra presence in the car---” he wasn’t able to continue when the crystals turned black and completely stopped rotating over his palm.

Then, they shattered.

“Fuck!” Pidge cried out and before anything else followed, the windshield suddenly shattered when a great force hit it.

Realizing that he was trapped by the seatbelt, Keith had no option of a quick escape and he was right in front of the windshield. But he froze with wide eyed shock when Lance suddenly threw himself over him to shield him from the sharp glasses that were smashed inwards.

“Lance!” Keith cried out from where Lance tucked him underneath his upper body. When the angel lifted his head, Keith paled at the sight of blood that trickled from a rogue shard that cut deeply through his cheek. Lance’s leather jacket was sturdy enough to protect his back from smaller pieces of glass but not from the larger, heavier ones that shot in.

“Are you okay, Keith?” Lance didn’t sound fazed at all and his tone was light as he wore a smile. His eyes glowed like blue ember and the ring of silver around his irises pulsed with the light of power.

“Yes.” Keith blurted out almost too quickly but he was on the verge of panic now even though he struggled to keep himself in check. If this situation goes to the dogs, he would need a clear mind to be able to fight back and get the group out with all he’s got. “But you’re bleeding!”

“Oh, this?” Lance slowly pulled back and when he wiped away the blood from his cheek, the cut was gone. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, I heal fast.” Then, Lance reached behind him and started to yank out the bloody shards from his back that he could grasp.

“Don’t fucking do that! You’ll bleed to death!” Keith exclaimed. “You’ll get an infection!”

The angel snorted. “Oh, what, glass? This is nothing.” He said. “Try luxite.” For a moment, softness passed through his expression and his smile did not reflect sass or sarcasm. “Thanks, Keith. I’m okay, don’t worry.”

Keith wanted to argue but he knew that this wasn’t the time to do so. He just nodded and muttered a soft ‘okay’ because he had to trust that Lance really was okay and his regenerative abilities would take care of the cuts.

“Fucking hell, Lance, you’re so hardcore!” Pidge popped out from where they were embracing with Matt protectively behind the front leather seats.

“I don’t know what that means but thanks!” Lance grinned but that cocky smile was immediately wiped away when he sensed something. “EVERYONE OUT NOW!”

They all scrambled out of the car and rolled on the mud to try and get away from the car as fast as they can. Suddenly, there was a loud caw from the sky and from the thick curtain of the rain and the dim illumination of the flickering lampposts, a giant vulture swooped down from the sky with large wings and curved claws that snapped open as it tore the Escalade’s roof off like it was made of foil.
Lance summoned his dual pistols while the others pulled out their weapons but no one shot at the beast yet. He signaled them to hold their fire; demon vultures are blind. If they stayed still and quiet, maybe it would go away.

But Pidge sneezed.

The vulture snapped its head to their direction and when lightning flashed again, they got a good view of the creature’s twisted, monstrous face. Two large red eyes black at the center and a blood red beak. There was a sickening sound of flesh tearing and the creature’s beak split into three in the middle when it opened its maw of razor sharp teeth and screeched at them.

Keith glared at Pidge who looked back and shrugged apologetically.

“Sorry,” they mouthed. “I catch a cold easily.”

The vulture flapped its wings and shot up into the sky, its black wings tearing rough rain and wind.

“Run, run, run!” Lance forced and they all skidded along the slippery mud while they tried to flee. Lance let his companions run ahead of him and when they scaled the fence and safely got to the other side, Lance propelled himself as he leapt into the air and landed on the other side in perfect balance. Lance whirled around and started firing at the sky while his eyes quickly shifted, seeing through the darkness just fine. He pinpointed his target and summoned his power in one calculated shot. Taking a deep breath, he aimed and fired.

When the bullets went off with a blue explosion in the dark sky, he heard a loud screech but no carcass fell. He had to try again and hit the creature on its weak spot but then he was distracted by another gunshot and he glanced over his shoulder. Drawing a streak of curses, Lance looked over his shoulder and saw that Pidge, Matt, and Keith were holding back beasts that had surrounded them at the entrance of a warehouse.

When one lunged at them, Keith shot it between the eyes but the only good it did was throw it back with the force of the shot. When the chimera like creature got back on its feet, Matt jumped in and whipped out his staff. He ran his magic through it and with his will, the staff extended on both sides and tendrils of electricity snaked around each end.

“Keith, get out of the way!” When Matt hollered, Keith rolled out of the way and the other jabbed his weapon into the creature’s mouth, electrocuting it before it fell dead on the floor.

While Matt was distracted, another lunged at him but Pidge was able to create a magical circle with a spell she used, rendering the monster immobile. With this chance, Keith withdrew his blade and charged at the creature and stabbed his blade into its chest before he twisted it to make sure to do as much internal damage as he can. The beast howled in pain and Keith yanked out his blade before he rolled out of the way when the thing fell dead on the ground.

It made Lance’s job much easier that his companions weren’t sitting ducks. But he had to take care of that giant bird first.

“Keith!” Lance called over the noise of the howling wind what whipped down on them. “Get inside the warehouse and don’t look back! Track the barrier’s aura and open the doorway!”

“We don’t have a feather!” Keith cried back over the clap of thunder. Near them, great waves crashed against the breakwater and sprayed them.

“Right vest pocket, sweetheart, now go!” Lance gave Keith one last look before he disappeared from where he stood in a blur of blue light when a loud screech sounded from the dark sky.
“Lance, wait!” Keith called but Lance was already gone. When he reached into his right vest pocket, he pulled out the feather. It looked like the same one Shiro gave him when the two of them first met; blue follicles tipped with silver. Lance must have slipped it in there when he shielded Keith with his body when they were first attacked in the car.

“He’ll be fine, come on!” Pidge grabbed Keith’s hand and dragged him inside.

“Here birdy, birdy!” Lance called as he landed on top of a water tank, pistols in hand. His eyes scanned the vicinity from where he stood on his vantage point. He spotted a few of the same chimeras that attacked Keith and the twins earlier lurking around but none of them approached the warehouse entrance, probably because Pidge put on precautionary barrier spells to buy them some time.

The vulture was nowhere in sight but Lance didn’t have to squint since his inhuman eyes could function well in the dark. Despite standing underneath a thunderstorm, Lance remained dry as he willed the rain to stray from him. Water was his element and he thrived in this kind of weather; the rain was his friend after all and the rain drops whispered to him.

Lance closed his eyes and heightened his senses to read his surroundings. When he caught wind of what was hurled towards him, he quickly jumped back and a heavy lump smashed the water tower he was standing on to pieces, flooding the ground below with debris and a surge of water.

The vulture fell on the mud, dead and unmoving on its own pool of black blood that stained the concrete where it landed. When lightning cracked and thunder rolled, the waves beat the shore with even more intensity and Lance was dumbfounded as he stared at the corpse. There were only four of them here and three were inside while he had not made a move to kill it yet.

“Now, that distraction is out of the way, we can have a nice little chat.” A familiar voice called over the flurry of the wind. Lightning flashed again and Lance whipped around towards the direction of the voice; that voice he had heard his former master conversed with while he laid in a bed of white lace curtains and black silk sheets, his body weak from use. Lance felt his stomach coil at the sickening memory of the scent of roses.

*White roses.*

“Shit!” Lance immediately shielded his eyes when the searchlights around the pier buildings and those situated on the ground all trained at him.

Rolo’s silhouette emerged and with the glare of the lights, the shadowy tentacles on his back coiled in anticipation to strike at Lance.

“Look at you,” Rolo smirked maliciously and Lance aimed his pistols at him, not letting his guard down. “you traded the jewels and silk your master dressed you in for a tacky jacket and a pair of toy gu---“

*Bang! Bang!*

Rolo was interrupted by two bullets that missed his head by a hair’s breadth that would’ve put holes in his skull had he not angled away in time. Strands of his ashen hair that were grazed by the streaks
of blue were swept away by the rain.

“Yeah, they’re pretty neat.” The corners of Lance’s lips twitched in a bitter smile but his eyes were dark and humorless. “Did he send you?”

“Bingo!” Rolo barked a laugh and clapped in sarcastic applause. Fearlessly, he strolled towards Lance with his hands stuffed into his coat pockets and the tentacles writhed on his back. “The demon lord wants the Vessel for his collection before he drains the human dry to the bone.” A chuckle. “He does have a thing for beautiful things, you of all people should know that; you were Lotor’s favorite pet, after all.”

Lance gritted his teeth when he felt anger bubble up inside him. Memories flashed in his mind that made his stomach fill with so much bile that he could taste it in his mouth. His skin crawled at the memory of Lotor’s lips against his as he fed him lies with every kiss. Lance didn’t want to be reminded about his naïve self and he was still angry at himself for the choices he made. But that was all in the past; it didn’t matter now because his top priority was getting Keith the twins safely to Altea. But to submit Keith through the hell that Lance personally experienced from Lotor’s sick desires was something he would never allow.

There was a huge chance that Lance would get left behind if he mingled here longer. However, it didn’t matter because he trusted that Keith will tell Shiro and Allura about what happened and they’d send help for him.

“Yeah well, I realized that it wasn’t my thing.” The angel shrugged. “I have more pride than kissing ass unlike you.”

There was a howl that came inside the warehouse followed by gunshots, a burst of green light and then the flash of flames. Lance wanted to slap his forehead so hard at how the others’ location was given away. When runes illuminated from the inside, Lance cursed.

“Oh, so that’s what you’re planning.” The black tentacles grew larger as the shadows from the shadows casted through the rain by the search lights slithered with Rolo’s power. “Taking a little field trip, are we?”

“Don’t even think about it, Rolo.” Lance warned and his eyes glowed when the demon took a step back towards the direction of the warehouse. “I’m the one you’re facing!”

“Sure, yeah!” Rolo raised his hands up in surrender. “I’ll fight you.”

Then, the demon bailed.

“Hey!” Lance exclaimed angrily when Rolo disappeared from where he stood and dashed towards the warehouse. “Get back here!” and the angel bolted in a surge of inhuman speed to chase down his opponent.

There were twin screeches that pierced the air as the shadowy serpents attached to Rolo’s back tore through the obstacles of overturned metal crates. The ground shook when Lance landed in front of Rolo, his eyes burning brightly with a molten silver flame. He gathered momentum and propelled himself forward, making concrete beneath his feet cracking at the force.

With a mad laugh, Rolo and Lance clashed head on with a series of sparks as the angel crossed his arms over himself and the butts of his pistols parried the sharpened points of the demon’s snake like extremities.
“I found it!” Pidge lowered their glowing hand that brightly illuminated the spacious warehouse. When their tracking spell located the hidden closed passage, the closed doorway appeared in thin air. It was a flat blue disk that hovered upright and it was elaborately decorated with strange symbols that they assumed to be Altean letters. Right in the middle of the disc was a silver drawn arc and a hollow space.

“I think that’s where the feather’s supposed to go.” Keith pulled out the blue feather and glanced at Pidge and Matt who looked back at him. Keith took a step forward and held the feather over the hollow crevice but he hesitated halfway in.

“What’s wrong, Keith?” Matt asked. “Did you change your mind?”

Keith shook his head. “Not at all; safety is our top priority.” He paused. “It’s Lance. I don’t feel comfortable opening the gateway without him here. We’re supposed to go together.”

“Lance is holding back that giant bird outside.” Pidge followed. “I’m sure he’ll be here once he kills it.”

“Do we wait or---”

The three of them jolted when a large icicle broke through the window and speared through the other end of the wall right next to them.

“Holy shit!” Matt exclaimed and Keith immediately peered through the downpour of rain outside. A chill ran down his spine when he saw Lance and Rolo engaged in a death match of bullets, icicle spears, and whipping shadow tentacles.

“Forget the fucking bird!” Keith sprinted back to the Altean doorway. “Rolo’s caught up with us and Lance is fighting him!”

“How bad?!” Pidge asked, worried.

“I can’t tell but I’m not going to fucking stand here while that reckless idiot risks his life!” Keith handed Pidge the feather. “You open the gate and go to Altea. Find a man named Shiro or go straight to the queen and tell them that Lance and I were left behind due to some setbacks and that we need help.”

“You’re the reckless idiot!” Pidge wore a look of shocked disbelief. “Lance is risking his life so you can get away from the people trying to kill you!”

“I know, Pidge!” Keith argued back and his expression was torn and angry at the same time. “But I can’t just leave him behind!” Without hesitation, Keith took Pidge’s small hands and placed the feather between their fingers. “We’ll find a way in but please send us help when you get there, okay?”

“Keith…” Matt scowled in worry. “Think about this!”

“I already have.” Keith’s tone was resolute and he pulled out his blade from where it was sheathed. “I’ll see you guys later, ‘kay?”

“You fucking better!” Pidge snapped but their voice was thick with unsaid emotion and the urge to kick their best friend’s ass. “We’ll get help so just…just don’t die, Keith!”

With a nod, Keith turned and sprinted towards the exit. He didn’t even look back when a bright blue and white light burst and a strong gust of wind blew with the scent of flowers and fresh air. By the
time he stepped into the rain, the doorway shut him out.

Lance dodged three consecutive jabs from those deadly tentacles on Rolo’s back, each strike faster and more lethal than the last. Parts of his clothes were torn from the struggle and his shirt was stained with blood from the wounds from the hits Rolo managed to land. But Lance retaliated doubly hard and willed his bullets to follow no matter where Rolo decided to dodge to. The demon bled black from the holy bullets that hit him but the battle was still taking too long; Lance had to end this because each passing minute that Rolo was alive put Keith’s safety at risk.

“I’m starting to get bored, Rolo!” Lance taunted as he skidded back, the ground tearing from the force of it but Lance managed to regain his balance and jumped out of the way to land on a top of a structure while Rolo was thrown back into an impact crater on the concrete below. At Lance’s will, a bright blue glyph circle burst beneath his feet and the rain that fell were thrown back by the magical force. “I’m ending this right now!” Lance’s pistols glowed and when he put them together, the dual weapons fused in a show of azure light and reformed to an elegant black and chrome rifle.

“If there’s anyone walking away from this,” Rolo spat with hatred, each word a curse. “It’s going to be me, you traitorous whore!”

The angel knew better than to lose his focus from the degrading taunt; he had too much to lose right if he failed to make the shot.

Taking aim, Lance’s finger caressed the trigger and pulled. But unknown to him, while he was busy, a chimera had snuck up behind him on the tower to pounce. When Lance realized what was happening, it was too late with the best was already in mid-air, lunging towards him. His aim was thrown off and the bright white beam that shot from his rifle skidded past Rolo and hit one of the abandoned ships docked on the pier. Half of the ship blew up right in the middle and the two split pieces sank into the water, lighting the black waves from the fire that burned on them.

Just then, just as the beast’s maw was ready to snap and tear Lance’s upper half off, a bright red jet of flame threw off the creature. Keith was below with his knife in hand while the other summoned the flames.

“What are you still doing here?!” Lance demanded angrily as he jumped down. His knuckles turned white when he gripped his rifle with sheer frustration on his face.

“Saving your damn ass!” Keith snapped back when Lance landed beside him. “That thing could have killed you!” he jabbed a finger towards the chimera that was howling dying screams as it burned by enchanted fire that even the rain wasn’t able to douse. “Pidge and Matt are in Altea already. They’ll tell Shiro and the queen to send help for us.”

“What?!” Suddenly, Lance was in front of him and grabbed Keith by the collar of his shirt before he yanked the human towards him. “I told you to leave me behind! What part of ‘go on without me’ don’t you fucking understand?!”

“And what part of ‘I’m not leaving you behind’ don’t you fucking understand, you reckless idiot!” Keith argued back and reached to grip Lance’s shirt collar and yanked as well.

“You need to get to safety!” Lance gritted, leaning in more towards Keith to tower over him.

“And you need to get home safely too!” Keith shot back. “I appreciate you protecting me but I’m not about to impose and throw you in the goddamn Galra pit to die!”
“If the Galra empire gets you, it’s all over! If I die, another soldier can take me pl---!”

“You stop that right now!” Keith cut off Lance and painfully jabbed a finger at the angel’s chest while his other hand planted sternly on his hip. “Don’t you dare give me that bullshit! We’re going to Altea together, do you hear me?”

“Oh, how sweetly disgusting.”

Lance and Keith stepped back from each other’s personal space and Rolo stood, watching them with a dumbfounded expression. Then, he blinked when realization registered;

“Oh,” he said again before bursting into howling laughter. “OH!”

“What?” Keith narrowed his eyes at the demon and raised his knife in preparation to fight. Had he only known that Rolo was Galra, he would have burned the demon to ashes the first time they met at the pizza parlor. “Did you hit your head too hard?”

“I think I did!” Rolo barked in amusement and he continued to cackle. “This is repulsive but at the same time really funny!” he pointed at the two. “You two fight like a married cou---” he paused, blinked, and howled in laughter again. “Man, Keith, you really ought to do a background check on the people you fuck. I feel bad for you; I can’t believe that Her Majesty, the Great Queen Allura of Altea,” he feigned a tone of admiration. “Assigned you a ‘pretend solider’ and you actually care about each other!”

“What are you talking about?” Keith scowled while beside him, Lance stood stiffly. Rolo’s laughter died and his expression became cool and almost stoic but a small smirk played on his lips. “Oh, you didn’t know? Your so called ‘guardian angel’ here used to get down on his knees and bend over for the demon lord to do as he pleased!” Rolo’s smirk cracked into a full blown grin when shock settled on Keith’s face. “I can’t believe that queen Allura sold you a dupe of a deal for assigning a floozy to be your guard---WHOAH, FUCK!”

Rolo was interrupted when a huge fireball made a beeline towards him and he was barely able to jump out of the way. The ground where he stood exploded when the flame hit.

“I don’t care what Lance was.” Keith said, the words hard and jagged with anger. “He’s a worthy fighter and he’s risked his life for me many times already.” His knuckles turned white as his bones cut through his skin when his grip tightened around his knife. “And he has more honor than a shitbag like you could ever hope to have!”

“Keith…” Lance breathed in astonishment. He didn’t know what to say nor did he know what to do that very moment. All Lance knew was that Keith had broken through the walls of ice he had surrounded himself with; literally burning his way into Lance’s very core and made his mark. There was a tug in Lance’s soul from the acceptance; a gentle knock, but he ignored it. Right now was not the time to sort out his feelings. He needed to get Keith to safety no matter the cost.

Rolo sighed deeply. “You know what, Keith? You seriously need to work on raising your standards. You really are just a pathetic human. Maybe prince Lotor can teach you a thing or two about standards when I bring you to him. He’s shown genuine interest in you so you should be honored.” Then, his eyes shifted to pin Lance on the spot who raised his weapon, ready to shoot.

“But by orders of the prince, you have to die, angel.” Rolo snapped his fingers and the moment he did, one of his tentacles which had secretly dug behind him and tunneled through underneath shot out from the ground behind them and went to stab Keith.
“Keith!” Lance cried out but the moment that he moved, Rolo’s eyes lit up with glee as the angel fell into his trap. Maneuvering his shadowy limb, it stopped with the point only a hair’s breadth from Keith’s forehead before it withdrew and struck at Lance’s direction.

Hot fresh blood splattered Keith’s cheek as the tentacle impaled Lance’s chest through and through. Lance, too, was in shock and blood trickled down the corners of his mouth before he coughed more out.

Everything moved in slow motion in front of Keith but as he drank in the sight of his angel dying in front of him, power surged in his veins and flowed to his knife. Keith moved on instinct, not even aware that his short blade throbbed with life and elongated into a black bladed scimitar.

“NO!”

Rolo wasn’t able to react in time and the next thing he knew, the sword Keith wielded burst with flames and he brought it down on the thick tentacle that still impaled Lance. Keith’s weapon cut through cleanly and burned the extremity along the way. Rolo cried out in pain as he withdrew the part that was still connected to him while what was left in Lance’s chest melted into black muck and was washed away by the rain while the angel fell to the ground, coughing out more blood.

But before Rolo was able to pull back what was left of his demonic limb, Keith grabbed it.

“Oh, no you fucking don’t!” Keith spat out in rage and gripped the tentacle before using it as a fuse and willed his flames to burn through as Rolo screamed in pain. Before the flames reached Rolo, the demon’s sharp claws slid out and he made the sacrifice of cutting off his blazing limb rather than taking the risk of being burned alive once the flames reached him. There was a sickening sound of tearing flesh as Rolo detached himself and with a curse he said;

“Mark my words, insect; you will die!”

Then, a black sphere enveloped Rolo and the space around it imploded as the demon escaped in a vortex.

Shaken, Keith stared at the spot where Rolo stood and then the sword he held. The blade was a beautiful onyx and the flames that enveloped the whole body of the blade died away when Keith felt the dizziness come from using his powers too much. He shook his head and took a few deep breaths to regain focus.

“Ke—ieth..”

“Lance!” Keith remembered that his guard had been fatally wounded. The rain had stopped and the clouds parted to reveal a waning crescent in the velvet sky. Keith fell on his knees and cradled Lance up to his chest. “No, no….” he muttered thickly with emotion when he saw the wide gaping hole on Lance’s chest. Keith didn’t waste time and pressed his hand on it in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. Lance’s blood was warm but his heartbeat was slow underneath his palm.

“You fucking idiot, what did you do now?!?”

Lance slowly opened his eyes when he felt two hot drops of tears plop on his cheek.

“Are you crying?” he grinned weakly. “You shouldn’t. We make a pretty good team.”

“We do, Lance.” Keith nodded through the tears. The anger he felt was reduced to panicked worry now and the fear of losing Lance. “Just hold on, okay?”
Keith looked around but hope was futile. They were alone in this scrapyard pier with nothing but beasts that nested in the area. Lance needed medical help and there was no one around or any hospitals near where they were. Would that even be a good idea? Lance isn’t human.

“Cool sword.” The words were soft and Lance closed his eyes. “Where...have I seen that...before...?”

The sword throbbed and reformed in Keith’s grip as the knife it had been. Keith had so many questions but right now, saving Lance was the most important thing.

“We’ll find a way out of here.” Keith’s voice shook. “Just...Just promise me you won’t die, okay? Promise me!”

“Mm...sure...” A faded whisper.

Keith struggled to get the two of them up but Lance was basically dead weight right now, almost literally, but Keith wasn’t going to think about that. Unfortunately, the scent of angel blood had attracted more chimera-like creatures and Keith found him and Lance surrounded.

“Go away!” Keith tried to sound brave but the monsters closed in. The only other place where Lance could get treatment was Altea and they were locked out. If only there was another way in without the need to use a quintessence feather. The creatures prowled closer and when one of them lunged at them, Keith closed his eyes and tucked Lance protectively underneath him.

“I SAID, GO AWAY!”

There was a yelp of pain when a powerful force knocked back the chimera followed by several whimpers of fear. When Keith opened his eyes, he saw that he was glowing and underneath him was a spinning magical circle of red light. Strange golden characters glowed and then the circle morphed and changed into the shape of a wide elegant gate etched on the ground.

“What...the...” Keith was interrupted when there was a loud echo that sounded like iron hinges being pushed open. The gate of light parted in the middle and Keith found him and Lance falling through to the other side of the ground. He held Lance closed but the next thing he knew, they two of them were falling...

From the sky.

This was no longer earth; there were floating mountains in the distance and what appeared to be a fortified kingdom on the horizon where the ocean met the sky. When Keith squinted, he caught a glimpse of a flickering light blue dome that covered the vast roof of the sky. Keith’s hair whipped and he squinted through the force of the wind that met them head on as they hurled towards the clear blue ocean below them.

“Lance! Lance wake up!” Keith hollered over the noise of the wind while he held onto the dying angel. The ocean underneath grew closer and closer and there was absolutely no way for them to fly. The only other way was down and under.

Throwing everything else to fate, Keith tapped into his full power and materialized a barrier sphere around him and Lance to break their fall. They crashed into the water and the impact shattered the shield despite his efforts to strengthen it.
Finally, with his power exhausted and his lungs filled with salt water, Keith lost consciousness and his vision faded into darkness as black as the ocean’s deep abyss and the current tore him and Lance apart.

Chapter End Notes

**Please do not repost art.** Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
Do As The Angels Do

Chapter by plumerafairy14

Chapter Summary

In the duration of his life, Keith had always been deprived. But in this new world filled with endless possibilities, a wingless angel gave him the great expanse of the Altean sky and along with it, his heart. It's battered and broken, but it’s everything Lance had to offer.

In the new arc comes new people, new feelings, and new challenges.

This is the beginning of the end.

Chapter Notes

HI EVERYONE! We're back for another update. But a quick announcement: Since this story is based on season 2, there wont be any characters from S3 that’s going to join in the story. I've also plotted out everything until the very and and everyone has a role to play already. The only character from S3 is Lotor.

Anyway, we hope that you enjoy this new update. Been through a lot writing this as I almost gave up on the story. Then again, I guess most writers go through that. I hope to see you guys in the next chapter! Thank you very much for keeping up with our tale!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 7

The fire cackled on the fire place made out of polished white marble. The rugs that lined the floor were plush beneath Rolo’s feet and the flickering flames cast shadows on the angel wings that hung on the walls like trophies. Rolo studied the fifteen pairs that adorned the wall of prince Lotor’s study; they were so perfectly preserved that they did not bear any sign of pruning or decay despite the centuries they’ve been mounted there.

Of course, Rolo, being Lotor’s personal bounty hunter, had had the honor to rip off three of those fifteen wings on the wall when the prince placed an order for them. The demon lord adored things of beauty and one of the rarities that often caught his eyes were the majestic wings on the backs of the creatures that he desired to be wiped out. It’s been quite a long time since Lotor had asked Rolo to get him a pair of wings since the prince had been occupied with other matters; like his beloved white roses and plotting to claim Altea as his, to be precise.

However, the evidences of Rolo’s achievements that were mounted on the wall did not compensate for his recent failure. Prince Lotor had given him very clear instructions and the consequences that would transpire should he fail;
'Do no fail me or I will guarantee you a painful death, do you understand me?'

And Rolo failed.

The demon stood too frozen in fear to move and his injuries were severe. Upon escaping from Keith’s flames, he had fled back to the capital of the Galra empire to deliver his discovery to the prince. The subject of interest, however, took his time as he poured himself a glass of fine aged liquor from the crystal decanter. Long fingers wrapped around the glass and Lotor lifted it near his nose to savor the aroma.

“Aged for fifty years in oak wood casks.” The prince’s smooth baritone reverberated in the spacious study and the firelight flickered as if to respond. “Liquor like this is so rare nowadays that it’s a luxury.” Lotor took a moment to drink and he hummed contently when the golden liquid warmed his throat.

“Mhhm, perfect on a fine evening like this, don’t you agree, old friend?”

Rolo lifted his gaze slightly but did not dare to stare prince Lotor in the eyes. He nodded quickly, ignoring the wounds around his body and how he was shamelessly bleeding all over the plush carpet but the prince did not appear to mind.

“Ah, how rude of me, Rolo.” Lotor’s brows shot up when he remembered. He went back to the silver tray that held his crystal decanter set and poured another glass for his guest. Walking back, he handed the glass to Rolo who took it carefully.

“Thank you, your excellency.” Rolo nodded with a smile and took a long drag on his drink, downing the liquor in one go. He really was on the edge right now.

“So,” Lotor stepped back and studied Rolo. A smile played on his lips but it did not faze the coldness of his yellow gaze. “Tell me everything.” An order that hid behind his cool tone.

“The Vessel and his entourage opened the gateway to Altea, your excellency.” The words flew out of Rolo’s mouth. “The two humans managed to escape while I engaged in a battle with the Vessel’s guard-” When he trailed off, Lotor quirked an eyebrow when the pale faced demon before him appeared as if he was conflicted.

“Who was the guard?”

Rolo remained silent, hesitant.

“I asked you a question, peasant.”

Fear struck Rolo straight in the chest and sweat trickled down the side of his face. There was absolutely no way he could lie to the demon lord. But what he’s more worried about was how it would affect his mood once he tells him that the angelic guard was someone… the prince did not expect.

“It’s Lance, m-my lord.” Rolo blurted out and he chewed the inner side of his cheek nervously, watching the prince for his reaction and bracing for whatever impact it might bring.

Lotor fell silent and he frowned with a look of confusion on his face. It was as if Rolo told him that the sky suddenly started spewing flower petals. Wordlessly, the prince lifted the glass to his lips and downed the rest of the liquor.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he began after a moment. “But did you just say that Lance is alive?”
Rolo nodded.

“Lance?” Lotor kept his voice even but the way his gaze bore into Rolo’s struck a cold fear that it might be the last thing he sees. “My favorite harem slave? The traitor?”

Again, a nod from his wounded subject but Lotor did not appear like he cared that Rolo was bleeding to death because of the bubbling rage that started to overwhelm him. This was not supposed to be the plan.

“You’re telling me,” Lotor spoke slowly as he tried his best to process what Rolo had just told him. This can’t be, he knew Lance inside out and that useless piece of klanmurel fodder can’t do anything but stare outside the window and bend over for him. “That Lance became an angelic guard?”

And yet, he was Lotor’s favorite because he was helpless and the fact that he didn’t wings made it easier for Lotor to sweet talk him into getting what he wanted. Lance was easy to manipulate, at least, that was what Lotor thought at first. His throat tightened at the memory of humiliation while he remembered Lance’s betrayal. Long fingers crawled up to the black silk collar of his leather vest underneath his breast plate and slow rage bubbled in his veins at the thought of the scar on the side of his neck.

For some reason, Lance had gotten ideas of ‘self-worth’ and ‘freedom’ from late night gossips with the other harem slaves. It wasn’t a new trend with Lotor’s beauties but none of them had acted on it until that blasted merwoman and that traitorous angel scum collaborated to escape.

Lotor will never forget the look of calm rage on Lance’s face when the angel stabbed a ornamental lacquered hair pin into Lotor’s neck in his sleep.

“Yes, my lord.” Rolo nodded, his tone airy but respectful. “And a highly skilled one too. I would device that that kind of end product can only root from the rigorous training of the queen’s groom.”

“Shiro’s proving more of a nuisance as centuries pass by.” Lotor muttered as he glanced at the angel wings displayed on his wall. Fifteen wings and two empty spots specially reserved for the bitch queen and the lowlife she calls a husband.

“What do you plan to do, my lord?” Rolo looked really pale now and yet, Lotor made to order for him to get treatment whatsoever; he was too distracted by his thoughts. “We need to take care of the pawns before we get to the king and the queen.”

“I’m glad you asked.” Lotor placed down his glass on the table and walked towards Rolo. He reached to gently tuck an ashen lock of hair behind the demon’s pointed ear. “That’s none of your concern, my dear friend. But if my memory doesn’t fail me, I gave you very clear instructions.”

Rolo paled and his dark eyes widened with fear. “My..My-My lord, I can explain…!”

“Then, were you able to kill Lance and capture the Vessel?” Lotor tilted his head to the side, long strands of silver hair falling elegantly. He towered over Rolo by an inch; not very intimidating but the aura of power he emitted made Rolo feel like an insect.

“I was able to lethally wound Lance but I had to flee when the Vessel used his flames.” Rolo replied hurriedly and he attempted to redeem himself when the whole room grew suffocating.

“So in short, you ran away?”

“My lord…!”
“I asked you a question.” Lotor’s tone was gentle but his golden eyes held flickering, sinister shadows within. “Did you run away? Answer me.”

“Yes, my lord.” Rolo admitted. “If I didn’t, the flames would have consumed me. And the Vessel has a sword made of Luxite. He commanded his flames to engulf the blade, I saw it with my own eyes!”

That got Lotor’s attention. “Is that so?” Luxite was a rare and enchanted ore usually made into swords. Since the weapons are enchanted, they are deemed alive and will only properly serve one master. But they can only be mined in the lowest levels of the caves located in the deepest parts of the Stone Forest which meant only wealthy individuals and affluent clans can afford them. Limbs cut off by luxite blades will never regenerate and through the heart, will instantly kill.

If Altean archangels wielded angelfire, Galra demons had luxite.

“Please grant me another chance to capture him, my lord.” Rolo begged and he immediately fell to his knees. “I will return to the human world and drag him back to you. I swear to succeed, even if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Rolo, stand.” Lotor sighed. He wore a serene expression and smiled when he saw a light of hope in Rolo’s eyes. The demon did as he was told and stood up yet he kept his head in a slight bow to show respect.

Lotor leaned in slightly and cupped Rolo’s face gently before he tilted his chin up to look into his eyes. Rolo leaned into his touch and he exhaled a shaky breath.

“My prince.” Rolo breathed. “Forgive me.”

Lotor closed the distance between them but instead of the gift of a kiss, the demon lord placed his lips against Rolo’s ear and whispered;

“No.”

Rolo gasped and black blood dripped from the corners of his mouth when Lotor thrust his sharp nails through Rolo’s chest.

“I have no use for failures like you.” Then, Lotor yanked out Rolo’s still beating heart and watched the demon fall to his knees, eyes wide in horror and words drowned out by the gurgle of blood. When Rolo fell dead on a pool of his blood, Lotor stared at the beating organ that he clutched.

He pondered about what Rolo told him as he stared his heart; how could a human possess a luxite blade? And more importantly, how was a human able to awaken a luxite blade?

Unless…

Lotor burst out into laughter when he remembered that there was another unique trait to luxite blades; it only served those with Garla blood running through their veins. “Oh, this is absolutely amusing. The irony of it all!”

He spent a few more moments in his moment of amusement before he finally collected himself. “Haggar.” When Lotor spoke her name, a black haze formed before him before it materialized into a cloaked figure. Snow white hair extended down from the veil of her hood and her yellow eyes glowed eerily from the shadow that concealed half her face. Those eyes were plainly yellow, no irises whatsoever, which earned her the title, The Blind One.
“Yes, my lord?” Haggar’s voice sounded hollow and held the echo of disembodied whispers of the spirits she commanded. When Lotor handed over Rolo’s heart, she immediately opened her wrinkled claw-like fingers to receive it.

“You know what to do.” The prince’s instructions were simple and he had ordered it countless times that Haggar knew what to do.

“Yes, my lord.” Haggar dipped her head in a slight bow. “I will create the most terrifying beast for you.”

“And make it big, witch.” Lotor added with a cool smirk when he turned around and walked over to his study to retrieve his sword. Grasping the handle, he unsheathed it from its scabbard. He looked at his reflection on the polished luxite blade that seemed to throb with life in his grasp.

“And make it big.”

“As you wish.” And in a show of smoke, Haggar disappeared.

~

Keith stood in darkness again but when he looked at his hands and his whole body, he was the only thing in the void that emitted light. It was this place again; the emptiness whose echoes filled his ears. But then, the scenery changed in a burst of light and suddenly everything was white and Keith stood in front of a giant tree. Its trunk was thick and made out of crystal while its branches stretched up towards the sky. But what took Keith’s breath away were the stark red leaves that glowed as if they were on fire. Tendrils of light shimmered as the leaves swayed in the wind and tiny white flowers peppered the ropey vines that hung down like curtains.

“Wow…” Keith breathed while he took in the sight of the majestic tree. Carefully, he took a step towards it and gently pressed his palm on the rough crystal surface of the trunk. It felt warm underneath Keith’s touch but suddenly, a powerful gust of wind blew and Keith’s hand went through the trunk as if it was made of water and he was pulled inside.

~

Keith’s eyes snapped open and he groaned. He immediately covered his eyes with his hands to shield them from the glare of the light. When Keith slowly reopened them, he allowed himself to get used to the brightness before he pushed back the blanket that covered him and sat up. Then, he looked around the lavish room; it was spacious, complete with a study area whose wall was covered with two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The mattress he laid on felt like a cloud unlike the old bedbug nest he was used to. The bed was itself was ridiculously big like it could fit four people all at once and the blankets smelled clean in a way Keith has never smelled before. It surely wasn’t detergent or fabric conditioner. It smelled far cleaner than that like… lavender?

“Where am I?” Keith rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. When he pulled his hands away, the room and everything else were still there. The next thing he noticed was that he was naked except for a lose pair of sleep shorts that Keith had no memory of every wearing. He ran his hands all over his torso and minded what he felt for any sign of pain but found none.

Then, the memories came rushing back; fighting Rolo, Lance getting stabbed on the chest, his blade turning into a flaming sword, and falling through the a gate and plunging into the ocean.

“Fuck.” Keith raked his fingers through his hair and he stared wide-eyed at the beautiful painting of an angel woman whose wings were spread while she reached towards the moon.
This was Altea.

“Holy shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit!” He couldn’t really form a coherent sentence besides the flawless string of repetitive curses that slid off his tongue. Where were Pidge and Matt? They did make it safely? Where was Lance? He had to find them especially his guardian angel who had been impaled on the chest by a thick demonic limb. “I have to find someone.”

Keith got out of bed and it took him a few moments to find his balance as he grabbed hold of one of the bed post. It felt like he hasn’t walked in twenty five years with how wobbly his knees were. After stretching his stiff muscles Keith noticed clean clothes neatly folded on an empty chair beside the bed. On top of the stack was his knife and a pair of fingerless gloves. They weren’t the same clothes he used to wear and guessed that those probably got damaged during their fall. After he put on the clothes, Keith looked at his reflection on the mirror.

These clothes certainly one that he’s never seen before in his world; a high collared, deep maroon short sleeved tunic gilded with patterns of gold thread. A matching scarf belt, black pants, and ankle high boots. Since Keith was able to move comfortably, he strapped on his knife and he exited the room.

It was still very early so he guessed that the occupants of the place were still asleep. ‘Palace’ was not the right term to do justice on how wide and gallant the hallways were. Tapestries and paintings hung on the walls, large vases filled with fresh flowers brightened up the emptiness of the corridors, and the atmosphere felt safe despite being alien to Keith. He followed the length of the hallway on silent feet, careful not to break anything or startle anyone. Although, the way he was sneaking around the castle made him look and feel like he was up to no good.

“Pidge?” Keith hissed quietly, hoping that his best friend was doing the same snooping as he was. “Matt?”

No answer. Keith kept on going until he reached the end of the hallway where he ended up on top of a grand staircase that branched out on both sides and led down to the lobby and great double doors that led outside. More sneaking and peeking into unlocked rooms led Keith to the back of the palace since he guessed that there are probably a bunch of guards patrolling on the entrance. If he could just manage to chance upon a nice servant or maybe the cleaning lady, he’d be able to ask for directions. That was most likely the best chance since this place is massive and whoever lived here probably had cleaning ladies like in the late night Victorian movies he comes home to.

But Keith ended up in the garden and he was even more impressed by how beautiful it was. Manicured lawns, topiaries of angels and strange animals Keith has never seen before, several outdoor benches and garden sets, fully bloomed flowers and trees were everywhere. There was a pond and a white centerpiece fountain and even a hedge maze at the other end.

“Are you going to stand there gaping like a dead fish or are you going to make yourself useful?”

Keith was startled at the voice and he quickly turned around to the source of it with his hand hovering really close to the handle of his knife. He came face to face with an elderly looking angel; dark skin, kind eyes filled with wisdom, and white wings with gold striations closed tightly against his back. The man sported a straw hat, work clothes, and giant shears that he used to cut and shape one of the topiaries.

“I’m going to guess that you’re not from these parts.” The gardener chuckled and shook his head while he resumed cutting the stray branches on the topiary. “Haven’t you seen wings before, boy?”

Keith shook his head, his eyes wide and his whole body frozen.
“And it seems that a fairy cat caught your tongue too.” The old gardener said. “I never thought humans were so quiet.” He paused and he lowered the shears to replace it with a smaller cutting tool to snip away the withered leaves. “I never would have known; you’re the first human I’ve ever seen, after all. Do you have a name?”

“Keith, sir.” Keith managed to force out when he realized that staring like a bug eyed creep at the man’s wings was probably rude.

“Well, Keith,” the man handed him a round blue sphere that resembled a crystal ball that fortune tellers used. “Make yourself useful and water those seedlings over there.” He handed the blue transparent ball to Keith who took it carefully. “And please, don’t call me sir. I’m just a humble gardener.”

“What should I call you then?” Keith asked and he glanced at the man before he peered into the orb.

“Just Al.” the older man replied when he met Keith’s gaze and Keith noticed the way those irises glowed with the silver rings around them that was the specific trait of angels. “Oh, and don’t put your face near th---” However it was too late when the orb splashed water on Keith’s face and the human immediately dropped the orb on the grass where it fell with a tinkling plop but did not break.

Al laughed heartily while Keith wiped his face with the tail of his scarf belt. “You’re quite the adorable one, aren’t you?”

“I’m not adorable!” Keith countered defensively but his ears turned red from the embarrassment.

“It’s…I’ve never used a magical…plant watering…orb..thing before!”

“Pick that up, young man.” Al gestured at the orb by Keith’s boots. “It’s always hardest the first time. Give it another try; just will the orb what to do.”

“Alright.” Keith wasn’t really sure what Al was talking about but he gave it a try. He stared at the orb he picked up and tried to imagine what he wanted it to do. Soon enough, the orb slowly levitated and hovered towards the bed of newly sprouted seedlings. It floated on top of the plant bed and finally, it sprayed water on the parched plants. “Do you know who lives here, Al?”

“Allura.” Al replied with a gentle tone that held adoration but then it seemed that he caught his mistake there. “Oh, of course, how could I forget? I meant, queen Allura lives here.” He paused and there was a shift in his voice. “And her groom.”

“Allura---“ Keith repeated and then he recalled what Lance had told them when they first met.

“Holy…fu---“ he looked around the massive garden and the towering palace the loomed over them.

“You mean Shiro lives here?”

“He didn’t used to.” Al said and he placed the small cutter he was using back into the tool box. “Allura was born here. Shiro moved in when they were mated.”

“What about you, Al?” Keith called back the orb when he decided that it watered the seedlings enough. “Do you have a family?”

A melancholy look crossed those age wise eyes of his and Al nodded with a small smile of memory. “Yes. My mate went on ahead of me but I have a daughter.” Al’s tone softened. “We haven’t seen each other for many centuries now.”

Keith felt bad for acting the question and he wouldn’t ask something so sensitive had he only known that it was a sensitive question. “I’m sorry, Al.” he said. “I didn’t meant to—-“
“It’s alright.” Al closed the tool box and stretched his stiff back when he stood straight. He looked at the brightening sky that was blooming with the colors of the rising sun. “I understand that she’s very busy.” he sighed. “She always pushes herself too hard and I still worry about her.”

Keith watched as Al briefly shuffled his wings to let his feathers settle from being cramped against the tight fold of his wings. Al’s daughter was so blessed to have a doting father like him but Keith wasn’t very familiar with that kind of affection. Truth be told, he craved parental affection. He had only experienced it for a short moment that he and his dad were together. As for Keith’s mother, he wished that he could at least meet her and thank her for giving him life. It was a life far from perfect and in his case, normal, but Keith was at least grateful for what he had; he would only get one life, after all.

“Hey, Al, if I ever meet her while I’m here in your world,” Keith offered. “I can let her know that you really want to see her. Maybe I can pass another message along too.”

A small smile lifted Al’s lips and his eyes softened with the touch of emotion. “For a youngling who doesn’t know the first thing about gardening, you have a kind soul.” He said and he looked at the flower buds that were furled tightly on the bush and caressed the velvety closed petals.

“Just tell her,” the elderly man’s words seem to quiver. “That I am so proud of what she had become and that I’m sorry…” Al’s words wavered for a moment at the later words. “…that I wasn’t able to say goodbye.”

“What’s her name—” But Keith wasn’t able to finish the question when he was distracted by the sound of opening doors.

“I went to check on him earlier but then he wasn’t there anymore so I started to get anxious.” Pidge emerged from the door way and they were wearing fresh clothes that bore the same fashion as what Keith has seen so far in this place. Pidge was followed by Matt, then a primly dressed older man with ginger hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. On his back were great brown wings that bore the intricate patterns that resembled an owl’s. Finally, a beautiful woman with dove white wings that matched her starlight colored hair. Her dark skin and her ethereal eyes were a stark compliment to her simple blue and lilac dress.

“What I’m worried about is that Keith might not be fully healed yet, your majesty.” Matt spoke up next. He donned the same style of clothes as his twin sibling’s but with more orange and indigo tones as compared to Pidge’s greenish hues. “He’s been out for a whole week because of how much he used his powers when they came here.”

Keith’s eyes widened. A whole week? ‘Your majesty’?

“I’m sure your friend got lost somewhere in the castle grounds.” The woman replied. Her tone was regal and kind at the same time. “If ever, one of the guards would have seen him slip past the gates.”

“Or!” The mustached man spoke eagerly. “He would surely cause a bustle among the citizens if he found himself outside the palace. You three are the first humans to come to Altea, after all!” He leaned in eagerly to look at the twins. “Until now, I’m still intrigued!”

“Now, now, Coran.” The woman who, judging by how Matt addressed her, Keith deduced was certainly queen Allura, smiled. “Let’s not overwhelm our guests. I’m sure we’ll find—oh.”

Her ethereal gaze locked with Keith’s violet ones.

“Keith!” Matt called out in surprise and he strode over to where Keith was followed by Pidge who
“Dude!” Pidge’s eyes searched Keith from head to toe as if to look for any sign of injury then gave him a big hug. “Don’t scare us like that!”

“Sorry.” Keith shrugged and ruffled the top of Pidge’s head before the other stepped back. “No one was up yet when I woke up and I was trying to look for someone to ask about this place, that’s when I found Al here…” Keith turned around to gesture at the friend he made.

“Al?” Coran glanced at Allura who returned the look with one that mirrored confusion.

“He’s the gardener?” Keith replied but it ended up as question. “He’s about this tall,” he held up his hand at half his arm’s length. “He’s old and he has a daughter he hasn’t seen in ages.”

“An intruder?” Matt asked this time.

“I doubt.” The queen replied with a shake of her head. “Shiro would have known.” She then looked at Keith and walked up to him. “How rude of me, I’m queen Allura.” Despite the title in her introduction, Allura was humble with her tone. “You’ve been unconscious for almost a week that we have not been introduced.”

“And my name is Coran, an Ancient and the advisor to the royal family.” The man older man beside Allura spoke up. “It is a pleasure to finally meet the Vessel.”

Upon remembering that he faced the queen who ruled this world, Keith quickly tried to copy the bow he had seen Lance do several times before when they were at the mermaid sanctuary.

“I’m Keith.” he quickly followed and he uttered a prayer that his curtsy didn’t reach the angels wrong; Keith didn’t have execution on his bucket list.

“Oh…my…” Coran breathed after Keith straightened while beside him, Allura giggled.

“He’s an adorable one, isn’t he, Coran?” Allura asked and Coran nodded.

“His bow can use some work though I’m sure he got that idea from Lance, yes?”

At the sound of the angel’s name, Keith perked up and looked around. “Where’s Lance?”

“Probably doing his rounds.” Pidge replied this time. “You two were found washed to shore, not far from each other. It was a good thing that you were able to come to Altea somehow or else Lance would’ve died.”

“Yeah, man.” Matt agreed. “He was in really bad shape. I even assisted Shay in getting magic flowing to help regenerate his heart, it was pretty bad.”

“Shay?” Keith repeated, confused. He was having trouble keeping up with names and he can only expect it to get more tricky when he has to catch up with the events that happened while he was knocked out cold. However, he felt a strange yearning in him; Keith felt so relieved that Lance was alright but now he really wanted to see him.

“She is the head priestess and the most renowned healer in all of Altea.” Coran replied this time. “Lady Shay tended to you as well.”

“Thank you.” Keith replied. “I didn’t mean to trouble you at all. You guys have done enough by taking me and my friends in.”
“You three do not deserve to be hunted down like animals but the Galra are relentless.” A frown tugged down Allura’s lips but she did not let it linger for long. “We are happy to have you here. Now, come, let us have breakfast.” But then Allura paused when her steps wavered and she grabbed hold the end of an iron fence to regain her balance and coughed twice.

“Your highness, are you alright?” Coran was immediately by her side to aid her. “Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“Thank you for your concern, Coran.” Allura smiled tightly. “But with two thousand and five hundred years in my life so far, sleep is a fickle thing. It’ll go away once I get some breakfast and ask Nyma for tea.” Then, Allura paused and looked up at the brightening sky. Her hand absentmindedly crawled to rest over her chest. “Oh, he’s almost home.”

Pidge asked with a look of concern. “You’re not going to have a heart attack are you?”

“A heart attack?” Allura asked them with tilt of her head then she shook her head with a smile. “I don’t know that is but I can feel my heart approaching.” She spread her wings to their maximum span and Keith felt his breath hitch in his throat when he laid eyes upon the angelic queen’s wings that glimmered like molten white gold. “Coran, please show our guests to breakfast, I will follow after I meet Shiro.”

“Allura gave one powerful flap and shot up into mid air in a single vertical take off. Keith, Matt, and Pidge covered their faces to block the dust that flew but they watched in amazement as they saw an angel in flight for the first time.

“I’m going to punch Lance’s face when I see him.” Pidge muttered. “He told us that seeing angel wings will melt our eyes out of our sockets.” They reached up to tap the metal of the thin coronet around their head and a single round glowing green stone set against the middle of their forehead.

“Pidge screamed when they woke up and saw angels working around the infirmary.” Matt pointed out. He wore a matching coronet.

“Did not!”

“Did to.” Matt sang teasingly. “You were like: ‘Don’t come any closer!’ and then you started throwing pillows with one hand over your eyes.”

“It was such a sight to behold.” Coran added. “I can’t believe that you believed that.”

“But Lance said so that’s why he hides his wings!”

While Matt continued to tease his twin, Keith’s met Coran’s and they stared at each other, both surprised at the knowing looks they had. So, Coran knew Lance’s secret too. Giving a silent nod at the royal adviser with the owl patterned wings, Keith showed that he too, knew about what Lance hid.

“By the way,” Keith began while they walked along the grand corridors of the castle. “What are you guys wearing?”

“Oh this?” Pidge tapped their coronet. “Hunk made these for us.”

“Hunk?” Keith pondered at the familiarity of the name. “Oh, right. Lance told me about him, I think
he’s a soldier too. So you’ve met everyone, huh?”

“A blacksmith, weapons expert, and quite talented in making things from scratch!” Coran chimed in.

“It’s an amplifier.” Matt explained now. “Remember how my quintessence was sucked out at the club? This realm has a similar effect; the quintessence in our bodies isn’t strong enough to keep up with the amount of magic here that’s why we need our quintessence to be amped.”

“Wait, then why wasn’t I given one?” Keith asked, aghast. “I can die, right?”

“No, you’re fine because you’re a Vessel.” Pidge said. “You have so much quintessence in your body that it offsets the effect it has on your human body.”

“You’re very special, Keith.” Coran stopped in front of grand double doors where the dining hall laid on the other side. “So special that prince Lotor wants to use you to destroy the lives of the countless innocents who refuse to bow down to him.”

“Well, I’m not going to let that guy ruin my life like that.” Keith narrowed his eyes at the thought of some asshole using him as a weapon. “I’m not an object. It’s my life and I decide how I’m going to live it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Coran snapped his fingers and his wings spread open halfway from the excitement. “You tell the demon lord; ‘Not today!’ and show him that he’s not the boss of you! Ahhh—“ Coran sighed. “For fragile creatures, humans sure make up for it with their untamable flames of stubborn determination! I must record this observation!”

“Pardon,” Matt arched a brow. “Did you just say ‘record’?”

“Why, yes I did.” Coran nodded. “I am one of the oldest beings alive in Altea and as I’ve mentioned earlier, I am an Ancient. I’ve seen the rise and fall of this realm and I have seen to the guidance of the proper upbringing and education of queen Allura.” A chuckle and they noticed soft light within the wisdom of Coran’s eyes. “The queen has been through quite a lot and I was there in each and every one of them. When she was but a babe tripping over her wings, when she snuck out of the palace to explore the marketplace streets, when she met her mate, when she lost her father…” The royal advisor trailed off at the painful memory.

“You mean the king, right?” Keith asked. “What happened to him?”

“King Alfor gave up his life to form the barrier that protects Altea today.” Coran motioned at the large painting of the former king that hung on the wall behind them. “But the power of the king’s spirit that resides within can only last for so long. Powerful as he was, the king’s quintessence has its limit and it’s running out, weakening the shield and making Altea vulnerable for a Second Siege.”

When Keith turned around, his eyes widened when he saw the regal image painted on the framed canvas. “Al?” he breathed out in disbelief. “Al the gardener?”

“Did you say something, Keith?” Pidge asked because Keith looked absolutely lost. He was good with remembering faces and he can remember pizza costumers he had from two weeks ago. He bet his right arm that the old gardener he met is the same guy on the painting.

“Keith?” Coran interrupted this time and Keith turned his attention back at them.

“So-Sorry.” Keith shook his head. His mind was torn between deciding if that morning had been a dream or pure coincidence. “I must have hit my head pretty hard back there. I think I’m seeing things.” That can’t be the king. That king’s dead!
“Well, I’m sure you’re just famished!” Coran perked up again and pushed the double doors open to reveal a grand dining hall. The long table in the middle was clothed in white and blue linen and it was lined with food that instantly made Keith’s stomach growl. He remembered that being out of commission for a couple of days, his last meal had been back on the human world at the mermaid sanctuary.

“Time to fill your bellies with authentic Altean food!” he gestured to the table in invitation. “After breakfast, why not go out and explore the kingdom? The capital has so much to offer and everyone is about and about preparing for the juniberry festival!”

Pidge and Matt gleefully followed Coran in the dining room while conversing about the things that can be found at the kingdom’s plaza. Keith gave the painting one last look with a second thought; he knew what he saw.

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With a single powerful flap of those midnight black wings that looked like the night sky, Shiro glided through the Altean skies. Rivers, thick forests, rolling planes, and mountain ranges zipped by below. The white forelock of his hair whipped back from the impact of the wind that he met head on. Behind him, a squadron of angel soldiers flew in a triangular formation while they patrolled over the rural villages that lay below. The early morning security flight he led that day carried out smoothly despite the sudden drop in of their human guests. But what still baffled Shiro was how Lance and the Vessel, Keith, were able to open a doorway without the use of a feather key.

Deciding that the areal areas were secured, Shiro swiped his hand to the right in a sharp gesture to signal the squadron to disperse for the ground patrol. Since the more brittle patches on the barrier are hidden by the thick canopies and shrubs, they had to do a security sweep on foot at the more secluded areas of the kingdom.

Shiro angled his wings and he glided lower where another angel shot up from the clouds below and stopped right in front.

“Sire,” Hunk snapped open his brown wings tipped with sunset gold to stop himself followed by consecutive flaps to keep himself upright and airborne. “It’s all clear with my squad.”

“Great job, Hunk.” Shiro gave an approving nod and an assured smile. “We’re done for the morning. You may return now.”

“Thank you, sir!” Hunk gave a cheerful salute. “You can depend on my squadron to carry out the rest.”

“By the way,” Shiro interrupted, his night sky wings mimicking the same pattern of flaps as Hunk’s to keep himself suspended in midair. “How is Lance doing?”

“Oh, he’s doing fine, sire.” Hunk replied. “He’s fully recovered from his injuries and he’s on capital duty.”

“That’s good to know.” Shiro said as he realized that Lance’s task of helping in keeping the capital secured while he was gone also helped his guardianship duties since the Vessel is currently in Altea. “Please tell Shay that she did an exceptional job in healing him.”

Hunk beamed in pride and he wore a happy grin the Shiro found infectious that he also smiled. “Your words honor my wife, sire. I’m sure that she’ll be thrilled to hear this!” Hunk paused to look at the sky and saw how late it was already in the morning. “Oh, shoot, Shay’s expecting me for
breakfast.” He muttered.

“Go.” Shiro chuckled. “My wife is expecting me home as well. We have guests joining us, after all.”

“Oh yeah.” Hunk remembered. “Kurt, right?”

“Keith. The other two with him are siblings; I believe they’re called Matt and Pidge.” Shiro corrected. “I’d have to see if he’s finally woken up first.”

Hunk nodded and gave a salute before he flew away.

Shiro resumed his flight and soon, he was a black blur against the stark blueness of the sky. Being in flight made angels feel the vast freedom of the heavens and it was where they are at an advantage. To defend that freedom to soar freely was something angels would fight to the death for.

Clouds were sliced in the middle as the impact of Shiro’s speed parted them. He had reached a wide green field with game grazing on the fresh morning glass when Shiro skidded to a sudden stop. Suspended in midair, his obsidian eyes ringed with silver scanned the clouds when he felt a presence lurking within them.

Suddenly, a gleaming sword shot out from one of the clouds and hurled itself towards Shiro who caught it by the blade with his mental arm. He narrowed his eyes when he studied the polished metal that appeared to have been dulled on purpose so that it didn’t hurt anyone. There was a high pitched tone that rung in the air around him and the blade in his grasp quivered with force that tried to pry it off Shiro’s hand.

Letting go, the sword shot back into a fluffy white cloud. Silence followed before the same sword shot out of here it hid followed by five more similar dulled blades that flew remotely and went towards him. Shiro smirked and got into a fighting position. He deflected the first few attacks using his arm and he used his wings to his advantage as he flew while fending off the flurry of attacks.

The way the swords were dulled told Shiro that this was a game; an invitation to spar.

Shiro grinned and flared his wings to their full span. Using his power as an archangel, Shiro summoned a powerful wind that blew the blades away as well as the clouds that hid his pursuant.

“Good morning, Allura.” His tone was gentle and doting but his eyes glinted with mischief as he laid eyes upon the beautiful woman who hovered before him. The skirts of her gown waved in the wind and her dove wings that looked like molten white gold in the sunlight with were spread to their full glory. The six swords spun behind her threateningly like a wheel of death. That limited number was not even a drop of the queen’s full power for Allura had the ability to create a portal and through them, summon hundreds of blades to impale her enemies. And of course, being an archangel like Shiro, she had the ability to call upon angelfire.

“Good morning, husband.” Allura crossed her arms over her chest. A smile played on her lips and her ethereal gaze held his. “Do you remember our favorite game when we were children?”

“You want to race me?” Shiro arched a brow in inquiry. “Are you sure you’ll win?”

“Is that a challenge?” The wheel of swords behind Allura spun faster.

“How about we play it as adults? Winner takes all.” Allura offered she flashed him an innocent smile that held the secrecy of a challenge.
The air suddenly grew heavy and the clouds beneath them started to darken as the skies attended to Shiro’s silent command. Tendrils of electricity slithered around his right arm and his fingers twitched in preparation.

Shiro eyes quickly glanced at a lake glittering in the distance. “To our secret spot?”

Allura pondered for a moment then shrugged, carefree. Without warning, she willed the six blades to shoot towards Shiro who parried four and crushed two in his grasp after he caught it. But Allura already flew off with a head start

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Shiro hollered over the wind, laughing.

“I didn’t say I was going to play fair!” Allura called back and she pushed her wings as fast as they could go. The world was a blur beneath them as they flew across the great expanse of the sky. Allura was about to dive down when a tendril of lightning crossed her path. Its tail wrapped around her ankle and yanked her back but she wasn’t electrocuted.

The memory of when they were children flashed in Allura’s mind wherein Shiro would yank her ankle back when he caught up to her so that he can get in the lead.

“Hey!” Allura protested but a large hunting knife materialized in her hand she hacked off the part of the electric tendril that coiled around her ankle and once she was free, she threw her weight to the side and maneuvered through the clouds to conceal her.

“You’re forgetting that you’re in my territory, dear.” Shiro smirked and he willed the clouds to disperse before him but when he saw that Allura was nowhere to be found, he halted in midair and frowned. In the midst of their race while they zipped through the sky, Shiro found that the lake they saw in the distance earlier was already beneath them but Allura wasn’t on the ground either where the finish line was supposed to be.

Shiro glanced from left then right; nothing.

Which only meant…

Shiro wasn’t able to dodge in time when Allura came from above and slammed against him with an excited battle cry. When Shiro caught her in his arms, the two of them closed their wings tight against their backs and the plummeted head first towards the lake.

“Shiirooo!” Allura’s scream was mixed with laughter as they fell at terrifying speed. Shiro was howling in glee as well and in that moment, it was like they were younglings again. Before they hit the water, Shiro grabbed Allura and locked her in a tight embrace before he spread his wings in time. Crystalline splashes of the water caught the sunlight when Shiro zipped over the lake’s surface and it illuminated a rainbow.

When Allura spread her wings to catch the wind and slow them down, they glided onto an empty glade and she gently pinned Shiro against the soft bed of grass and wildflowers. Shiro craned his head while Allura closed in the distance between them in a deep and affectionate kiss.

“We’re been mated for centuries.” Allura arched a brow after she pulled back. “Why are you still blushing like a youngling?”

Lifting his right hand to cup his wife’s cheek, Shiro replied with shrug. “I don’t know.” His metal fingers were cool against her skin. “Maybe I’ll never get over the fact that I married my best friend.”
The palace courtyard that took up the front of the castle premises was a sight to behold. White polished marble railways, manicured hedges, and angelic guards that patrolled around greeted Keith when he stepped outside. He earned some strange looks from the guards considering that they’ve never seen a human before but they kept up at their training and merely nodded politely at Keith while they never left their post.

Keith had gone ahead outside, not interested in Coran’s briefing for their little tour around the kingdom’s capital. While he waited, Keith walked by the towering trees whose shadows were pierced by spears of sunlight that poked through the gaps of their rustling leaves. Carefully, Keith placed his hand on the trunk and thought back to the strange dream he had.

A huge, majestic tree whose trunk was made out of crystal and its leaves were like flickering flames in their stark red color.

Suddenly, Keith was distracted by the sweet sound of a flute being played. He glanced up when he followed the sound and found out that the melody floated from the high lying branches.

Then, Keith saw him; wings that looked like the midnight sky were draped behind him, a white forelock of hair, and a horizontal scar across the bridge of his nose. Shiro sat comfortably on a high branch while he leaned on the thick trunk of the tree and he held a short wooden flute to his lips. His eyes were closed and his expression was as serene from the melody he played. Keith was awestruck because the last time he saw Shiro, the man saved him from a beast that was out to kill him during a very bad pizza run. Shiro had literally thrust in that metal arm into the monster and electrocuted it until it exploded.

“Hey, Keith.” Shiro opened his eyes and flashed smile at Keith’s direction. He made his voice a little louder so that Keith would hear him all the way below where he stood. “Would you like to come up here? The view’s nice.”

“I can’t fly.” Keith managed to reply. He felt awkward that he couldn’t do what most of the people in this world can. That solidary thought made him ponder; if he felt awkward then Lance probably felt worse.

“Every heard of climbing?” Shiro chuckled and tucked his flute into a pouch by his waist. “Or would you like me to pick you up?”

“I think I can do it.” Keith replied, headstrong and stubborn. He glared at the trunk and contemplated how he was going to climb. He’s climbed quite a few trees when he was a kid but none of them was this massive. “This is going to take a while, Shiro!”

“Not a problem,” Shiro stood to his full height and when he spread his wings half way. “Hold your hands up and I’ll haul you up.”

Keith did as he was told but as he raised his arms, Shiro jumped down from the high branch without a look of fear from the lengthy drop. He used his wings to parachute down and when he grabbed Keith’s hands and yanked him up, he gave two powerful flaps and they were airborne.

“Holy shi--!” Keith barely got the words out when the ground disappeared beneath his feet and the greenery of the trees zipped past as Shiro flew him up. The adrenaline rush in his veins throbbed all over him by the time the two of them landed on the branch Shiro was standing on just moments earlier.

“Shiro, that… that was… wow!”
“Really?” Shiro chuckled. “It’s nothing new around here.” He paused and turned to face the view. “What do you think?”

The height they were in provided Keith a full view of the kingdom’s bustling streets. Merchant tents and smoke from the fires that carried scrumptious scents of food being cooked, voices of sellers shouting and advertising their goods, citizens that walked and citizens that flew could be seen. In the distance was the glittering horizon where the sea was and the sky sheened with a shade of blue that did not match its color; the barrier.

“It’s a beautiful city.” Keith found himself saying. “It’s not like mine.”

Dull gray concrete and slippery alleys crawling with thugs, Altea was the opposite of that. It was also a city… a world that branded Keith as a freak of nature and one that did not accept him. But since arriving in Altea, Keith had received nothing short of a hospitable welcome. They offered him and his friends sanctuary and even went as far as sending one of their own to protect him from the Galra.

“Sure is.” Shiro replied softly. “It’s not perfect, no world is, but it’s home.”

Keith fell quiet and watched the bustle of the city below. “Shiro,” he finally said as he glanced at the angel beside him. “About last time, I never really had the chance to thank you properly. So, thank you.”

“I appreciate your gratitude.” Shiro placed a heavy hand on Keith’s shoulder. “But there is no need. I was just doing what I thought was right. You’re filled with so much promise, after all.”

“Am I?” Keith smiled bitterly. “I don’t even know what’s going on. I don’t even know who I am.”

“So, what do you plan to do about that?”

“I have to find my answers.” Keith said and he pulled out his knife that was strapped around the small of his back. “I’m tired of living in the dark. I need to know what this is and why it turned into a sword.”

“It turned into a sword?” Shiro frowned while his dark, silver ringed eyes studied the blade in Keith’s grasp. “Can you show me?”

“That’s the point,” Keith sighed. “I tried earlier but nothing happened.” He shook his head, frustrated. “I’m not crazy, Shiro. It turned into a sword and it felt like…it was alive!”

Shiro glanced at the human and then back at the blade. “If I may?”

“Go ahead.”

Shiro took the knife by the handle using his metal arm and ran his other finger on the lethal edge, drawing blood. He hissed at the sting of the cut and watched a crimson bead of blood slide down the length of his finger and disappeared into the dark material of his fingerless glove. “It’s not closing very fast.” He said when he clenched his fist in order to stop the bleeding and allow his cut flesh to meld together. It took a few minutes for the bleeding to stop before Shiro wiped the remaining blood off on his pants.

“Is that bad?” Keith asked while he inspected the small pink cut that remained. “What does it mean, Shiro?”

“Well, it seems that you’ve got yourself a luxite blade.” The frown Shiro wore set deep lines on his rough handsome features.
“A what?”

“It’s an ore found deep in the Galra empire.” Shiro returned the blade to Keith handle first. “They say that it’s cursed. A blade through the heart means instant death to any being and limbs that are cut off by a luxite blade will never regenerate.” Shiro lifted his metal arm to make a silent statement.

“Oh.” Keith’s blood ran cold. How could his dad get his hands on something like this? “…I didn’t know, Shiro, I swear! I’ve… I’ve had it for as long as I could remember. My dad gave it to me and said that it will keep away those who try hurt me.”

Shiro was silent for a moment but Keith felt the intensity of those inhuman eyes. Keith felt the nervousness because the simple possession of a blade like this can get them kicked out.

“I believe you, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Shiro’s shoulders relaxed and Keith felt the tension in his own body lay low. “A weapon is a neutral object; it does what its wielder bids it. In the wrong hands, it will kill. But in the hands of the just, it will protect and defend. You used that to protect Lance and your friends when you were cornered back there, right?”

Keith nodded and stared at the knife before he sheathed it. “I’m guessing that I should keep this hidden?”

Shiro nodded. “But I will tell my wife because she needs to know what happens in the kingdom especially that a suspicious weapon like that is in the possession of one of our honored guests.”

“Lance knows too.” Keith added. “And my friends, but beside that, I don’t think anyone else does.”

“Lance is trustworthy and he is loyal to the crown.” Shiro assured and his eyes softened in brief memory. “He’s one of the best students I’ve ever had; he’s really good despite…” the words halted and Shiro suddenly looked conflicted at the suddenly slip but Keith quickly assure him with a nod;

“It’s alright, I know, Shiro. Lance told me.”

The night winged angel sighed in relief. “This makes things easier, then. Not everyone knows.”

When silence consumed the passing minutes between them, they watched the glittering sea on the horizon and the mountain ranges the touched the sky.

“If there’s something you must ask, speak.” Keith was startled when Shiro broke the silence. “I can see it in your face, Keith.”

There was hesitation on Keith’s part and he anxiously chewed on his inner cheek while one question after another popped into his mind but he decided to go with the one that currently bothered him the most; “Shiro, me and my friends are human.” He finally said. “We don’t have wings and we’re more fragile than you but still, you treat us so nicely and well… Lance… he said…”

“Because humans don’t have wings to begin with but angels do. Lance came from a secluded village where they retained old Altean beliefs.” Shiro’s tone held an echo of sadness and disappointment in it. “Because Lance was born different, he had to suffer the discrimination given to him there and it eventually drove him out.”

“But it drove him out to go the wrong way.” Keith clenched his hand and he felt his jaw tightened when he remembered those scars on Lance’s back. He felt his blood boil at the Galra emblem branded onto him like he was reduced to cattle… to property.

Keith felt those dark eyes study him with quiet intensity. “But this is a much better place for him than
that old one, right?”

“It is.” Shiro smiled and turned to look at Keith. There was something comforting about Shiro’s smile, Keith thought. He knew that he can trust this angel who had saved him before and take his word that Lance is better off here. Keith had not known Lance for very long but he has saved him many times before. If there was anything, Lance was tried and tested; Keith trusted him.

“Keith?!” Someone called out from below. “How the hell did you get up there?” Pidge looked incredibly small from the height Keith was at. Matt stood beside them while he waved.

“Come on! Coran said we can go around the city!”

“Looks like your friends are looking for you, Kieth.” Shiro nudged him by the shoulder. When Keith looked over from the tumbling height he was in, the long drop below from the top of the tree made Keith’s vision spin dizzily. “Come on, I’ll bring you down.”

Matt jumped from his skin when Shiro landed beside him with a powerful gust of wind from those midnight black wings while Pidge gaped in utter wonder at the glitters that peppered them.

“Jeeze, Shiro.” Matt shook his head, having already introduced to the head of the royal guard while Keith was out of commission. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that,” he glanced around. “To any of this, to be honest.”

“You people are so extra.” Pidge drawled dryly.

“You will soon.” Shiro replied after Keith stepped away from him. “It looks like you’re going to be here for a while so you might as well get used to the kingdom.” Shiro paused and he tilted his head up, those dark, silver ringed eyes scanning the vastness of the blue sky. “Speaking of, where’s your tour guide?”

“Tour guide?” Pidge perked up. “You arranged a tour for us?”

“We can’t have a couple of humans getting lost in the kingdom, now can we?” Shiro paused when he spotted a speck in the sky spear through the clouds. “Oh, there he is.” He nodded at them. “You should meet him by the gate. Go on and have fun, you three.”

“Hello!” Later, the big hulking angel turned to them and held out a large hand to shakes theirs, each. Keith firmly grasped it and nodded a hello. He had dark hair held back by a strip orange cloth, his muscular arms and his chest were clad in leather that was gilded with strips of iron hammered into the armor with delicate care, and his wings were broad; the feathers were a warm mahogany flecked with warm sunshine yellow on the tips and bore the same striations a falcon has. Judging by the iron war hammer strapped across his back, this angel was a soldier.

“I’m Hunk! Nice to meet you!” he blabbered happily. “You must be Matt, Pidge, and,” He turned to meet enigmatic violet eyes. “Keith! Oh, boy! I’ve heard a lot of things about you! The whole kingdom has, actually!”

Keith felt nervous from the attention he’s suddenly getting. He can only hope that they don’t get a mob following them around the town when they go out. “Good things or bad things?” he asked, uneasy.

“Good things! You haven’t exactly caused trouble.” Hunk grinned he ruffled his wings a little while he walked past them. “Let’s go, there’s a lot of the city that you should see!”

Just as Keith expected, they earned gazes from the winged civilians but those who approached them
were friendly. They got waves and welcomes and occasionally, free stuff to welcome them. Pidge and Matt seemed to be enjoying themselves while Hunk told them rich pieces of Altean history and culture. Sometimes, they also got their shares of unfriendly stares but no one dared to get in their way; not with a big angelic guard with them and immunity bestowed by the queen herself.

“So, Hunk.” Keith initiated a conversation when Matt and Pidge walked off to a market stall selling magical spell books and other knickknacks. “Have you been a guard long?”

“Oh me?” Hunk replied, pointing to himself. “Some six to seven hundred years, I guess. Not as long as the sire, though. He’s been a royal guard even before queen Allura was on the throne.” He shook his head with a knowing chuckle.

“And Lance?”

“We trained together.” Hunk replied. “It took him a while to learn the basics but when he finally did,” the angel let out a whistle of admiration. “ripped the words right out of our mouths. Have you seen him shoot?”


“If it wasn’t for you, he would’ve died.” Hunk turned to him with a smile and those dark brown eyes ringed with silver at the irises softened. “Thank you for saving my best friend; Lance has been through a lot already. You’ve made a great impression for saving him like that, buddy.”

Keith had always been alone most of his life after his father’s death that social interactions were awkward. However, he also felt relief that Lance was alright. It’s true that it was his duty to guard Keith, but for him to die because of trying to protect him when Keith didn’t do anything was something that was going to haunt him.

Besides, Lance actually makes good company.

“I just did what I thought was right.” Keith said then he at his gloved hand. His eyes became clouded with turmoil and confusion. “I honestly don’t know how I did it.” He clenched his hand into a tightly furled fist. “I was desperate to escape with Lance then everything happened so fast.”

“Hey, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” Hunk assured him. “I don’t know a lot about Vessels like you except that you’re a coveted walking balloon of quintessence. I’m not the guy to ask about this kind of stuff but I’m more than happy to invite you to dinner in my home sometimes and maybe you can ask Shay about it. She’s my wife, by the way.”

“Shay?” Keith repeated in surprise. “The healer?”

“Oh, totally. Best lady ever! Couldn’t be any happier being a married man.” Hunk repeated with pride. “You and your friends should come over for dinner sometimes!”

Memories of Keith falling straight into the ocean with an unconscious Lance flashed in his mind and he was grateful that they were both found despite the water’s current tearing them apart.

“I should at least thank her for fixing me up.” Keith said with a small smile. “So, yeah, dinner sounds nice.”

“Great!” Hunk beamed with excitement. “We love guests! Shay makes the best cave root soup! She learned the recipe from her grandmother eons ago and it just gets better and better whenever she makes it!”
Keith smiled as Hunk rambled. He listened to Hunk as the angel showed the best food stalls and told him about Altean weapons which Keith found himself interested in. As they walked around, Keith noticed that people were hanging up garlands on the lamp posts and the scent of different breads and pastries wafted in the air.

“Hey, Hunk.” Pidge asked while they stopped for a break at one of the stone benches in the town square. “What’s all the stuff for? You guys having a party?”

“Oh, that.” Hunk replied while he tore off a piece of grilled meat with his teeth from the skewer he held. “The kingdom’s getting ready for the juniberry festival.”

“What’s that about?” It was Matt who asked this time when he looked up from the gem charms he bought from a stall.

“It’s a festival that we celebrate the blooming of the juniberry flowers.” Hunk paused when he quickly finished the kebab he was eating. “You see, juniberries only bloom once a decade so we dedicate a festival for it that lasts for seven days.” He motioned at a flower bed on the yard of a cozy looking cottage. “See those furled pink buds? Those will bloom on the night the moon is at its fullness this week and they will last for the rest of the year.”

“Then they will disappear again for a long time, huh?” Keith’s tone was thoughtful. “It’s like welcoming the flowers every ten years.”

“That’s a deep way to put it.” Matt smiled. “Looks like you’re going soft.”

“I-I’m not!” Keith exclaimed and his face turned the same shade as the juniberry buds.

When they were on the move again, Hunk introduced them to some of the citizens who looked at them with interest and asked them many questions about the human world. Matt and Pidge were more than happy to answer while Keith stood on the side, nodding politely while trying to get used to all the attention. However, while at it, Keith felt a strange feeling like he was being watched.

* 

Lance casually leaned against a dormant chimney on top of a house while he watched the bustling streets below. Hands stuffed into the pockets of his pants, his eyes quietly followed that three humans that were prancing around with his best friend. Upon leaving the human realm, Lance had also abandoned the clothes he wore there for his usual Altean fashion. His right arm was an archer’s glove that was connected to a gauntlet that covered halfway up his arm. His dark blue sleeveless hoodie shirt was made of sturdier material fit for a soldier like him.

Those watchful blue eyes never once left the dark haired human who walked the streets below. Lance wanted to join in but the bile in his stomach held him back with a grip. After his failed attempt to protect Keith, Lance felt like he couldn’t even show himself him. He even felt upset with himself that Rolo managed to get away and the word about him being a guard under the direct order of the queen must have reached prince Lotor by now but that didn’t matter. Lance had a mission of protecting Keith. The only thing he could hope for right now is for Rolo to think that Keith and Lance were still back in the human world since the catalyst feather was used by Pidge and Matt without them.
“There you are, my boy.”

Lance remained still even when a new voice interrupted his thoughts. He didn’t move from his post and as he glanced over his shoulder at the royal adviser who landed gracefully on the tiled roof. Coran folded those owl patterned wings and they settled, poised against his back.

“Enjoying the view, hm?” Coran commented when he walked carefully behind Lance, hidden by the brick chute of the chimney.

“I’m working.” Lance replied almost defensively.

“Oh, really, now?”

“Yeah!”

They watched Hunk tour Pidge, Matt, and Keith around the market place in silence before Coran said;

“Keith is the first human quintessence Vessel I’ve had the honor to meet. Humans are such fragile creatures whose bodies break quite easily and their lifespans quick as a wink of an eye. The thought
of one being a reservoir of pure quintessence is so surreal.”

“Yeah.” Lance agreed, the hem of his hood writhing at the breeze that passed by. “I don’t remember much of what happened and I was only half conscious when he did so, but Keith opened a gate to Altea.” He paused to recall the events at the pier. “We were surrounded and I was losing blood with every heartbeat. Then, the last thing I remember was this surge of power that filled the air and a gate formed. It was made out of light and everything was the shade of vermilion.”

“A vermilion gate, hm?” Coran repeated thoughtfully. “A mere human opening a gate to Altea without the use of a quintessence feather is something unheard of.”

“Coran,” Lance finally turned to face the adviser, his hands curled into fists beside him. “Keith can easily open gateways between worlds. That’s how powerful he is. If Lotor finds out what Keith can do, who knows what he would do when he gets his hands on Keith’s power. He needs to be kept safe.”

“That’s why the queen placed that task in your hands, Lance.” Coran said and he reached up to twirl the tip of his mustache out of habit as he nodded. “Allura trusts in you.”

“But,” Lance felt reluctance wrap its fingers around his throat and he suddenly found it hard to swallow. “Can I even do it?” his gaze fell sadly. “I couldn’t even protect him properly back at the pier, Coran. Maybe, maybe,” bile filled his mouth. “I should talk to Shiro about a reassignment. Keith deserves better.”

Coran studied him with those eyes that had seen the rise and fall of Altea and had witnessed the formation of their realm’s history. “Lad, if I may bestow wisdom upon you, let me say this; I believe you should speak to Keith first about the reassignment before going to speak with the sire.”

“What?” Lance was taken back. “Why?”

“Consider Keith’s feelings in this as well, Lance.” Coran smiled kindly. “You to have grown into quite a pair since your adventures in the human world.” He paused and his eyes trailed below where Keith was talking with a large burly angel who manned a knife shop. He looked really invested in the conversation with the shopkeeper who was trying to sell an elegant curved dagger.

“He kept asking about you after he woke up this morning.” Coran continued and Lance’s brows shot up momentarily, surprise in his eyes. “He even attempted to bypass palace security to find you. You should speak to him, Lance. I believe it would upset Keith if he walked back to find a different guard without a single explanation as to why.”

Lance absorbed those wise words and managed to swallow the hard lump in his throat. Then, he smiled; “Alright, thanks, Coran.”

“My pleasure.” Coran chirped and smoothed one of the lapels on his pristine coat. He motioned at the straw basket he was holding on one hand. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there are some pastries in the oven that need these berries.”

“Don’t burn down the palace.” Lance grinned, teasing. “Remember the last time. Allura wasn’t very happy.”

“Hmph!” Coran quickly turned away. “You poke on sleeping klanmurels but enjoy my pastries. You are banned from the palace kitchen for your insult.”

“Aw, Coran, come on, I was just kidding!” Lance said apologetically but there was a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “You made the best fruit puffs despite burning down half of the palace kitchen.”
“There you go again,” Coran wagged a finger at him. “If I catch you near the royal cookie jar, I will personally cut off your hand.”

“Ohh, harsh!” Lance chuckled. “Maybe so, if you can even prove that it was me.”

Coran waved him off with a huff and turned around. He spread his wings and prepared to take flight. Then, he paused and glanced over his shoulder at the young angel; “And Lance?”

“Yeah?” Lance replied absentmindedly when he turned to resume his guard duty and he leaned against his post.

“I’ve been alive for nearly eight thousand years.” Coran said. “I know a look of love when I see one. You should go and talk to Keith.”

A powerful gust of wind with a single flap and Coran shot up into the air, leaving Lance wide-eyed and red faced.

~

Lotor strolled along his garden of eerie snow white roses. His dark half cape flapped gently behind him as he walked. The prince stopped and bent over to pluck a rose from the bush. He took a whiff of the sickly sweet scent but was interrupted by a soft hiss. When Lotor followed the direction of the sound, he lifted his hand forward to receive a winged serpent that winded in mid-air. The snake had two pairs of small leathery bat like wings that were attached on the top and middle of its back. Its scales were a deep shade of green that they almost appeared black while its eyes were the color of molten gold.

“Ah, you are her familiar, yes?” Lotor cooed. His voice languid when the serpent landed on his hand and seductively coiled around his forearm.

The snake flicked out its tongue twice then its pupils dilated, making its eyes look like dark bottomless pits that shone with a green light within.

“My lord.” A disembodied female voice reverberated from the snake. “How I’ve missed you, love.”

Lotor felt a vein of irritation throb in his temple but the mask he wore was flawless and his voice wasn’t any different. “And I, you, my dear.” But the prince wasn’t the kind who liked to waste his time on small talk. “What tidings do you bring?”

“An interesting one.” The woman’s voice echoed and the winged snake continued to stare at Lotor. “The human container of quintessence has arrived in Altea.”

“What?” Lotor’s voice the quiet but the burst of rage within him laced his tone with a dangerous calm that he didn’t noticed that he had already crushed the poor rose which he held on his other hand.

“Keith, my prince.” The feminine voice replied. “He is in Altea.”

So Rolo did fail. Lotor could have pardoned such a disappointment had the human known as Keith and that pathetic excuse of an angel were locked out in the human world; he could have easily sent someone else to fetch Keith and kill Lance. Or, to make sure that there is no room for any more failure, Lotor can do it himself had he not been occupied with fighting the rebels who opposed him in his own realm.

Truly, Keith falling under the protection of the angels was an obstacle in Lotor’s plans but there’s
always a way. Even the constant dripping of water will eventually erode the stone.

“Thank you for the news, my dear.” Lotor made sure to sound pleased. “And how is your own task coming along?”

“Smoothly. She’s starting to show symptoms.” A pause and Lotor heard an audible sigh of impatience. “I just wish that the poison would work faster.”

“Now, now,” When Lotor chuckled, the snake flicked out its tongue to lick the skin of his wrist. “Patience, is a virtue. However, let’s try this.” Letting the crushed petals fall to the ground from his cruel grasp, Lotor flicked his other hand and a small glass bottle that contained a glowing purple liquid materialized on his palm. “I’m sending you something through your familiar.”

“A gift?” the disembodied voice echoed again. “Oh, love, you shouldn’t have~”

“Klanmurel venom.” There was a soft gasp from the woman’s voice and Lotor smiled. He held the bottle of poison in front of the snake and the creature opened its wide mouth and swallowed the bottle to carry it within its body.

“This is extremely difficult to acquire, my lord! How did---“

“The mystery is part of the fun, my love. Use it well and hope that it will aid our plans. Also, keep an eye on the Vessel for me.”

“Should I kill him?” the woman asked.

Lotor shook his head, the stark powder white locks of his hair waved. “He’s is our greatest resource. I need him alive; if he dies, the quintessence dies with him so play along with the charade and keep him out of trouble as well.”

“Please believe in me, prince Lotor.” The woman’s voice softened lovingly. “Altea will be yours soon enough.”

“And you,” Lotor cooed. “Will be my queen. Until then, be patient and let the plan take its course.”

“Yes, my lovely prince.”

The serpent spread its wings and flew away. It disappeared when dark smoke covered its whole body, leaving the demon lord in his glass dome of roses. Lotor watched where the creature vanished and thought about the last of his conversation with the snake’s owner who was spying on the angels for him. Then, he played with the repetitive promise of making her his queen once he takes Altea.

Lotor smirked maliciously. “Fool.”

~

A hooded figure blended along the crowd while it went from one stall to another in the market place, filling up the basket she carried with provisions and supplies for the week.

“Thank you.” She smiled at the storekeeper when she exchanged her coin for two fat loaves of bread. She briefly peered up from underneath her hood and through the straight black bangs that brushed her yellow eyes but she tore her gaze away before the storekeeper recognized what she was. It was a normal thing that Vea and her trio had grown accustomed to in their stay here in Altea. With the tension of territorial war that is inherited by that bastard prince from his tyrant of a father, no one really trusted the Galra now and people tend to generalize that all Galra were bad.
Vea went along her way after she finished shopping and decided to do a quick stop at a street food stall to buy some egg waffles and reward herself for the effort of doing the weekly marketing. She ran a mental list her friend asked her to buy while it was the other’s turn to watch their herbal medicine shop along with their mentor.

As she walked, she passed by the town square where the other citizens had erected colorful poles and hung garlands on the houses. That was when she saw them... *him*.

The young man had thick dark hair and clear eyes that were the color of polished amethysts. Unlike everyone else, he didn’t have wings which made him stand out along with his other wingless companions.

“Humans in Altea?” the Galra woman muttered in wonder, her stick of egg waffle forgotten in her hand. She continued to wonder them with curiosity before she remembered the news that was buzzing along the streets a few days ago about humans coming to Altea. “Oh, I remember now.” She shrugged. “Good for them that they didn’t die during the trip here.”

Vea was about to walk away and mind her own business when she caught a movement at the corner of her eye. When she looked over her shoulder, the dark haired human had stood up from the bench where he sat with his friends and was crouched by the foot of a thick garland pole that was being held up by two angelic citizens. One of the thick ropes had snapped and the huge thing almost fell on some innocent people who were just passing by.

The human reached for something from the small of his back and it turned out to be a blade which he used to cut the frayed end of the thick rope.

A very familiar black blade.

“Is that a Blade of—“ but the words died from her mouth when the human’s hand burst with vermillion flames to melt the thick knot he tied to secure the rope. “Oh my Quiznack!”

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“Brew these with some tea and bring your child back here after seven days so that I may check to see if her ailment is cured.” The words were quiet from the darkly cloaked man whose face was concealed by the shadow of his hood. He handed a bottle of dried herbs to an angel mother who held her young daughter’s hand. Beside him, there was another hooded figure cloaked in deep beige and sat on the corner of the store by the shelves of dried herbs and powdered medicine, watching the transaction.

After the mother thanked him, she handed her payment and bid them good bye. Standing back from the counter, the male heaved a deep sigh.

“What is it, Ulaz?” the figure by the shelves asked when she pulled up the beginnings of a quilt that she was knitting. Her pale violet fingers worked skillfully with the two silver needles that she used to weave the yarns and threads together.

“That’s the fifth child this month that was bitten by a creature that’s not a native to Altea, Ivy.” Ulaz replied, clearly bothered. “These children are being bitten by animals that normally sleep beneath the ground of Galra territory. Creatures that rarely leave the stone caves and the murky burrows are suddenly finding themselves here in Altea.”

“Alfor’s barrier is weak and our realm is unsettled from the internal struggles that’s disturbing the land.” Ivy’s voice was soft and her yellow eyes peered from underneath her hood while they focused
on the quilt she was knitting. “I do not blame these creatures that are merely trying to seek sanctuary here.”

Ulaz leaned against the counter by the small of his back and stared at the smooth repetitive pattern that Ivy’s fingers were doing to weave the quilt. He and his apprentices, Vea and Ivy, were the only Galra in Altea and they lived out here in the fringes of the country side that bordered the capital. They ran a shop that sold herbal medicine and catered to residents who lived too far away from the shrine where Altea’s healers resided.

They have been in here for many centuries now, millennia, even. The three of them arrived here before the final days of the fragile alliance between the Galra empire and Altea. They were studying Altean medicine in hopes to carry the knowledge back to their home realm to cure those who are in need. It was as dictated by the creed of their resistance that was formed to fight against the tyranny of Zarkon.

And now, the Blade of Marmora carried on the fight against prince Lotor who inherited the Galra throne.

“Has Thace made contact?” Ulaz suddenly asked and Ivy’s fingers halted. She lifted her head and Ulaz saw a twinkle in her eye.

“Not yet as far as these past weeks are concerned.” she replied and her fingers started to move with efficient speed once more. “You’re worried, Ulaz.” It was a statement instead of a question and Ulaz looked away. He said nothing and instead, he busied himself with arranging the jars of herbal salves beneath the counter and Ivy smiled knowingly while she continued to knit.

Suddenly Vea burst in and slammed the door shut before she bolted the door. The hasty movements had pushed back her hood, revealing her face and the streaks of white on her purple cheeks that were shaped like upturned crescents.

“Vea, what’s wrong?” Ulaz asked hastily. When he pulled back his hood, Ivy did as well, revealing her dark hair that was pulled up into a bun behind her head that was held together by a single ornamental pin. “Did someone see your face?”

Vea leaned against the door and she inhaled in greedy gulps from running all the way back here.

“Hu-Humans in Altea…!” she began, disheveled. Ivy put down the quilt she was knitting and wordlessly poured a glass of water from a pitcher reserved for patients. She handed it to her shaken friend;

“Yes, we know. That news is days old, didn’t you know?” Ivy said while she watched Vea down the glass of water.

“One of them is the Vessel, so I’ve heard.” Ulaz followed. “So, why do you look like you saw the ghost of Zarkon himself?”

Vea took a moment to collect her thoughts and she placed the basket of groceries on the wooden floor. “The human has a blade.”

“A blade?” Ivy frowned. “What bla—“ but she immediately stopped when Vea reached from inside her cloak and showed them her luxite blade that was dormant in the form of long hooked dagger which gleamed in the light.

Ulaz and Ivy stared at Vea, bewildered just as she was.
“That’s not the most interesting part.” Vea continued. “He has her flames! He can summon them!”

Ulaz and Ivy looked at each other, clearly shaken by the news.

“We have to contact the resistance back home.” Vea pushed on. “Our general must know about this!”

“How do you think she would react?” Ivy frowned thoughtfully and the thin wisps of red on her forehead furrowed over her brows.

“I believe that this happened for a reason.” Ulaz said with wise finality. “Maybe it’s time that she made amends with the boy.”

~

The crisp night air in the empty palace garden was cool against the sweat on his skin. Keith was huffing bursts of air while his limbs protested from exhaustion. He held out his knife in front of him while he did a series of knife exercises the fashion Shiro showed him after they got back from their tour. Keith also tried using his flames in small amounts like Allura advised him to so he doesn’t wear himself out. But after all the effort he made, the knife still remained…well, a knife.

“Come on, why won’t you do the thing?” Keith asked with frustration. “What if I need to use you in a fight? This can’t be a one-time deal!”

Keith’s answer was silence and he groaned in defeat. He decided that he shouldn’t push himself too hard since he just got out of bed today after days of comatose. Giving up for the night, he sat on the grass and plopped down on the ground. He stared at the twinkling stars that hung on the black velvet sky and the faint illumination of the barrier’s roof.

“Even with what Shiro told me,” Keith muttered quietly to the stars that listened. “I still don’t know who or what I am.”

“You’re stubborn, that’s for sure.” Keith felt the air rush out of his lungs when Lance filled his view with the backdrop of stars while the angel looked down on him. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“I’m-I’m fine!” Keith blurted out and he shot up from where he laid on the grass. “Where were you?”

“Around.” Lance shrugged with a small smile. He paused and handed Keith a face towel to wipe the sweat off.

“Thanks.” Keith accepted it gratefully and ran it down his face and his arms. After he put the towel aside, he glanced up from where he sat; Lance was looking around the garden. “How have you been?”

Lance turned to meet his eyes and he smiled but Keith noticed the sadness that the angel tried to mask. “I’m alright. I was out for two days and Hunk said that Shay had to stitch me up. The scar’s faded away so I’m back to my beautiful flawless self!” however, the chuckle that followed after had a different meaning considering that Keith knew the truth about Lance.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Keith said. He paused and got up to his feet, standing almost shoulder to shoulder with Lance. “I held you, Lance. You were bleeding to death.”

“Yeah, well, it’s going to take more than a stab wound to kill me.”
“Rolo’s…whatever the fuck you call that thing that grows out of his back went through and through your chest!” Keith’s tone turned gritty when the gruesome memories replayed in his mind.

“It was about to kill you, Keith.” Lance frowned. “What do you expect me to do? Just stand there? I couldn’t even protect you properly.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Fuck, the shit bag even got away. I just---” Lance trailed off and everything dawned to Keith.

“Is that why you were avoiding me this whole time?” he asked and he felt a strange pang of hurt stab him in the chest when he saw that Lance didn’t even look at him. “Because you thought that you did a shit job?”

“Look where it got you.” Lance sighed, defeated. He glanced at Keith with sadness in those sapphire eyes ringed with silver. “You had to tap into your power so that we could get away and you were out cold for a few days. If you used a little bit more, your body wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

Keith remembered the flames that surrounded his body and the gate of light that opened upon his will.

“It wasn’t your fault, Lance.” Keith said. “We were cornered so there was nothing else we could have done.”

“That never would have happened if only I was a better fighter.” Lance wrapped his arms around himself like a chill ran underneath his skin. “You’re clearly too important to be compromised, Keith. Lotor himself is after your power and I know how powerful that guy is. I—I’ve seen what he can do and there’s no way for me to fight that.” Lance sighed and his voice trailed off but despite that, he tried to push out the words. “So maybe I should do what’s best and step aside.”

“What are you talking about?” Keith frowned, worried and confused.

“I’m going to resign as your guard.” Lance finally said. “I’m going to ask Shiro for a reassignment in the morning. The reason I told is because Coran said it wouldn’t be fair if you just found out that I left you.”

“Fuck yes that would be unfair and I’d be incredibly pissed at you!”

Lance’s arms went slack beside him and he looked at Keith with startled eyes. “What, really?”

“Yes!” Keith exclaimed, flailing his arms to make a point. “Lance, you’ve saved me countless times and if it wasn’t for you, who knows what shit hole I’d be in right now. Hell, I might be rotting in a ditch somewhere in the demon realm if you didn’t help me.”

Lance didn’t say anything and just continued to stare.

“What I’m saying,” Keith sighed after he took a deep breath to calm his nerves. “Is no. I don’t want you to go. I don’t want another guard, Lance. I want you.” This time, he had to look away when he felt heat creep up to his cheeks. “I think you’re great. And you know what? No one said that you’d have to fight Lotor on your own. I’ll fight him with you!”

Lance stood there, utterly speechless at what Keith just said. Emotion clashed inside him; from disbelief to happiness and then the warmth of something else that he finally allowed to consume him.

“I say, you’re just afraid you’d miss me.” He said slyly and took amusement at the way Keith’s face turned red.

“Whatever, Lance.” Keith turned away and started to walk away but then, Lance grabbed him by the
wrist and stopped him.

“Wait.” Lance said. Even when Keith turned around, Lance didn’t let go of the hold. “Are you free right now?”

“Uhm, sure.” Keith pushed the words out and they were such a jumble along his tongue that he wasn’t sure if it meant what he was trying to say. “I don’t have anything else planned. I mean, you’re making me go get some rest, right?”

“I want to make it up to you for avoiding you.” Lance flashed him a quick but bashful smile. “This is going to sound really crazy, but I want to take you flying.” Keith was bewildered and Lance immediately read the look on the other’s face. “Don’t worry, I have my ways!”

The next thing Keith knew, Lance was dragging him away from the garden and towards a clearing at the far end of the palace grounds. “Allura will smite me with her blades if I ruin her lawn.” He held out a hand towards Keith. “Do you trust me?”

Keith didn’t even waste time and took Lance’s hand in a heartbeat. Lance pulled him close and locked his arm around his waist, securing him safely in his embrace.

“Alright.” Lance grinned and Keith saw his eyes glow with power from within. “Here we go!”

A bright and wide magical circle formed on the ground beneath Lance’s feet and the air around them pressurized as Lance gathered power. Then, using that, Lance launched them high into the air and the circle under them shattered, leaving a dent on the ground.

The noise of the wind filled Keith’s ears but he was grinning from ear to ear. Lance formed bright blue magical circles in the air that spun with unreadable ancient Altean letters. He used those like jumping pads and they shattered every time Lance stepped on them before the pressure launched them forward.

“Lance, this is fucking awesome!” Keith cried out over the wind and adrenaline rushed through his body. Lance was grinning, taking pleasure that Keith’s arms were around his neck and that raven head slightly tucked underneath the crook of his neck protectively.

“When there’s a will, there’s a way!” Lance hollered over the wind after he took another jump. He managed to create circles just in time for them him to take the jumps. They were high up over the kingdom, a bright blue streak in the night sky from the trail of light left in Lance’s wake. The sight Shiro showed him earlier was nothing compared to what Lance gave him right now. Keith saw the capital below in a bird’s eye view; tiny flickering lights from the houses and the palace itself. The stars appeared nearer and Keith felt like he could touch the moon if he reached out.

Despite not having wings, Lance brought him to the sky in his own way. He showed Keith a more beautiful view of Altea using his own abilities. Keith found it thoughtful and gravitating; it made him feel… happy. Had he lost Lance in the fight with Rolo or even by resignation, this never would have been possible. Letting the overwhelming feeling consume him, Keith leaned in and burrowed his head in the crook of Lance’s neck and nuzzled the skin of his throat.

Automatically, Lance’s other arm came underneath Keith and swept him up to carry him like a bride just in time for another jump. The two of them leapt through the moonlit clouds, high with freedom and the consuming emotion of never wanting to let go.

Later that night, Lance smoothly landed on the balcony of Keith’s room in the palace and he placed
the other down to his feet. It took Keith a couple of seconds to get used to his legs because his body was still humming with adrenaline and momentum.

“Whoah, careful.” Lance quickly caught Keith when the other almost tripped due to a case of ‘after-flight’ legs.

“I’m alright.” Keith replied before he let go of his hold on Lance which he used as support. Keith turned to face him; “Thanks for tonight, Lance.”

“No problem.” Lance shrugged his shoulders slightly, smiling. For a brief moment, his eyes flickered down to glance at Keith’s lips and contemplated whether he should make a really crucial life changing move. “I hope that redeemed me in your eyes.”

“You didn’t need to do that in the first place, you know.” Keith said. “I’m just glad you’re okay, buddy.”

Lance’s smile fell.

Only the chirping of the crickets filled the silence between them. Somewhere in the trees, an owl hooted. Lance stuffed his hands in his hoodie shirt’s front pockets and awkwardly rocked on his heels once. Keith cleared his throat to break the silence;

“Well, good night, Lance.”

“Good night, Keith.”

With one final smile Keith turned around and pushed the windowed glass doors open that led into his room. The lights automatically turned on when Keith’s presence was felt by the crystals in the chandelier and he closed the door. Keith stared at the empty room; the bed, the painting, and the grand shelves before he turned around to face the balcony doors once again which was behind thick royal red and silver curtains that blocked the view from outside.

His heart screamed. Keith’s heart called out a single name and his whole body hummed in agreement; ‘Lance’.

“Ah, fuck it!” Throwing it all away, Keith pulled back the curtains and pushed the balcony doors open. “Lance, wait!”

“Yeah?” Lance, who was halfway to the railing where he was going to jump off to land below, turned. “What’s wro—Keith?”

But Keith strode towards him and the distance between them dissolved. Before Lance could ask again, Keith cupped his cheek gently and pressed their lips together. The whole world stopped while Lance’s own black and white world burst into color. Keith’s lips were soft against his and they lingered over a little bit longer before Keith pulled back slightly. He looked into those silver ringed eyes, searching… asking… hoping…
Devoid of words, Lance’s reply was to smile softly at Keith and he wrapped his arms around the other’s waist while Keith locked his arms around Lance’s neck, pulling him close.

“Yeah. I’ll miss you if you quit. So don’t, okay?” Keith managed to say and his tone was gentle but it shook. “Please, don’t leave.”

Lance pressed their foreheads together, affection in his eyes. He felt a strange tug in his chest that drew him closer to Keith in a deep emotional level and every beat was an aria that sang for his human.

“I won’t leave for as long as you will have me.”

“Baby, I don’t do expiration dates.” Keith grinned and his hand crawled up to caress Lance’s cheek. “This isn’t even a contract anymore.”

“Baby?” Lance arched an eyebrow. “Did you just call me an infant?”

“Oh, it’s also an endearment used in the human language used for uhm… for significant others.” Keith babbled and his face was red from the embarrassment. But then, his face cracked into a happy grin when Lance burst into laughter.

“Sounds great, baby.” Lance affectionately nuzzled the tip of their noses together.

Keith closed his eyes when it was Lance who tugged him closer this time and kissed him deeply. He responded to the kiss with equal if not more emotion and lost himself in the warm fluttering bliss that bloomed within him.

Lance on the other hand, decided right there and then that he maybe, just maybe, it’s alright to love again; broken pieces and all.

Chapter End Notes

Please do not repost art. Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
The Juniberry Festival

Chapter by plumeriafairy14

Chapter Summary

It was said in an old Altean myth that if the juniberry buds that one offered to their beloved one bloomed in the light of moon, it will bring fortune in their union.

Then again, that was just a story, or is it?

Chapter Notes

It's been a long time coming but we're very proud to present the 8th chapter of Vermilion Gate! I've had difficulties writing this because thesis and real life was stressing me out and Angel had a lot on her plate too but we would like to thank you for your patience! We hope you enjoy this MASSIVE update! (it's 48 pages and like 23.1k words)

We hope to see you next update!

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Flashbacks of sexual non-con
- Mildly graphic sex scene

By the way, N00dl3gal was nice enough to make a playlist of her interpretation of the story! Thank you very much! You can watch it here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNVJtBzzsOcyjXhFe-z8bIHziKf_VfQn

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Haggar cannot see and at the same time, she saw all. The druid chamber was dark and shadows danced along the walls from the crystal torches that illuminated the darkness. She stood in front a black iron chair and on it sat a Galra man with dark hair that was silver on the temples. His yellow eyes didn’t look fazed and he held that eerie milky yellow gaze that were as empty as her voice when she spoke.

“Lieutenant Thace.” Haggar began as she loomed over him. Her bony fingers twitched on her sides against the fabric of her dark cloak and half of her face was shadowed by the hood over her head.

“Do you know why you are here?”

“No, I do not.” Was Thace’s bland reply. He did not show any trace of emotion and his eyes fearlessly held Haggar’s glowing, empty eyes. The witch was quiet and Thace felt the underside of his skin crawl and heard his primal survival instinct scream at him to run, but he did not. He sat there perfectly still and his face betrayed no sign emotion. “Would you care to explain to me the meaning of this, blind one? I’m in the middle of duty.”
Haggar’s eyes glowed even more sinister underneath the shadow of her hood. “Prince Lotor isn’t pleased that the Blade of Marmora was able to counter the attack that he organized.” They narrowed. “I was put to the task to interrogate those who know about the plans of attack.”

“You’re more than welcomed to do so.” Thace did not show fear for a single sign of it would mean his doom. He knew what to do and he was equipped with secret spells to counter the intruding darkness that Haggar was about to place upon him. Had it not been for Ulaz’s cleverly weaved enchantments, Thace would have been caught long ago; his loyalties and motives exposed and him, executed.

He closed his eyes and remained calm. Evening out his breathing, he began to chant in his head the words that Ulaz had thought him to utter during such an occasion. He felt his nerves calm down as the voice until all he heard in his head was Ulaz’s voice. As the dark tendrils of smoke wrapped around him like slithering serpents that maliciously licked his skin, Thace felt no pain or the force need to say what he knew.

“You’re clear.” Haggar’s voice sliced through the reverie of his thoughts and Thace opened his eyes. “You may go.” Thace wanted to smirk at the disappointment in the witch’s voice. He knew that she was expecting to find a traitor and carry out an execution but Thace outsmarted her yet again. However, he didn’t celebrate too much for the events of the next few hours are unpredictable.

Thace stood up from the chair and smoothed the wrinkled leather of his armor. “I shall be taking my leave.” He turned around and did not spare another glance at the witch.

“Lieutenant Thace.”

Thace halted in his steps and tilted his head to the side but still, he did not spare her a glance. He didn’t need to nor did he feel the importance to do so.

“The Vessel, a human that goes by the name of Keith, has arrived in Altea.” Haggar said. “As you know, Vessels are a walking, breathing, living resource of pure quintessence.”

That got Thace’s attention. A Vessel is a powerful being no matter what race they may be. “A human?”

“A mortal shell of meat.” Haggar agreed. “Who will be dead in a blink of an eye.”

“Like a fly.” Thace commented dryly but his concern was with his people hiding in Altea. If this was true, Ulaz and his students already knew about it and they have hopefully contacted the general and the rest of the Blade. It was him who did not have the freedom to move so freely because if he’s caught, he will be tortured for information and killed. Even if Thace is prepared to die any time, it would still be a difficult loss for the Blade of Marmora because they wouldn’t have intel working close to prince Lotor.

“Why are you telling me this, witch?”

“War, lieutenant.” Was Haggar’s hollow reply. “Glorious, war.”

Then she disappeared in a swirl of black smoke that engulfed her cloaked form.

~

_Somewhere underground, in the demon realm…_

“Make sure the wounded are treated immediately.” Kolivan was a big man with an even bigger voice
as he barked commands at his men and women. His eyes were a deep yellow and his face was like it was carved from stone with the sternness of his expression. The white braid attached to the back of his head whipped when he turned around to the sound of a grunt. “What is it, Antok?”

Antok did not bother to remove his mask as he silently addressed his commander. However, he did motion towards a group of Blades who worked on laying the dead in a neat line, all whose faces have been covered with a white ceremonial kerchief with the emblem of their order sewn on the front with violet thread. The luxite blades laid on their chests underneath their hands. There were all in all, twenty six casualties but these twenty six brave and loyal Blades gave up their lives to defend a small village that was about to have its civilians massacred just so Lotor can farm the quintessence in their bodies.

Kolivan kept his silence but he felt the tearing pain in his heart while he looked at his fallen brothers and sisters in arms. They were his friends and comrades that would never rise again and they all gave up their lives so that others may live… so that the Blade of Marmora can keep on going.

“Kolivan.” A female voice, regal even behind her mask. Kolivan stiffened in attention and beside him, Antok saluted wordlessly.

“General Krolia.” Kolivan bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement.

“Status.”

It was not a request but a subtle order that held an air of authority although it was not unkind. Kolivan gave a single nod and did as he was told;

“The village is safe but not without collateral damage.”

“How many are our dead?”

“Twenty six.”

Krolia was quiet for a moment and Kolivan wondered if their stoic leader showed emotion behind her mask but not when it was off. “Antok,” the demon who was a silent force beside Kolivan, lifted his head in attention. “please handle the preparations for the funeral pyres.”

A nod.

Krolia motioned for her right hand man to follow her while Antok took his leave. Kolivan followed and the two of them assisted in tending the injured in any way they can. Kolivan helped in carrying patients to cots in the infirmary while Krolia held the bloody hands of the dying and uttered quiet words of comfort until the hand she held seized to move.

Twenty six was not the final count later that night as Kolivan silently stood in front of thirty one funeral pyres. Rosewood shavings and dried sprigs of lavender surrounded the bodies. Krolia’s hand reached up and tapped her mask once before it rippled like water and disappeared, revealing her face. Her features were exotic and almost feline in its beauty; high cheekbones that defined her face, thin lips, and thick raven hair hacked short into a pixie cut with a single long, side braid. Her eyes were a pale yellow that stood out against her violet skin but it was her deep amethyst eyes that were striking.

“Tonight,” Krolia’s voice rang clearly for every member of the Blade of Marmora that stood before her. “we honor our fallen brothers and sisters who gave up their lives so that innocents may live. Their sacrifice is the sturdy proof of their loyalty to our resistance and their dedication to our cause.”

As much hurt and grief there is with her and the people who stood by her, Krolia’s expression only allowed a sliver of emotion flicker in her eyes and then, they were gone.
“Thirty one Blades to join the countless who have lived and died with hopes in their hearts that someday, we may walk free from the tyranny of the royal family.” She paused and lifted her head up, proud of her brethren but her eyes mirrored the sadness at their loss. Krolia walked towards a pile of wood that extended out in a single file. It branched out to connect to the dried wood, coal, and rosewood shavings at the foot of each pyre.

“The way of the Galra is through honorable combat.” Their general said and her voice rang clearly throughout the secluded glade. “Our bodies will return to the ash that fed the fires which forged our blades and our souls finally at peace.” Krolia lifted her hand once she reached the pile of wood, there were sparks that danced around her fingers before her whole hand burst into brilliant golden flames. The fire did not burn her but the wood was instantly ablaze when Krolia touched them and the flames scattered on the single file of wood which acted as a fuse before it consumed those that branched out to the pyres. After her own flames fizzled out from her hands, she reached for one of the twin luxite blades sheathed by her hips and as she did, the others did as well. Wordlessly, they all lifted their blades towards the sky in a final homage as the smoke and the flicks of flame lifted into the stars.

The glade was cleared eventually as Krolia’s flames had the ability to quickly incinerate anything on its path. Kolivan walked beside the general along the complex mazes of corridors of their underground base.

“General Krolia,” Kolivan began and with just her name, it held a request for permission. “We have received a message from commander Ulaz and his students in Altea.”

“You may report.” Krolia nodded slightly but continued to walk and Kolivan followed.

“It seems that a human Vessel has arrived in Altea.” He said. “He is currently within the care of queen Allura and general Shiro.”

Krolia was silent for a moment while they continued to walk, their footsteps echoing against the black stone and metal walls. “Interesting.” She finally said. “As long as the Vessel is kept from Lotor’s filthy hands, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Vea reported as well that she witnessed the boy command flames and owns a luxite blade.” Kolivan mentioned one of the Blades who was with Ulaz in Altea and served as one of the eyes and ears of the resistance in the angelic realm.

Krolia stopped in her tracks but she stared far ahead instead of turning to Kolivan. “Anything from commander Thace?”

Kolivan sensed the change of tone and subject and he instantly knew that his suspicions about the human boy was correct; everyone knew about Krolia’s absence twenty three years ago but only a selected and trusted few knew about the finer details of their general’s disappearance.

“Not since he sent us a warning that was able to aid us in countering Lotor’s ambush.” Kolivan replied.

“I see. So, my suspicions were right all along.”

Kolivan took the silence from their general as an opportunity to speak since Krolia did not move from where she stood. It was like she knew that her right hand man had something to say. “Krolia,” he said, choosing his words with care. “don’t you want to meet him?”

“There is no need. It’s best that he remains ignorant about the truth.” Krolia resumed walking but this
time, her steps were brisker like she was trying to further avoid the subject but her tone remained
cold as ice. “It’s for his safety and I’d rather be a stranger to him if it means that I can protect him
from the horrors of our war. Being a Vessel means being a source of immense power and with him
being in the care of the angels, I trust that he will be well taken care of.” She had met the queen
once when they were both younger; Allura sought for Krolia’s help when her would-be-then
husband laid dying in her arms.

Krolia remembered when Allura was just a princess and she, a lieutenant on her way of rising up the
ranks of the resistance. The Blade of Marmora had already been fighting against the tyranny of the
royal family of the Galra empire all the while Lotor’s predecessor, emperor Zarkon, slowly
descended into madness.

“Yes, I remember that as well.” Kolivan muttered thoughtfully. The alliance between the angels and
the demons had already been rocky and Zarkon shattered the remnants of that alliance when he
decided to invade Altea on the day of Allura and Shiro’s wedding. “I helped gathered the materials
for Ulaz to create Shiro’s right arm.”

It had been a real blood bath; the cobble stone streets ran red with the blood of the innocents and
many lives were lost including king Alfor who gave his life’s quintessence to form a barrier around
the angelic realm. But now, that shield is weakening and it will only be a matter of time before Altea
falls again, this time, by Lotor’s hand. However, there was one good thing that came out of that
fateful day and that was Allura’s rise to becoming an archangel. Krolia knew that Allura was
responsible of the hundreds of deaths of those who stormed the castle. When she came to ask for the
Blade’s help, her wedding gown was torn and bloody and her wings were molten white with her
lethal, newfound power.

“She isn’t an imbecile and she is kind, Kolivan.” Krolia’s next words were softer. “She would
recognize the boy as half of my own flesh and blood. She’ll take care of him.”

Kolivan kept his silence and gave a single nod. The two of them continued to walk until they
reached the heart of the base that housed the numerous living quarters for the members of the Blade
as well as the large common room and kitchens.

“Is there something else, commander Kolivan?”

Kolivan pursed his lips, reluctance in his eyes yet his face remained stoic.

“Speak, my old friend.” Krolia sighed. Her tone was less stiff now and sounded more like it coaxed.
“Your thoughts are of great importance as well.”

Kolivan studied Krolia and there was solemnness in his eyes. “He might come seeking answers.” he
said.

Krolia stared, her violet gaze deep and unwavering. “Then let him come on his own free will and
earn his answers.”

“Krolia you know what I mean.” Kolivan forced out the words but his tone was quiet and in a way,
concerned. “The boy, Keith is his name, I believe.” He paused when Krolia nodded. “His blood is
Galra but his body is human.”

“I know.” The general slightly lifted her chin in acknowledgement of that fact.

“His mortal form is fragile and his quintessence grows with each passing day.” Kolivan continued.
“His body is like brittle earthenware underneath a strong stream of water. He won’t live as long as
the non-human Vessels in the past did.”

There was a flicker of emotion in Krolias’s violet eyes but it was gone just as soon. “I know.”

“Don’t you want to see him? To at least meet him before his body gives up?” Kolivan asked with a deep frown. “Don’t you think his questions deserve your answers?”

Krolia was quiet, an enigma. Kolivan knew that the general was not a heartless rock for that was only the shell that she built around herself in order to be more efficient in leading the Blade of Marmora. Then, Krolia spoke and the words were crisp but it wasn’t meant to be unkind.

“As I’ve said, Kolivan; let Keith come on his own free will and earn his answers.”

~

A few days later…

“Fuck!” Keith gritted through clenched teeth when he landed on his ass ten feet from his opponent. “Matt, you’re cheating!”

“I’m not!” Matt laughed and spun his staff in his hand before he slammed it on the ground.

“You used magic!”

“I told you, I didn’t!” Matt grinned and on the side, Pidge snickered.

Keith narrowed his eyes while he dusted himself off with one hand while the other held a dulled practice sword that Hunk lent him. “You little shit!” he said. “You’re using spells to assist Matt!”

“The rule was you two are not allowed to use magic.” Pidge shrugged smugly. “Didn’t say anything about magical assistance.” The tips of their fingers displayed trails of fading green light as they waved them to dismiss the matter.

“Dude, come on!” Keith sighed, exasperated.

“How about you guys go for another round and I’ll assist you this time?” Pidge offered after they had a good chuckle. On the side, Shay observed the sparring with contentness in her silver ringed topaz eyes. Her mint green wings caught the morning light.

“How’s it looking, Shay?” Hunk asked after he emerged from the back door of their cottage with a tray of freshly made refreshments. He set down the tray on an outdoor iron table and watched the humans chase each other around their spacious backyard. Shay had invited Keith, Matt, and Pidge to their home for an assessment of their conditions after their arrival in Altea. Along with that, they also invited them to their table for a scrumptious breakfast specially prepared by her husband.

“It seems that they’ve healed quite nicely.” Shay replied when she glanced at Hunk. “They’ve adjusted to the Altean atmosphere in such a short time. Keith’s been weakening less as well.”

“So that means that the magical atmosphere in the human world can’t handle Keith’s quintessence that’s why it tends to take more from him.” Hunk offered Shay a glass of juice and his wife thanked him by planting a sweet kiss on his cheek. Hunk blushed but he smiled at her even though the dark skin on his cheek was touched with pink.

“Correct, dear.” Shay nodded, her eyes meeting his dark ones. “The Altean atmosphere is more suitable for Keith but it still costs him when he uses too much of his power.” She paused and took a
sip. Then, she giggled when Keith tackled Pidge to the ground before Matt jumped into the pile. The three of them rough played on the grass, trying to get the best of each other.

“It’s because his body is mortal.” The words that slipped out were quiet and thoughtful. Shay immediately caught the tone in her husband’s voice.

“Lance?” Shay asked.

“He’s doing his rounds around the barrier with the sire today.”

“You know what I mean, dear.”

Hunk fell quiet and the huge possibility ran through his thoughts. The past few days, Keith and Lance had been growing closer than how a guard and his charge should be. There are times when Hunk would catch silent looks of tenderness and secret touches of affection from the two. Lance had also been smiling more and it wasn’t just his regular smile. Lance really was smiling in a genuine way. This was the first time in centuries Hunk had been the best of friends with Lance that he had seen the other angel truly happy.

“Ah, come on, Shay,” Hunk forced a smile to show his wife but there was worry in his eyes. A mellow shadow that crossed the silver ring on his brown eyes that told of the bitter truth. “Let’s not think about that right now.” He lifted his head to glance up at the clear sky tinged with the reflective chrome of the barrier. “Smell that? The juniberries will be in bloom soon.”

Hunk tried not to think about it; Lance is intelligent. Surely, he knew the risks of taking a human as a lover. Lance had been through so much already; from the discrimination for being wingless in his village to his time of captivity in Lotor’s harem that lasted for six hundred years. When he escaped back into Altea, it took him five years to actually hold a full conversation with Hunk and another two to smile the way he did today. Even though time is irrelevant for the near immortal angels, it was still a long time for one to suffer in their internal silence.

Time is kind to angels but cruel to humans. The three that rough played on his lawn; smiling, laughing, throwing playful blue streaked curses at each other… they’ll return to the earth too soon. Lance was like the brother Hunk never had and to see the blue eyed angel bent over and broken over a grave is something Hunk never wanted to see. But it was inevitable. One cannot play with time; it waits for no one. Keith can stay in Altea where time moved slower but it moved nonetheless and his quintessence grows each day which weakens his mortal body in the process.

Hunk didn’t have the heart to tell Keith or the twins about this truth. Maybe it was best to keep his silence; he wanted Keith to have a happy life no matter the time given to him.

“Hunk! Is that for us?” Pidge’s voice tore through Hunk’s thoughts. He looked to see them push Keith away from a headlock with one efficient move.

“Yeah!” Hunk called back cheerfully. “Come and help yourselves! It’s fresh from Shay’s garden!”

“Oh, man, I’m parched!” Matt jumped up to his feet and helped Keith up with a hand. “Thanks for the lemonade, Hunk!”

They took their glasses and Keith squeezed his eyes shut while he downed his glass in a heartbeat. “Holy shit,” he breathed after he finished. “This is the best lemonade I’ve ever had!”

“Aw, shucks, Keith.” Hunk scratched the back of his wings, embarrassed at the compliment. “Thanks! Here, have some more!” He poured them another glass.
“The flavor’s pretty fun.” Pidge commented. “It’s like my favorite juice box from kindergarten except it’s fresh with no artificial flavors.”

“Oh man, juice boxes were the shit back in pre-k.” Keith grinned. “I became a celebrity for a week when I brought the Space Explorer’s lunch box dad bought…” he trailed off.

Pidge and Matt glanced at each other but Keith quickly recovered with a shrug to avoid the awkwardness of the moment.

After placing down the glass on the tray after he finished his drink, Keith stretched and gave a little moan of satisfaction when he heard his joints pop. When the wind blew, there was a faint fragrance that danced along as the leaves rustled. Everything looked so peaceful and Keith suddenly found himself closing his eyes and floating in the elated feeling that swelled in his chest. He had never felt like this back in the human world where it was gray and smelled like mold and sewers.

“Looks like you’re all warmed up!” Keith stiffened when Hunk clapped him on the back, the shock reverberating throughout his body from that big hand.

“A little, I guess?”

“Great!” Hunk perked up. “You can start your training!”

Keith blinked in remembrance that to be able to make it through whatever was going to come after him, he needed to gain knowledge in different aspects of fighting so that he can protect himself and those around him. Magic, sword fights, and the basics of healing; these were things that he had started to learn gradually since arriving. Busy as it may be, Keith was willing to learn what he can and then reward himself after by spending time with his friends and going out to see the town with them.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Shay’s eyes widened and her feathers ruffled slightly when she collected the tray with the empty glasses. Then she lowered her gaze and her eyes turned glassy, the silver around her topaz irises became molten as power surged through her. At her silent command, a translucent wall erected around the flowers beds and the rows of spice pots.

“Uh?” Matt looked around the protected flora around the spacious yard. “What’s this about, Shay?”

“Well, I have to protect my garden now, do I?” Shay chuckled softly. She turned around, the skirts of her robes swirling around her calves. “I’m going to go get more refreshments for more of our guests.”

The moment Shay walked back into the cottage and the door closed, Hunk was suddenly in front of Matt and Pidge, his arms in front of him and his hands curled like claws. He made an upward motion as if he was lifting a great weight and along his movement, the ground by his feet quivered and broke off, erecting a stone wall to shield him and the twins.

“Dude!” Pidge exclaimed and pulled out one of their katars. Matt’s hand immediately went to his staff, thinking that there was an attack.

“What’s happening?!” Keith demanded and unsheathed his luxite blade. The lethal obsidian edge caught the light while Keith’s eyes scanned the surroundings. Heaven help all of them if something or someone had slipped past the barrier to attack them. But everything was peaceful. Keith didn’t hear anything but he felt the hairs on his nape stand. “Hunk? Hey, answer me!”

“Duck!” Hunk’s head briefly popped out from behind the rocky wall.
“Duck?” Keith looked confused. On the side of his vision, he thought he saw a black shadow zoom past but he wasn’t sure if it was a bird or a squirrel. Clouds started to gather and veiled the sun and the land below in a gray shadow.

If Keith didn’t move out of the way, his head would’ve been separated from his body. Night sky wings filled his vision and Shiro was suddenly in front of him, crouched low on the ground with his wings spread to keep his balance. His right arm glowed with a deep violet light that seeped through the nooks of his metal arm like mechanical veins.

“Shiro?!” Keith stumbled back and Shiro smirked at him, his eyes glinting.

“Think fast.”

There was a loud clang as metal clashed with metal and Keith parried the next blow from Shiro with his blade. The ground beneath Keith’s boots broke and his heels dug deep as he skidded back.

“What are you doing?!” Keith’s eyes were wide as they locked with onyx silver ringed ones. But Shiro was relentless with his attacks; he pulled back and jabbed down at Keith again with his glowing arm in swift efficiency.

“The lesson today is about ambush attacks.” Shiro said and he didn’t even look at bit fazed while Keith was already a breathless mess. “This is going to happen a lot. Unless you can efficiently use your flames, you’d have to depend on your blade.”

“It’s not doing the thing it’s supposed to do!” Keith exclaimed and his tone held a subtle whine.

“Think, Keith. You’re on the short end, what are you going to do against a stronger opponent?”

Shiro stepped back to give Keith a chance to recover but he didn’t let his guard down. Keith took the granted moment to collect his thoughts and ponder Shiro’s words. His knuckles turned white when he gripped the handle of his knife harder.

“I don’t want to use my powers on you, Shiro.” He finally said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” Shiro smiled. Behind him, Keith saw Pidge and Matt peek out from the wall of rock and Keith suddenly got an idea. “As long as you don’t overdo it and you remember Allura’s lesson on energy channeling, you’ll be alright.”

“Are you sure?” Keith asked.

“I can take it, Keith.” A nod and Shiro lifted his arms forward in a fighting pose that told that he was ready for whatever Keith was going to throw at him. “Think of this training as a real fight.”

Keith narrowed his eyes and attacked. Sparks flew once again when their attacks met but this time, a green circle burst beneath his feet and the movements became swift glides.

“That’s cheating.” Shiro’s smile disappeared for a moment but it returned tightly. Keith ducked to the side and when he rose up, Shiro angled his head to avoid the licks of vermilion fire that shot out of Keith’s fingers.

“In a real fight,” Keith’s eyes were bright with power. “Pidge and Matt have my back and I have theirs.”

Shiro’s eyes quickly darted when he caught a movement from behind the shield of rock that Hunk erected. Then, he snapped his wings open and jumped up just as twins attacks came from both sides. Matt’s staff hit the ground and the blunt end the slithered with electricity broke through the ground
while the fingers of his right arm creaked when they caught the blade of Pidge’s katar and pushed back. Pidge was able to regain their balance and with the tips of their hair whipping in a gust of invisible wind, they muttered something from under their breath and thrust their left hand on the ground.

Giant vines whipped out, thick as tree trunks and quick as serpents. With an audible whipping sound, they wrapped around Shiro’s right arm while the other wrapped around his ankles. “Now!” Pidge cried as the archangel was momentarily rendered motionless. Keith and Matt were quick to move and they charged from both sides but then were almost knocked out of balance when the ground quivered underneath their feet and earthen spikes shot out. Hunk had stepped out from behind the shield he erected with a challenging smile on his face and his eyes bright, the silver around his irises, molten.

Shiro broke free from the thick vines with a single stream on angelfire and Keith’s eyes widened when he saw the same hot white flames tinged with purple Shiro used the first time they met. The vines were quickly obliterated and its ashen remains fell to the ground.

“Yield!” Shiro’s voice was a booming force that rang through the thick barriers Shay placed around the flora in the yard. None of them had suffered but the intensity of the mock fight had rendered even the birds to quiet their singing and watch. Keith, Pidge, and Matt stood back on one side while Hunk stood by Shiro’s.

“Great job, you three.” The flare of Shiro’s right arm dulled down until it completely disappeared. “You’re all very gifted and we can work on that to further improve your skills.”

“Oh, that was fun.” Hunk laughed. “For a moment there, it felt all too real!”

Keith, Pidge, and Matt looked at each other, feeling oddly proud of themselves. Them, mere humans, were able to hold their ground against an angel and an archangel.

Someone cleared her throat softly to get their attention and the barriers around the flora faded away as Shay approached them with a full tray of refreshments. Her jewel mint green wings casted broken shards of green light on the grass. “I take it that your mock fight went well, sire?”

“It did.” Shiro said and he took a glass from the tray.

“I’m pretty surprised, myself.” Keith said, looking down at his blade. “I’ve never used my powers so openly.”

“It’s normal here, Keith.” Shay said and placed down the tray of refreshments. “You can use them as much as you want here as long as you are mindful. Now come, you must be parched. Oh and dear,” she turned to Hunk. “Could you fix the ground, please? I don’t want anyone tripping on uneven lawn.”

“Oh, sure!”

Keith wordlessly sheathed his blade. “Shiro, have you seen Lance today?”

“Not since we separated on the way back here from patrolling the barrier.” Shiro replied.

“Maybe, he’s with the queen.” Hunk suggested. “He usually goes with her when they check the security around the nursery.”

“Nursery?” Keith asked but then he was distracted when Pidge sang teasingly and Matt snickered. “You mean for kids, right?”
“Awww, he misses his booyfriiiieeend~”

“Dude, what the hell?!” Keith’s face instantly turned red. “I was just asking! It doesn’t have to mean anything!”

“That’s hurtful.” Matt pouted. “We don’t really mind, you know. I think it’s cute.”

Keith pursed his lips together and his brows furrowed but the intense blush wasn’t getting any better so he turned around. “I’m going to head to town and see the preparations for the festival. Maybe there’s something I can do to help. You guys coming?”

“No, I’ll pass.” Pidge shook their head. “Coran said he’ll show me the royal library today!”

“Shay’s going to teach me some Altean healing techniques.” Matt motioned at Hunk’s wife who smiled radiantly, glad that her new apprentice is so eager to learn.

Shiro and Hunk politely declined as well which in turn, prompted that Keith went off on his own. With the promise to stay out of trouble, Keith bid them a brief farewell before jogging off a little too enthusiastically.

Shiro watched with a small smile on his lips and beside him, Hunk chuckled; “I remember when I courted Shay. Her brother wouldn’t let me near her.”

“Rax did what any brother would.” Shiro commented and he placed down the empty glass back on the tray. Matt had gone off with Shay for their lesson in the Altean healing arts while Pidge ran off excitedly towards the direction of the castle to meet with Coran.

“Is something wrong, Shiro?” Hunk’s smiled disappeared and worry was immediate in his deep brown eyes of his. He only every called the sire by this name whenever he noticed that something was off. It was the silent understanding between them that not only tied them as superior and subordinate, but as good friends.

“It’s Allura.”

“What happened?” Hunk’s voice shook on the edges and his eyes darted around to make sure that no one could hear them. The queen can never be seen as weak because enemies and spies will take advantage of that at the very first chance they get. There was an electrified tension in the air and Hunk immediately noticed the way Shiro’s eyes darkened;

“I don’t know.” The words were gritted as they slipped from Shiro. There was a soft grating when he clenched his hands into fists. “She’s been acting strange lately, like she’s sick but she wouldn’t tell me what’s wrong.” A frustrated sigh. “No matter how much I ask her, she just dismisses it!”

“Illness is rare in our kind.” Hunk said with such confusion that his forehead creased and his brows furrowed over his eyes. He settled into silence and there was a soft rustle as his wings settled tightly over his back. “It’s still possible, though. Is she showing symptoms? I could ask Shay about it.”

“She’s been frailer lately and she tires out quickly when we spar.” Shiro tried to fight of the quiver in his voice but was barely able to do it. It worried him that his lively and spirited queen was ill.

Hunk paused in thought. “Is she with child?”

Shiro stared at him for a moment and his gaze turned soft. “How I wish, Hunk. How I wish she was but I would have felt another life pulse inside her through the mating bond.” He shook his head. “I didn’t feel anything but the same ill feeling she feels.”
As a married and bonded man, Hunk completely understood where Shiro was coming from. He watched his sire look up at the sky, the tips of his white forelock dancing in the wind. There was a look of longing in his eyes; children were rare in angelkind and those who were born into the world were guarded and protected like treasures because they are so beloved. Because to compensate for near immortality, angels rarely conceived. “And besides,” Shiro continued. “We live in a time of war. I don’t think Allura and I are in the right position to bring life into a world like this. The child would be our weakness that would be used against us.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to put our youngling through such a thing; no child deserves that.”

“Hey, if that’s the case,” Hunk smiled and reached to squeeze Shiro’s shoulder comforting. “I hope that this war ends soon. Coran recorded the tale with Allura in our histories as one of the greatest angelic courtships ever told. Despite your positions in our realm, you two deserve to be able to raise a family too.”

“You always know what to say to comfort someone, Hunk.” Shiro smiled at the other angel with wings the color of mahogany that lighted like the sunset at the tips. “Thank you. I hope Shay could check Allura soon.”

“I’ll ask her.” Hunk nodded. “If Allura’s health that’s at stake, I’m sure Shay will be more than happy to see what’s wrong with her. I just hope it’s nothing too serious.”

Shiro’s eyes bore deep into Hunk’s dark silver ringed ones. Angel to angel, one’s heart speaking about the other’s.

“I hope so too, Hunk.” Hushed words from the general who had the night sky painted on his wings. “I’ll give everything just for her to be alright.”

~

The final preparations for the festival are being put up while Keith walked along the cobblestone streets. The whole capital had been preparing for days and right now, they’re putting the final touches for the beginning of the weeklong celebration tomorrow. Colorful tents lined the front of houses and garlands hung on polished poles. Keith spotted several children dart around the roofs with baskets of fruits and flowers while merchants lined crates of their goods that they will sell tomorrow.

Keith couldn’t help but grin when the children spotted him from midair waved at him. He wave back and smoothly caught an apple a little girl chucked at him. In the days after their arrival in Altea, the public had grown used to Keith and his friends. Although, he still got stares from some people, everyone mostly greets him now and it felt like they actually welcomed him. Just when he was doing morning knife exercises that morning, a lady flew by the courtyard and gave him a loaf of bread.

“The first one from me stone oven, lad.” She smiled but shook her head when Keith said that he had no money with him. “A tradition of mine is to give the first loaf for free. Now, ye share that at the queen’s table, a’ight? A greedy stomach of’rn ends up pained.”

Keith rounded a corner and was greeted by the sight of the beautifully decorated plaza. Allura was there at the center dressed in loose cargo pants, a simple cotton shirt, and her long wavy hair was pulled up and tied into a tight bun behind her head. Her white gold wings looked aflame under the noon sun while she helped tie down the foundations of the centerpiece pole.

“Allura?” Keith approached the archangel who immediately turned at the sound of her name. However, Keith was taken back because of the dark bags underneath Allura’s eyes. She looked like she wasn’t getting enough sleep and her skin appeared pasty instead of the healthy glow she had
when he first met her. “Whoah, are you alright?”

“Oh?” Allura cocked her head to the side, a single silvery lock escaping the tight bun. “Yes, I am. Tired, but otherwise, I’m quite alright.”

“I think you should be resting instead.”

Allura huffed out a laugh and shook her head. “Sleep is fickle thing, Keith. My body can go for many days without sleep as long as I get a bit of a rest.”

Keith thought back to when he first met Lance and how he didn’t go for any sleep during the first couple of days. The angel literally crashed on his apartment’s roof and stood guard there through sun and rain. It still made Keith felt guilty that he let Lance live on the roof but he actually didn’t know that the other stayed there.

“Well, Lance mentioned that before.” He cleared his throat and hoped that he didn’t appear flustered. He and Lance had been getting closer the past few days since they had that little jumping trip in the sky. “I had no idea he was staying on the roof of my house until he had to knock and ask to sleep on my couch because he was up for days keeping watch for me.”

Allura blinked while she absorbed that information then a smile cracked on her face which turned out into a flat out knowing grin. The tension vanished from her; it made her looked refreshed.

“Between you and I, Keith,” the queen scooted closer and cupped her hand over her mouth to whisper to Keith. “There were nights that Shiro slept on one of the branches of the huge tree outside my window when we were younger.”

“Are you serious?!” Those violet eyes widened and Allura nodded eagerly. “But why would Shiro sleep there?”

“Eons ago, on nights when I find it hard to catch sleep,” Allura replied and her eyes softened at the memory. “Shiro would fly in when the palace was asleep and he would play a lullaby on his flute.”

“And he just… knew?”

For a moment there, there were only sounds of tinkling from the jewelry merchant and the shouts of people passing around the crates of goods to the stalls. Allura’s voice softened as if her very heart filled her words; “I don’t know how love works in your realm, Keith.” She said. “But here, you just… know. You feel slivers of emotion that are not your own at first. It’s strange.”

Keith immediately remembered the frayed ribbon of light in his dreams. The feelings of regret, hurt, and loneliness that echoed within his own heart whenever he made contact with it.

“What…” Keith gulped; he slowly understood now. “What does it mean if you feel that?”

“It’s the beginnings of a mating bond.” Allura said. “With angels, we become soulbound to our significant others. It begins as slivers of emotions being felt by each other and when both parties both accept, it just… snaps into place. You’ll be able to feel each other’s very souls and be able to find each other no matter the number of worlds and realms that separate you.”

Unable to speak at Allura’s description, Keith felt his throat go dry and the words fly out of his mind. But one thing was sure, he had felt emotion that wasn’t his own and when he did, it reverberated so deeply within him that the very thought of it sent his heart racing.

“Keith, you look a little pale.” Those ethereal silver ringed eyes bore deep into Keith’s and Allura’s
Keith shook his head. “No, I just…” he paused and bit his lip. This was nothing, this can’t be, right? Keith didn’t see himself worthy of love but deep inside the walls he had built around himself, he wished for it. He absentmindedly raked his fingers through his dark hair.

“It’s pretty cold to let Shiro sleep on a tree, don’t you think?” Keith immediately changed the subject and hoped that Allura wouldn’t push anymore question as to why he suddenly looked shaken.

Allura casually tore her gaze away and pretended to watch some angels fly up to hang colorful paper garlands on some trees. However, Keith noticed a tinged of a blush on her face. “My father didn’t actually approve of Shiro at first.”

“Why?”

“I think any father wouldn’t be too happy if they found out that their rebellious daughter had taken a street urchin who stole for a living as a lover.”

Keith’s mouth dropped in utter shock. Shiro? A thug? The head of the royal Altean guard? That neatly dressed cool headed guy who almost put him down on his ass during training?

“Judging by the look on your face, I’m assuming that you’re trying to put two and two together.” Allura chuckled. “Shiro and I met when we were children. We were friends but the attraction came when we were both in our wild teenage years.” Something shifted in Allura’s tone and shadows flickered in her eyes. “I only truly felt the pain of the bond that had formed between us when death almost took him from me. It was a pain far worse than anything in this life; like your very heart and soul were being yanked out of your chest.” The later words came out hushed. “Death would have been a mercy for the one left behind.”

“I didn’t mean to go there, your highness.” Keith immediately waved his hands in worried dismissal. “I’m sorry; that must be personal.”

“No, it’s alright. It’s only right that I teach you the angelic way if Altea is going to be your home for a while.”

Keith stilled at the alien word; home.

It was something Keith never really had. He lived with his dad and they moved a lot back in the day but there wasn’t really a place that Keith felt welcomed. But Altea welcomed him otherwise. It felt like a breath of fresh air that Keith knew never existed. Provided, he still got odd looks from some people because he didn’t have wings but most of the people didn’t run away from him when they saw him use his flames. They didn’t think he was crazy when he talked to them about the things he saw that others can’t.

“Don’t you think that home is where the heart is, Keith?”

Keith looked at Allura and pondered at her words but was then distracted by a voice who called from behind;

“Keith, there you are!”

Lance jogged up after them with a big smile on his face. He held two cups of shaved ice generously topped with sliced fruit and honey. “You should try this, it’s amazing!” he skidded to a stop when he saw Allura. “Oh, hey, my queen! Are you helping out with the preparations?”

brows furrowed with concern. “Are you feeling ill? Did Shiro push your training too hard?”
“Yes.” Allura smiled and eyed the frozen treat that Lance gave to Keith. “Hm, maybe I should get some too. Now if you’d excuse me, there is… how would you say it Lance? Er, ‘shaved ice with my name on it’.” But when she turned to leave, she froze and almost tripped. Her hand immediately went to massage her temple.

“Your highness?” Lance frowned. “Are you alright? You don’t look so well.”

“I’m fine.” Allura lied with a smile. “Have a good day, you two.”

Keith felt the air in his lungs shut in when Allura spread those magnificent white gold wings and with a single flap, she made a vertical take-off. She disappeared behind some high rooftops, leaving Lance and Keith in a wake of a powerful wind.

“Matt’s right.” Keith blew out a huff of the breath he was holding. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that. I’ll never get tired of watching angels fly.”

“You know what I’ll never get tired of?” Lance asked after he swallowed a spoonful of the sliced fruit on his dessert.

“What?” Keith’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“You.” Lance leaned in and pressed his lips on Keith’s in a stolen kiss. Keith felt those soft lips mold against his and he was pulled towards Lance. He could taste the milk and the fruit the moment he parted his own lips and Lance’s tongue slipped right in. But the embarrassment caught up to him and he quickly stepped back.

“Dude, wait, people can see us!” Keith protested and his face was red. He heard a couple of giggles from the women by the textile shop.

“Can’t I kiss my lover?” Lance wagged his eyebrows playfully at Keith who pouted through the glare but the way his face was flustered only fed Lance’s teasing. “You were so eager yesterday.”

“Because we had privacy!”

“I’d like to make a public point that I’m laying my claim on you.” Lance shrugged but his eyes were serious. “Just so if ever another suitor presents themselves to you, they know who they’re going to piss off.” There was an edge on Lance’s voice.

“Well, that’s too bad for them.” Keith immediately mirrored the same. “I’ll cut off their hand before it goes somewhere exclusive. And besides,” he said freely. “I’m a one-guy er… guy.” he grabbed Lance by the hand after he tossed his snow cone cup in a trash bin by a garland pole. “Come on, we should look if there are more people we can assist.”

“But the festival is tomorrow.” Lance let himself be towed along. “Everything’s almost done—what the—“ Before Lance could even finish, he spotted something falling from the sky.

It was a child. Her wings were crumpled and one of them looked broken. Lance knew that at this age, the child was practically a babe. Her body wouldn’t heal when it smashes on the ground. Keith followed the direction Lance was looking at and his eyes widened.

“Is that a kid? Why is she falling?!” he demanded.

“She probably flew too high and passed out because her body couldn’t take the pressure of the altitude.” Lance gritted and his eyes darted from side to side. The most efficient way was to fly up and catch the child but that was the issue; he didn’t have wings. There wasn’t anyone around to help
“Shit, we have to do something!” Keith was already on the move to do whatever he can but he realized that he was earthbound and it would be too late to break the impact when the kid hits the ground. He craned his head up and shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun. “Wait, what are those?”

Behind the child, there was a swarm of black birds that went after her. Their eyes were red slits against the soot of their feathers. They looked like crows but were too large to pass for one. However, when one of them opened its beak, the appendage opened so wide that the side of its mouth tore to reveal a maw of serrated teeth. These birds looked similar to the giant one that attacked them at the pier back in the human realm although these were quite smaller.

“Shit, how did those get past the barrier?!” Lance’s eyes glowed with power, the rings around his blue irises were molten with power. At his will, two flashes of blue light appeared in his hands and solidified into his twin pistols; one, chrome white and the other, a polished gunmetal black.

He quickly turned to Keith. “Can you form a barrier to break her fall? I’ll take care of those demonic birds.”

Keith immediately nodded. “Got it. Go kill ‘em, baby.”

Lance flashed him a menacing grin and a blue magical circle swirling with ancient Altean letters and symbols burst on the ground underneath his feet. The air grew hot and pressurized before he launched himself into the air. Keith staggered back from the gust of wind and debris but regained his balance and focused on his task. Planting his feet firmly on the ground, he took a deep breath and tapped into the quintessence within him. Remembered the energy allocation pointers Allura taught him, he summoned a small amount of power before gradually adding to it like how one would kindle a single ember with dried leaves.

Keith felt the power flow through his veins and he lifted hands in front of him towards the sky, palms open. He squinted through the glare of the sun and waited for the right moment until the unconscious child was at an optimum distance where Keith can efficiently materialize a barrier to catch her.

However, he within him, Keith felt a thrum of power at the back of his mind that he knew didn’t belong to him. The pulse grew stronger and the confusion made Keith’s concentration waver. He couldn’t afford to get distracted now, not when someone’s life depended on him.

“Goddammit,” Keith muttered in frustration at the alien consciousness at the back of his mind. “Who are you?”

He got his answer when gunshots went off in the vastness of the sky.

Lance had to intercept the beasts and he had to hurry before the swarm reached the child. He used the high roof tops as leverage to leap higher so that he can conserve his energy from launching himself into the air. When he reached high enough that the roofs and the high spires of the buildings couldn’t aid him anymore, Lance resumed using magic. He didn’t want to think about it now, but this would be so much easier if he could fly.

He got to the child first and he caught her in his arms. There were cuts on her back and her white wings that were blushed with pink at the primaries hung limply. It could be that she was flying but those demonic birds attacked her. She was just a child; there was no way she could have defended either.
herself. Letting himself fall back into the ground, he tucked the child protectively in his arm and lifted the free one to shoot at the birds. The first few shots missed but the other two managed to hit. The beast crumbled into black ash and was blown away by the wind but there were at least ten more.

Lance couldn’t fight them with the child in his arms so when he got close enough when gravity pulled him down, he moved out of the way and trusted Keith with the little girl.

The moment Lance moved out of the way, Keith fired up his power and the sparks that danced around his hands launched towards the incoming body of the child in a jet of vermilion flames that solidified into a sphere-like barrier around the child. A woman’s scream came from somewhere probably when they saw Keith holding up a hovering sphere with a kid inside. More people came to gather but Keith kept his focus. Had this happened in the human realm, Keith would have already passed out from the prolonged use of his powers.

“I got her!” Keith cried when the sphere was low enough. He released the power and the barrier gave in and shattered, falling like red glitter snow that vanished before it hit the payment. Keith caught the little girl in his arms and he fell to his knees at weight of the child’s body and her wings. Her red hair was a tangled mess and she had cuts and all over that were already knitting back together but she still needed help.

“Is there a healer here?!” Keith called to the shaken crowd. “Please, I need a healer!”

“I’m on it!” A male voice called out and black hooded figure darted out of the crowd. Keith guessed that it might be a glamor spell because the person didn’t have wings and he knelt down to tend to the unconscious child. When Keith checked underneath the hood, he saw the person’s face had a mask lined with neon violet tribal designs that illuminated within the shadow of his hood. Keith had never seen that kind of mask before during his stay here in Altea and his instincts immediately grew alert. But Keith forced himself to calm down, suspicious as this man looked, the child needed a healer’s assistance.

“Her injuries are healing and her body shut down from the shock.” The masked man’s black gloved hands glowed with an eerie violet light that crawled over the girl’s dark skin then wrapped around her whole body and her wings like an aura. “I’ll normalize her blood flow. She should be fine. Without your barrier, she could have died. I commend thee.”

“Uh, thanks.” Keith said but for the first time in a long time, he felt proud of himself. After he handed the girl to the stranger and the mother’s child came running from the crowd, weeping, Keith got up and saw the woman gather the girl in her arms.

Keith watched the exchange and felt an emptiness in his heart only a mother could fill.

“Vessel, aid your angel.” The darkly hooded man’s voice broke through his thoughts but when Keith turned to look at him, he was gone.

Lance was starting to get pissed; for every one bird he killed, three took its place. He was also starting to get tired from forming magical circles that he used as jumping pads; he can only keep this up for long. He needed to find a way to take them out all in one go because the swarm had multiplied already.

He landed on a high spire of a building. Lance was panting and his eyes were bright from the use of his power while frustration clouded his mind. Right now, those pesky beasts taunted him as they hovered in midair. They were a dumb bunch that relied on their numbers; had they been smart, they would have taken the chance to attack the town square below but no, they just flapped and taunted Lance.
Lance felt a strange presence in the back of his mind; like someone else was there. It didn’t feel
threatening but it piqued his interest. However, it was a small sliver of curiosity since Lance was
preoccupied right now. He took a chance and reached towards the presence that seem to reach to him
as well. He closed his eyes briefly and in the darkness of his mind, he saw a strange flickering light, a
single ember that hovered into nothingness. Lance reached out with a telepathic hand and touched it
with the tip of his finger and it was like his thoughts flowed through out of him and into the tongue
of flame.

“Heads up!”

The birds screeched together when they were encased in a translucent red barrier that were licked
with flames. When Lance snapped his eyes open, he saw that Keith was mobilizing his power from
the foot of the building whose roof he stood on. The barrier burst into flames and Keith groaned
while he struggled with his power to confine a huge number of demonic birds in a single barrier. The
flames grew brighter and Keith slowly clenched his hands into fists. As he did, the barrier seem to
shrink too, crushing the birds inside but those that died immediately multiplied while those at the
center pushed back, using the force to break the barrier.

“Lance, I can’t hold them in much longer!” Keith cried from below. “Do your thing!”

Lance’s eyes widened; how did Keith know that that was his plan? But the questions had to wait, the
birds had tripled in number from those that succumbed to Keith’s flames.

“Lance!”

“I know, stop yelling at me and let me concentrate, holy quiznack!”

“Hurry the fuck up!” Keith barked from below. “Or I’ll throw this birdcage on your face, so help me
God, I will!”

Lance took a deep breath and mustered an immense volume of power from inside him. He gripped
his pistols, the embedded gold vines that adored the handled digging into this palms. Lance anchored
himself to that hard touch and to Keith’s voice; he calmed down and felt the power flow more clearly
in his veins.

He muttered something in old Altean and when he opened his eyes, they were electric blue with
silver around his irises spread so thin that it was barely visible. The air grew cold around Lance and
suddenly, thick spears of ice materialize around Keith’s birdcage.

“Keith, I need you to compress the barrier even more!”

“On it!”

The demonic birds screeched when they were crushed against each other when Keith made the
barrier smaller. Lance summoned numerous jagged spears of ice all aimed at the cage. Finally, a
great surge of power expelled from him and the spears launched towards the cage impaling the
trapped creatures within. Lance narrowed his eyes and shielded his face when the cage exploded
along with the bloody cries of the birds. The wind blew away the black ash but then Lance gritted
his teeth in frustration when he saw that he missed one bird. He prepared to shoot at it but the
moment it started to multiply, Hunk swooped down from the sky with his great war hammer drawn
and smashed it right on the beast the shattered like coal.

“Nice one, Hunk!” Lance panted and wiped the sweat from his forehead while below, Keith leaned
on a brick wall, gulping great heaps of air.
“It’s a good thing someone called me and I got here on time. Was the last one?” Hunk’s wings flapped behind him to keep him airborne and he was able to hover in midair in front of Lance.

“Yeah, thanks, buddy.” Lance gave a thumbs up. “Great save back there, that who knows how many that single bird can multiply to.”

Hunk looked up at the sky tinged by the faint electric blue of the barrier. The faintness of it was already a bad sign that the barrier was failing and the fact that these demonic creatures were able to slip through the cracks and attack an angelic child meant that the situation was getting worse.

“I’m going to report back to the sire and the queen.” Hunk slid back the long war hammer on the sheath across his back. He looked down and motioned at Keith who was still leaning on the wall, catching his breath. “Go to him.” A pause as he regarded his best friend and when Lance met those dark brown eyes, they softened and he smiled warmly. “He needs you.”

Lance’s cheeks burst with color and Hunk rolled his eyes. “Get going, lover boy Lance.” Then, with two powerful flaps, he shot up into the sky and speared through the clouds before he disappeared.

Keith managed to calm down and he took deep breaths to get the blood flowing around his body. He still felt a little dizzy so he continued to lean on the brick wall until he managed to reign himself in.

“Keith!” Lance landed in front of him where he jumped off from the high roof. Keith felt the angel hold him by the arms on both sides to steady him and his eyes snapped open when he felt Lance press their foreheads together. Keith exhaled a shaky breath and anchored himself to the touch. The two of them both stood in the privacy of the shadow of the alley, cut out from the rest of the world.

“We did it, Lance.” Keith breathed out. “We really saved that little girl.”

“We did.” Lance agreed. “We do make a good team. And you know what? You were amazing.”

“You’re a neat sharpshooter, yourself.” Keith flashed him a grin but then his knees buckled from the energy loss.

“Whoah, be careful!” Lance caught Keith just in time. Keith rested his head on the crook of Lance’s shoulder while his whole body went limp. “Hey, I have an idea; do you want to go to my home?”

“Yes.” Keith mumbled tiredly and he wrapped his arms around Lance’s neck for support.

“You’re still a little dizzy.” Lance chuckled. Keith was startled when Lance bent down, gesturing for Keith to ride on his back. “Climb on. I’ll introduce you to the most beautiful lady in the realm.”

Keith frowned.

~

After making their way out of the kingdom they trekked through the woods until they reached the other side. Lance’s home was a cozy cottage beside a glittering crystal clear lake. Lance made his way to the front porch that was adorned with herbs and potted plants with tiny blue and red flowers. There was hammock tied up on two poles that faced the lake.

“Blue?” Lance called after he opened the door and stepped in with Keith still riding on his back, the other’s chin snuggly propped on the crook of Lance’s neck. “I’m home, beautiful. Where are you? There’s someone I want you to meet!”

The house was quiet but Keith saw that it was a cozy bungalow home; there was a living room
complete with snug looking couches, a fire place, a kitchen, and two doors at the far end. The shelves displayed some books, knickknacks and memorabilia. Light crystals that automatically lit up when they walked in. Keith hopped off from Lance’s back when the Angel slightly lowered himself and he felt better now after getting some rest while Lance carried him here.

“Girlfriend?” Keith asked with an arched brow.

“But aren’t you my lover already?” Lance threw the question back with a wink. “No, this one is a lady with class, taste, and the utmost beauty.”

Keith saw a shadow dart at the back of the house and Lance clapped softly and crouched down. Then, what happened next was something out of a fairy tale book. A blue cat with pretty golden eyes and fairy wings on its back flew happily towards them.

“Oh…MY GOD! YOUR…YOUR CAT HAS WINGS?!” Keith exclaimed, completely bewildered. Blue landed by Lance’s feet and proceeded to affectionately rub her head against his boots.

“Yeah, Blue here is a fairy cat.” Lance replied while he petted the blue cat with the transparent wings that were shaped like a dragonfly’s. “Fairy cats tend to mind their own business and they’re very picky with who they interact with but Blue took a liking to me.”

Keith looked reluctant as he stared at the winged cat; their cats back in the human realm don’t really fly around the house. Then, he offered his hand towards Blue carefully; “Hey, Blue.” He said, letting the cat choose whether she likes him or not. “I’m Keith. Nice to meet you.”

Blue regarded him silently with those golden eyes full of intelligence. She blinked twice while she studied Keith then glanced at Lance before she gave a soft mewl.

“Keith is human.” Lance said as if he understood what the cat meant. “He’s also very…special to me.”

Heat tinged Keith’s cheeks at that but continued to hold out his hand towards Blue. Then, the cat jumped up and those transparent fairy wings on her back flapped at such a speed that they became almost invisible with only a faint hum. Blue flew closer to Keith and he stepped back. Then, Blue gave a loud meow and immediately dropped herself into Keith’s arms.

With a soft ‘oof’, Keith caught her in his arms and she curled up, tucking her wings close to her shiny blue coat and she started to purr contently.

“She likes you!” Lance exclaimed gleefully. “I know she’s friendly but this is the first time she did that with someone she just met!”

“Re-Really?” Keith was bewildered. Even when he was young, he never experienced having a pet of his own. His fingers combed through Blue’s fur until his fingers found themselves underneath the cat’s chin and started to pet her there. Blue’s purrs grew louder. “Oh my god, Lance, she’s so adorable!”

“See? Even you’re in love with her at the first meeting.” The angel chuckled. “Settle in, sweetheart. I’ll get you some food. You really burned yourself out back there.”

“Mind if I crash on your hammock on the porch?”

“Go right ahead.” Lance leaned and reached to push back Keith’s dark bangs to kiss his forehead. “I’ll join you in a bit.”
Lance walked to the back of the house leaving Keith a flustered mess in the middle of the living room. Blue snuggled close to Keith and curled up like a blue ball of fluff. When Keith met her silent gaze, he can’t help but think that this cat was throwing a knowing, shit eating grin at him.

“You really are his cat.”

After a plate of bite sized sandwiches, hot chocolate, and honey glazed jerky, Keith found himself tucked in beside Lance on the hammock. Lance stuck out one leg and the heel of his boot latched onto the wooden railing of the porch and used that as an anchor to rock them gently. They faced the glittering lake that was so clear that Keith saw the colorful schools of fish and the waving forests of underwater plants below. When he mentioned it to Lance, the angel chuckled and told him that the lake was deceiving; it looked shallow but it’s actually deep.

“I still want to swim.” Keith mumbled sleepily and snuggled closer to Lance who wrapped his arms around him.

“Perhaps, we can.” Lance said softly against the soft hair on top of Keith’s head where he buried his face to take in Keith’s scent. “But you’re tired. You need to rest first.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re half asleep.”

“Your damn hammock is making me sleepy.” Keith insisted. “The cold water will knock some sense into me.”

Lance sighed helplessly but he smiled. “You’re so reckless. Tell you what? You rest up and we’ll take a dip tomorrow after we get back from the festival. How does that sound?”

“Great.” Keith smirked. “So, you’re going to win me prizes, right?”

The angel rolled his eyes dramatically but continued to rock them on the hammock. “If you bid it to be so, then I shall make it my life’s mission to win you the biggest stuffed mer-hippo toy.”

Keith’s eyes widened. “Holy shit. You have mer-hippos here? As in half fish, half hippo?”

“Yeah, they’re mostly common at the Eastern Bay a couple of miles from the kingdom.” Lance replied. “They’re friendly things but very protective of their young so you can’t go around touching the babies.”

“Dude, I love hippos!” Keith breathed in amazement. He looked at Lance who returned a look of bewilderment and amusement. “I used to have this stuffed hippo when I was a kid. Dad said that I cried for days when I lost it.”

A sense of melancholy fell on them and shadows danced in Keith’s eyes at the memory of the father who left him too soon. Only the bird songs sounded along the trees that surrounded the cottage and the gentle creaks of the wooden beams where the hammock was tied on could be heard.

Blue curled up underneath a shadow of a potted plant with little orange berries. A butterfly fluttered down and landed on her ear but Blue flicked her ear without opening her eyes. The butterfly flapped up but settled back to land on her ear again. When it did, Blue didn’t bother to shoo it off and continued to nap under the plant.

“He may be gone too soon but I’m sure he loved you.” Lance broke the silence. He turned his head and looked at the clouds that sailed by on the sky. “He died trying to protect you. My father saw me
as a failure.”

A lump formed in Keith’s throat and cursed his ability to open painful memories. “We don’t have to go there. You’re doing much better now.”

“Am I?” Lance chuckled but the sound came out strained and humorless.

“We went through this already, Lance.” Keith interjected he turned on the hammock so that he was face to face with Lance. “I’m not asking for another guard; you’re great. Shiro can offer the best one in his army but I’m not going to take it.” He felt his heart kick when Lance smiled and he wasn’t able to hold himself back; Keith’s hand reached up to hold both sides of Lance’s head and he leaned in to kiss him.

The kiss was warm when Lance kissed him back. Their lips melded with each other’s in utterance of the song in their hearts. Lance gently licked against the seam on Keith’s lips and the other immediately opened up. The kiss turned from innocent to molten as their tongues caressed each other’s and they got a little too passionate. Keith felt his whole body hum, his veins on fire as he was sucked into the kiss. He got carried away and his hands started to trail up and comb through Lance’s hair.

In turn, Lance’s hands trailed down to lock firmly around Keith’s hips. His fingers slipped behind Keith’s shirt to caress his hot skin. Keith was all over him, he drank the kisses greedily, and eventually felt his body react. The need to mark and claim this beautiful human was primal and it only drove him to the brink when Keith moaned within the kiss, the other’s erection rubbing against his through the barrier of their clothing.

Lance spiraled out of control in the worst way possible in that very moment.

“Who do you belong to, my beautiful bluebell?” Lotor’s voice filled his mind while his hand constricted possessively around Lance’s throat.

“…Y-You, my lord.” Lance wheezed out. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes while his naked, scarred body laid slack beneath Lotor’s on the black silk sheets.

“Good, and best you remember it.” Lotor whispered hotly into his ear. “No one will love you the way I do, my dear.”

Lies. Those were all lies.

The jewelry that adorned Lance tinkled with every brutal thrust from the prince. Lance was trapped in a cage that he entered in ignorance and the desperation to find a place to belong.

His sobbing moans were muffled by the sheets and his tears wetted the pillows as he shattered into unwilling pleasure.

“Lance!” Keith cried out when he landed on his ass on the porch. Lance had jumped out of the hammock suddenly and was standing on the other side, breathing hard and looking horrified at Keith. Blue was also startled by the suddenness and had flown up to avoid the commotion, her tail all fluffed up. “Lance, what’s wrong?”

“I…I’m sorry.” Lance tore his gaze away and he looked pained. “You…you need to leave.”

“Please, did I do something wrong?” Keith asked in worry. “Tell me if I did!”

“Keith,” Lance’s voice was hard as stone. “now isn’t a good time. So please, just go.”
“Lance…”

“I said go!”

And that was all it took for Lance to end the conversation. Keith froze, his eyes wide as he stared at the angel from where he sat on the floor of the porch. But despite the hurt and confusion, Keith accepted the rejection.


Keith walked off with his fists clenched on his sides. He didn’t spare a glance over his shoulder as he disappeared behind the canopy of trees where they came from earlier.

Back on the porch, Blue mewed as if heaving a sigh and flew off to follow Keith to make sure that he made it back to the palace safely.

Lance stood there, alone and shaken at what just happen. After he calmed down, his heart bled from the knife of regret.

~

The morning after, Keith woke up because of a dull pounding on his bedroom door. He opened his eyes and glared at the rays of sunshine seeping in from the other side of his closed curtains. Keith felt like death; we had a pretty hard time catching sleep last night but when he finally did, it felt more like a waterspout pulling him down the darkness that made him feel like he was drowning. It was dreamless and empty; Keith didn’t see the frayed blue ribbon of light or the giant tree with the crystals on its trunk and its fiery red leaves. He didn’t dream about his dad or being chased by God-knows-what. It was just empty, lonely, frustrating darkness.

The pounding on his door became louder.

Keith growled in irritation and kicked off his blanket. He grabbed his shirt that hung on the backrest of one of that chairs and stomped angrily towards his door.

“What?!” Keith yanked the door open. He mellowed down when he was met by a wide-eyed Pidge and a startled Matt. Coran was behind them with a look of confusion but then broke the silence as he shuffled his wings before he closed them tightly against his back.

“Good morning, Keith!” The royal adviser was chipper today. “We’ve come to fetch you for breakfast. It’s an early day for all of us and a special one at that!”

“Huh?” Keith frowned. He was still having a hard time processing sleep from the lack of sleep he got last night. “What’s happening?”

“Today is the start of the festival!” Pidge replied with excitement. “Allura and Shiro are going to open the event and there’s going to be cool stalls and lots of food!”

“And there’s this Juniberry dance thing at the end of the week.” Matt added enthusiastically. “Coran said that you can ask anyone you like and rumor has it that it’s good luck for your love life.”

“It’s true.” Coran nodded and he habitually fiddled with his mustache. “Shiro and queen Allura danced in it when they were very young. Look at them now; fought in the First Siege of Altea minutes after their wedding and they’ve been together for more than a thousand years!”
“Dude, that’s so cool!” Matt gaped then he elbowed his twin. “Hey, maybe I’ll find my happily ever after too if I ask someone to that dance.”

Pidge snorted. “As if, dorkus.”

“Hey!”

“My love life is non-existent, guys.” Keith sighed. “Let me get some sleep. I’ll catch up later.” He turned to closed the door but Pidge was quick to wedge it open with their foot. “Oh no, you don’t, Gerard Way. You skipped dinner last night then proceeded to ignore everyone, and you sigh every twenty seconds; it’s driving me insane! You’re going with us and we’re going to have so much fun at the fair!”

“Who’s Gerard Way?” Coran whispered to Matt. “I thought his name was Keith?”

“Oh, it’s an expression like how you say ‘King Grogery’ a lot.” Matt explained innocently. “Gerard Way is a famous musician back home and Keith loves their band.”

“Get ready or I’ll drag you out and use magic if I have to.” Pidge said boldly. “Life’s too short to sulk!”

“Fine.” Keith groaned.

*

In a sense, Pidge was right; Keith needed some cheering up from the festival. It wasn’t like the ones he’s seen back on earth. The merry music and the different scents of freshly cooked food lifted Keith’s spirits. When they reached the plaza at the heart of the town where an elaborate stage was set up, Allura was already on the pedestal, addressing the people while Shiro stood by her side. The queen was dressed in a simple dress that brushed her calves but otherwise, Allura looked beautiful. However, she didn’t look radiant; her eyes had bags beneath them, her skin was pasty, and her smile was tired. It was as if she just put an effort to attend the event.

After her welcome speech, Shiro stepped back to hand her a ceremonial saber and she neatly but the ribbon tied to several containers that hung on top of the poles. People cheered when confetti and petals rained down on them and the children screamed in glee as they chased each other in midair amidst the colorful rain.

“Come on, Keith!” Pidge called over the noise of the crowd as they pulled him by the wrist. “This way!” He went with them and soon, Keith found himself being absorbed by the festival. With the pocket money he had, he bought a new scabbard for his knife to replace the old one he has and a new pocket belt. Most of the things Keith bought were necessities because he found it hard to spend on something he actually wanted. It was like it was ingrained in him that he should prioritize buying things that he needed and not wanted but then, Matt, took notice.


“Uh…what?” Keith looked so confused.

“That!” Matt towed him towards a stall that sold colorful candy that were shaped into ornamental designs like long tailed koi, a bear, a flower, and basically every aesthetic thing Keith could think of. For an extra fee, the candy maker, an bright eyed Ancient with gray wings who made the candy by hand, will make a custom design.
“It’s really good!” Matt beamed. “I’ve had a few already! You should try it!”

Keith eyed Matt with a frown. “You’re having a sugar rush, are you?”

“Me?” Matt scoffed a little too loudly. “No, I don’t get rushes so are you gonna try it or not??!”

“W-Wait! Dude, don’t pull me too hard—ow, oh sorry!” Keith was towed by an excited Matt to the oogleberville bonbon stall so hard that he bumped onto someone and he quickly apologized.

“Hi, this is my friend I told you about!” Matt half laughed and for a moment there, Keith thought the other was up to something. It could be that it was the sugar that’s talking because the elderly angel nodded with a gentle smile. “Ah, Vessel, yes, I’ve heard about you. I’ve got a custom made candy made for you.”

“I don’t have the money to pay---“ Keith began but the angel shook her head.

“It’s already been paid for.” She said and she took out a small box made out of cardboard paper. “Here you go.”

Keith took the box and after he gave the angel an unsure look, he opened the box. Inside, the candy was lovingly carved into the shape of a tulip. The crystalized candy was colored a translucent blue and it looked too beautiful to eat.

“Who paid for this?” Keith asked but the elderly angel just shrugged. “Who knows? Now, run along, young human, you’re holding up the line.”

“You got your candy, now let’s go check out the booze!” Matt grabbed Keith by the wrist once again and dragged him across the crowd.

“You drink now?!” Keith cried over the noise of the festivities.

“Dude, it’s not every day we get to experience angelic customs and festivities! Quit being a sourpuss and let’s go!”

That afternoon, Keith slumped on a bench at a secluded part of the plaza. It was a good thing that he got rid of Matt and Pidge on his tail for now. Those two really knew how to bulldoze through a fair. Of course they would; those two always went to fairs back home. Keith, however, didn’t have anyone to go with. Sometimes, the twins brought him along but Keith still felt alone in the massive crowd of people.

Keith took out the small box he was given earlier and removed the lid. He stared at the blue candy tulip and admired how detailed it was shaped to the very last petal tendril.

“Good afternoon, Keith.” A female voice interrupted Keith’s thoughts. When he looked up, he was greeted by the sight of deep forest green wings tipped with gold. Nyma’s long golden blonde hair was fashioned into a crown braid today. The queen’s handmaiden carried a straw basket with her and Keith must have been so deep in thought that he didn’t notice the other angel walk up to him.

“Hey, Nyma.” Keith greeted back but he didn’t sound too enthusiastic from being exhausted from being dragged around. “Are you out shopping?”

“Ah, no. I’m running errands and went to buy some tea leaves for queen Allura.” Nyma shook her head then she motioned at the empty spot beside Keith. “If I may?”

“Sure.” Keith scooted to make room for Nyma on the bench. There was a soft sound when those
green wings rustled and draped behind the backrest.

“That’s a lovely ooglebervillebonbon you have there.” She said and her bare shoulder slightly brushed against Keith’s. For some reason, a shiver slid down Keith’s spine and the primal part of his brain told him to run. He wasn’t sure if he was only imagining it or did the touch registered to him like scales instead of skin?

“I got it for free from the old lady that sold them.” Keith found his voice again when he shrugged off the uncanny feeling. “She said someone paid for this.”

Nyma leaned in to take a better look at the artisan sweet. “A tulip, hm? Say, Keith, have you ever heard about the language of flowers?”

“We have something similar back in the human world but I don’t really care about it.” Keith replied. “I mean, flowers are just flowers.”

“You should care to look into their meanings more.” Nyma said. “Here’s some unsolicited advice, dear; listen to the words not said for they are the ones that hold the most meaning.” Finally, Nyma stood up and momentarily ruffled her wings to let her feathers settle. She reached into her basket and took out a round clear jar of colorful jelly beads. The top was covered with a silk cloth and Keith caught the slight scent of mint and the tang of citrus. “Here, consider it as a welcome gift from me.” She smiled as Keith took it. “They’re scented beads for your room, my own special blend too! I know you’ve been here in Altea for weeks now but I’m so busy with my duties that I haven’t given you a gift.”

“There’s really no need for this, Nyma.” Keith stared at the jar of colorful beads. “Everyone’s been so welcoming and I feel like I’m already imposing. Is it because I’m different?”

“Have we not shown the same hospitality to your friends?” Nyma threw the question back with a smile. “Even if you are not the Vessel, you are still welcomed here in Altea.” She sighed and looked at the orange sky that was painted by the sunset. “If only the barrier didn’t bar us from the outside realms.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Nyma shook her head. “I must take my leave now. I need to brew these for the queen.” She motioned at her basket of tea leaves. Nyma spread her wings and the wind of the action whipped Keith’s hair back. “Oh and Keith?”

“Uh, yeah?” Keith said.

“In the language of flowers, a tulip means ‘I’m sorry’” Nyma winked. “Maybe consider giving the poor dear a second chance?”

Keith staggered back when Nyma shot up into the air with two powerful flaps and she disappeared past the high rooftops of the buildings on the other side of the plaza.

Then it dawned to him, Keith hasn’t seen Lance today.

~

Lance was nowhere to be found for the rest of the week. Keith tried to distract himself with the festival and his training. When Keith casually asked Shiro where Lance was, the general said that Lance was stationed to patrol the western quadrant of the barrier until the end of the week.
Tomorrow was the end of the festival. It was also the time in the whole festivity when the Juniberry Dance will be held and the blooming of the juniberries when the moon reached the center of the sky.

On the way to Keith’s room, he heard a slight thump from the inside and Keith quickly pulled out his luxite blade and prepared to use his flames in case there really was an intruder inside. Then, he barged in;

Blue the fairy cat lounged on the windowsill, her delicate transparent wings catching the moonlight. She stared at Keith with intelligent golden eyes and her tail flicked judgingly when she saw that Keith was armed.

“Blue?” Keith sheathed his knife. “What are you doing here, girl?”

Blue responded by flapping her wings and lunging into the air. She flew to Keith and let herself drop in his arms. Keith scratched her behind the ears and he smiled when the cat started to purr contently. Then, Blue looked up at Keith and blinked before she turned her head towards his bed. Keith followed the direction the cat stared at and his own eyes widened.

“Oh.”

There, on his bed, was a huge, fat stuffed plush of a mer-hippo. The stuffed toy was almost as big as him and it had a goofy smile on its face. Blue jumped down from his arms when Keith approached his bed and studied the mer-hippo. Judging by how different it looked from the mer-hippos being sold at the fair as souvenirs and prizes, it appeared that this one was specially made.

“Did,” Keith swallowed the lump in his throat and he felt his heart race in his chest. “did Lance make this on his own?”

Blue meowed an affirmative.

“And you brought it here all by yourself?” Keith turned to look at the small fairy cat. “But…but how? This thing is huge!”

Blue rolled her eyes and licked her paw a couple of times before she jumped off Keith’s arms. Crouching as if she was about pounce, the whole room was filled with a powerful energy and Blue’s small body was covered in a bright light that expanded and solidified. Keith fell on his ass with a dumbfounded look when a great blue lioness emerged from the light. Blue’s wings had reformed into something similar to an angel’s but there were four instead of two.

The lion in the middle of the room growled and slowly walked towards Keith who had pushed himself against the edge of the bed. His eyes darted for an escape route but Blue blocked his way. The lion sat in front of him proudly and Keith carefully reached forward with a reluctant hand.

“Blue?” he asked, softly.

Blue butted her great head against Keith’s hand and rubbed her forehead against it. When Keith started to pet her, she purred deeply.


Blue lifted her head proudly and winked. Keith rolled his eyes this time, “Yeah, you are definitely Lance’s cat.”

Then the winged lioness motioned at the huge mer-hippo plush again and Keith noticed a folded note tucked behind the red ribbon around the toy’s neck. He glanced at Blue before he pulled the note out
and opened it to read Lance’s neat handwriting.

“Could you find it in your heart to save me a dance tomorrow night?”

“PS: Please. I miss you. Let me apologize and explain everything. You deserve to know.”

Keith felt his heart burst with emotion. Goddammit, Lance was a smooth one, is he? He turned to Blue, his face all red and flushed at the cheeks. “Blue, could you take me to him now?”

Blue shook her big head and she made a disapproved growl. Keith’s gaze fell sadly, Lance was on duty right now and it probably wasn’t a good idea to bother him.

“I see.” Keith sat on the edge of the bed and threw his arms around the huge mer-hippo. It gave off a soft squeak as Keith embraced it tightly. “I guess I don’t have to wait long for him to get back.” He muffled and nuzzled the toy’s belly. “That idiot.”

Keith wanted to give a little something as a subtle confirmation then he remembered that Nyma gave him some scented beads a few days ago. He got up to his feet and went over to the coffee table on the other side of the room where the jar of gelatinous beads were. “These smell really nice. Nyma gave them to me but I think it’ll fit better in Lance’s home.” He said as he walked back to Blue. “I’m sorry it’s not the most romantic thing but the shops are closed and I can’t make anything for shit. Peace offering?” He gave a nervous chuckle when Blue arched a feline brow at him.

Then, the lioness reverted back into her house cat form with a great ‘poof’. She took the jar by the tiny handle and jumped on the windowsill to spread her wings.

“Thanks, Blue.” Keith said. The fairy cat glanced at him one last time before she took off and disappeared into the night. Keith plopped down on his bed and cuddled the mer-hippo, wishing it was Lance. Sleep was a blissful blanket that draped over him and the next thing Keith knew, the frayed blue ribbon of light had returned in the emptiness of his slumber. Keith reached for it and it grew brighter as it wrapped around his fingers.

”Stop ignoring me and come home.” Keith said, his voice echoing in the dream. “Can you hear me, Lance?”

The response he got was silence and the ghost of a kiss upon his lips that sent his heart thundering in his chest as he slept.

On the western part of the realm, Lance slowly opened his eyes, both pistols in hand while he guarded the weakening shield. He looked at the stars in the sky and smiled; whatever that strange feeling he felt was, he welcomed it.

~

The final day of the festival was the most grand of all the days. The best baked breads and the finest merchandise were put out for sale. Lively dances both on the ground and the sky boosted the energy of the festival. Keith ran out of the palace as soon as Shiro let him go after his training. He met Matt and Pidge by the gates and they went to the town to join the final day of the festival.

Keith had no idea how much he spent on the knife throwing games just because he couldn’t say no to a challenge. He and Matt competed on the shooting games while Hunk challenged him to a pie eating contest. Keith was able to beat Matt but fell three pies behind Hunk who brought home the grand prize of a bottle of carefully aged ale. Shay, of course, the proud wife that she is, was cheering on the sides.
After Keith lost a bet to Pidge, they made him buy them a set of boosting crystals and an advanced spell book. It was a good thing that their bickering amused the shopkeeper that he gave the items at half a prize so Keith still had some pocket money left with him. During lunch, Keith was able to escape Pidge and Matt for a little while and he wandered around. Secretly, he looked at every face he saw and hoped that Lance came back early from barrier duty.

When Shiro saw him, he patted him on the shoulder and placed a single finger on his lips in a gesture of silence.

“I’m going to teach you a trick that you might need in dire times but you have to promise me to only use it when you’re either really desperate to survive or if your target is the enemy and you need something from them.” There was a mischievous twinkle in Shiro’s dark eyes. This guy, who almost cut Keith in half during training with his hard drills, grinned. “Do you see Coran over there?” he motioned at the royal adviser haggling with a sleazy looking shopkeeper who would most likely scam him out of his shoes.

“Yeah?” Keith asked, confused.

“The trick here is to use the crowd to blend in.” Shiro said. “Watch.” Then, the night winged angel was on the move. Keith watched from a safe distance as Shiro waited for a crowd of angels to walk by before he casually joined their group without them noticing. As they passed by Coran, Shiro’s hand was a blur as he plucked out Coran’s purse from his belt.

Keith gaped, horrified and at the same time, amazed. That shit Shiro pulled would get him thrown into jail back in the human world. Then he remembered what Allura told him back then about Shiro.

“Well?” Shiro’s dapper clothes that marked his rank in the angelic hierarchy did not fit his thievery skills. “Did you catch all that? That’s the most basic trick; let the crowd do the work for you. Hey, Coran!”

The adviser looked over his shoulder when he was called and Shiro chucked the old man’s purse back at him who almost dropped it in bewilderment.

“Sire! You know better than to play your childish tricks on me!” Coran was horrified when he realized what happened.

“The kid might need it in the future.” Shiro replied. “I told him to use it only when needed.” The moment Shiro saw that Coran was stomping over to where they were to scold them, Shiro quickly grabbed Keith on both arms, snapped his wings open, and took off.

A scream was trapped in Keith’s throat when the ground disappeared underneath his feet and the high rooftops were past his reach as they soared. When Shiro landed on the other side of the capital, Keith downright kissed the floor. “Shiro, what the fuck, man?!”

“Coran was going to give us an earful.” The archangel shrugged. “Having fun doesn’t hurt once in a while.”

“I thought you were a serious guy!”

“I am.” Shiro replied. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t like to mess with people once in a while. Stress relief.”

“Oh my god!” Keith groaned. “I had so much respect for you!” Keith and Shiro stared at each other before Keith burst out laughing while Shiro grinned.
“Pick a target for me.” Shiro said. “Someone who looks difficult.”

Keith looked around the crowd and saw Allura half walk, half fly as she glided to look at a shop that sold clothes. “Her.”

“Oh, this is going to be easy.” Shiro smirked. “I’ve been messing with her since we were kids.”

“Oh yeah?” Keith challenged. “Show me, then.”

“You’re going to eat your words, kid.” Then, Shiro was gone from his side. When Keith looked around, he saw the queen’s husband blend in the shadows of the nearby allies. Shiro ghosted from one crowd to another until he reached Allura. When he was near enough, Shiro quietly spread his wings and hopped on a low lying balcony on top of the shop. Flipping himself upside down with his legs hooked on the railings, he reached to pluck out Allura’s coronet from her head.

But Allura quickly looked up and grabbed Shiro’s hand, his metal fingers creaking from her vise grip. There was a frown on her face and she arched her brow questioningly at him.

“Oh, shit.” Keith breathed, astounded and half scared of the look on Allura’s face. “It was nice knowing you, Shiro.”

But then Allura stood on her toes and kissed Shiro who hung upside down. The queen laughed when her husband turned red at the face. Shiro hopped down from the balcony and scratched the back of his head awkwardly as he began to say something that Keith didn’t quite catch from where he stood. Keith ended up being treated to lunch by the royal couple at a café. The café owner was so happy that the queen, her guard, and the Vessel graced her shop with their presence that she threw in an extra basket of breadsticks and a slice of their chosen cake for free. Allura offered to pay the excited woman but she shook her head before she made her way to the back of the shop to get their cake slices, almost stumbling on her wings.

“Shiro, you’re a bad influence.” Allura reprimanded but she was smiling while she sliced her cake. “You’ll get Keith intro trouble.”

“The first time I tried to steal the royal crown,” Shiro leaned back on his chair and draped an arm around Allura’s backrest, his fingers playfully tangling the curled tails of her snow white hair. “I never thought that I’d end marrying the princess too.”

“Shiro, cut it out, it’s embarrassing!” Allura glanced at Keith. “You’ll make him uncomfortable!”

“Oh, please, by all means,” Keith waved his hands. “I don’t mind being third wheel. It’s actually nice to see Shiro not trying to kill me for once with his training drills.”

Allura frowned at Shiro.

“Keith is good with his skills and he has so much potential.” Shiro said. “I have to get it out of him to so he can hold out longer in a real fight.”

Keith watched as Allura started to scold Shiro for being too hard on Keith but Shiro was able to turn the conversation around after looking like a guilty puppy. The two laughed and the way Shiro looked at Allura was something Keith could only guess as love.

How lovely it would be if Keith had someone who would look at him the way Shiro looked at Allura. Those enigmatic amethyst eyes gazed down at his half eaten cake and Keith thought about the angelic soldier that stood guard at the western barrier right now.
When the sun finally set and the moon peeked out of the horizon did the festivities reach its climax. Keith was exhausted despite the breaks he took because the whole event was just so energetic. He felt it just by watching the children play and the people dart into the sky. The whole plaza was lit with torches and light crystals that set the festive mood.

There were several celebratory dances that Keith got pulled into before the finale that would signal the end of the festival and the blooming of the juniberry flowers. The first one who pulled Keith to the center was Pidge. They said it was a dare but soon, they too were getting away while Pidge danced with him. Keith even spun her around before Pidge maneuvered them so that Keith would twirl right into Matt’s arms. The older twin winked at Keith and soon, Keith was being swayed through the energy of the music from the band that played at the side. Matt was actually tamer to dance with than with Pidge but Pidge’s brother still kidded around with Keith and even threw in a tango dip. Then, he wagged his eyebrows while he smiled smugly at him. Keith burst out laughing and pushed Matt away but the other spun him around until the swaying chaos of the dancing crowd led Keith into Coran’s direction.

The dance with Coran was more of a lecture than an actual dance but Coran was patient while Keith got the hang of his more advanced steps. Soon, Keith was grinning while Coran twirled and guided him along the dancefloor and it ended with an extravagant half push, half spin that led Keith to Allura.

The queen curtsied with the traditional Altean bow and Keith mirrored what she did. He took her hand into his and the two of them danced along with the festive beat of the song. Allura laughed when she skipped and snapped her wings open, slightly lifting Keith off the ground before they landed again; Keith didn’t really take surprise flights well but he was getting used to it.

Allura spun him around and Keith landed in Shiro’s arms. His mentor and oddly, a friend he has grown close with during his stay here in Altea led him through some smooth steps that Keith struggled with at first. Thank God or whatever greater power there was that Keith was born with exceptional reflexes and a sense of rhythm that he was able to follow Shiro’s wide steps and twirls.

Shiro gently pushed him off after he spun Keith around and the other almost tripped from an uneven portion on the cobblestone floor but Hunk caught him just in time.

“Having a great time?” Hunk asked him cheerfully while they danced along the moving crowd in the plaza.

“Yeah, I think I’ve danced enough to last me a lifetime.” Keith nodded, a bit breathless from being passed around. “Angels really know how to party, huh?”

“Oh, man. Wait ’til you see the Winter Solstice festival!” Hunk got a little too excited that their steps sped up and he was half lifting Keith into little flight jumps. “We have the Winter Duel contest and amazing soups of all kinds to fight the cold! Oh, and that’s also the time when the snow owls migrate here to nest, they’re really pretty!” Hunk rambled on until he stopped when the beat of the song slowed.

This was it.

“Well, Keith,” Hunk stepped back and bowed their traditional bow which Keith mirrored again. “It’s time for the juniberry waltz. I’m going to find Shay.”

This was the dance Pidge and Matt were talking about where you invite your love interest to dance
and it’s supposed to be good luck if the juniberry buds offered to you bloom at midnight.”

“Thanks for the great time, Hunk.” Keith nodded. He had danced most of the night away and there was still no sign of Lance. Keith tried not to think that it was all a cruel prank and more importantly, he hoped that nothing bad happened at the Western Barrier where Lance was supposed to be patrolling for the week.

Keith looked around and saw that people had paired up and were waltzing lovingly in each other’s arms. The solitude of standing all by himself made him feel awkward and embarrassed; Hunk held Shay as they swayed lovingly. Shiro and Allura closely waltzed as well with their wings brushing each other’s, a gesture Keith learned to hold intimacy in angelic culture.

Sighing, Keith turned to leave; Lance wasn’t going to show up tonight and his hopes ended up crushed. But then, Keith stopped in his tracks as the people in the crowd moved aside to reveal Lance standing there with a wreath of juniberry buds in his hand. He had put on a fresh shirt and his hair was still damp and neatly pushed back like he rushed here from his post at the west.

Lance was here.

Lance kept his word.

Slowly, the angel made his way towards Keith who couldn’t find it in him to look away. The music had slowed down into something gentle, loving, and passionate. Around them, people gave juniberry buds to their partners and soon, Lance was standing in front of him.

Keith wanted to say something but the words were trapped in his throat mostly because he didn’t know what to say first. He wanted to tell Lance how handsome he looked tonight but that feeling was overwhelmed by the memories of their fight.

Lance smiled at him apologetically, his blue eyes catching the moonlight which made the silver in them glow with gentleness. He bowed but it was lower than how Shiro or Hunk executed it. The depth of the bow almost looked like a sincere apology. Keith was about to mirror the gesture as customary but Lance quickly lifted his head and shook it;

“Please, don’t,” he said gently. “I owe it to you.” He lifted the crown of juniberry buds. “Will you accept this?”

Keith’s response was to lower his head and Lance placed the crown upon his head. The pink flowers were a stark contrast against his jet black hair. They looked at each other, unmoving.

Lance was the first to look away. “I…I guess…shouldn’t we? I know you’re still probably pissed off…!” Lance halted when Keith threw his arms around his neck and yanked him close into a tight embrace.

“First of all, fuck you, Lance! Don’t you disappear on me like that!” Keith hissed and pulled back to looked intently in Lance’s eyes. “I had to find out from Shiro that you were sent to patrol the barrier far west. Your awesome cat-lion-cherubim-pet wouldn’t let me see you. I was fucking worried! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

Bewildered Lance blinked but his arms locked around Keith’s waist. “So-Sorry, sweetheart. You were angry with me and I couldn’t face you yet.”

“You’re confusing and we can’t make this work without you telling me what I should and should not do. I can’t keep guessing what happened, Lance.”
“I know that I can trust you with that part of my life now, Keith.” Lance replied as he took Keith’s hand into his own and placed a gentle kiss on each of his fingers. “But, I’d like to dance with you first. You know, to make it up to you?”

“Hm, I don’t know…” Keith frowned and Lance’s shoulders drooped.

“Aw, come on! I thought we bonded?!?”

Keith chuckled. “Sure, whatever.” He leaned in and pressed his head against Lance’s chest. “Impress me.”
Lance grinned and true to his word as Lance always was, Keith was swept away as his angel led him in the waltz. They twirled and never once did Lance let him go. Keith found himself blushing and grinning and the world was a blur around them that nothing else existed. The song being played came into a rise of dramatic tempo with the violins and the beautiful voices of the choir matched it with lyrics that Keith didn’t understand.

Then suddenly, the song reached a climax and every winged person in the crowd snapped their wings open and they flew up to dance in the air. It was breathtaking as Keith watched them do aerial flips and spins in midair. It looked romantic like birds in courtship. The only ones left on the ground were Pidge and Matt who had ditched the dance to buy some food and the band and choir.

Lance’s gaze fell and he looked defeated. “I’m sorry, Keith. I can’t---“

“Shhh… Shut up.” Keith leaned in kissed him. Nothing else mattered because for Keith, he didn’t care if they were in the sky or not; anywhere with Lance was heaven.

Anywhere with Lance was home.

Lance returned the kiss. It was delicate and deep and wild and loving and everything else Keith adored when he kissed Lance; it was perfect. That was the best thing Keith had to describe the way Lance made him feel. Gently, he pulled back and looked at Lance who broke into a smile. Lance reached up and cupped the side of Keith’s face, smoothing his thumb to caress his cheek.

“Let’s get out of here.” Lance breathed. The two of them were still so close to each other from their kiss that their breaths mingled between them.

“Why?” Keith asked with a tone of confusion; the dance wasn’t done yet.

“There’s a place I want to show you.” Lance replied and his fingers interwined with Keith’s as he led him away from the crowd. “It’s got the best seat in the house.”

~

It was a half an hour walk from the capital and they went past the woods like how they did when they went to Lance’s house. However, instead of going westward where the lake was, Lance led
them east. The ground started to rise and soon, they were hiking up a small hill.

“Lance, where are you taking me?” Keith asked as he followed behind. Never once had Lance let go of his hand since they left town.

“You’ll see.” Lance replied as he helped Keith over a fallen log. “It’s just on the other side of this hill.”

They slid down the hill and landed on a flat field at the foot of it. It was dark with the moon hiding behind some thick clouds, but Lance can see better in the dark than Keith did so Keith followed where the other towed him. Keith could make up grass that grew until their ankles and something else that brushed them on the calves. As they waded through, numerous little gold and silver fireflies lifted from the dark sea of grass that lit their way. It appeared so magical to Keith and he instinctively tightened his hold on Lance’s hand.

“This looks like a good spot.” Lance plopped down on the ground and stretched his long legs in front of him before tucking one underneath the other. “Come and relax over here, Keith.”

Keith sat down right beside him, their shoulders brushing. Before them, it was just a great expanse of darkness and the smell of fresh grass.

“I might as well tell you.” Lance finally broke the silence with a sigh. “Why I…I lost it when we…”

Keith nodded and braced himself for Lance’s explanation. Throughout the way here, Keith had been preparing himself for the ultimatum.

“Do you remember when we fought Rolo at the pier?” Lance asked and the question triggered the images in Keith’s mind; the fight, the chimera, Lance almost dying when he took the hit meant for Keith…

“Yeah?”

“He said something about my time in Lotor’s court.” Lance continued and it suddenly dawned to Keith.

“What did he do to you besides the scars on your back?” Keith’s voice shook with the anger that bubbled within him.

“Many things that I didn’t want to do but I had no choice but to obey.” Lance confessed. “When I left Altea to find a place that accepted me, I found myself crossing paths with him. He took me in and made me believe that I did not need Altea or the people here. I was young and naïve back then.” Lance clenched his fists to keep himself at bay and Keith saw the pain in his eyes. “Lotor made me a member of his harem and since I tend to keep my silence and bid his wishes without hesitation, I became his favorite to take to bed and to his royal social gatherings.”

Keith felt his lower lip tremble out of spite for Lotor but he let Lance continue.

“He dressed me in jewels and silk as a front to the public but at night he—-” Lance wrapped his arms around himself to brush against a faint scar that peeked out of his trimmed sleeve. “I didn’t fight back, Keith, because I was afraid of him at first. I had no wings, I couldn’t fly away. The angels he took into his harem, he cut off their wings every time they regenerated while the mermaids were chained to a pool. For six hundred years, I suffered.” Although time wasn’t a big deal for near-immortals like him, it was still a pretty long time to endure. Lance inhaled shakily. “He made me into his property and made sure to let people know by branding me with a luxite iron.”
“Wh-what the fuck…” Keith breathed out in utmost horror. He knew Lotor was vile but hearing it from Lance who had firsthand experience in his court made him downright putrid evil.

“I had a friend.” Lance said, his voice quivering. “Her name was Plaxum and she was a mermaid. Do you remember queen Luxia from the club? Plaxum was her daughter.”

Keith felt ice form around his chest when he placed two and two together. “You don’t mean…?”

Lance nodded and started out at the great dark expanse of the field in front of them. “She was a harem slave like me. One day, she inspired me to escape with her and I wanted to get out of there that I took the risk to do so. We devised a plan to escape while Lotor was away and we took the very first opportunity we had. The demon lord was supposed to leave for a raid at the rocky cliffs at the edge of the Garla Empire but for some reason, he cancelled it. Plaxum and I had already made the preparations and we couldn’t miss the chance so I seduced Lotor to bed.”

“Lance, you don’t have to-“ Keith began but Lance held up a hand.

“Please, I need to tell you this. You need to know who I was if we’re to be together.” Lance’s voice was resolute and he continued when Keith nodded. “When Lotor was asleep, I knew that I had to think of a distraction to cripple Lotor even momentarily to buy us time to escape. So while the prince slept, I pulled out a long ornamental hairpin that I took care to sharpen and stabbed it into his throat. Then, I ran.”

“Then, what happened?” Keith’s eyes were wide with horror. He imagined what he thought the prince would look like; a vile, evil creature who manipulated those around him, black demon blood dribbling out of the wound.

“His soldiers were able to intercept us at the tunnel and Plaxum stayed hold the gate open.” Lance gritted out the words, had he’d been faster, Plaxum could have lived. “I got out but Plaxum was left behind. The sewer water that I crawled on ran red with her blood and her screams haunts me to this day.” Lance shook his head and tears filled his eyes. He tried to blink them back but they fell anyway. I can’t even look Luxia in the eyes while I told her what happened to her daughter when we were at the mermaid sanctum.”

“Explaining death is always hard, Lance.” Keith said softly. “Her death wasn’t your fault.”

“After all this time, it’s like Lotor still has a hold on me. When we got frisky at the porch, the memories of Lotor came back.” Lance sobbed as he opened his heart to Keith and laid it at his feet. This was Lance, this was his full, uncensored reality; his past, his pain, and all his regrets… this was the real him and it broke Keith’s heart.

“I hate this, Keith.” Lance lowered his head to hide the tears from Keith. “I finally found my happiness but I feel like I can’t take it without my wounds bleeding fresh.” He shook his head. “I just want to be happy. I just want to give you the best.”

“Lance,” Keith said achingly. He reached out into the darkness towards Lance and cupped his face with both hands. Slowly, he made the other look at him and wiped away the tears that fell. “You’ve already given me more than I’ve bargained for. You’ve given me something I thought I’ll never have again if not at all.” Keith leaned in and pressed his lips against Lance’s then moved to his cheeks to kiss away the tears.

“We don’t have to do it if you’re not ready.” Keith said gently. “There are other ways, right?”

“But I want to.” Lance said with ache.
The confession was a painful one but was real and sincere. Right now, Lance was very vulnerable; open to verbal rejection and even to a physical kick but Keith would never hurt him that way.

Keith would never hurt the man he loves.

The realization was a punch to the stomach. Keith loved him and he accepted Lance despite how broken he was.

“Will you give me a second chance, Keith?” Lance asked with pain and hope at the same time. “It’ll be slow but I want it to be with you. I want to make new memories with you where we can both be happy.” He lowered his gaze sadly. “I’m a little broken and soiled but---“

“Hey, don’t you remember what I said before?” Keith pressed their foreheads together, the leaves of the juniberry buds brushing against Lance’s hair. “Despite what happened before, you conquered that and you emerged stronger. Every part of you, even the parts you claim broken and soiled? I accept all of that. I accept who you are.”

“Keith,” Lance breathed.

“Please, believe me, Lance. I’m not just saying this. We’re all broken inside and I admit that I have my own shortcomings but it’s how we work past that to make ourselves better that matters.”

Lance was quiet and he sniffed and pulled back to dry his eyes. “Well,” he smiled. “You do have a nasty short temper and you’re reckless and very stubborn. Did I mention that you’re a pain in the ass?”

“Hey, that’s pushing it.” Keith frowned but it didn’t last when Lance laughed. There was a pregnant silence between them and Lance scooted in closer to Keith, taking his hand into his.

“May I kiss you?”

“You seriously had to ask?” Keith scoffed then he nodded enthusiastically. “Duh.”

“Duh?” Lance frowned and Keith cleared his throat at the awkward moment that ensued.

“It means ‘obviously’ in human slang.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Then, Lance burst out laughing and leaned in to kiss Keith fully on the mouth. “I duh adore you. Like that?”

“God, that sounds so wrong!” Keith chuckled but playfully nipped on Lance’s lower lip. There were little chuckles in between kisses and before they knew it they were sinking to the ground with Keith leaning back as Lance’s kisses became deeper. Suddenly, the clouds parted to reveal the full moon on the roof of the sky. The moment that the benevolent rays touched them, Lance opened his eyes in wide shock and pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asked, worried. “Are you uncomfortable?”

Lance shook his head and swallowed once but despite his effort, his mouth still ran dry. The circlet of juniberry buds around Keith’s head unfurled into a crown of fully bloomed juniberry flowers. “Keith, the crown...” It bloomed on its own; plucked buds that were disconnected from the soil,
bloomed on their own.

“So, I guess this is good luck, huh?” Keith reached up to touch the velvety.

Then, as the moon was fully uncovered and flooded their surroundings with its benevolent beams, Keith saw that they were in a wide field covered with juniberry buds. Then, something magical happened; the flowers bloomed underneath the moonlight and they became surrounded by a sea of red and pink flowers with golden centers. Keith stared in awe, his eyes wide at the beauty that flooded them but Lance wasn’t captivated by the flowers, he was captivated by Keith’s beauty. The way his mullet was messed up from laying on the grass and the flowers around his head, to the way those violet eyes appeared ethereal underneath the moonlight and the way Keith accepted him…

That was how Lance knew deep within him that Keith really was the one.
“Keith?” Lance asked softly.

“Yeah?” Keith turned to look at him.

Lance lifted his hand and lovingly cupped the other’s face. “Will you… come home with me tonight?”
Keith had expected his first time with Lance to be awkward but it wasn’t. Lance’s bedroom was filled with an odd sense of comfort for Keith but along that, sexual tension hung in the air. He actually felt more at home here than in the palace where he felt like he was more of a guest whose move was being watched day in and day out. Here, at this cozy cottage by the crystal lake, Keith felt at home with Lance.

It was a miracle that he didn’t knock over anything when he and Lance stumbled in earlier amidst the passionate chaos of their mouths locking with each other’s. Keith guessed that he had kicked off his boots somewhere in the living room, he wasn’t sure. However, he was sure about one thing as he watched his angel by the windowsill while he lit some fragrant incense;

Keith loved him.

Moonlight poured in and cast off a glow on Lance’s tanned skin and when his arms moved when he lifted to blow off the match he used, Keith caught a glimpse of the silvery scars that peeked from his shirt.

Slowly, Keith got off from where he sat on the edge of the huge bed and silently padded towards to where Lance was. The other didn’t move from where he stood when he sensed that Keith slowly made his way towards him. Carefully, Keith reached forward to place his hands on Lance’s shoulders before he gently ran his hands down the length of his back. The rhythm of the caress was slow and coaxing as Keith lifted Lance’s shirt off and the other easily shrugged it off.

The sight of Lance’s back greeted Keith; the long, silvery, centuries old scars that crisscrossed his tanned skin and the Galra emblem branded at upper center of Lance’s back between his shoulder blades where his wings are supposed to be if he had any. Keith wanted to feel furious for the pain Lotor put Lance through but he shoved the bubbling anger at the back of his mind because tonight belonged to him and Lance. Keith leaned in and gently pressed his lips against the Galra brand that was painfully burned into Lance’s skin centuries ago.

“Are you sure, Lance?” he murmured against the angel’ skin.

“Yes.” Keith felt Lance shudder underneath the touch of his lips but it wasn’t one rooted from fear, but rising excitement. When Lance turned around to face Keith, he reached pulled him by the waist. Keith let out a soft gasp as he was pressed against Lance’s bare chest and he wanted to curse and tear off his own shirt that was barring off the body heat that he craved. “I want to make new memories. I want this, I want you.” He paused. “What about you? Are you sure?”

When Keith nodded, Lance took the lead and swooped in press their lips in a crushing kiss that got wilder, deeper, and raw. A strained gasp of surprise burst from Keith when he was tossed to the bed and he scooted back as Lance got on.

“Off.” Lance growled breathlessly and he tugged the hem of Keith’s shirt. The garment quickly flew when Keith yanked it off and chucked it on the floor. He was half grinning with a wild glint in his eyes; so, Lance can get bossy, can he? The rings around Lance’s irises were molten silver and his eyes had become dark with arousal. Keith leaned back against a wall of pillows stacked against the headboard and craned his head back to expose his throat.

Lance rewarded him by ravishing the sensitive parts of his neck with wet, suckling kisses and Keith moaned louder. However, when his hands reached up to latch and claw down Lance’s back from the intense kisses and he arched up to rock his hips against Lance’s, the other froze.

“Keith.” Came the quiet whisper and Keith immediately sat up.
“Do you want to stop?” Keith asked gently with no trace of judgement or reprimand in his tone. He gazed deeply into Lance’s eyes, searching for any sign of pain but Lance shook his head.

“No.”

“Do you want to go slower?” Keith reached forward to cup Lance’s cheek.

Lance nodded.

“Hey, Lance?”

“Yes?”

“Are you in complete control, okay, baby?”

Keith leaned in to brush his lips gently against his. “You’re in complete control, okay, baby?”

This time, it was Lance who smiled and it was so tender and beautiful that Keith found himself smiling back. “Are you going to profess your undying love for me?”

“You really like to push your luck, do you?” Keith rolled his eyes. “Now, c’mere.” Wrapping his arms around Lance’s neck, Keith pulled him down on the bed and on top of him. The kiss resumed and in the passionate chaos of it, the rest of their clothes came flying off.

“Oh my god…!” Keith moaned as he felt Lance’s erection rub against his shamelessly.

“The name’s Lance, sweetheart.” Came the hot purr against his ear and Keith shuddered when Lance licked the lobe of his ear. The room was filled with their airy gasps and the soft moans. The bed covers came off from the edges of the bed as Keith clawed and tugged them to anchor himself when Lance started to kiss lower and lower.

“L-Lance…” Keith breathed as he closed his eyes and he bit his lower lip when those kisses came closer to his own erection that laid against his navel. “You’re driving me insane!”

“Good.” Keith felt Lance’s lips curl into a smile against the sensitive skin of his inner thigh.

The touches got bolder but Keith made sure not to make any sudden moves without letting Lance know first. The covers were kicked to the floor with the way Keith writhed beneath Lance; sweat-soaked, kiss bruised, and the intimate intrusion of Lance’s fingers to prepare him. Keith gave a sinful moan when Lance’s long fingers probed his inner walls and pressed against a sweet spot. It pushed him towards the edge and he moved his hips to meet with those wet thrusts that loosed him up.

Dark marks started to form on his pale neck from the passionate sucking kisses that Lance ravished there. With his hand around Keith’s member, Lance stroked him steadily while drowning him in deep and loving kisses. Keith’s breathing became short and shallow while his moans raise in pitch as Lance stroked him closer to an orgasm.

Keith tore away and cried out when he came. Lance let out a soft blue streaked curse when Keith arched beneath him and thrust his hips to meet with his strokes while hot come dribbled down Lance’s fingers.

“Keith,” Lance panted, his eyes were bright sapphires under the moonlight. He was settled on top with Keith’s legs parted on either side of him. The blunt tip of his cock teasingly pressed against Keith slick, prepped entrance but there was a shadow of worry in his eyes. Lance rocked his hips twice against Keith, his erection sliding against his entrance but did not attempt to push in.

“Wo-Would you like… to stop, ba-baby?” Keith breathed out the words in the hot silence of the
room.

Lance nodded, looking worried.

“That’s okay, then.” Keith said and he reached to cup Lance’s cheek gently. “That’s completely okay. There’s nothing wrong with that.” However, Lance kissed him affectionately and pressed their foreheads together when they parted for air;

“Thank you, Keith.”

Rolling onto his back, Keith automatically curled up in Lance arms. The night’s chill started to settle in when the sweat dried off their bodies. Lance reached for the blanket that Keith kicked off and draped it over them. Snuggling close, Keith tucked his head in Lance’s neck and the other rested his chin on top of that raven hair.

“You still smell like juniberries.” Lance smiled in the moonlit darkness.

“Really?” Keith mumbled sleepily, his body humming from the high of the orgasm. “I guess magical flowers tend to stick for a while. Do you think I can kick Lotor’s ass, be bathed in flames and demon blood and still smell like juniberries?”

“I guess we could see but I’d rather keep you away from that guy.” Lance chuckled.

“Your ex is a murderous batshit psycho but I think I can take ‘im on.” Keith’s words were starting to slur with sleep and Lance found that completely adorable.

“Hey, Keith?” Lance asked.

“Hm…?”

“Will you stay? I mean, always stay?”

Keith yawned and nodded. “Do you want me to pack up my stuff from the palace and move in with you here? I don’t have a lot, just my knife and this really nice pillow that I’m gonna steal from my room there.” He stifled a yawn again and Keith’s dark ashes fluttered close. “A few clothes too, I think.”

Lance smile turned into a full blown grin. “That sounds great!”

“Okay, this side… of the bed is… mine.”

“As you wish.” Lance buried his nose on top of Keith’s head and nuzzled.

“I like my eggs over easy.”

“Alright, I can do that.” Lance said when he gave a thought about it. “I’m not a bad cook. Any more demands?”

“You’ll take me jump-flying in the sky again when you’re free.” The later part of Keith’s sentence was barely a whisper as he fell asleep and Lance pulled his beloved closer into his protective embrace.

“I’ll give you the whole damn universe if you asked me to, mullet.” The angel whispered the quiet promise as he, too, fell into a deep slumber.

But unbeknownst to the both of them, the threads of fate had woven them together, the bond
between them set to be tested in the utmost brutal way.

~

“And then Hunk beat Keith by three pies.” Allura said while she spoke to the giant crystal that was the energy source of the barrier that protected Altea from invasion. “Three pies, father, can you believe it?” the queen laughed and reached to press her hand on the smooth surface of the crystal.

“Shiro pulled one of his tricks from when we were children.” Allura continued. “Do you remember that, father? When you first met Shiro, he was a fledgling who picked pockets. He couldn’t even fly that high and you were displeased that he became my dearest friend even if he stole my crown to trade for a year’s worth of bread.” Her gaze lowered. “He’s done a magnificent job of keeping Altea safe amidst the failing barrier and each passing day, I fall in love with him even more.”

Allura settled onto the cushion on the foot of the pedestal where the crystal was kept. As she knelt, her dove white wings draped down her back, slanted, like a cloak pooling around her. “Father, I miss you. I wish I could have watched the juniberries bloom with you even if for the last time.” Her voice quivered at the end. “It’s hard being a ruler. I have Shiro and Coran by my side and a strong army to aid, but being a queen... Even after all these centuries of ascending to power as an archangel, I still feel like I’m not fit to rule, father.”

Tears stung Allura’s eyes. “I’ll never be the ruler that you were. War is brewing on the horizon and once your power gives out, Altea...” her voice faltered and emotion filled her throat. “Not only will Altea fall, I’ll lose what I have left of you.”

Silence. There was only heartbreaking silence in the shrine that became the response to her confession. The tears finally fell, staining the midnight blue material of her loose linen pants. “Say something. Please, father, even it’s just one word.” And in that moment, Allura was not a queen nor was she an archangel; she was a lost, lonely child yearning for her father’s love.

Allura lowered her head as more tears fell but amidst her grief, the world started to spin. She felt sick to her stomach and her muscles gave out, making her fall to the floor. She knew that something was wrong but her limbs felt like lead that she couldn’t move them. Breathing became difficult as if something was constricting against Allura’s throat. Spots appeared on her vision and the last thing she saw before darkness consumed her was the brilliant pink and violet aurora borealis in her mind, the mating bond of which connected her to Shiro.

Grabbing that in a last attempt to cry for help, Allura pushed the distress on the bond.

“SHIRO!”

Then, there was nothing.

*

An hour later, in the dead of the night, the highly esteemed head of the royal guard and the archangel who wielded the wrath of the sky to his command, sat quietly beside the bed where his wife laid unconscious.

Shay’s hands glowed with a soft green light while she used her power to further assess Allura’s condition. Coran dutifully prepared some herbal medicines that Shay asked him to stir in small amounts. Hunk stood guard by the door, war hammer in hand to make sure that no one gets close.

“Lady Shay,” Shiro spoke up, his voice hoarse. “What did you find?”
Altea’s head priestess pulled her hands back and the light died from them. Her topaz eyes were grim as she shook her head; “It is grave, sire.” She said. “The queen has been poisoned.”

“Is it with this snake?” Shiro took out a small woven sack and pulled out a dead winged serpent. Shay frowned and took a closer look at the creature. “It was around her throat when I found her.”

“This one is not a native here in Altea.” She said. Carefully, she touched her index finger on the snake’s head and chanted something under her breath. The scales rippled like water and parted in the middle to reveal an embossed insignia of the demon lord.

“Lotor.” There was a sick cracking when Shiro’s metal arm which held the dead creature curled and gripped the carcass so hard that the bones inside broke. “But poison is slow to act on angels.” Silent as it may be, time and patience was needed to down an angel with Allura’s age and power.

“So, the queen was being poisoned for quite some time, it seems” Coran said this time with grimness in his usual cheery tone. He reached to twirl the end of his mustache out of habit. “Which means that the suspect works within reach to be able to get to the queen every day so they can slowly poison her.”

“This is klanmurel poison at work, sire.” Shay’s gaze met Shiro’s stormy ones. “Now that it’s fully integrated into queen Allura’s veins either through food or drink, the queen will die if the antidote isn’t given to her.”

“Do you know what the antidote is?”

Shay shook her head. “I’m sorry, sire.”

There was a flash of anger in Shiro’s dark eyes when his sharp mind put two and two together. He dropped the sack with the snake on the floor when he stood up. Outside, the moon was covered by dark clouds that had rolled in and lightning flashed and slithered within.

“It’s Nyma, isn’t it?” Were Shiro’s quiet words. “She put it in Allura’s tea that’s why she’s so insistent that Allura drinks tea to “help her” feel relaxed while she worked.”

The whole room was heaving with intense tension. Shadows illuminated Shiro’s sharp features when lightning flashed outside which was quite odd since it was clear just hours ago at the festival.

“Sire, what should we do?” Hunk spoke for the first time with concern clearly visible in his expression. They all watched as Shiro took a deep breath to calm down and focus but it only did so much. He knelt by the bed and pressed a lingering kiss on his wife’s lips who did not steer.

Getting up, Shiro squared his shoulders and held those night sky wings close to his back as he turned to face Shay;

“Can you manage the poison to give us time to look for the antidote, Lady Shay?”

The priestess held her head high to meet the height of the sire’s gaze. “Yes. Please, leave it to me. I can slow down the advancement of the poison’s effects but sadly, I can’t completely stop it. I will have my acolytes and possibly, Matt, to assist.”

“Then please do that.” Shiro met the royal adviser’s gaze. “Coran, could you take Pidge and Keith to research whatever cure you can find?”

“Without a doubt, sire.” Coran nodded and placed his hand on his chest. “Please leave it to us.”
“Good.” Shiro managed to smile a little but it was gone as soon as he remembered that there was still a traitor on the loose; Lotor a mole within the Altea and who knows what kind of damage Nyma will do next.

Shiro walked to the balcony and opened the doors and the curtains fluttered when stormy winds rushed in. “Hunk.” He said, his voice crisp with his command and the other angel straightened in attention.

“Yes, sire?” Hunk replied in all seriousness, all bubbly sunshine was gone and was concealed beneath the façade of a soldier.

“Prepare your squadron at sunrise and secure the barrier. No one gets in or out of Altea without authorized reason. Take Lance with you; you’ll need an exceptional sniper.” The archangel said. It is best to let the men and women of the squadron rest for tonight since they’re probably still in the festive mood and Shiro didn’t want to ruin that.

“As you command, sire.” Hunk saluted then he asked. “If you don’t mind me asking, what about you?”

Shiro spread his wings and the silvery specks that peppered the velvet black feathers glimmered when lightning streaked the sky and illuminated them.

“I’m going to get in touch with some old connections.” He said and prepared for flight but then paused when he remembered something. “Oh, and Hunk?”

“Yes, sire?”

“Send out some of the soldiers and find Nyma.” Shiro’s voice echoed eerily through the rising cry of the wind. A chill ran down their spines when the archangel glanced over his shoulder to look at them; the silver around his obsidian irises were molten and it glowed with dangerous power fueled by anger. To anger an archangel was one thing but to anger an archangel by harming their mate was as good as asking for an execution order.

“But don’t kill her just yet. Bring her back to me because I’ll do it myself.”

And then, Shiro was gone.

Chapter End Notes

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forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
The Blade of Marmora

Chapter by plumeriafairy14

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR! I hope everyone had a safe and lovely new year! I know it took a while, but Angel and I would like to present to you the ninth chapter! IT'S 49 PAGES LONG HOLY CRAP. Anyway, thank you so much for all the love and support you've given us and this story. We hope that you enjoy this and we hope to see you in the next update (Which won't be for a while since I got my final thesis defense this month *sobs)

Anyway, here you go! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The angelic woman’s kiss was docile and her lower lip trembled. Her ankles had black iron shackles but there was no chain, the metal being enchanted that it bound its prisoner on the ground. The light from the shattered moon in the matte night sky made her hair shine like polished copper but her wings were two small bloody stumps on her shoulder blades, freshly clipped. It was regenerating slowly inside the linen and the process was slow and agonizing. When they reached halfway through angelic regeneration, the prince would only have it clipped again.

Lotor lifted his lips after the deep, suggestive kiss. He gazed upon his harem slave, an Altean angel that had been in his harem for a few decades now. It was brief for near immortals like them but an eternity for those who do not live for long. Lifting his long cool fingers to brush against the cream of her skin, he secured the buttons he had pried open when he pinned her down on the wrought garden table in the citadel’s royal garden where he took her.

“Darling, that was quite lovely.” Lotor gently brushed away the copper strands that managed to stray, covering her doll-like face.

“My lord.” The woman knew better than to meet those dark cobalt eyes submerged in beaten gold. “I serve to please you.”

Dead words that were practiced by his harem. Lotor’s expression remained gentle as well as his tone of voice but deep inside, he was sickened and dissatisfied. It had been centuries since he was truly captured by a harem’s beauty and that was when he had a certain male angel with eyes the color of the ocean tinged with silver.  The helplessness of his inability to fly away because he was wingless was an amusement Lotor missed dearly.

Hatred and rage bubbled in Lotor’s chest when memories of that angel’s personal rebellion against him flashed before his eyes. He remembered the humiliation of being bested by a pathetic earthbound scum who stabbed him with a damn hair ornament in the throat. Lance was beautiful and he was one of the most prized in Lotor’s possessions. It enraged him to find out that the toy he took care of to manipulate had become an esteemed royal guard in queen Allura’s army and a guardian of the mortal Vessel of quintessence.

The copper haired angel yelped in pain; the sound snapping Lotor out of his thoughts to see that he had gripped her arm at a strength that would snap a mortal’s neck. But angels and demons were built
stronger than those creatures from the human realm that were easily crushed like insects.

“I’m sorry, darling.” Lotor cooed, worry in his eyes as he released her. He rubbed the spot on her arm with the pad of his thumb to soothe it. “Ruling the kingdom has tired me out today and strategizing for the invasion of the angelic realm isn’t exactly easy.” He sighed to put the illusion of being tired and leaned in to rest his head on the crook of woman’s neck but she remained stiff as a board; fear, a quick pulse in her throat.

Inwardly, Lotor rolled his eyes; there was no use in keeping this one around. He didn’t even know her name nor did he care to find out. He doesn’t care to know the names that make up his harem that merely existed for his pleasure.

“You have been with me for quite some time now.” Lotor lifted his hand to caress the angel’s cheek. “And quite frankly, it pains me to see fear in your eyes. I’ve grown to like you, my dear.”

“M-My lord?” She spoke for the first time, her citrus silver ringed eyes widening.

“I release you.” Lotor smiled. “Nothing will do my heart good but to see the light return to your eyes and for your smiles to grace your lips again.” He summoned a lick of purple and black flame and the tongue of fire gently flickered and floated towards the angel. “Follow this sprite and it will lead you to a small crevice in the barrier that will lead you back to Altea.” Lotor leaned in to press a lingering kiss on her lips. “You are free.”

“Th-thank you, my lord!” The woman’s face lit up with a smile but her eyes were wide with the instinct to escape. However, Lotor retained the smile he wore on his handsome face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “for all the pain I have caused you. Know this, you have softened my heart; something I never thought was possible.” He watched in amusement as the light in her eyes softened and he continued; “I will never forget you.”

The woman swallowed the lump in her throat and Lotor snapped his fingers to will the enchanted shackles around her ankles to unlock and fall to the ground.

Then, she bolted right out of Lotor’s sight as fast as she can while she followed the black tongue of flame that flew ahead of her. When she disappeared down the hallway, Lotor listened patiently at the sounds that were carried by the soft breeze of the eternal night. Finally, when the rusty groans of the great black iron gates reached his ears, Lotor smirked. He raised his hand and snapped it once, the supposed soft sound echoing loudly along the garden.

The bushes rustled and there were growls that lifted in the air as three huge shadows emerged from the darkness of the thick shrubs. Three pairs of blood red eyes ringed with a stark yellow and rows of razor sharp teeth dripping with saliva were the only things that were visible on the wolf like creatures Lotor had summoned.

“Time to dine.” Deep and sinister, Lotor’s voice was made to seduce people into his bed and enthrall armies to do his bidding. The wolves snarled, their eyes bright with excitement and the pitch black fur on their muzzles damp with drool; they crouch and looked at the demon lord with patient anticipation.

“Kill her.”

The beasts lunged forward and ran after the harem slave that Lotor had ‘released’. A shrill, terrified scream sounded from afar and Lotor sighed contently. Then, he turned around and made his way back into the citadel to head to the witch’s lab to check on Haggar’s progress with the beast he asked
to be made to aid his siege on Altea.

~

The woman did not scream because of the wolf beasts sinking their fangs into her flesh but rather the sight of how Thace easily and efficiently moved like an assassin as he silently executed the wolves with expert ease by driving his luxite sword into their throats. If he had been a second too late, the angel would have been dinner for these gluttonous beasts. Thace made sure to order away any guards who could have seen the act before he took a shortcut and intercepted the beasts by the gates before they got to her.

Thace yanked out the onyx blade that he thrust into the beast’s throat while the other hand closed around its muzzle to keep it from crying out and drawing attention. The thing fell dead on a sloshy pool of black blood that seeped into the hard ground.

“Calm down.” Thace muttered calmly to the distraught angel. “Hush, you will draw the attention of the guards. Do you want to go back to the prince?”

The woman quickly clamped her mouth shut to block the bubbling screams that were trapped in her throat and her wide eyes were filled tears.

“I’m here to help you, alright?” Thace knelt before the woman who had sunk to her knees on the ground. Carefully, he assessed her with a practiced eye to make sure that she wasn’t injured. When he was sure that the woman was unharmed, Thace pulled out a small rough, unpolished gem and enclosed it in her hands.

“Go straight down the unpaved path towards the woods.” He instructed. “Run until you see a petrified tree then go left to the stone forest. Once there, strike this gem against the ground. They’ll come for you and give you sanctuary. They will know that I sent you.” He nudged the angel towards the path he’d pointed. “Now, go and hurry. I will dispose of the bodies.”

With a hasty nod, the woman croaked out. “Th-thank you.”

As she dashed off, Thace frowned at the two bound stumps on her shoulder blades. It would take several weeks before her wings start to regenerate but years for them to reform back to their original state. It would be much faster if she could fly to the Marmora stronghold but that wasn’t much of an option right now. Thace wanted to save all the harem slaves trapped within the citadel but he can’t do it all at once without blowing his cover.

Thace turned and scowled at the dead beasts on the ground. They started to dissipate into ash but with their size, it’s going to take a while. Thace got to work in disposing the evidence because right now, he did not want to get caught and ruin his hard work of getting into Lotor’s inner court.

~

Haggar stared at the huge glass capsule case with several translucent tubes attached to it. Glowing purple liquid tinged with neon blue flowed through the tubes and into the container that held the silhouette of a body inside. The glass was fogged up with a sheet of ice but one could see the floating body within that was starting to take form.

The witch was inside the back chamber that was only accessible to her and her alone. No one may enter the chamber without authorization and it was heavily defended with layers of spells so that no one can find it. Haggar read the beeping holographic screens that monitored the vitals of the subject within the capsule. The heartbeat was low and spaced far apart but the limbs have taken full form.
“He needs more quintessence.” Haggar muttered under her breath, her yellow eyes glowing within the shadow of her hood. This certainly won’t do; she had to split the quintessence resource between Lotor’s beast and this side project she had been working on for centuries. However, prince Lotor demanded to see swift and quality results and therefore, Haggar needed to perform to avoid suspicion.

Suddenly, one of her the crystal mirrors rippled to show Lotor sauntering inside the lab. Haggar hissed a curse and turned to exit her secret room to meet the prince. She made haste to make her way to the door and she secured it with powerful spells before she made her way to the other side of the druid chamber where the beast was chained and forming into the brutal monster it was meant to be. The doors parted when two druids opened them to let her pass and with quiet footsteps that were further muffled by the hem of her dark robe brushing the floor, she stepped into the room.

The room was enclosed with the ceiling rising up to form a dome. Several of the druids under her command stood on floating slabs of rough crystals while hems of their dark robes flapped from the power that blasted from their hands and into the creature chained in the middle of the room. The beast was pitch black and its form rippled like it was made from black smoke although it was very much solid. The prince stood boldly on the front railing of the observation deck. His snow white hair whipped from the swirling quintessence in the room that was blasted at the beast in order to make it grow.

“My lord,” Haggar bowed. “to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“Ah, High Priestess, I merely came to oversee the progress.” He glanced over his shoulder at her. His half cape flapped at the force of the quintessence beams. Those dark cobalt blue irises against the yellow of his eyes were sharp with a sinister light. “I must say that I’m disappointed.” The demon lord didn’t smile. “I’ve given you enough quintessence which was harvested from the four corners of our realm and the beast still isn’t good enough.” Lotor paused, his black polished breastplate held down by battle leathers gleamed from the blasting streaks of lightning from the druids. “I demand an explanation.”

“Our quintessence resource isn’t enough to make the beast grow in the optimum time frame.” Haggar answered. She held her ground and her expression was difficult to read from underneath her hood but she feigned a tone edged with remorse. “We need more quintessence, my lord.”

“Did I not ship in a thousand gallons of quintessence last month?!” Lotor snapped. His eyes were bright and sharp like daggers while the tips of his hair lifted from the energy that surrounded him. A dark aura that looked like dark blue smoke and black lightning sparked on the tips of his fingers. “My spy in Altea contacted me last night saying that she has successfully poisoned Allura and she has left the angels astray and scrambling.”

Lotor jabbed a finger, pointing at the chained beast that was forming underneath the flow of druid power. “The queen is dying and my time to strike down that fucking barrier should follow soon, witch! And what do I see? A half formed pathetic excuse of a creature! I can’t expect that thing to break down the barrier and lay waste to the angelic realm when it’s far from ripe completion! What happened to the quintessence I provided?”

Haggar was silent for a moment and she chose the words carefully first. “I ask for your patience and understanding, prince.” Her tone was apologetic but she held the steel in it that said that she was not going to back down, not even from the demon lord himself. “But quality work takes time and resources.”

“I do not have time, Haggar!” Lotor snapped. Before Haggar could take another breath, the prince had moved from the spot where he stood and was immediately in front of her. Haggar could not see
but her senses screamed at her to flee. However, she didn’t show a sliver of emotion because that will always get one killed in the Galra empire. She made a sound when Lotor’s hand wrapped around her throat, his fingers that threateningly slithered with miasmic smoke and black lightning licked Haggar’s dark purple skin. Haggar choked when those fingers constricted around her neck and her hood fell back, revealing her face; red marks that told of her former status as an angelic Altean alchemist.

But that was before. Altea had shunned out Haggar for using dark magic even though it was more effective than the regular kind. But of course, the good King Alfor exiled her for it. He was a fool who didn’t see her potential. However, emperor Zarkon had seen that potential and she traded her wings for an immense amount of dark magic in order to serve him better.

Until Alfor murdered him, that is.

And this, brat of a prince, knew nothing.

“Please, let go, your highness.”

“And why shouldn’t I snap your neck this instant, hm?” Lotor’s smile was cold. “I can very well do it.”

‘Fool.’ Haggar thought with spite. ‘A fool without an ounce of knowledge or respect.’

“I beg thee, your highness.” Haggar wheezed out. “The time is upon us, I will deliver what you have commanded with the right amount of resources.”

The prince was silent but he let the witch go. “Nyma,” he said. “reported to me that Shiro has sent out an execution order for her but that task is left to his soldiers.” Lotor stepped back and walked to the railing to watch the hunched beast again.

“Unfortunately, Shiro isn’t stupid. He’s bound to discover that the antidote to the klanmurel poison can only be found here in the demon realm.” He narrowed his eyes. “I know that he will come here and when he does, we can capture him and use his Archangelic quintessence to form this grand beast.” A smooth chuckle escaped from the prince and his shoulders quivered slightly. “How ironic it would be that the creature that will break down Altea’s barrier fed from the life force of the Archangel who fights to protect it.”

Lotor turned to regard Haggar, laughter bright in his eyes. “I can’t wait to see the look on Allura’s face when that happens, if she even lives long enough to see her precious husband become part of a monster.”

~

Lance stirred the oatmeal that was simmering over the stove. After that, he went to the counter and began to slice the fruits that he’ll be dropping in the oatmeal once it was ready. The morning was calm and Lance felt lax and satisfied especially with what happened last night.

Keith accepted him and Lance couldn’t be any happier that very moment that someone accepted him even with his flaws and the wings he lacked. Lance didn’t move from his spot by the kitchen counter even when he heard the quiet, dragging footsteps behind him. Heat sparked on his skin when he felt Keith’s lips press on his bare back and against one of the scars near the bottom of his nape.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Lance chuckled and he placed down the knife beside the bowls of fresh fruit slices. He turned around and was completely captivated by the sight of Keith wearing the formal shirt he wore last night paired with boxer shorts.
“Mmhmm…” Keith muttered sleepily while he rubbed sleep from his eyes. “’Mornin’” he yawned and Lance pulled him closer with one arm wrapped around Keith’s waist. He planted a small kiss on the tip of Keith’s nose which made Keith grin and step forward.

“You look good in my clothes.” Lance grinned, letting Keith trap him between him and the counter. Keith returned the grin this time even though his violet eyes were hazy with sleep and the pleasurable remains of the glow that came from their passionate time last night.

“Oh, yeah?” Keith gripped the edge of the counter where Lance was between his embrace. “Do you want me to wear your clothes to bed?”

“I rather undress you in bed.”

Keith rolled his eyes but leaned in to kiss his lover anyway. His hands slid up from Lance’s waist to his back, loving the gentle heat that radiated from his skin. The kiss got wilder and deeper with Lance mumbling something under his breath which was followed by a soft moan when Keith hoisted him by the hips to sit on the counter. He stood in between Lance’s parted legs and Keith moaned again when Lance slid his hand past the garter of his boxers.
“Keith,” Lance breathed when Keith became bolder and strayed his lips from Lance’s and he angled his head down to plant sensual kisses on Lance’s neck. Then, something piqued Keith’s attention
and he lifted his head back to look at Lance who was hazy-eyed from being intoxicated from the kiss.

“Is…Is something burning?” Keith asked.

Those blue eyes ringed with silver snapped wide open and Lance jumped off from the counter.

“THE OATMEAL!” He rushed to the stove and quickly turned it off while frantically fanning away the rising smoke from the pot. “This is your fault!” Lance turned to glare at Keith. “You almost made me burn breakfast!”

“Me?” Keith feigned a shocked look and his voice became dramatic. “I’m merely greeting my boyfriend a good morning! I’m offended!”

Lance grinned and stalked back to where Keith stood. Keith bit his lower lip suggestively when it was Lance who cornered him against the countertop this time.

“You’re a very naughty angel.” Keith arched towards the other while he slowly wrapped his arms around Lance’s neck to pull him in invitingly.

“Angels can sin too, sweetheart. I may be a near immortal but I’m also a man who desires you.” Lance whispered hotly into his ear which made the hairs on Keith’s arms stand and all the blood rush down south to pitch a tent in his boxers. “And right now, you are very tempting.”

A soft gasp escaped from Keith when Lance’s lips crashed against his once again and when his hips rolled, his erection brushed against Lance’s through the barrier of their clothes.

“As long as you are comfortable.” Keith barely got the words out properly and moaned them out instead.

“I am and I think I want to try going a little further today.”

Keith shuddered at those words and the world spun as he was left breathless. The oatmeal in the pot became cold and the early morning became hot while Keith was splayed on the counter with Lance’s head between his legs.

“I hate you.” Keith muttered later that morning while he was curled up in Lance’s arms and they cuddled on the couch. Two empty bowls of oatmeal were set on the coffee table in front of them.

“I spoil you lovingly and this is how you repay me?” Lance’s voice was husky against the skin of Keith’s nape that he nuzzled. “I thought we had a bonding moment?”

“I missed my morning training with Shiro.” Keith said. “I’m pretty sure I stood him up.”

“Hey, you started it.”

“I-…” Keith began at the accusation but realized that Lance was right and he scowled. “Y-yeah, I guess. But you get the point!”

Keith settled deeper in Lance’s embrace without argument. Well, he actually wanted to argue but the sun’s rays poured in through the window and the house was quiet with only the constant ticking of a wooden wall clock. Blue curled on the windowsill to bathe in the sun’s rays while her tail flicked back and forth lazily. Her coat gleamed a deep shade of sapphire and her sharp fangs flashed when she yawned.

It was so peaceful. The peace and quiet lulled Keith, gently beckoning him to sleep while his body
hummed in the afterglow of pleasure. Everything felt so right for him and Keith felt like he finally found the place where he belonged. He finally found a place he could call home.

“Hey, Lance?” Keith began, the words merely a mumble.

“Hm?”

Keith hesitated for a moment and asked himself if he really should tell Lance but maybe, just maybe, it was worth a risk. Lance was worth everything, after all. As he considered it, he felt a faint throb in his chest and he closed his eyes to savor the warm, lingering feeling. He thought that he caught a glimpse of the frayed blue ribbon of light that he only saw in his dreams. From the conversation that he had with Allura a couple of days ago, Keith had an idea of what that light was. He wanted it; he wanted it tied to him for as long as he lived and wanted it to be the light in his darkness just like how Lance was to him.

“I lo—…” Keith started but he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Oh, someone came to visit.” Lance sat up and pulled on a shirt while Keith grabbed where he had discarded his pants and shirt on the floor. “Wait, what were you going to say?”

Keith pursed his lips and he met Lance’s gaze and he hesitated. He had second thoughts; he wasn’t sure how Lance was going to react to how he felt and a deep confession early in a relationship only spelled disaster. They were testing the waters to see where the tide will take them. Keith wasn’t about to blow a hole in their ship. He thought that to himself but those were all just excuses because all courage suddenly left Keith.

He was afraid those three words of commitment might chase Lance away just like how each and every person Keith has ever loved left him.

“Uh, we could get to that later.” Keith said and the knock came again. “I think you should get the door.”

“Well, alright.” Lance got up to his feet and walked to the front door which swung open after he turned the knob. Coran stood on the other side, all primly dressed without a single wrinkle on his formal coat. A white cravat around his neck was pinned with an orange jewel that matched his owl patterned wings. Pidge was with the royal adviser today and they smirked when Keith met their teasing gaze.

“Oh. Hey, Coran,” Lance greeted, opening the door wider to let them in. “Hey, Pidge, come right in.”

“Good morning, Lance.” Coran nodded with a slight dip of his head.

“‘Sup, lover boy?” Pidge piped up this time but those eyes framed by thin rimless glasses looked tired. Nonetheless, they reached to bump fists with Lance in greeting.

Their guests entered the humble abode and Keith watched Coran step in with ease. His wings didn’t brush against the varnished wood of the wide door frame that was made to accommodate wings. However, Pidge and Coran both looked tired and deeply troubled. Tension hung heavily in the room and the welcoming smile Lance wore suddenly disappeared. It was Keith who broke the silence;

“Did something happen?”

Coran and Pidge looked at each other before the royal advisor replied;
“There is a traitor on the loose. Queen Allura has been poisoned.”

Keith felt his heart drop to the floor and dread was a dark maw that swallowed him whole. He listened in intent silence while Pidge and Coran narrated to them what happened and he felt the pressure of the mission tasked to him by Shiro to join Coran and Pidge in researching for a cure.

“So, you came to pick me up?” Keith asked with grimness in his voice. He felt horrible that while he was blissfully in bed with Lance last night, Shiro and Allura were suffering. Over the past few weeks that he had been in Altea, Keith had grown fond of Shiro and he respected the head of the royal guard not only as a friend but as a mentor. Allura on the other hand, opened her home to receive Keith and his friends and made him feel welcomed. She also taught him how to properly manage his powers and for that, Keith was grateful.

Pidge nodded. “Yeah. Matt’s with Shay trying to slow down the poison with healing magic while Lance and Hunk were assigned to secure the barrier with the other soldiers and hunt down Nyma.”

“Understood.” Lance’s tone was clipped and serious and in that moment Keith saw the lethal near-immortal that Lance was. However, what he felt for his angel was the same. Keith slid out of his trance when Lance turned to him. “Go on ahead with them, I’ll catch up.”

Keith didn’t say anything but he jerked his head in a single but troubled nod.

“Hey.”

The next thing Keith knew, Lance was in front of him and he trailed his eyes up when Lance’s fingers tided his chin up so that their eyes met. The intimacy of their closeness made Coran and Pidge engage in an off-subject conversation while they looked suddenly interested in a flower vase in the room to give Lance and Keith privacy in their moment.

Lance smiled. “Shiro entrusted you with this because he knows you can do it.” His thumb caressed Keith’s cheek. “I believe in you.”

“Everything will be okay.” Keith agreed and he found the flare in him. “We’ll catch Nyma and find the cure.”

~

Lance watched Keith walked away with Coran and Pidge. It was probably best to get on the move to prepare as well. He closed the door and padded to his room to take a three minute shower and a fresh change of clothes. However, when he walked out, he noticed that Blue was acting strange.

“Blue?” Lance frowned when he saw the fairy cat crouched threateningly at the foot of the table while she hissed at the jar of scent beads that Keith sent him while he was away on barrier patrol duty. Suddenly, the fairy cat’s fur started to glow with a silvery blue aura and her eyes lit up from within like golden embers. “Whoah, whoah! No transforming in the house, girl!” Lance grabbed Blue and held her close but the cat thrashed in his arms, swiping her claws towards the jar’s direction.

Massaging the back of Blue’s ear until the fairy cat calmed down, Lance went to the kitchen table and set her down there. Then he returned to the living room to retrieve the jar and saw that the colorful translucent beads had started to turn black.

“Blue?” Lance frowned when he saw the fairy cat crouched threateningly at the foot of the table while she hissed at the jar of scent beads that Keith sent him while he was away on barrier patrol duty. Suddenly, the fairy cat’s fur started to glow with a silvery blue aura and her eyes lit up from within like golden embers. “Whoah, whoah! No transforming in the house, girl!” Lance grabbed Blue and held her close but the cat thrashed in his arms, swiping her claws towards the jar’s direction.

Massaging the back of Blue’s ear until the fairy cat calmed down, Lance went to the kitchen table and set her down there. Then he returned to the living room to retrieve the jar and saw that the colorful translucent beads had started to turn black.

Lance brought the glass up and removed the cloth that was tied on the mouth of the jar to take a closer look and when he did, a rotten, decaying scent instantly hit his nose and made his vision spin. Lance pulled away from the jar and he squeezed his eyes shut as the rot climbed up his sinuses and
then settled in his head through a dizzying throb. His eyes watered, his throat constricted, and a vile taste filled his mouth.

“Holy shit,” Lance gasped as he held the jar away from him with one hand and used the other to pinch his nose so that he wouldn’t smell it. “Man, these expired pretty fast. I should get rid of it.” He capped the cloth on the mouth of jar and secured it with the band that held it in place. Then, Lance made his way back to the kitchen and chucked the jar in the bin.

“I know they’re expired but you didn’t have to blast a fae beam at it.” Lance chuckled and rubbed Blue’s head. The fairy cat rubbed back against Lance’s touch affectionately but when their eyes met, Blue froze to stare and the mewl she made sounded concerned.

“I’ll be alright.” Lance said when he reached to rub his eyes. “I need to go. Could you keep the place together while Keith and I are gone?” because this was also Keith’s home now.

Blue didn’t stir for a moment then nodded her small head. When Lance turned to head towards the door, Blue flapped her translucent wings to see her friend off.

“I’ll see you later, ‘ol Blue.” Lance grinned when he stepped out into the open. A bright blue magical circle burst beneath his feet and the ancient Altean symbols spun in neon blue. With a final wave to the fairy cat, Lance leapt high into the air and disappeared.

At the back of the house inside the trash bin, the bead jar cracked and the black beads spilled before they started to move and gravitate towards each other until they melded like water and formed a single black mass. A gruesome eyeball opened in the middle and tiny tentacles that slithered like snakes extended out. The blob slammed against the bin, tipping it over and it tumbled out along with the other trash. The creature found a crack on the wooden panels of the wall and skittered away into the woods to report back to its mistress.

~

Shay could only watch with sadness in her eyes while the sire sat on the bedside where the queen laid sleeping. Matt sat on the opposite side with his hands hovering over Allura’s unconscious body and they glowed with a soft blue light. Pidge’s twin had taken over for Shay in holding up a spell meant to slow down the poison. Although Shay was hundreds of years old, she had been awake and continuously using magic since the night before. Unfortunately, she started to feel the exhaustion in her bones and needed to rest. Matt, being human, won’t be able to hold out very long in supplying healing magic for Allura but it was long enough that Shay can take a quick rest or for one of her acolytes arrive.

There was a pang of pain that speared through Shay’s heart at the sight of Shiro with his head hung low. His hands carefully cupped Allura’s while his thumb lovingly caressing the back of it. Angels rarely slept and Archangels could go on for more without it considering the level of power in their bodies. But right now, Shiro looked exhausted and defeated. Shay saw the pain and she couldn’t bear to imagine the same suffering happening to her own husband; her mate and the other half of her heart. Shay didn’t know how she would be able to handle it if she ever saw Hunk suffering like that.

If the queen dies…

If Allura dies…

There was too much at stake right now; the barrier was close to collapsing, there was a traitor on the loose, and they were at the brink of a Second Siege.
“Sire, I think you should get some rest.” Shay found it in herself to speak up and Shiro lifted his head, his dark silver ringed eyes locking with her topaz ones.

“I’m fine, lady Shay.” He replied. Shiro broke the eye contact and returned his gaze to Allura. Shay caught Matt glance at her when he noticed the way Shiro’s wings drooped slightly but he immediately pulled them up again and kept them tightly closed against his back. He really was trying to put up a strong front for them but his pain was too obvious.

“So,” Matt spoke for the first time. “back when we were in our world, I got quintessence sucked out from me via mermaid song.”

“Oh?” Shiro’s eyes flicked up and he looked at Matt but the mage averted his gaze. It seemed like a natural human reaction to avoid staring into the eyes of powerful, otherworldly beings. “How did that go?”

“My twin asked for Keith and Lance’s help.” Matt replied while he continued on his task diligently. He felt a little relief wash over him when the crystals that were hovering beside him read that Allura’s breathing had stabilized. However, it remained shallow. “They didn’t stop until they got me back.” Matt’s eyes mellowed as he looked at Allura. “I could only imagine what it must have been like for them to see me like that. I understand where you’re coming from, Shiro, and we’re all right there with you.”

Those dark obsidian eyes softened. “Thank you, Matt.” Shiro replied. He was about to say more when there was a knock on the door which made his sit up straight in attention.

“Were the guards outside not instructed to keep visitors away?” Shay frowned deeply.

“No,” the sire shook his head, white forelock waving slightly. “I’m expecting someone.”

Shay looked unsure but she nodded and her robes whispered as the hems brushed against the floor. “I’ll let them in.”

“There’s no need.” Shiro got up to Shay’s bewilderment while Matt looked utterly confused. Shiro went to open the door and Shay understood why he didn’t want her to open it; she would have reacted in shock.

A hooded person garbed in a black cloak. The mask they wore underneath was adorned with markings that glowed with a neon violet light within the shadow of the hood.

“Come in.” Shiro opened the door wider and the person stepped in and he closed the door, locking it. “I hope you didn’t startle anyone.”

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“Come in.” Shiro opened the door wider and the person stepped in and he closed the door, locking it. “I hope you didn’t startle anyone.”

“Not at all, general.” The stranger pulled down his hood and his mask rippled like water to reveal his face. The first thing he regarded after his intelligent eyes scanned the unconscious queen was Shiro’s arm. “I hope it serves you well.”

“It hasn’t lost it touch.” Shiro’s smile was tight.

“You’re…” Shay’s eyes widened; those tribal markings beneath the man’s eyes and the purple skin greeted her. Shay felt tendrils of power dance across her fingertips. “You’re Galra.”

“Yes, I am.” The man nodded and he placed an open palm on his chest to refer to himself but otherwise, made no reaction even though he noticed the priestess’s defensive reaction. “I am Ulaz and I am a member of the Galra resistance called The Blade of Marmora.” He took a moment to dip his head in a respectful bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet the head priestess of Altea. I’ve always wanted
to meet you and exchange valuable healing knowledge.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Shay felt the edges of her jaw tighten. She admitted to herself that in terms of angelic age, she was young; younger than Shiro and this man, it seems. Gifted as she was, she still had a long way to go.

“As you can judge by your reaction,” Ulaz replied. “my kind seem to make you feel wary and uncomfortable.”

Shiro did not speak but stared at Shay who felt her cheeks burn. “If I must remind you, your kind and mine are at war.” Shay said, refusing to back down. “Your emperor murdered our king and forced us to lock ourselves in our realm.”

“Ulaz and two of his comrades have been living secretly in Altea since the barrier has been erected.” Shiro explained. “Allura and I have authorized their stay here over a deal struck centuries before you were born.”

That was when Matt caught on after he had noticed the way Ulaz had looked at Shiro’s arm. “You,” he said softly. “You’re the one who made Shiro’s arm.”

Shiro nodded silently while Ulaz’s eyes flicked towards Matt’s direction. “Ah, human mage, you are observant. I have heard words in the wind about you and your twin.”

“Oh, uh, like what?” Matt asked after he pulled back his hands and withdrew the stream of magic he flowed through Allura.

“Not only did you escort the Vessel here in Altea, you were also able to hold in a fight.” Ulaz commented which made Matt reach to scratch the back of his head with an embarrassed smile.

“Pidge will be thrilled.” He said. “Thank you.”

“I did not know of this.” Shay said quietly. “All my life, in the centuries I have been alive, I have always been taught that we were at war with the demons. Their emperor was the reason that Altea was sieged and the barrier erected in the first place.”

Shiro frowned. He was quiet for a moment before he sighed; “There are a lot of secrets that are kept from you and the others, all mostly so that it will not cause panic.” He got up and walked to where Shay stood. Carefully, he placed his left hand on her shoulder. The metallic weight was a brand against Shay’s skin but the warmth of it was gentle. “We are war with them, yes. But that doesn’t mean that all of them agree with Lotor’s or Zarkon’s ideals. Not all Galra are bad just like not all Alteans are good.”

“Nyma.” Matt muttered, his brown eyes darkening.

Shiro removed his hand from Shay’s shoulder and quickly turned around to hide the tendrils of lightning that flashed in his obsidian eyes. Ulaz took that as signal walk to the queen’s bedside. Carefully, he removed his glove and touched the tip of his index and middle fingers on Allura’s forehead. A soft violet light shone which spread all over Allura’s body, highlighting the numerous tendrils of her veins. A dull red glow that took the shape of her heart inside her chest beat slowly. Thousands of golden dots flowed through the violet veins that highlighted the severity of the poison.

Shay and Matt were both at a loss of words. This technique of highlighting what was inside without cutting open the body was not taught in the Altean healing arts.

“This is amazing.” Shay whispered and she found herself drawn in. “I can see everything inside.
This makes everything easier to identify.”

“It does.” Ulaz agreed with the fellow healer. “You know angelic bodies better than I do, lady Shay. What is your diagnosis?”

Shay’s eyes sharpened with focus and her gaze quickly followed the flow of the poison in Allura’s bloodstream. Some veins glowed duller than the others and the direction seem to come from the outer veins. The dullness crept closer and closer towards Allura’s heart.

“The poison is doing the damage from the outside then in.” Shay’s voice was hard and she pointed towards the damaged veins and the way that the rest were trying to fight off the poison. “Her majesty is fighting but with her strength, she can only do so much. This is a powerful poison that’s meant to aim and stop her heart.”

Shiro sucked in a sharp breath and he raked his hand through his hair in utter frustration. “So what do we do?” he sounded desperate. “She’ll die at this rate.” His jaw had gone tight and his voice quivered ever so lightly.

Ulaz’s magic died down until the soft glow around Allura’s body disappeared and then, he stepped back. “This is klanmurel poison.” He said. “Although queen Allura is the first case I have seen it in action.”

“You don’t know how to cure it?” Matt sounded worried now and Ulaz shook his head.

“Like I said, this is the first time I have come across this. Klanmurel poison is an ancient way of assassinating royalty through poisoning their food or drink. Although such a practice isn’t common now, it was even before the birth of emperor Zarkon.” The Galran healer explained.

“Of course, who would Lotor assassinate?” Shay asked sourly. “He’s the only one left.” A pure dictator.

Ulaz turned to look at the queen’s husband. “You said that you’ve dispatched a team to do research in the royal library?”

“Keith, Pidge, and Coran.” Matt answered this time because Shiro was too distraught to even formulate an answer. “They’re there right now.”

Ulaz nodded. “Then they will meet my comrades.”

~

“This could take forever!” Keith whined and dropped another leather bound book in the pile that had built up beside him. Time was running short and it was something that they all didn’t have.

“Coran, your civilization is magically advanced.” Pidge called from the top ladder where they went through the ceiling high shelves. The royal Altean library was so huge to the point that they can probably fit the town plaza inside. In here were millennia’s worth of knowledge. “Don’t you have a cataloguing spell or maybe Google?”

“What is a Google?” Coran, who flew by Pidge with books in his hands, asked. The library was so huge the one may even fly inside to reach the high-kept books. The flaps his wings echoed against the ancient walls.

“Uh, never mind.” Pidge grimaced and returned a book to its place after skimming through without success. “I have one that I use but this place is so huge that it might not cover everything.”
“But there’s something that I want to try.” Coran said while he hovered in mid-air. “A searching spell that I used a couple of times during my youth.” He nodded and twirled the end of his mustache thoughtfully. “However, like you said, the library is huge and it might not work with just one person. You need a partner.”

“I can do it!” Keith volunteered from below. Coran looked at him with thoughtful eyes then nodded. “You are a resource of quintessence so Pidge will be able to use the full capacity of the spell to cover the whole place if you assist them.”

That was when Pidge’s eyes widened. “You mean like power sharing?” they climbed down the ladder while Coran descended as well and landed below where Keith was.

“I mean, that’s basically why Lotor is after me, right?” Keith shrugged. “I’m a vessel with a shitload of quintessence and I can power up Galra generator plant if I wanted to. There’s no harm in trying, you’re the one who’s the genius with spells, bro, and I can amp that up.”

“Bro…” Pidge breathed, their eyes shining behind their glasses.

“Bro.” Keith nodded with a grin. “You game?”

“Fuck, yes!”

“Then it is settled,” Coran nodded. “I can walk you through the spell. Come with me.”

The three of them ended up in the heart of the library where there was a wide space. The floor was a mosaic of polished stones that displayed lavishly detailed magical circle. On either side of it were wings made from cut gems that spread as if in flight.

Coran made Keith and Pidge stand in the middle of circle, back to back. “Alright.” Coran began. “It’s quite simple; Pidge, you carry out the spell just like how you always do but you have to channel your power down towards the magically charged gems on the mosaic’s wings. However, these stones will only work for as much as your power level would allow. That is where you,” Coran poked Keith on the chest. “Come in, my dear boy.”

“Ohhh, okay.” Pidge nodded. “You got all of that, Keith?”

“Yeah.” Keith replied then he gazed down when Coran pointed at the gems.

“Mind them.” The advisor said. “The moment that they cannot go up any further towards the tips, make quintessence flow through Pidge’s magic stream.” Coran clapped his hands once, snapping the two humans in attention. “Now, let’s get started!”

Keith heard Pidge take a deep breath and he did the same. Then, Pidge began to mutter something under their breath and the air around them became filled with throbbing power. The magical circle beneath their feet started to glow with a bright green light. The Altean symbols started to spin and as it did, the wings on either side of it lit up with magic starting from the primary roots that were attached to the circle.

The light kept going and Keith kept his eyes on the wings that were slowly being consumed by Pidge’s magic; each gem in place of a detailed feather. The light crawled to each one, creeping towards the tip but at the middle, it began to waver. That was when Keith stepped in. His fingers intertwined with Pidge’s from where the two of them stood back to back and Keith tapped into the reservoir of quintessence in him. He fed the power through the stream of magic; there was no wind in the room but his and Pidge’s hair waved as they stood in the middle of the magical circle.
Coran’s eyes widened when Keith and Pidge were engulfed in a cocoon of vermilion flames that did not burn them as it swirled around their bodies. Then, the flames thinned out and merged with the green light of Pidge’s magic, igniting it and the mosaic burst with a bright green light tinted with fire, the wings lighting fully until the very tips. Coran went slack jawed in awe.

“Well, that’s talent right there.” He muttered with an approving nod after he had gathered himself outside of his own shock. “Humans; such a surprising bunch.”

Pidge’s voice chanted words that Keith did not understand and once the two of them reached the height of the spell, Pidge opened their eyes, the brown irises glowing with power.

“Show me what I seek.” Pidge spoke with sense now and there was a loud fluttering sound as books were yanked out of the shelves from all the corners of the library. “Sages’ souls in the stars,” they continued and Keith watched in utter awe as the books spun around them quickly. “Teach me what I desire to learn.”

The books that spun around them stopped spinning and Keith felt a chunk of his quintessence sucked from him as the whole library was engulfed with a soft green light that did not hurt his eyes. Instead, the light concentrated to form a green vine that stretched out and it retrieved a small black leather bound book.

“That’s it!” Pidge exclaimed and the rest of the books that spun around them dropped to the floor.

“Pidge, you did it!” There was a full blown grin of pride on Keith’s face for his best friend’s achievement.

Pidge reached out as the chosen book floated down towards them but then something dark darted across them, too fast for the naked eye to see, and it grabbed the book with its tail.

“Hey!” the light died and Keith immediately drew out his dagger.

The hooded person cloaked in black and whose mask was riddled with glowing violet patterns skidded to a halt and regarded them with a glance over their shoulder. They were short, which enabled them to move nimbly and Keith didn’t waste any time. He charged at the stranger and slashed his blade at them. At the same time, he tried to grab the book that was clasped in the grip of the stranger’s tail.

“Who the fuck are you?” Keith demanded but the only response he got was a soft ‘hmph’ that taunted and made his temper flare.

Keith readied his blade and his eyes trained on the stranger. “I said,” he repeated slowly, each word a threat. “give it back.”

“If you want it, human.” The stranger’s voice sounded distorted by their mask but it was somewhat playful and taunting. “Then come and get it!” Without another word, the stranger leapt into the air and latched onto one of the high bookshelves.

Pidge immediately withdrew their katars that were sheathed into their holsters at the small of their back. The polished metal of the blades gleamed with a deadly green tint from the spells Pidge enforced them with. “Keith, you go right and I’ll go left!”

“Got it!” Keith dashed off opposite of Pidge.

“Just a moment!” Coran cried after them but the humans were already gone through the weaving maze of towering bookshelves of the royal library. He sighed and spread his wings to fly after the
scrambling people in the hall before they went and destroyed a precious artefact. But Coran halted when he felt a soft tug on the cuff of his coat.

“No.” It was another voice, muffled but female. Coran turned to look behind him and saw another hooded figure that was shorter than the first one that appeared. Even without the mask that they wore, Coran recognized them.

“Ah, Ivy.” Coran said turning to acknowledge the Blade. “I haven’t heard from you in years. I would love to chat but Keith and Pidge might end up burning the whole library down if Vea doesn’t stop with her silly taunting.”

“Let her.” Ivy shook her head. “There’s a reason she’s doing that.”

“Are you mad?!” Coran asked, exasperated. “Haven’t you heard of the phrase; ‘no running in the library’? Much more going on a chase of pursuit armed to the teeth!”

“There is something we want to try.” Ivy’s voice was calm. She reached within her cloak to pull out a slim luxite blade but made no attempt to awaken it. “A theory we want to prove.”

“And that would be?”

Ivy was quiet but then her mask rippled to reveal her cat like face; the red marks on her forehead partnered with the white streaks on her purple cheeks. The top of her hood twitched when her ears did. “I’m sure you know.”

“I don’t think Keith is ready for that truth.” Coran frowned deeply now. “If that truth comes out, the rest must too and we don’t know how this will affect him.”

“Haven’t you lied to the boy enough, Coran?” Ivy retorted but her tone was calm. “Are you just going to continue keeping him in the dark until his mortal breath expires, dying without knowing who he truly is or would you rather tell him when it’s too late to fully live what is remaining of his life?”

“We are not sure how he will take the news, Ivy.” Coran refused to lower his guard. Although Allura or Shiro neither ordered this certain fact to be kept secret, they all weren’t sure how to tell Keith.

“Coran,” Ivy sighed. She stepped closer with her blade lowered to her side and placed the other on the royal adviser’s shoulder. “Keith is wildfire itself. Nothing will subdue his spirit.” Then, she stalked to the pathway where Pidge disappeared into.

* 

This was bad. Keith watched the hooded stranger leap from bookshelf too bookshelf with the book wrapped tightly around their tail. They didn’t have wings and Keith was sure about that because he hadn’t glimpse the shadow or brief illumination of wings when the cloak flapped while they jumped. This could only mean that they weren’t Altean and judging by the patterns of their mask, Keith realized that the person who helped that little girl that fell from the sky wore the same thing.

Who were these people? Were they Galra? Was the barrier so weak already that the enemy were crossing over from the other side? Something didn’t click for Keith though; if these people were Galra, then why did that man help that girl?

Galra were supposed to be vile.
“Do you want your book or not?” The masked person hollered from where they hung on the side of a high shelf. “Come on, use your fire! Use your blade!” they laughed merrily.

Keith gritted his teeth and narrowed his glare. He felt his temper flare but he knew that if he used his flames carelessly in here, he might end up burning the place down.

“Come down here, you shit!” Keith barked angrily and sparks danced around his fingers that did not grip his blade.

“Oh, I’m scared.” The stranger laughed. “What are you going to do, shoot fire balls—WHOAH!” they almost lost their balance when an orb of flame flew past them and hit the ceiling, burning a hole on the ancient white wood.

“Hey!” Pidge cried out from the other side of the shelf. “Watch it, that ceiling is older than your crumby ass! Mind the rich history, will ‘ya?!”

“Shut the fuck up, Pidge! They’re falling on your side!” Keith hollered back and right on time, there was a flash of green light. He saw thick vines whip from the top of the shelf followed by a phrase yelped from the other side. He didn’t waste time and immediately ran around the shelf to reach the other side.

But the sight that greeted him made him freeze in shock.

The stranger with the book was wrapped tightly in the vines that Pidge had summoned but another hooded stranger had appeared and they held luxite blade against Pidge’s neck. The air hung heavy with tension and when Keith took a careful step forward, the stranger pressed the blade harder against Pidge’s throat.

“Oh, look, our blades match!” the stranger trapped in the vines, said.

“Why are you doing this?” Keith forced out the words and he felt blood pound in his ears. He swallowed the lump in his throat only to taste bile afterwards. But the two didn’t answer and instead, their masks rippled to reveal their faces.

“You’re Galra.” Pidge croaked, the words barely a whisper against the blade on their throat.

“Save your friend, Keith.” The one who had Pidge hostage moved the weapon to do its final task and something in Keith just snapped into wakefulness.

“No!” Keith cried out and just then, the luxite blade in his hand burst with light and reformed into a scimitar. Vermilion flames dance on the obsidian blade streaked with a purple slit in the middle and an aura of power swirled around Keith, the flames cackling threateningly as they waited for their master’s command.

Pidge and the two strangers stared in awe while Coran had flown in from the grand lobby of the library and witnessed the blade’s awakening as well.

“Keith,” Coran said but Keith didn’t hear him; he was only focused on saving Pidge and getting them out of harm’s way. Without wasting another second, Keith charged forward, weapon raised and the Galra who had Pidge retaliated. She raised her blade which elongated as well and the weapons clashed in a series of sparks and flames.

The provided distraction let the second Galra escaped her bindings. “Wait!” she cried out, waving the book in the air which Pidge immediately grabbed. She made no move but her yellow eyes followed Keith and her comrade who were crossing blades. “Keith, stop! Listen to us!”
“No, you listen to us!” Pidge jabbed their katars which the other Galra parried with their own awaked luxite blade. “Who are you? What the fuck are you doing here in Altea? Who sent you!?”

That wing of the royal library was pure chaos with clangs of blades and the streaks of flames. Profanities were exchanged on one side while pleas to stop sounded from the other. Finally, Coran stepped in; the Galra Keith was fighting was pushed back while his own luxite sword clashed with polished white Altean steel as Coran parried Keith’s blow with a sleek, elegant rapier.

“You four are going to cease this absurd ruckus this instant or I will raise this to the Sire’s attention.” He glared at Keith and Pidge then his eyes turned to meet two yellow pairs of Galran ones. “And Ulaz’s, as well.”

Keith stepped back to Pidge’s side. “Can someone tell me what the fuck is going on?” he said. Then he looked at his sword which had transformed. “Please, I don’t understand what’s happening.”

The Galra Keith fought with was the one who stepped forward with an answer. “Let us introduce ourselves first.” She said. “I am Ivy.” She motioned to her companion whose own mask rippled to reveal her snow white hair and the crescent moon markings under her eyes. “And this is Vea. We are members of the resistance against the Galra Empire, the Blade of Marmora.”

“Hello!” Vea greeted cheerfully. “Quite a meeting, huh?”

“Yeah.” Pidge glared. “It was really nice of you to steal our book.”

“Hey, I needed to get your attention.” Vea shrugged. “I did, didn’t I?”

“A tap of shoulder would work just fine!”

Coran spoke now as he sheathed the rapier he wielded in a hidden holster within his coat. “Vea and Ivy are resident Galrans here in Altea with their superior, Ulaz.” A pause. “I believe he is with the Sire right now.”

“I think you’ve met.” Ivy told Keith. Her own blade became dormant and she sheathed it while Vea did the same. “He healed that girl you saved a couple of days ago.” Her mellow yellow eyes trailed to study the awakened luxite sword. “Coran, it seems Keith has finally learned to control his blade.”

Keith stared at the flaming scimitar. The fire did not burn him and when he willed it, the flames died down, leaving the blade bare.

“It’s done this before.” Keith frowned. “Back in our world when Lance and I were attacked.” His grip clenched the handle tighter at the memory. “Lance was hurt and we were surrounded. But it reverted back quickly and I wasn’t able to make it do this again for quite some time.” But until now, the blade was very much alive in his hand. “What is this?”

There was a heavy silence that hung in the air but Keith’s mind was riddled with so many questions that he didn’t even notice the front door of the library open quietly.

“Keith,” Coran said and he stepped forward to place a hand on his shoulder. “My dear boy, that simple question of yours will open more questions. And the answers might be something that you will have to live with for the rest of your life. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Keith pulled away. “It seems that you guys know stuff about me and you’re keeping me in the dark about it.”

“All for good reason.” Coran replied.
“Just spill it out!” Keith snapped, his eyes bright amethysts. “What is this? What should I know?!”

“Keith, calm down.” Pidge pulled on Keith’s wrist in a gesture. “You need to calm down or this is not going to sink in right.”

Keith took a deep breath and then another and another. Finally he closed his eyes and willed the sword to be dormant. When he had achieved some sort of level headedness, he said; “Alright. Tell me, please.” He added in a quiet whisper. “Please.”

Ivy and Vea glanced at each other then nodded.

“What you hold is a ceremonial luxite blade that members of the Blade of Marmora wield.” Vea began. “Although luxite blades come in all shape and sizes and can be afforded by wealthy citizens in the empire, those that can be awaked like ours, are only exclusive to Blades.”

“However, that’s not the whole specialty of it.” Ivy spoke this time. She glanced at Coran then looked straight into Keith’s eyes. “These ceremonial blades can only be awakened by someone with Galra blood running through their veins.”

Keith’s world spun at the revelation. “I’m...Galra?”

All this time, this was the reason why his mother wasn’t there when he was growing up. She wasn’t human. This single truth was the very reason of his existence and like Coran said, Keith’s mind started to buzz with questions.

“Dude, this is kind of cool.” Pidge perked up beside him. “Weird and shocking like a reality TV show but pretty cool.”

“My mom is a Galra demon.” Keith muttered lowly as he looked at the dormant blade in his hand.

“Not just any Galra demon.” Vea grinned. “She is our general. The warrior who leads the Blade of Marmora.”

Keith knees started to buckle. “I can’t believe this.” He shook his head. “All this time, I thought she died or left because she didn’t want us... I-I don’t know... I just can’t believe this.”

“Neither can I.”

They all turned to the direction of the voice and Keith whirled around to see Lance standing in the archway entrance of the library wing. His face was unreadable but his eyes were distant. However, they looked tired and sunken and if one would look closer grayish veins ghosted from his temples to the corners of his eyes.

“Lance!” Keith’s heart leapt at the sight of his angel and he felt the yearning comfort in this confusing time for him. But the moment Keith made a step forward, Lance took a step back and a look of repulsion twisted on his face. Keith frowned, concerned. “Lance, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t come near me.” Lance gritted through clenched teeth as if he was in pain. He clenched his fists but the moment that he spotted Vea take a cautious step forward, he immediately summoned his ivory pistol and aimed it at her. “I said stay back! Get out of Altea! I will not have Lotor’s presence crawling in my home!”

“Lance, what is wrong with you?!” Keith demanded and he immediately pushed Lance’s armed hand away from the Blade he aimed it at. “She’s not doing anything wrong!”
For a moment, Lance looked at him and Keith notice something flicker in Lance’s eyes before the wild look of frenzy returned. “Don’t touch me! You fucking lied, Keith! You’re Galra and you didn’t tell me!”

“Didn’t tell you—“ Keith repeated, trying to get the concept. “I just found out now! Why are acting like this, Lance? You need to fucking listen!”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Lance shot back and shook his head, pulling on his hair. “I swore that I’ll never again take a Galra for a lover, not after him... not after what Lotor did to me... and yet here I am, fucking one!”

Keith froze and stared wide-eyed then his face flushed with anger and humiliation when he realized that there were other people in there with him. “Lance, this isn’t like you!”

“How would you know what I’m like?!” Lance yelled angrily. He grabbed both side of his head and shook his head madly. “Stop laughing at me! Stop it!”

“We’re not laughing...What is happening to you?!” Keith was confused and dismayed but he tried to reach for the angel. When he touched Lance’s shoulder, the other immediately cringed away as if the touch hurt him.

“Shut up! You’re never going to manipulate me again!” Lance snapped before he whirled around and stormed out.

“You can go fuck yourself, Lance!” Keith shouted at the retreating angel and he felt his emotions battle it out inside that made it hard to breathe but he struggled to pull himself together.

Something was definitely wrong.

“Hey, get back here!” Pidge was about to run after Lance with their weapon drawn but Keith stepped in their way.

Keith’s voice shook and he couldn’t meet their brown ones rimmed behind round glasses. “Keith?” Pidge asked when he just stood there. He took a deep breath and lifted his head to face the others that were with him.

“Sorry ‘bout that.” He said with his composure intact. “Where were we?”

Coran looked concerned and so did Vea and Ivy but the royal advisor flipped through the pages of the book they were fighting over just moments ago. “Well,” he cleared his throat. “According to ancient records, klanmurel poison can be cured with an antidote from the petals of a flower known as the Ivis Lily. But it only grows on the black stone cliffs by the Cursed Sea in the demon realm.”

“It’s in the Empire.” Ivy said thoughtfully. “We have to cross over to save the queen.”

“Then we will.” Keith lifted his head proudly and faced them. “And I’m coming with you.”

* 

“Absolutely not!” Shiro’s tone was hard and resolute as an Archangel of power could get. He stood in the middle of the study with those night sky wings pulled up tightly against his back. He crossed his arms over his broad chest in a gesture of stern finality but Keith wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Why not?” Keith argued back. He stood in the middle with Shiro while everyone else was seated.
The conversation was heated but that wasn’t going to scare Keith; this was his chance to get answers.

“Keith, Lotor is after you.” Shiro’s eyes narrowed. “Going with me to the Empire will be like serving yourself straight to his dining table! The whole point of you staying here in Altea is so that we can protect you!”

“And you’re just going to waltz in there on your own?” Keith arched a brow at Shiro. On the side, he noticed Coran massage his temple out of tired frustration while Hunk nervously chewed on his lower lip. Shiro was an Archangel who can very well incinerate Keith with Angelfire if he wished it. “What about back-up, huh?” Keith placed a palm over his chest in a gesture to himself. “I can fight Shiro. I can be useful and at the same time I can search for answers.”

“Answers?” Shiro frowned and glanced at Coran who stood on the side with Ulaz. “What answers?”

“He has been told, sire.” Coran replied with a nod. “He knows about his roots.”

Shiro studied Keith and sighed. “What else does he know?”

“What else should I know?” Keith fumed. “Are there anymore secrets I should know about or should I hunt them down myself?”

“If I told you,” the Archangel returned the banter that Keith stubbornly held on to. “will you stay here in Altea?”

“Fuck, no!”

Shiro grimaced.

“I...I want to go with you so I can meet my mom. I want to talk to her in person.”

The whole room went silent. Vea and Ivy fidgeted on the couch while Pidge’s mouth hung open in shock. Keith avoided everyone’s gazes and looked at the floor. “If you’re not going to tell me anything then I’ll ask her. I can open a gate, I can go anytime.” He was able to do it once back then at the pier then he could do it again. Bravely, Keith added; “You can’t stop me; I will get my answers one way or another and meet my mother.”

Shiro’s obsidian gaze was intense and the silver around his irises were bright and molten but Keith met that gaze and held eye contact. Had Shiro been a cruel immortal, he would have ripped Keith in half without breaking a sweat. “What else should I know, Shiro?”

The Archangel inhaled and breathed out in a sigh of frustration. “As a human Vessel, your body cannot withstand the growing quintessence inside you.” He finally said and when he looked at Keith again, his face was grim. “All Vessels are doomed a short life from the day they are born and since you are mortal, yours will give up much faster.”

Keith stood there and his hands turned cold. They shook but then he clasped them together to find some sort of way to regain himself. Then, Pidge shot up to their feet;

“So, you’re telling me that my best friend is dying?!” They exclaimed, their voice thick the tears that sheened their eyes. “You’re telling me that Keith will die soon?!”

“Yes.” It was Hunk who answered this time and Pidge bit back a sob at that. Unfortunately, Matt was in Allura’s room with Shay and the other healers trying their best to slow down the creeping damage caused by the poison. “I’m sorry but it’s the truth. It’s the price paid for that kind of power.”
“I hate this.” Pidge muttered. “Keith and I have so many plans; we were supposed to go to Disneyland on Christmas. We were going to go ghost hunting in famous haunted hotspots in the US. We were... were supposed to---“ Pidge wasn’t able to continue when the rest of their words were nothing but tearful hiccups. “And now he’s...”

“Pidge, it’s okay.” Keith started but Pidge shook their head and the tears fell.

“No, Keith, it’s not! You’re the most stubborn guy I know; how can you just accept all of these? First, you tolerate Lance’s bullshit and now you’re okay that you don’t have long to live?!” Tears streaked down their face and they took off their glasses and wiped them away angrily.

“Pidge...”

But Keith’s already broken heart only shattered further when Pidge shook their head.

“I don’t want to hear anymore.” They said quietly through the tears. “Excuse me but I’m very tired. I’m going to bed.” They wore their glasses again but kept their head bent down as they exited the room without another word.

This was all too much for Keith but he lived up to it no matter how hard it was because he did ask for answers. He was going to find out anyway. It was best to find out now so that he can better prepare himself.

“So,” Ulaz emerged from the corner where he stood in the shadow while he observed the events unfold. “What is the verdict now?”

“My decision stays.” Keith replied. Tears wetted his eyes but they were stubborn as he was and refused to fall. “I’m going with you.”

Shiro blew a breath and raked his metal fingers through his black and white hair. “Okay.” He finally agreed to Keith. “But the moment that all goes to shit, I’m hauling your ass and throwing you back into a wormhole to Altea, do you understand?”

Keith nodded wordlessly.

Shiro then turned to Hunk. “Status, report?”

The royal guard stood up from where he sat and saluted to his sire. “Still no sign of the traitor.” He said. “But my people have secured the barrier through rotational shifts. No one is allowed in or out of Altea without authorization as per your orders.”

“Good. And Lance?”

Keith felt a sharp pang of pain stab him in the chest when he remembered the events that happened earlier that day.

“I swore that I’ll never again take a Galra for a lover, not after him... not after what Lotor did to me... and yet here I am, fucking one!”

The pain of a thousand glass shards tore through his heart and it exploded inside Keith. But even if he was coming undone, he held onto the brave front he put up.

“He separated from the group to guard the western part of the barrier.” Hunk replied with a concerned look. “That was the last time I saw him today.” He turned to Keith. “Have you seen Lance today, Keith?”
Before one of the witnesses at the interaction with Lance spoke up, Keith beat them to it; “No.” he lied and glanced at Coran who immediately closed his mouth before the words were even out. “I didn’t.”

Shiro looked thoughtful and his gaze did not waver from Keith. He looked around the room until it settled on Ulaz.

“Now that everything has been settled.” He said clearly. “We will leave before dawn.” Several heads nodded an affirmative and Shiro walked over to where Keith stood before he placed a hand on his shoulder. “Pack up and get some rest. Let Lance know about your decision.” He whispered lowly to Keith. “If he wants to come so he can protect you then let me know immediately so I can pull up some men for extra shifts to take his place here in the kingdom.”

“I don’t need him to protect me.” Keith subtly shrugged off Shiro’s hand. “I can protect myself just fine. Besides, the Empire holds horrible memories for him. He escaped from that place, right? So there’s no reason for him to return. I’ll go alone.”

Shiro nodded and the rest of the people in the room started to leave. Hunk saluted before he left while Ulaz and the other Blades said that they will make preparations for the trip. Coran was the last one to leave and he smiled at them.

“I shall pack essentials for you.” He chirped cheerfully. “There are some nasty soul sucking bugs in the Galra woods from what I remember during my last visit there.” He shivered. “Nasty little critters, puts gaps in your memory and they itch really bad!”

“Does it always have to be soul sucking bugs?” Keith sighed. “It’s always something that sucks souls.”

This time, Coran chuckled. “You’ll eat those words, Keith! There are winged snakes whose poison can destroy the mind. It makes its victim hallucinate to the point they get destructive!”

“Alright, Coran.” Shiro nodded. “We get it.”

The royal adviser smiled and bowed in respect before he quietly took his leave. Keith looked up when Shiro turned back to face him. “I’ll see you at the courtyard before dawn.” He said but when he turned to leave, Keith spoke;

“Wait.”

Shiro halted and looked at him.

Keith’s mouth felt dry but he forced the words out. “Uhm, could you, uh, could you not tell Lance that I’m leaving?” he felt his primal instinct shrink at the intimidating look in Shiro’s eyes even if it was just curiosity. “I mean, we’ll be back soon, right? It’s a race against time.”

“Did something happen, Keith?”

The look Keith gave Shiro was enough of an answer. He nodded and gave a kind but tired smile. “Alright. Do you want to talk about it?”

Keith shook his head and avoided Shiro’s gaze by glaring at the porcelain vase on the other side of the room. The silence between them felt wide but there was an air of understanding.

“You’re welcome to stay in your old room if you’d like.”
“Thanks, Shiro.” Keith gave a small smile and hoped that Shiro didn’t notice the way the tears filmed his eyes. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” With one last look at the sire, Keith turned and left the room. He made a beeline for his own room where he didn’t even bother turning on the light crystals. Keith dropped on the bed and just curled up. When he was sure that he was alone, that was when everything sank in and he wept and sobbed and screamed into the pillow. The whole world caved in on Keith and he felt the loneliness that has always been his constant companion while growing up.

He cried because he was going to die soon. He cried because he finally found out the other half of his ancestry. He cried at the newfound hope that he was finally going to meet his mom. But most of all, Keith wept as his heart bled because the man he loves did not accept him like the way accepted him. He let Lance in but in the end, Lance walked away.

Exhaustion finally wrapped itself around Keith and he passed out with tearful eyes and a broken heart.

*

It was dark. His path was aimless. Lance wandered into the woods muttering incoherent words. He felt like someone was following him but when he looked over his shoulder, there wasn’t anyone there. He walked again because he felt like it. He didn’t know why, he just did. Something told him to move, so he moved.

“Where am I?” Lance muttered to himself. He reached up to rub his temples from the pulsing migraine and his vision was blurry which was odd; his vision never failed, that was why he was dubbed as Altea’s sharpshooter. Lance looked around again and found that he was reaching forward into the darkness. “How…How did I get here? Hunk? Hunk!” he called into the dark woods.

The last thing he remembered was telling Hunk that he was going to check the west side of the kingdom because the area of the barrier there was more brittle than the rest. But the next thing Lance knew, he was standing alone in the middle of an isolated forest. His palm tingled with a soul’s essence when he reached out to touch the barrier. It felt like polished glass but the life within it was fading

“Lance?”

When Lance turned around, he saw Keith standing there with a lovely smiled on his face which did not reach his eyes. “Keith?”

“Destroy it.”

Lance was taken back. “What? Destroy what? Why are you here? Why aren’t you at home?”

“Destroy it, Lance.” Keith said again, taking a step towards him.

Lance frowned now “Keith, what are you talking about?”

“Destroy the barrier, baby.”

“Why?! ”

“Destroy it. Lance. It’ll hurt you. Destroy it, Lance.”

“Keith, you’re freaking me out.” Lance backed away as Keith stepped forward. He had no recollection of how he got to this place. “Keith, this is really weird.”
“Destroy it, Lance.” Keith said again. In that moment, Lance felt his muscles going slack and his mind buzzed painfully with a headache. He grabbed both sides of his head and fell to his knees while he gasped for breath. The headache came at him wave after wave, pounding against his skull.

“Lance.” The voice had changed now; deep, velvety, and sinful. It woke up the horrible memories that Lance fought so hard to lock away. When he looked up it wasn’t Keith standing in front of him anymore, it was Lotor. “You think you can run from me?”

“Ho-How did you get in here?!” Lance exclaimed. He willed to summon his weapons but nothing happened; his body didn’t feel like his own and in mind, it felt like he was chucked into a backseat while someone else thought for him and moved for him.

“Even after all this time,” the demon lord scowled. “you are still disobedient. Why do you love this realm so much, Lance? Didn’t your own family reject you? No one loves you and no one cares. You lack so much but I can make up for that; I can accept you.”

“You fucking liar!” Lance spat angrily but he was slack on the ground. “You will never trick me into doing what you want. I won’t let that happened again! There are people who care about me and there is someone who has given me purpose!”

“Can’t you see, my little bluebell?” Lotor smirked maliciously. Lance found it hard to take back control of both his mind and body. This was all in his head, Lotor can’t be in Altea, the barrier still stands. Lance tried to skid back when Lotor walked up to him but when he reached to tilt up Lance’s skin, the touch felt real. “You already lost and everyone you hold dear will suffer because of your failure but I can assure you that your precious little Keith will be the first one to die.”
“Stay away from him!” Lance cried out as he yanked his head back. “If you lay a finger on him, I swear I’ll…I’ll…!”

“You’ll what?” Lotor challenged. “Do a little seductive dance for me to win my favor and spare your human?”

“Lotor… I’ll fucking kill you.” Were Lance’s last words before he blacked out and completely lost control of his body while his mind was plunged into darkness.

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Nyma stood in front the unconscious Lance who was sprawled on the floor. “Hm,” she poked her lower lip thoughtfully with her index finger. Her forest green wings tipped with gold in each feather gently rustled on her back. “I was expecting Keith but,” a slow, sinister smirk graced her lips. “I
think this could be fun.”

She walked over to Lance and pulled him by the roots of his hair before she effortlessly dragged him back to her lair while she hummed a merry tune. On the way back, a small black mass of squirming tentacles slithered up her arm and squeaked something in her ear. A wide smile cracked on her lips;

“Is that so?” Nyma licked her lips. “Then I must inform the prince that he will be having visitors.”

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The night air was bitter for Keith while he stood in the middle of the empty courtyard. He wore a cloak over his body with the hood pulled up and there was a small bag of belongings and necessities that hung on his back. Keith didn’t need much; he lived simply and most of the time, out of what he could find around him. It was a skill he had to master to survive growing up alone.

Everyone was here; Ulaz, Ivy, and Vea waited in silence and Coran was also present to see them off. The only one missing was Shiro and when Keith glanced up on the high balcony where the royal bedchambers were, he saw the silhouette of wings bending down then rising once more. Keith knew that it was Shiro bending to lovingly kiss Allura before he departed and Keith couldn’t help but feel the pang of loneliness and hurt in him.

“Are you alright?” Ulaz asked quietly. He was masked and his dark hood made the carvings glow brighter in the shadows.

“Yeah.” Keith replied, proud that his voice didn’t quiver. “It’s just cold.”

“It will be colder in the demon realm.” A new voice entered the courtyard and when Keith looked up, he saw Hunk walking towards them. The huge angel’s sunset and mahogany wings were a brush of warmth in the dim and quiet courtyard. “Here.” He held a folded fabric and Keith took it.

“Wow.” He whispered as the soft cotton and wool scarf brushed against his fingertips. It was in a deep shade of burgundy. “Is this for me?”

“Shay made it.” Hunk nodded. “She didn’t want you to get cold. They said that the demon realm doesn’t have a sun.”

“It’s true.” Ivy interrupted softly in the shadows here she stood in the middle of Ulaz and Vea. “It is eternal night in our realm.”

“And this is from me.” Hunk pulled out an oblong shaped metal. It was simple but it weighted quite a bit for something so small. When Keith fiddled with it experimentally, a tiny blade flicked out. He did it again and this time a strangely shaped tool replaced the former that retracted back in.

“A utility knife.” Keith muttered and he looked grateful for the useful tool.

“You’ll never know when you’ll get into a sticky situation.” Hunk smiled. “It’s one of best ones I’ve made. I hope you can use it and oh!” Hunk handed a small pouch. “These are healing crystals from Matt and Pidge.” The twins might have been too exhausted to wake up so early for this.

Keith was so grateful that there were people who cared about him. He’s never had people look out for him before except for Pidge and Matt and lately, Lance, who wasn’t there.

“I still haven’t seen him, Keith.” It was like Hunk read the silent question in Keith’s eyes. “I’m worried too so I’ll make it my mission to look for him.” He paused and glanced at the others to make sure there weren’t any eyes on them before he said more lowly; “Listen, Lance is… complicated. But
it’s not like him to just suddenly disappear without saying anything. “

“I think so too. I would have to depend on you in this one, Hunk.” Keith nodded, his jaw set tight. “I think something’s wrong. It’s weird but something isn’t sitting right with me. I want to look for him but this,” he glanced at their Galra companions. “is something that I have to do for myself. I might not get another shot at this.” He wasn’t going to live very long so he might as well get his answers before he comes in terms with his fate. He felt like the universe was poking fun at him and he felt that it wasn’t fair. It added to his aggravation but he needed to stay focused.

“I got’cha, buddy.” Hunk patted Keith on the back. “Hug?”

“You give the best hugs, man.” Keith grinned and wrapped his arms around Hunk who in return, secured him in a tight and warm bear hug. “Guard the fort while we’re gone, alright?”

“You got it!”

There was a sound of flapping wings and a gust of wind when Shiro landed in the courtyard. Keith sucked in a breath at the sight of those night sky wings that were spread on either side of him.

“Are we all ready to go?” Shiro folded his wings and threw a glamor spell around him that made his wings disappear. He put on a black cloak and pulled the hood over his head.

“Yeah.” Keith nodded with determination. He and Hunk clasped hands one last time before he turned to join them.

“We weren’t able to send word to the Blade of Marmora about our arrival due to the lack of proper materials to cast the spell to open a communication channel.” Ulaz said. Ivy hauled a sack of supplies that looked oddly huge and bulky. But the Blade, despite her small size, was able to carry it with ease. Vea unsheathed her blade and awakened it, acting as one of the defenses of their party.

“I assume they’ll be hostile?” Shiro asked.

“Possibly.” Ulaz replied. “They’ll recognize us soon enough.” He took a moment to pause and look at Keith. It was a thoughtful silence while their gazes locked. “Hm, yes, I’m sure of it.”

A chill that slid down Keith’s spine; mother was there. But was Ulaz sure? What if she doesn’t recognize him? What if they don’t look like each other? He wasn’t purple after all.

“Let’s get going.” Shiro said and Coran nodded at the Sire’s command.

“I’ve cleansed the courtyard of any impurities that may follow and disrupt the wormhole, sire.” The royal adviser walked forward with a flat box in his hands. Carefully, he opened it to reveal two shining feathers set upon a red velvet pillow. “These are the last ones that we can spare.” Coran was apologetic. “The acolytes are doing their best to make more but they take quite a long time to create.”

“It’s alright, Coran.” Shiro placed a firm hand on the adviser’s shoulder and gave an assuring squeeze. “This will do. Save the other feathers in case of a kingdom emergency and you need to evacuate the townspeople.”

“Shiro, I can open a gate.” Keith interrupted. “Let me do it.”

“No.” the other shook his head. “You need to conserve your strength. You’ll never know when you might need it.” Shiro took the feathers from the box and kept one safely in the pouch that hung around his waist. “We have a feather for an entrance and an exit. You will only use your power to open a gate when we are in a desperate situation, alright?”
Keith was frustrated from the constraints of his own power but Shiro was right. Creating a gateway will take a toll on him and might render him useless for days. “Understood.”

Shiro studied the quintessence feather in his hand for a brief moment, the item shining dully against the black metal of his fingers. Then, he crushed it within his grasp and the feather disintegrated into a million glitters that swirled around Shiro’s right hand and crept through the hinges of the black metal like metallic veins. Shiro’s eyes were bright and the whole courtyard was filled with a powerful aura that can only be manifested by an Archangel.

“Stand back.” Shiro warned and his arms burst into black flames that cackled with white lightning. Then, he slashed his hand into the air and tore open a portal which expanded wide enough to let them pass through. The wind that gust through the wormhole flipped Keith’s hood back and he had to shield his eyes and face from the force of the wormhole but when he peered through, he saw a whole different world on the other side.

“Let’s hurry.” Shiro said as the howling wind mellowed down. “This feather only holds enough quintessence to let us pass through quickly. It’ll close soon.” And just as he said that, the swirling edges started to revert back in.

“Take care of her and the kingdom while I’m gone, Coran.” Shiro said and there was a tone of plea and respect for the man who guided them throughout the centuries like a second father to them. “We’ll handle this.”

A single nod. “Of course, sire. I wish you all a safe journey.”

Shiro stepped through followed by Ulaz, Vea, and Ivy. Keith was the last one and he gathered his wits before he stepped into the rift. The clean cut courtyard filled with flowering bushes and topiaries withered from Keith’s sight and were replaced by a harsh terrain of black jagged mountains, leafless trees, and a gloomy purple sky where a shattered moon hung.

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They had been trekking a winding path going uphill for about an hour and a half, or so as Keith thought. It was hard to tell the time in a place where there was no sun. It felt as if they were going in circles because the trees looked alike but the mountains didn’t which confirmed that they weren’t exactly lost. Keith was in the middle of the formation with Shiro at the front and Ulaz at the back. Ivy carried the sack of supplies on Keith’s right while Vea flanked the left side of the formation.

Keith was getting tired but when he was about to open his mouth to say something, he noticed the sack that Ivy carried moved.

“Wait.” Keith mumbled lowly at Vea who immediately halted. Behind him, Keith heard the pebbles crunch when Ulaz stopped walking as well. Shiro turned and all eyes turned to the sack that Ivy carried. With a single look from the Archangel, Ivy lowered the sack to the ground.

“We might as well set up camp.” She said coolly as if nothing was suspicious but the moment Ulaz gave the order, she yanked the sack open and dragged out the defector stowed away in their supply sack.

“Ivy?!” Keith demanded. “What the fuck are you doing here?”
“I followed you. What does it look like?” When Ivy let them go, Pidge got up to their feet and patted the dust away from their clothes. “I snuck into the sack and got a free pass to the demon realm.”

“Are you crazy?!” Keith snapped.

“Actually, I’ve asked myself the same question and you know what the answer is?” Pidge retorted. “Yes. I’m crazy, Keith. I’m crazy enough to risk my ass and cross over to the demon realm to make sure you don’t get yourself killed!”

“I…” Keith was taken back by that answer. “I mean, I guess, thank you? But I didn’t come here alone, you know. What if something happened to you? Does Matt know about this?”

Pidge paused to think and Keith was about to release another string of nags the very moment Pidge admitted that even their twin brother didn’t know. “Yeah, he said it was cool as long as I don’t die.”

“Goddammit, Matt!” Keith sighed, frustrated.

“Do you have any other reason for coming here, Pidge?” Shiro frowned deeply, his brows creasing.

“Besides making sure Keith isn’t alone, this might be the only time I’ll get to see the demon realm!” Pidge’s eyes glimmered behind their round rimless glasses. “Hell if I’m going to let this opportunity pass me by.”

“With Lotor on the throne,” Ulaz now spoke. “there’s not much to see.”

“Crime, sleazy deals, war, thirst for power,” Ivy shrugged. “beasts running rampant. It’s nothing new.”

“That’s why we’re here.” Vea sheathed her weapon and stretched. “But overthrowing that bastard is pretty tough. Had it been easy, we would have done it centuries ago.” She looked around at the glade they were in. “I mean what I said now; we might as well set up camp.”

“Are you sure you’re not shitting me?” Pidge asked, suspicious. “Or are you going to throw my ass back to Altea?”

They all turned to look at Shiro who studied Pidge with those intense dark silver ringed eyes. “Are you sure about this, Pidge?”

“Yeah.” Pidge bravely met the near-immortal’s eyes. “I’m not about to let my best friend do something stupid and reckless without me.”

Keith felt his throat go dry and emotion bloom in his chest. Even with people around him, he felt like he was alone but it was moments like these that he was reminded that he had people by his side. These were the kind of moments that Keith treasured.

“Alright, Pidge. Keith, what do you say?” Shiro turned and asked him this time. “Half of this is your journey too.”

Keith looked at Pidge and the other looked back. Then, he nodded. “Fine.” He raised a fist which Pidge bumped with theirs enthusiastically. “Welcome aboard.”

“Alright!” Pidge whooped and picked up their satchel from the ground. The night carried on and they found a cave with only one entrance and exit that they all guarded meticulously. After they built a fire and cooked some of their rations, Shiro agreed that he will take the first watch to give time for the others to rest.
Deep into the night, Keith curled up in his sleeping bag. The fire had died down and only embers were visible in the darkness of the cave. Keith turned on his sleeping back to face the mouth of the cave and watched the stars that twinkled in the violet sky. An owl hooted from somewhere in the trees and when Keith squinted hard enough through the dark woods, he saw the faint outline of Shiro’s form sitting on top of a high boulder while he kept watch.

“Hey, Keith.” Pidge whispered from where they laid in their own sleeping bag beside Keith. “Are you awake?”

“Yeah.” Keith turned to lay on his side to face Pidge. “What’s up?”

Pidge stared at him for a moment and Keith saw the sadness that flickered in their brown eyes. They heaved a sigh and pulled the covers up to their chin.

“Pidge?”

“Are you really going to die soon?” Pidge’s question was quiet and their words quivered with the tears that glistened in their eyes. “Is there no other way to save you?”

Keith fell quiet and sighed softly. The rush of the events from last night returned to him now that his mind wasn’t so busy trying to stay alert and survive in an alien realm. The more the power inside him grew, the weaker his body became as a price.

“I don’t know, Pidge.” Keith admitted.

“And you’re okay with all of this?”

“Oh course not” Keith shook his head. “I hate this. I really do hate it and I think it’s…I think it’s fucking unfair.” His hands clenched the blanket. “I don’t deserve this and yet, here I am; dying.”

“Maybe there’s a way to save you.” Pidge desperately held on to hope. “Keith, you have your whole life ahead of you; we’re going to go travelling, we’re going to go back home after all of this is over.” They lifted their head. “You’ve just met the most awesome people and I’ve never seen you so actively spending time with others back in our world.”

Keith felt a vise around his heart; he’s just starting to gain so much but that was about to be gone soon. He felt that he’s always been doomed to be on his own. He wanted to burn everything to the ground, wanted to destroy fate itself but who can do that?

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” Keith lied. He didn’t know what else to say to Pidge. If he told them the extent of his feelings on the matter, he’d only distress them even more and Keith didn’t want to burden anyone more than he already has. “Let’s not think about that just yet, okay? I’m still alive. Maybe we can find a way to reverse the effects my quintessence is doing to me while we’re here too.”

“You’re really calm about this and you’re the most hot headed person I know.” Pidge commented.

Keith gave a soft ‘heh’. “I guess I’m just too tired to do anything right now.”

Silence fell between them for a moment and Keith’s gaze traced the freckles on Pidge’s nose while the other was curled up in their sleeping back.

“If you’re doing that dot-to-dot thing and trying to draw a dick on of my freckles,” Pidge’s tone was filled with dry sarcasm. “then you should give up. I tried doing that and I can’t make one out; my freckles are too scattered.”
“Really? I’ve already made out five.”

“You kinky bastard.”

Keith snorted and grinned in victory.

“Hey, Keith.”

“Hm?”

“Did you break up with Lance?”

The question caught Keith off-guard. He turned to avoid Pidge’s gaze and stared at the cave ceiling that dully glowed with fungi and neon vines. “I haven’t seen him since he stormed out.”

“But will you?”

Keith pondered on the question and the more that he did, the more the memories stabbed at him. He knew that he should but something was telling Keith otherwise. “Pidge, I think something is wrong with Lance.” He admitted.

“How so?” The other looked confused at the response. “He couldn’t accept you for what you are despite you accepting him.”

“He’s not acting the way he should be.” Keith said. “I know Lance; he’s not like that.” He paused. “At least, that’s what I want to believe.”

“Keith…”

“Look, let’s not talk about that.” Keith cut Pidge off before they could say more. “He’s not here right now so I’ll leave that back in Altea and focus on my mission.” He heaved a breath and exhaled shakily. “Let’s let him cool off, Pidge. If he’s still the same when we get back, then I’ll leave.”

The very thought of it hurt Keith. It really tore his heart to shreds at the thought of not having Lance in his life but if his angel cannot accept him for what he is then there was no point staying.

It broke Keith but he deserved better than this.

“I think he’s a dick.”

“You think all the guys I date are dicks, Pidge.” Keith chuckled softly. “You’re too overprotective for someone so short.”

“Hey,” Rolling their eyes, Pidge scoffed. “The guys you dated before Lance are dicks. I actually believed Lance was the right one but then he had to go and do that.” They sighed. “But if you think something is wrong then we’ll get to the bottom of that when we get back.”

Keith pondered on those words and shook his head while he continued stare at the ceiling. “No, Pidge, I don’t think something’s wrong with Lance.” Absentmindedly, his hand crawled up to rest on his heart. “I feel it. Something’s not right with him.”

“The decision is yours with what you want to do.” Keith turned to face Pidge again and they continued. “Whatever you decide to do after you figure out things with Lance, I just want you to know that I support you, okay? I’m right there with you.”

“You’re the best, Pidge.” Keith smiled softly in the darkness and he reached over to Pidge, hand held
“I know.” Pidge returned the smile smugly but they reached over as well and held their best friend’s hand.

Gray vines and petrified tone branches fell to the ground. Shiro’s right arm glowed dully in the dark landscape as he hacked the obstacles out of the way. Keith kept his eyes peeled open as well and observed the changing landscape around him. Pidge walked beside him while a single clear crystal spun over their palm that emitted a green magical circle of light.

“Readings are clear, we can proceed.” Pidge said almost mechanically while they read the aura of their surroundings. They were in charge of plotting out the course and figuring out the routes that were infested with beasts and those that weren’t. Although power-consuming for Pidge, it was the best option to take the routes that didn’t require them to get into a fight.

“Let’s keep moving.” Shiro said when he resumed hacking away the low lying branches that got on their way. Keith and the Galra trio with them also helped clear away the obstacles in the rocky terrain. Their party advanced forward until the air changed and Keith could taste the salt in the air. When he strained his ears, he heard the sound of crashing waves.

“Is that…” Keith muttered and bolted past Shiro. Keith ran into the clearing where he spotted the shattered moon past the roof of the overlapping canopies and he was greeted by the sight of a black ocean. “Whoah.”

“This is the Cursed Sea.” Ulaz came to stand beside Keith and his mask rippled to reveal his face. He watched waves crash against the black cliff walls of the same color. “Anything that falls in the water is never found again.”

“Even driftwood will not float.” Ivy followed suit. “No one dares to explore its depths for they will never return.”

“I’d like to throw Lotor in it.” Keith muttered and glanced up when Shiro came to stand on his other side.

“I’d like to do the same.” The Archangel’s words did not hold humor in them. There was only grimness in his eyes as he watched the black expanse of water in front of them. A powerful and tall wave crashed against the cliff and the ground beneath their feet quivered slightly.

“Stand back.” Ulaz warned and he was quick on his feet but Keith reacted a little too late. The ocean spray splattered on his arm and the water was so cold that it hurt his skin.

“Holy shit.” Keith hissed and patted his arm dry. “What is this? Acid?”

“No one knows.” Vea shrugged. “No one dares to find out. The water will drag you in the moment you step in it. There is no shallow part; it plunges into the deep abyss when you step off from the shore.”

“This sea has a legend.” Shiro said, looking at Keith. “A long time ago, when the realms were young, there was an angel prince and a demon princess who fell in love.”

Something within Keith clicked and he felt a lump form in his chest but he kept his silence and let Shiro continue with his tale.
“But since time itself was young, so were the civilizations back then.” Shiro continued. “They did not understand that love did not have to be bound by realm, territory, status, or gender. And since the Empire and Altea were at war during that time, it fueled the prejudice for their love. The prince and the princess fled in an attempt to escape to the human realm where they could live in peace but royalty from both sides considered it as treason and the two of them were hunted down. They were driven to a corner.” Shiro tapped his foot on the ground twice. “Right on this very cliff. The prince’s wings were wounded from a luxite weapon when they fought and it wasn’t healing back.”

Keith knew where this legend was going. The plot was simple; a love that ended tragically. However, for the legend to be tied in to an ocean that consumed everything without a trace, added to the tragedy of it.

“They jumped?” Keith asked.

“No.” It was Ulaz who answered this time. “Their own people drove them off and they fell into the water. The hatred they felt in their hearts towards the people who did not accept them cursed the waters and turned it black.” He turned to Shiro and clapped him firmly on the shoulder. “You know our tales, Archangel.”

“We weren’t always at war, Ulaz.” Shiro flashed a quick smile. “I’ve snuck in here quite a few times when I was a youth.”

“You’re pretty bold, huh?” Pidge chuckled and pushed their glasses up the bridge of their nose.

Shiro shrugged. “I wasn’t always alone.”

It clicked. “You crossed over here with Allura?” Keith gaped and Shiro grinned.

“Her curiosity is hard to satisfy and she wanted to see it for herself.” He replied. “I just wanted to make sure that she didn’t get hurt. She was the wild one between the two of us, after all.”

“Allura?” Pidge asked in disbelief. “But she’s so proper and graceful!”

“That’s just what she wants you to think.” Shiro’s grin became wide and his tone was proud. “My wife is a beautiful flower, but one that has iron thorns and bladed petals.” But then the reality of their mission caught up to him and those dark eyes became grim. He cleared his throat and turned to Ulaz. “How much farther before we reach the Blade of Marmora?”

Ulaz’s mask rippled once more to conceal his face. “The reason that we could afford the luxury of a chat is because we arrived early.”

There was a snap of a twig somewhere within the canopies behind them and Shiro, Pidge, and Keith immediately held up their weapons in an anticipation for an attack.

“While you were all busy telling campfire stories about romantic tragedies,” Ivy said. “It gave the others time to assess and confirm that you are not the enemy.” She nodded at the shadows in the woods and Keith caught movement within them. “They’ve been watching us for a while.”

Members of the Blade stepped out of the shadows. Their masks remained on but they sheathed their weapons. Among the group that surrounded them, a rather tall Blade emerged. Vea and Ivy recognized them, saluted, and stepped aside as the other approached Ulaz.

“You are well. I am glad.” His voice was deep behind his mask.

“As are you, Kolivan.” Ulaz replied and when Kolivan extended his arm, Ulaz clasped it the way
warriors did. Finally, Kolivan turned to Shiro.

“Greetings, Archangel.”

Kolivan and Shiro clasped hands in the same manner Ulaz did. “It has been many eons since an Archangel stepped on Galran soil.”

“It has.” Shiro agreed. “We are humbled by your welcome. Thank you for not ambushing us.”

“We are careful.” Kolivan replied. “The demon lord has succeeded in lessening our numbers and he has spread us thin. We cannot afford to carry out an attack where we have no clear vision of the outcome.”

Keith kept his silence but he stared at this hulking man named Kolivan. His lips itched to ask his questions but that would be rude. He cannot let excitement ruin his chance; if he was going to get answers, he will get it directly from his mother.

Shiro glanced at him and Keith briefly met those obsidian eyes. “This is Keith and Pidge. They’re humans who have sought to seek sanctuary in Altea. However, I think you already know this.”

“Yes, we have been informed by one of the Blades with Ulaz about that interesting news. They are the first of their kind to walk upon this realm.”

“They are.” Shiro agreed.

“Hi. I’m Pidge Holt.” Pidge greeted politely but their eyes were wide with wonder. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hello, I’m Keith Kogane.” He said simply.

Kolivan nodded in acknowledgement and studied Keith. Even though he was masked, Keith could feel Kolivan’s heavy stare from behind his mask.

“What is your business here?” The Galra asked. “With the war, I doubt you are here for leisure.”

“I think we must find a secure place before we talk.” Shiro’s tone was monotoned and cold. This was the Archangel who spoke and not the friend and mentor Keith knew. The tone Shiro used felt like electricity sliding down Keith’s spine.

“We speak here.” Kolivan held his ground. “We are surrounded by several members of the Blade of Marmora; this clearing has been secured and scouted upon your arrival.” It was an assurance and a threat at the same time.

Power electrified the air and the silver around Shiro’s eyes became molten. The waves crashed but even that was dulled out by the pounding in Keith’s ears.

“Very well.” Shiro never broke eye contact with Kolivan but despite the dangerous aura around him dying down, the intimidating air of clashing power did not subside. Shiro was reasonable but he was also a lethal Archangel. “I came here to seek an antidote for Klanmural venom.”

“For?”

“Queen Allura has been poisoned by Lotor through a traitor who worked as her handmaiden.” Unlike earlier, Shiro’s tone did not show the vulnerability he had for his mate. “Research has led me here to get an Ivis Lily. Our healers can only slow down the poison but not stop it. Time is short and
I’m in a hurry.”

Creaking leather sounded when Kolivan clenched his hand into a fist. “Lotor using poison,” he shook his head. “What a coward. Yes, the Ivis Lilly grows on these parts but it is difficult to obtain. Only one lily per bush blooms in a year and right now is not the season for it to grow.”

Lightning streaked on the violet sky like a web despite the lack of storm clouds; an unnatural occurrence, but not impossible for an angry Archangel.

“So, you’re telling me,” Shiro’s voice was dangerously calm. “that there is no available antidote and I wasted my time in coming here?”

The waves grew bigger when stormy winds blew. Shiro’s back flickered and the glamor spell he wore was snuffed out as great night sky wings emerged. They glowed dangerously the way it did when an Archangel prepared to use Angelfire to incinerate everything in his path.

Keith knew he had to step in. Shiro is reasonable, yes. But right now, that was looking bleak. He had to do something before Shiro’s anger snaps out and makes everything worse.

“I think the Blade of Marmora isn’t stupid.” Keith interrupted suddenly and the brewing storm died down as well as the dangerous glow around Shiro’s wings. “Spread thin as they are now, Lotor would have wiped them out centuries ago if they weren’t resourceful.” Keith boldly stepped in front of Shiro and faced Kolivan himself. “I think,” he narrowed his eyes at Kolivan in challenge. “they have an antidote in their reserves.”

“Even if we do,” Kolivan stepped forward, towering Keith intimidatingly but Keith was too headstrong to back down. “What makes you think that you can convince our leader to allow it to be given to you, human? Unless Shiro uses force which would worsen the war.”

Keith held his ground stubbornly. “I need to talk to her anyway.”

There was a heavy silence in the glade and soft murmurs lifted from the Blades that surrounded them. Kolivan’s mask rippled to reveal his face; his yellow eyes were hard as granite and his mouth was turned down into a deep frown. “Keith,” he warned.

“I know that you knew about me, Kolivan.” With steely determination in his eyes, Keith pulled out his luxite blade and awaked in at will. The weapon elongated and burst into flames that surrounded the gray blade. “And I’m sure you knew that I have some questions.”

The whispers died down when Kolivan glanced at the other Blades to glare at them. His eyes returned to Keith who held his flaming scimitar then stared at Shiro who had calmed down but still wore the cold mask of a powerful near-immortal.

Finally, Kolivan said; “It won’t be easy. You must prove that you are worthy to speak to our general.”

“I’ll prove it.” Keith still refused to back down.

“Then, come, we are burning valuable time.” Kolivan’s mask rippled and he walked past them to disappear within the shadows of the canopies where the other Blades were. “You must rest to replenish your strength; the Trial of Marmora is grueling.”

Shiro and Pidge stared at Keith, both bewildered. But Keith just motioned to them that they should
follow before he too, disappeared behind the petrified trees.

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“I knew you were crazy,” Pidge paced back and forth in the living quarters that were given to them in the heart of the Marmora base. “but that was downright batshit insane! That was reckless, dude!”

“I need to prove myself in order to talk to their leader.” Keith replied without looking at Pidge. He had his arms crossed under his head while he stared at the black stone ceiling of their living quarters. He had no idea how they got in here because the three of them were blindfolded to hide the mazes of corridors that they were led through.

“You could die from this, Keith.” Shiro spoke from where he sat on bed that was stationed opposite of Pidge’s. “Switch with me.”

“No.” Keith sat up and stubbornly locked gazes with Shiro. “The Blades seem to have a thing about self-worth. If I’m going to talk to my mom, I have to earn it.” He glanced at Pidge then back at Shiro but kept his voice low in case someone else was listening. “Have you guys figured out the hallways in case we need to bail out of here?”

“I’ve memorized the path we took.” Shiro would have easily broken through a strip a cloth around his eyes but Keith knew that near-immortality has also sharpened Shiro’s mind over the two millennia that he had been alive.

“I secretly used a sonar spell.” Pidge added in a whisper. “I recorded a map within a hundred and fifty meter radius of the path we took.” They pulled out their leather bound spell book from their satchel and it flipped open on its own to a blank page. When the mage muttered something under their breath, light illuminated from the page and green lines and squiggles drew themselves on the blank parchment. The path was clear but as it extended further to both sides, they faded off. “Here’s the path we took and a map reflecting both sides of that path.” Pidge pointed at the far off corners where the map faded. “But these are the gray areas that the spell wasn’t able to cover; blind spots that we’d have to explore and find out ourselves.”

“Hm,” Keith sat up and crossed his legs beneath him while he studied the sonar map Pidge made. “So, it’s like those world building games we play? You have to walk forward and the map appears on its own within a certain radius, right?”

“Yeah, like Civilization.”

“Ah, the classics.” Keith sighed. “I’m still going to beat your ass in it. Viva la General Keith, sucker.”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over the success of my empire.” Pidge’s smile was smug. “Maybe someday you’ll surpass my prowess. You’ve never won a match with me.”

“Hey, I beat you twice.”

“Only because you cheated!”

“You can kiss my ass.” Keith chucked a pillow at Pidge and the sonar map dissipated in a show of green glittering lights when the book was knocked off Pidge’s hand.
“I don’t know what you two are talking about,” Shiro managed to smile despite the aloofness in his eyes. “But this game of yours sounds interesting. I’d like to try it out.”

“I don’t know, Shiro.” Pidge pouted thoughtfully. “You have like several thousand years of ruling experience. It’s not fair.”

“Two thousand and five hundred.”

“What?” Keith’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“I’m two thousand and five hundred years old. I ascended into Archangelhood at one thousand but I’ve been leading Altea with Allura since her father’s demise when we were five hundred.” Shiro cleared his throat. “So, it’s not several thousands of years. I…I’m not that old, you know.” He crossed his arms over his chest and for a moment there, the way he pursed his lips from embarrassment made him look innocent. “Now, Coran, he’s old.”

Pidge burst into laughter and Keith managed to crack a smile but he couldn’t help but take Shiro’s words into account; he came into power at the age of five hundred and became an Archangel at one thousand years? That’s relatively young in terms of an angel’s near-immortal lifespan.

“You’ve been with Allura for quite a while, huh?” Keith asked. He watched Shiro slightly lean back on the bed. His wings draped loosely behind him brushed the floor. Since demons don’t have wings,
their beds were relatively smaller compared to the beds angels were used to. But Shiro did not look a bit bothered by the lack of comfort.

“We decided to get married when we were on our fifth century.” Shiro’s eyes softened at the memory. “It was… an intense wedding.”

“Got the groom jitters, eh?” Pidge dropped on their own bed and laid on their chest against a pillow while they watched the Archangel with pure interest.

Shiro scoffed softly and his gaze turned distant as he stared at wall. “No,” he shook his head. “Zarkon decided that it was funny to invade Altea on the day of our wedding.” Shiro’s lips pursed into a hard, thin line while his gaze turned hard. “Angels and demons have gone to war with each other over the course of the many millennia that the realms have existed. In a sense, it’s normal that neighboring civilizations share a time of peace and of war. In effect, we have come to accept this and have established the common courtesy of declaring war first.”

“Oh. Shit.” Keith breathed. “You mean to tell me that the First Siege of Altea…” a hard lump formed in his throat and it was hard and bitter to swallow.

“Was a massacre.” Shiro finished off and the last word was a quiet whisper that echoed so much anger and pain.

“King Alfor died on his daughter’s wedding day.” Pidge’s words quivered and their gaze clouded with sadness for Allura’s loss. “He gave his life and took out Zarkon then formed the barrier.”

“Allura also ascended into becoming an Archangel and the moment her father created the shield around Altea, the skies opened and blades rained down on the Galra armies that were trapped inside the kingdom. She was an enraged goddess who donned a bloodstained wedding dress.”

Shiro paused and looked at his right arm. The hinges of his metal fingers clicked softly when he moved them. “I made sure that no one got to her during her transformation when she was vulnerable.” The Archangel’s tone hardened and Shiro clenched his metal hand into a fist. “And I’ll do it again. I don’t care if I have to give up my other arm or both my legs, or cut off my own wings…” he turned to Keith. “You don’t have to do the trial, Keith. Let me do it.”

“I have to try.” Keith’s tone was final. “If I fail or if something happens to me, then you take my place. You can’t die because Altea needs you. Allura needs you and so do the people of your world. But I have to try, Shiro. I owe this to myself; if my quintessence is going to kill me sooner or later then I might as well kick the bucket knowing the answers to the questions I’ve been asking all my life.”

“And what about Lance?” Shiro asked the hard question.

That stopped Keith and his mouth parted to reply but the words will not come out. Pidge huffed a frustrated breath but did not dare to answer a retort because this was something only Keith could answer.

“I have questions for him too.” Keith forced out. “And I will get my answers from him. That’s why I don’t plan on dying during the trial so I can go back to Altea and yank out the answers from his mouth.”

“What if…you do?” Pidge’s own question was quiet and their eyes were huge behind their glasses. “What if something happens to you, Keith?”

“Like I said, you’ll take my place.”
“Okay, okay,” Pidge shook their head stubbornly. “Let’s not consider that yet, okay? What if you do finish the Trial of Marmora? What do you have to bargain for the antidote and your answers?”

Keith paused and got to his feet. He walked over to the dresser on the other side of the room and started checking on the small drawers. There wasn’t much; a powder jar, a comb, a wash basin, a mirror, some towels, and a simple oil lamp.

“They’re desperate.” Keith replied.

“What?”

“Weren’t you listening to Kolivan earlier, Pidge?” Keith turned to face them. “He said that he didn’t ambush us because they weren’t sure what they were up against and they were spread thin. With their small number, chances are bleak in beating Lotor.” His violet eyes trained on Shiro. “And we’re against Lotor too. That’s why I’m going to ask for your permission, Shiro.”

“I’m listening.” Shiro sat up straight and pulled his wings up from where they were draped. “Go on.”

“I’m asking you to let me offer the Blades an alliance.” Keith said and Shiro’s eyes widened but he let Keith continue. “They hate Lotor, we hate Lotor; if we work together, we can make progress in this war. We can defeat Lotor together.”

There was a cold silence that fell upon them before Shiro stood up and pulled his wings tightly against his back he crossed his left arm over his torso while the right propped up as he caressed his chin thoughtfully.

“I’ve got to say that you have the potential to be a good leader, Keith.” Shiro replied. “But not everyone is going to accept the Blades if we bring them back to Altea with us.”

The first image that flashed in Keith’s mind was Lance.

“There will always be people who will think differently.” Keith said. “But like you said to me; not all Galra are bad. There must still be angels who are alive when the Empire and Altea were in a time of peace. Zarkon and Lotor might have ruined the Galran image but not all of them are share the same blood thirsty ideals.” Keith placed his hand over his chest to refer to himself. “I know I’m not and I’ll prove it.”

“Then I’ll allow it.” Shiro agreed and Keith beamed but then he remembered the worry that throbbed in his heart.

Keith lowered his gaze to the floor. “Lance is acting strange.” his eyes became like wet amethysts but he blinked back the angry tears that were rooted from Lance’s hurtful words but they refused to fall.

“I know.” Shiro nodded and that confirmation made Keith snap his eyes to glare at Pidge.

“I didn’t tell him, I swear!” Pidge raised their hands in surrender.

“Spare Pidge the lecture, Keith.” Shiro smiled gently. “Coran told me. Don’t take it out on him either, he was just doing his duties.” He sighed. “I can’t assure you, Keith. Lance had suffered in the hands of the Galra but I don’t think he’s the kind of person who would throw around his words carelessly. It could be the shock of the revelation that made him say it.”

“I’ll let him cool down.” Keith sighed. “Even I’m still shocked by this.”
With a single nod, Shiro proposed for them to get some rest and Pidge volunteered to take the first watch so that Shiro and Keith could rest. However, Keith found it hard to get a wink of sleep since the answers that he had always sought after was only a few corridors away from reach.

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Keith stood in a dark chamber illuminated by light crystals embedded on the walls. Torches of violet flame hung on the four corners of the spacious room. He stood on a platform overlooking wide space where three pillars stood. An unlit torch that was set on the top of each one.

He wore a tight body suit that resembled the clothes that the Blades wore. He was equipped with a reasonable amount of light armor like gauntlets but besides those, his only weapon was his blade.

“The Blade of Marmora hold a creed;” Kolivan’s voice was a booming force from the viewing booth on the left side of the chamber. “Knowledge or death.”

Keith gripped the handle of his knife tighter when the torch on the first pillar burst into flames and a Blade stepped into the arena in front of him. Their weapon awaked and extended to elongate into black bladed halberd.

“The way of the Galra is by combat.” Kolivan continued. “This, we hold true. Therefore, Keith Kogane, you must earn what you seek through the hardship of battle. However, tell us as to why we should allow you the sanctity of our Trial. It is your friend who needs the antidote, why doesn’t he stand in your place?”

Keith felt his throat go dry and he stared up at the booth where Kolivan stood with Ulaz, Pidge, and Shiro. He chewed on his lower lip until he tasted blood. He had to choose his words carefully or things might turn to shit.

“Because it’s not just the antidote that I want.” Keith raised his voice so that everyone could hear. “I came here to speak with my mother who happens to be your leader.”

Quiet whispers rose from the dark corners of the chamber but Keith dared to continued; “If I can earn that chance to speak with her, I also have a proposition the she might be interested in.”

Silence.

Kolivan stepped forward in the clear view of the Trial chamber with his hands loosely crossed behind him. “And if you die?”

“Then I die. Shiro will take my place to earn the antidote and your leader can keep her secrets.”

“Keith---!” Pidge interrupted but Shiro held an arm on their path to stop them. Keith didn’t budge; he had made up his mind. He knew that this wasn’t going to be easy but if this was the only way, then so be it.

“It seems that the human has nothing to lose except his life.” Kolivan confirmed. “Earn your right to speak to our leader. If you are truly are her son, then prove it!” The silence was pierced by two booming dream beats and the torches flared brighter. “Begin the Trials of Marmora!”

Bracing himself, Keith awaked his blade but did not attempt to use his flames to enforce it just yet. His opponent took a stance and anticipated Keith’s attack.

“Turn back, human.” he taunted. “You have no place here. Let the Archangel take your place to save his mate. Our leader wouldn’t speak to a babe she abandoned!”
Keith gritted his teeth and his temper flared. “I’ll believe that when I hear her say it!” Without wasting any more time, Keith lunged forward and raised his blade. Sparks flew when luxite blades clashed. Keith was thrown back by the sheer strength of his opponent and it was difficult to land a blow with that halberd parrying his attacks from a distance. He racked his mind for the pointers and lessons Shiro’s training had put him through. Keith used his size as an advantage. His opponent was slow and he compensated with that with his brute strength and that halberd of his.

He wasn’t able to dodge fast enough when the halberd’s tip jabbed at him and Keith cried out when the blade slice his shoulder.

“Keith!” Shiro cried out from the booth. “Kolivan, you’re going to kill him!”

“Let him go! Let him go!” Pidge panicked.

The searing pain blurred his vision but then he saw his opponent coming at him again. Rolling out of the way before his skull was sliced open, Keith gave a power kick and used the momentum to get himself up on his feet. Parrying another blow, Keith found an opening through his opponent’s defenses and slipped past the dull end of the spear shaft. Crying out fiercely, Keith wrapped his hand with vermilion flames before he went and punched the demon on the face.

The flames immediately burned through and shattered his opponent’s mask. The force of the flames and Keith’s strength knocked the Galra back and the other slid off to the side of the arena, unconscious. The other Blades pulled him out to safety.

Keith panted and he felt slightly dizzy from the use of his power but he shook his head and gulped in deep breaths until he was able to steady himself. He reached up to touch the crook of shoulder and felt something warm and wet and when Keith checked his fingers, they were stained with blood.

The first torch died and the second lit up.

The air around Keith grew thin and he felt like his body suit was constricting him. The lines that were etched around his outfit glowed with a soft neon purple light and it tightened again. He tried to fiddle with the zipper of the high collar around his neck but it wasn’t budging.

“Keith.”

Ice slid down his spine at the familiar voice. Blood was rushing out of his wound and his body ached from the amount of power he put into his punch. His vision wavered but he was sure of who stood in front of him.

“L-Lance?” Keith squinted. “Is that you?”

“The one and only!” Lance grinned and walked towards Keith. However, something didn’t seem right and Keith stepped back. Lance frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“You were supposed to be in Altea.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Pidge demanded from where they were in the booth.

Kolivan gestured at Keith who was down at the arena. “This is the second part of the Trails designed to test the strength of Keith’s mind. That suit he is wearing is special; it makes him hallucinate and that illusion will be his test.” He paused and crossed his arms sternly over his broad chest. “And in this moment, that person is the one Keith wants to see the most.”

“Yeah, I heard you ran off to do something stupid so I came after you.” Lance said and held out his
hand. Keith stared at it and then at Lance. “Come on, let’s go back.”

“I thought you hated me,” Keith frowned. “That time at the library, you were mad that I’m part Galra.”

“I was but that doesn’t matter anymore, does it?” Lance said and he gestured at his hand. “Let’s go.”

“But Allura and the poison!” Keith argued. “If I don’t finish this Trial, I won’t get the cure and she’ll die!”

“Leave it to Shiro.”

“What?”

Lance huffed impatiently. “Leave that to Shiro; it’s his problem, okay? You shouldn’t waste time on something you can’t do anyway.”

Keith stopped. “Lance, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’re just a human, Keith.” Lance sighed. “You can’t do this, you’re too fragile. You’ll only get yourself killed. That’s why you need angels to guard you, remember? You can’t fight these things on your own, you simply can’t do it.”

“Are you calling me weak?” Keith narrowed his eyes from the blow to the ego and he gritted his teeth out of anger. “You think I’m weak!”

“I’m not calling you weak,” Lance said and he pulled back his hand. “I’m saying that you’re valuable, Keith. This is all a waste so you might as well give up.”

“This is the only chance I can get to talk to my mom, Lance!” Keith shouted and the tears streaked down his face. His heart throbbed at the hurtful reality but it also hurt that Lance didn’t care how much all of this meant to him. “I accepted you! I accepted everything about you, flaws and all! But if you don’t care about that… if you can’t accept who I am, then I don’t need you!”

He shook his head and shouted; “YOU’RE NOT REAL!”

The second torch died and Lance’s illusion was sliced in half by a bladed fan that spun in the air. Keith was barely able to avoid the new attack when the illusion was replaced by a new opponent who caught the weapon when it returned to them.

It took a split second for everything to register for Keith when the masked newcomer pulled out a second dormant blade which they awaked. The luxite rippled in their hand and transformed into another bladed fan. The opponent formed a ball of golden flame in their hand and chucked it towards the final torch to light it before they took a graceful stance as if preparing for a dance. Their form was slimmer and more lithe than his first opponent. However, the weapons they wielded told otherwise that this dance Keith was about to participate in was a dance of death.

“You.” Keith whispered in disbelief before he glared and enveloped his scimitar with fire.

The Galra’s response was to wrap their blades with golden flames and Keith prepared himself as best as he could. But when his opponent attacked, Keith was barely able to keep up with the speed. The flames flared brighter whenever their weapons clashed.

“You’re her, aren’t you?” Keith demanded when he was pushed against their parrying blades. “We’re the same!”
“Focus on the Trial!” The voice that replied muffled by the mask was female and that was enough for Keith. “Your enemy will not hesitate to kill you.”

“Are you her?!” Keith shouted over the clang of parrying steel. Sparks flew and fires blazed as the fight carried on. “Answer me!”

“Earn your answers and you shall have them!” She snapped and her attacks were vicious. If Shiro didn’t give Keith any kind of training, he would have lost at the signal of the first torch.

Exhaustion rattled Keith’s bones and his movements started to become sluggish but he refused to give up. He kept going even if he was starting to see streaks of white in his vision.

“Give up!”

“No!” Keith formed a barrier of flames to push back the general but she broke through it with a single slash. “I will not leave until you tell me why you left me and dad! Argh-!” Keith cried out when he felt a hard kick on his back and he fell on the floor, face first. “I won’t…” he spat out blood. “…leave!”

The leader of the blades loomed over him. When Keith attempted to get up, she roughly pushed him back down on the chest with her boot.

“Stubborn just like Ryou.”

Keith stared in wide-eyed shock; he hasn’t heard his father’s name in sixteen years. The general’s mask rippled to reveal her face and she pulled down her hood. Keith found himself staring into deep violet eyes that mirrored his. His mother’s blade fans reverted into their dormant forms before she stepped back to free Keith who laid panting on the floor, half unconscious. Shiro didn’t waste time and quickly spread his wings to fly down with Pidge in his arms. The two of them helped Keith up and Pidge immediately took out their spell book for a first aid spell to close the gaping wound on his shoulder and stop the bleeding before they can get enough time to fully heal it later.

“The Trials of Marmora have ended!” The general announced into the whole chamber. “Keith Kogane has passed the three trials that tested his combat skills, the fortitude of his mind, and the willpower of his heart.” The third torch died down and the other Blades emerged from the shadows of where they watched attentively. “Although he still has a long way to go before he can be an effective Blade, his potential is promising and he can be trained. I decree that he has passed our sacred trial and has earned to ask what he came for.”

“Krolia, that was too much.” Shiro hauled Keith up and the other groaned in pain while Pidge continued to run the healing spell. “He could have died!”

Keith was barely conscious but he dared to look up and looked his mother in the eyes. The name Shiro said etched deeply into his memory; he finally knew his mother’s name. “Knowledge or death, right? Why didn’t you kill me? I knew what I was getting into.”

Krolia sheathed her blades in the holsters that hung around her hips. She pulled up her hood to cover the ebony hair that was hacked short into a pixie cut with only a single long braid that hung on the side.

“I am not mad like Zarkon who wanted his own child dead.” Krolia replied. She walked past them to return to join the rest of the Blades but before she left, she gave Keith a gentle pat on his unwounded shoulder. “We shall speak when you have been healed and rested. You did well.”

Keith watched Krolia walk away. “She… I…” Keith started but exhaustion caught up to him and his
vision blacked out. The last thing he saw before his consciousness drifted off was the frayed blue ribbon floating aimlessly in his mind’s eye. It flickered sickly like it was fading away, doomed to disappear forever.

And then, Keith heard a familiar voice that sparked up so many emotions in his heart but the voice was quiet and filled with pain. It was so distant that it almost sounded like it was just a bad dream. It could only belong to one and it was Lance’s.

“Keith, help me, please!”

And the ribbon of light disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Please do not repost art. Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
Chapter Summary

It was a race against time.

Chapter Notes

HELLO WHAT IS UP SEASON 5 WAS LIT HOLY CRAP! It's been a while since the last update and Angel and I would like to thank everyone for being so patient and supportive. Real life, lack of motivation, and anxiety had been making it hard for me to write. It's overdue, but better late than never.

In lieu of Season 5, I'd like to say that Vermilion Gate is a post S2, pre-S3 fic and shall remain that way since everything had been plotted out until the very end. Therefore, characters from the succeeding seasons (except Lotor) like the lady generals won't be here.

There will also be an adjustment in the updating that Angel and I have decided to beneficial for the both of us in updating sooner; the chapters will be shorter than they usually are but there will only be one art piece instead of the usual two.

Thank you very much for all the love and support! Please let us know what you think of this chapter and/or the story so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10

The pain was dragging through her veins but Allura forced her eyes to open. The first thing she saw was the blue and white paint of the ceiling; a common sight but this time, everything felt wrong.

“You’re awake, your highness.” Said a male voice. The queen turned her head to the direction of the voice and saw Coran sitting on a chair by her bedside. His pristine cravat was slightly crooked and his owl patterned wings were loosely draped behind the chair’s back rest. “I’m so relieved that the healers’ efforts have paid off.”

“What…What happened?” Allura sat up slowly and squeezed her eyes shut as the world spun briefly. “Where’s Shiro?” it was her instinct to look for her husband first; Shiro was her heart after all. Allura felt a dull tug in her chest that pulled her towards the direction of the east. This was one of the facets of the mating bond; two soul-bound people can find each other no matter where. “He’s… not here. I can feel that I must go east.”

Coran bit his lower lip and cleared his throat while he straightened up in his seat. “My lady, Nyma is a spy for Lotor. She poisoned you with Klanmurel venom.” He began grimly. “You are merely
Allura’s fists clenched and her eyes briefly flashed dangerously from within; the silver around her blue and lilac irises turning molten for a moment. The room buzzed with power that was a fair warning that Allura was still an Archangel and the ruling queen of Altea. She pursed her lips into a thin line while she absorbed what Coran had just said. Then, she nodded; this was treason and by Altean law, treason was punishable by death.

“But, where is Shiro, Coran?”

“He went into the demon realm to retrieve the antidote.” Coran did not dare hide anything from the queen. “He went with Keith, Pidge, Ulaz, and his comrades.”

“They what?!?” Allura shot up but then buckled when she felt her joints give in. She would have fallen flat on her face if Coran hadn’t caught her. It frustrated her that she felt this weak and powerless but she refused to give up. “Shiro, Shiro I understand.” Her voice quivered as she placed a trembling hand over her chest when her heart ached at the absence of her husband. “But Keith and Pidge?” her eyes were bright as they glared into Coran’s. “It’s too much of a risk; what if Lotor manages to capture them? Nyma probably told Lotor about them now if she had an idea about what happened! How could this happen?”

The royal advisor sighed deeply and his brows furrowed over his eyes. Coran looked tired and frustration was evident in his expression as well. “Keith knows about his roots, my queen. He went there to seek answers.”

Allura’s gaze fell to look at the white sheets that bundled around her legs. “I see.”

Coran nodded.

The silence that followed was cold and heavy. Allura’s hands fisted to crumple the blankets and she closed her eyes. She reached deep inside her and through her mind’s eyes, she glimpsed at the iridescent chain of the mating bond. Allura reached out and touched it and the warmth of her touch was immediately repaid with a strong surge of emotion that rushed in her.

“Return to me once your mission is done.”

Shiro’s voice filled her mind in reply; “Yes, my queen.”

Although the telepathic communication that the mating bond allowed is limited, hearing Shiro’s voice gave her comfort. “Alive, Shiro.” Her voice became gentle as she passed the message in the chain of light that was bound deep into their hearts.

“I will always return to you.”

The connection broke off when Allura opened her eyes; the swirling colors of blue tinged with deep lilac briefly glowed within the silver ring around her irises. She straightened her back, the dove white wings that arched on her back relentless in its immortal beauty.

“Coran.”

The royal adviser stiffened when his name elegantly rolled off Allura’s lips. He dared to meet the Archangel queen’s gaze, her head held high despite the signs of the poison present in her body.

“Yes, your highness?”
"I need a full briefing of the situation of the kingdom, the armies, and the barrier." Allura said as she stood up. "And Coran?"

"Yes, your highness?"

Allura gave him a gentle smile and the little girl Coran once tutored countless eons ago was there. "I’d like some tea, please." Her voice became solemn, her smile, almost sad. "Just like how you used to make it before when I was little whenever I got sick."

Coran returned the smile. He got up and placed his palm on his chest before he bowed. "Of course, my queen."

The door gently creaked on its hinges and the lock clicked softly into place after Coran took his leave. Left alone in the solitude of her thoughts and the painful state of her body that she tried to hide behind a posture of strength expected from a queen, Allura’s whole body was covered in a show of sparkling lights. Her nightgown withered and rippled before it transformed into a silver and gray chainmail dress adorned with a deep pink sash that hung diagonally over her breastplate and it was pinned into place by a brooch of polished gold that donned the coat of arms of the royal Altean family. Her wings gave off an aura of white fire that licked the delicate follicles of her feathers but did not burn them.

The queen’s heart beat within the spirit upheld by her kingdom and her people as well as her mate who was currently away. However, her veins hummed with a dull sense of sickness and anxious anticipation.

Allura walked out into the high balcony that overlooked the palace grounds as well as most of the city. The air felt stagnant and her father’s barrier was becoming more brittle. But Allura noticed that today, it felt oddly quiet.

Something definitely felt wrong.

~

Hunk stared at the cozy looking cottage beside the crystalline lake. The sun reflected off the deep mahogany of his wings that faded off into sunset yellow at the tips while the head priestess and his wife, Shay, stood stiffly by his side with shadowed eyes. Blue, in her lioness form, sat in from of them, the two pairs of wings draped gracefully over her back. Her tail flicked back and forth while those intelligent yellow eyes watched them.

"Greetings, guardian spirit of the water." Shay’s voice was light, careful that she did not trip over her words as she addressed the fae before them. "We’re looking for Lance."

Blue gave a low growl but did not move from the spot she sat on. This time, Hunk took a step forward and held out a hand towards the winged creature. The angel bravely held the lioness’s brilliant golden gaze and he smiled. "We’re looking for him." He said. "And I’m sure that you’re worried about your friend just as we are."

Blue regarded them with one final gaze before she got up and padded towards Hunk. The angel stayed stiff while crouched on the ground only to relax when the winged lioness bumped her huge head against his hand then Hunk proceeded to pet it. With a low growl, Blue gestured for them to follow her inside the house.

It was a mess and Shay held a hand over her mouth to push back the gasp that threatened to lash out. The kitchen was completely trashed and what was evident was the broken jar in the middle of the
scattered garbage.

“What happened here?” Hunk was horrified but Blue just shook her massive head. She projected her thoughts through the deep growl that rumbled through her chest.

‘Parasite spore.’

“Oh, no…” Shay muttered. She immediately went to the nearest cupboard and started rummaging through until she found a cooking thong and a dish cloth.

“Shay, what are you doing?” Hunk frowned. “Be careful, alright?”

“I am.” Shay’s brows furrowed deeply. She crouched beside the mess and started to collect the large broken shards of glass to place them in the middle of the dish cloth. Once done, she started to chant a spell under her breath and the cloth started to float in mid-air. With a snap of her fingers, a soft green light wrapped around the broken glass but then they suddenly flashed red. There was a high pitched squeal as the residue on the shards started to rise in the form of thick black muck.

“Hunk!”

“Got it!”

Without wasting time, Hunk drew out his hammer and smashed the animated muck, the impact pulverizing it into black ash.

“A beast the size of a parasite.” Shay’s voice was grim. “Maybe this was why Lance was acting weird.”

Hunk round his teeth together out of frustration. “His mind is infected. Who knows what he’ll do.” The angel then turned to Blue. “Do you know where this came from?”

There was a shadow in Blue’s golden eyes and she nodded once again. Projecting her thoughts into their minds in a brief telepathic connection, she growled; ‘Keith.’

“This doesn’t make sense!” There was a soft sound that whirred into the air as Shay’s sleeves flapped when she swiped her arm to the side in defiance. “Keith would never hurt his lover, right?”

“That’s true.” Hunk agreed. He’s always been a great judge in character and he just couldn’t see Keith hurting Lance like that. “Something doesn’t add up… Unless…” quickly, he addressed the fae lioness. “Blue, do you know where Keith got the jar?”

It only took a single look from Blue and an image projected in their minds.

‘Nyma.’

“Shit.” Hunk hissed. Not only did Nyma poison the queen, she poisoned Lance too. “Shay, get back to the shrine and prepare the supplies for healing, alright?” Hunk cupped his wife’s cheek gently. “I’ll go and hunt down Lance before the poison does any more damage to him.”

Nodding, Shay leaned into his touch, worry in her eyes. “Be careful.” She said. “Unlike Klanmurel venom in the queen’s veins that slowly kills her body, beast spores rot the mind. He’s not himself, Hunk. You…” she paused and Hunk’s brows furrowed over his dark eyes. “Love, you might have to fight your best friend.”

The grim void that swallowed him whole throbbed within his heart. Hunk parted his lips to speak but
no words could come out from the shock.

“You…” Shay’s voice trembled. “You might have to kill Lance if he proves to be too far gone into the madness.”

“No…” Hunk shook his head. “No, Shay, please, there’s got to be another way.”

“I’m sorry, my love.” Shay shook her head. “Only a miracle can save him.”

Blue watched the heartbreaking exchange between husband and wife. She, too, felt her own heart break with dread at the hopelessness of the situation. There has to be a way.

~

The first thing that Keith felt when he came into consciousness was the way his joints ached. Then, it was followed by a dull throbbing behind the pressure of the bandage that was wrapped around his shoulder. He slowly opened his eyes and the view of the dark stone ceiling came into view.

“Keith?”

He turned to the source of the voice to see Pidge sitting by his bedside. They held a damp wash cloth over his forehead while their spell book was flipped open on their lap. Shiro leaned against the wall on the other side of the room where the door was, still as a statue. Had he not shifted those night sky wings behind, one would think that he truly was a realistic piece of art. Angels were strange in the eyes of mortals but what they are capable of doing can be terrifying.

“What…happened?” Keith croaked out. Pidge helped him sit up before they took glass of water from the tray on the nightstand. The cool liquid soothed the grittiness of Keith’s parched throat after he took careful sips.

“You passed the Trial.” Shiro replied this time. His hand slipped into one of the leather pouches that hung around his waist and took out a slim crystal vial filled with a translucent liquid tinged with silver. “We got the antidote.”

Keith sighed in relief and let his head drop back against the pillow. “Fucking yes.” He breathed out. “I thought I was going to die out there.”

“You almost did!” Pidge’s voice was hard on the edges. They really did sound angry except their eyes were burning with worry. “You almost burned yourself out there; three stages were too much!”

“Hey, I’m alive, right?”

“Don’t you even give me that, Keith Kogane!” Pidge’s finger jabbed on Keith’s chest. “You…I…”

Keith was about to argue back but bit the words back the moment he noticed the angry tears that burned in Pidge’s eyes.

“Hey, bro…” Keith sat up and his gaze fell sadly while guilt spun within him. “I’m okay, I promise.”

“You could’ve died!” Pidge snapped angrily, their tears finally falling. “Even though it’s not by your mom’s doing, you lost a lot of blood and you used a lot of your power!”

“Pidge…” Keith quickly pulled his best friend into a tight embrace the moment their shoulders shook with each sobbed that they choked out. “Shhh, it’s okay… I’m okay…”

“You reckless idiot!” Pidge hissed through the tears and buried their face in Keith’s neck. “I’ll never
Keith smiled sadly and nuzzled the top of Pidge’s head. He closed his eyes and savored the warmth of the embrace. In that moment, he too was glad that he was alive. He didn’t know what he did to deserve a friend like Pidge but he was happy that he decided to sign up for the cryptid forum all those years ago. Had he not, he never would have met his best friend.

“So sorry, dude.” Keith muttered softly. He pulled back and Pidge stubbornly wiped away their tears while Keith gently squeezed their shoulder in assurance. “But backing out is not in my vocabulary.” His gaze lowered to stare at the sheets that covered his lower half. He could still feel the ache in his bones but it wasn’t as bad as it was earlier. With another round of sleep and Pidge’s healing spells, he’ll be good to go.

“How’s the pain?” Shiro spoke for the first time after Pidge settled back on the chair and busied themselves with looking for an appropriate spell to soothe the remaining injuries that Keith had.

“It’s not too bad.” Keith replied and he dared to meet that dark immortal silver ringed gaze. They were stark and enigmatic like night shadows but Keith didn’t find them beautiful. He rather stare into eyes of impossible blue that no ocean, sky, or sapphire could compare.

The pain that Keith felt wasn’t only physical now, but it struck deep into his heart how much he missed Lance.

“I’ll be okay after a bit.” Keith paused and studied Shiro carefully, looking for any sign of the emotions that the Archangel tried to hide. “Are you mad at me too?”

“No.” the other shook his head. “I was worried but I’m not angry.” Shiro sighed. “I owe you a lot, Keith. Allura will be cured because of you and Altea will gain new allies if your mother agrees.”

Then it hit; Keith totally forgot about his mother. He had fought Krolia at the final stage of the trial and he had to find out the hard way just how strong his mother was and how much longer he needed to train to actually be effective.

“I feel like I looked embarrassing out there.” Keith groaned but then he gave out a soft ‘oof’ when Pidge smacked him with a throw pillow on the face.

“You almost got killed but you’re more worried that you looked like a complete duck during the trial.” They paused and the bridge of their pert nose crinkled when they actually thought about it. “Which, to be honest, you did.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“My reason stands, Keith.” Shiro’s calm voice pierced through the banter. “Thank you. I don’t think I can ever repay this.”

“I only did what I thought was right.” Keith shook his head humbly with a soft smile on his lips but his eyes were sad; something…someone else was missing and he was sure it was Lance. He remembered the blue ribbon of light and Lance’s voice screaming at him which made the sliver of the smile he had completely disappear.

“What’s wrong, Keith?” Shiro asked with a concerned frown. “Do you need medicine?”

Keith shook his head and thought about asking Shiro about the ray of light in his mind’s eye but hesitated when he remembered that Pidge was there. However, it was like Pidge sensed that Keith was hesitating because of them.
“If you want me to leave, I can.” Pidge said tightly and they were about to get up but Keith took hold of their wrist.

“It’s okay. I think you’ll find this interesting.”

“Is that so?” Pidge quirked an eyebrow. “How interested will I be?”

“It’s about my love life.”

Pidge made a face and choked out a dramatic gagging sound. Keith rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest; “Dude, the door’s right there.”

“Nah, I think I’ll stay.” Pidge plopped back into the chair. “I’d like to hear why I might be interested.”

Shiro quietly waited for Keith to compose his thoughts and he was patient with him. He didn’t make any gestures or any sign of impatience while Keith gathered his wits.

“Uhm,” Keith gulped, unsure, but he forced the rest out anyway. If there was someone experienced he can ask about it, it’s Shiro. “Have you heard anything from Allura lately?”

There was a ripple in Shiro’s expression and for a moment, Keith wondered if it was rude in angelic culture to ask but before he could counter it, Shiro replied;

“Yes, I felt her presence awaken within the soul bond we share. Why do you ask?”

“It…uh, I don’t mean any harm. I just… you see, there’s this thing that, you know…I think it’s with Lance but I’m not sure so…”

“You see an ethereal chain of light deep in your mind which feels like Lance’s presence?”

“More like a frayed ribbon.” Keith corrected.

“And there’s a strange pull towards you to connect with said ribbon of light.” Pidge added. “The urge roots from deep down.”

“How…”

“I read a couple of books about it, got curious, and went to ask Shay.” Pidge shrugged with a carefree smile before it receded to a groan. “She told me about the mating bond, her history with Hunk, and their courtship. I had to sit with her for three hours but that’s alright because she fed me freshly baked cookies, milk and berries.”

“That’s not fair!” Keith argued with a look of shock; he had tasted Shay’s cookies before and they were divine. For Pidge to hog them for three hours was simply an outrage. “Where was I?”

“You went off with Lance.” Pidge replied. That single name made Keith go quiet. He wanted to say something witty and clever back to Pidge but there was a dull ache that tugged at him inside.

“Allura did mention to me that you’re starting to feel it.” Shiro said this time. He walked over and the bed dipped when Shiro took a seat, his wings draping down his back. “Which was why I found Lance’s behavior strange; if there’s a forming soul bond between the two of you then that means there is a form of trust and acceptance.” He paused to ponder for another meaning but merely shook his head. “Even I cannot describe the depth of it; there are simply no words for something felt so intimately.”
“So, there really is something wrong.” Keith muttered, his lips pursed into a fine line. He briefly closed his eyes to search for the open end of the bond but found nothing. It made his heart ache with both emptiness and worry. “I need to talk to my mom about our agreement then we need to get out of here and return to Altea.” His hands clenched into fists. “I need to know what’s going on with Lance.”

The air in the room grew heavy with dread and Keith had to fight tooth and nail internally to restrain himself from going back. He came to the demon realm for a personal reason and he won’t waste the opportunity now. He pushed the covers aside and started to get up but when his knees wavered, Shiro immediately came to his aid with an arm around his waist. Keith clung onto the Archangel and cursed under his breath.

“Take your time.” Shiro said calmly.

“I don’t have time!” Keith snapped. His eyes were bright embers but then the blaze died down when he realized that he had raised his voice at Shiro. He immediately looked away and muttered a quick apology. “I’m sorry, Shiro… I just… Lance, he called out for me before I passed out.” He trailed off and it was a struggle to push out the next couple of words. “He cried out for me to help him.”

Shiro and Pidge looked at each other and Keith felt helpless in the state he was currently in. He had a lot to do in the Galra realm and at the same time, the clock was running for Allura and Lance.

“I understand.” Shiro helped Keith sit back down on the bed. “I feel the same; I’m worried about Allura and there is nothing I want right now than to run back to Altea and give her the antidote.” He placed a hand on Keith’s shoulder, the weight of it a comforting presence. “But we have a delegation mission to attend to and you,” Shiro emphasized his point by gently squeezing Keith’s shoulder. “have to talk to your mother and get your answers.”

It was hard for Keith to swallow but Shiro was right. They had to do the most that they can because it would be difficult to return to the demon realm again and they needed the urgency of it since war was looming on the horizon and the barrier was weak.

“I’ll go speak to Kolivan and tell him that you’re awake.” Shiro got up to his feet and his wings arched gracefully on his back. He then turned to Pidge; “Could you heal Keith a little bit more? He needs to be back in full strength.”

“I can.” Pidge nodded eagerly. “Can’t have this guy tripping over his feet and falling asleep every twenty minutes.”

“Thanks, Pidge.” Shiro motioned at the door. “I’ll get going. I’ll see you two when Keith’s ready.”

The door closed with an audible click after Shiro left. Keith was quiet the whole time Pidge was working a healing spell on him but he could deliberately feel the effect it had on his body. A soft green light illuminated the dark walls of the room from the magic that emanated from Pidge’s hands. “Are you in love with him?”

Pidge’s question caught Keith off guard. “H-Huh?”

Those golden brown eyes briefly glanced up and stared at him from behind rimless glasses glazed over with the soft magical light that emitted from their hands. “I asked if you’re in love with Lance.”

Heat bloomed on Keith’s cheeks, tainting them pink. But his heart, the very core of his soul all hummed with warmth, making the absent bond ache painfully.
“Yes, I am.”

Pidge snorted and returned their gaze to the task at hand. They muttered something under their breath and the light grew brighter while Keith felt his shoulder wound knitting close from behind the gauze and bandage that were wrapped around it.

“Laaame~” They rolled their eyes but then, spoke gently. “And I really wanted to kick his ass when he said that bullshit.” They looked up again and this time, smiled at their best friend. “But I’m glad you found someone, Keith.”

“Yeah.” Keith’s reply was gentle. The light died down when Pidge finished running the spell. There were no more words between them, their friendship being deep enough that they understood the silent words relayed by smiles.

Later, Keith found himself in a room stripped bare except for a long cut stone tables blunt on the jagged edges, a desk, a map, a couple of crystal lamps that hung on the four corners of the room, and a receiving area adorned with a low lying wooden table and plump mat cushions to seat visitors. Pidge left earlier to roam around the base and complete their magical floor map. Their curiosity got the better of them and took this as the chance to learn more about the Blade of Marmora and their way of life.

Keith sat crossed legged on one of the cushions with Shiro beside him. The Archangel’s wings were draped down his back and pooled on the floor behind him like a majestic cloak of stars strewn over a deep canvas of the night sky. Krolia knelt across from them on the table. Her long fingers wrapped around the wooden handle while she carefully poured the hot tea in the lacquered clay cups in front of them.

“Apologies, this is all I can offer right now.” The Marmora general placed down the pot on the wooden tray and settled back into her own cushion. “Supplies are tight with the demon lord ambushing our supply lines.”

Shiro nodded once; he smiled but the expression he wore was stoic. The room hung heavy with power with forces and auras clashing. Keith felt the hum of that in his veins because even if he was human, the power he had in him could match with a near-immortal.

“Cut out the supplies and the prey will be forced to leave the den to search.” Shiro said. “A classic military tactic used in smoking out the enemy.”

“Lotor is a seasoned general in his own accord.” Krolia agreed. “His father made sure of that.”

Keith stared at his wobbling reflection on the surface of his tea. The smoke that swirled out disappeared like melting fog into the open air. “But you mentioned during the trial that Lotor’s father tried to kill him.”

He could feel Shiro’s eyes on him but he refused to meet those dark silver ringed orbs and continued to stare at his mother. When her violet eyes that mirrored his came to lock gazes, Keith felt electricity slide down his spine and he thought that he was looking straight into a mirror.

“Zarkon meant for his son to lead his armies but Lotor’s ambition grew.” Krolia explained. She paused and took her cup with both hands to blow on the liquid and take a sip. “On the day of the royal Altean wedding of sir Shiro and the then-crowned princess Allura,” she continued without strain. “He didn’t aid his father as king Alfor defeated him. He watched from the horizon as his
father died by Alfor’s hand.”

“The throne was his for the plucking.” Shiro added, metal grinding against metal when he clenched his fist. “So he took that chance.”

“That’s sick.” Keith muttered. “He’s a fucking traitor.”

“Lotor is many things, Keith.” His mother said and Keith felt something kick in him at the sound of his name with his mother’s voice. It didn’t rub him the wrong way but it felt so new. “And his blood is venom itself with how vile he is. We’ve spend centuries doing what he can in trying to destroy him from the inside but it is difficult especially now that we are on the losing side.”

“Maybe you’ll be interested in our offer, then.” Keith’s tone struggled to sound business-like but it shook on the edges. However, he carried his head up high and refused to buckle under the pressure. “It’s only right that you hear us out.”

His mother’s gaze bore deep into his and Keith felt cold sweat bead his forehead. Beside him, he felt Shiro shift and he was glad that the Archangel spoke;

“It’s part of the agreement of your son undergoing the trial.” He said and Keith felt his heart slam against his ribs. “I take it that you will honor your word.”

“Of course, sir Shiro.” Krolia’s reply was smooth and she placed down her cup on the table in front of her. “We are old allies, after all. And,” she turned to look at her son. “Keith has proven himself and his dedication. It’s admirable. Let me hear your proposition.”

“An alliance.” Keith didn’t waste any time and went straight to the point because time was running short for them to beat around the bush for pleasantries. When Krolia kept silent, he continued; “We’re fighting a common enemy so why don’t we join our forces and fight him together? Sooner or later, he’ll find this place and you’ll be forced to move bases. To be out in the open would mean that you and your Blades will be prone to an ambush and in a likely case, a massacre.”

“Who will compromise in this alliance? Do angels come here or do the Blades come to Altea?” Krolia arched a brow and her mouth was turned into a deep and thoughtful frown. “if so, you’re trying to say that we leave our home realm and go to Altea. Our order exists to protect this realm and the people who live in it.”

“I’m not saying that, ma’am.” Keith turned stiff. “Just to fight Lotor together and aid each other. We’re stronger if there are more of us.”

“The travel between realms is costly though.” Krolia leaned towards the table on her elbows, her fingers crossed underneath her chin and her brows were furrowed in thought. “I don’t think a single quintessence apparatus has enough to support a portal that could transport a lot of people.”

“How many people do you have?” Shiro asked.

“Currently, there are thirty four Blades and most of them are spread out along the kingdom. This statistic is based on the last update by one of my lieutenants.” Her mouth twisted but it was subtle. However, Keith noticed the bitterness in her eyes. “They could be fewer now. Lotor’s soldiers are weeding them out like rodents.”

“I can open a gate.” Keith blurted out all of a sudden. Beside him, Shiro stilled and then turned at him with a look of shock. Keith knew that he shouldn’t be relaying this kind of information just yet since it was their trump card and they weren’t sure if the Blades can be trusted.
“A gate?” His mother narrowed his eyes. “You mean a portal just like how a quintessence apparatus works?”

Keith nodded. “Only it’s a whole goddamn gate, it may be able to fit in a lot of people! I’ve done it before when Lance and I fell back into Altea!”

“And who is this… Lance?” Krolia asked.

“His assigned guard.”

“My boyfriend.”

Shiro’s and Keith’s reply came out at the same time but they differed. Keith immediately glanced at the Shiro who in turn looked at him with a ‘what-the-fuck-are-you-doing?’ expression. Keith slightly shrugged his shoulders and threw back a ‘who-cares?’ look at the Archangel. But their attempt at a silent conversation was interrupted when Krolia cleared her throat.

“It seems that my son has an angelic lover.” She said. Keith and Shiro turned back to give her their full attention. “But he is not with you when you came here? He’s not doing his job very well, in that case.”

“Okay, one, I think you shouldn’t judge someone you haven’t met.” Keith immediately interjected his disagreement. “And two, don’t call me that.” Keith made his tone unwelcoming towards his mother’s judgement making it clear that Krolia had no right to call Keith ‘her son’.

His mother’s cold violet gaze flickered for a moment and it felt like the room was ready to burst into flames but Keith held his guard even though his basic human instincts told him not fuck with a near-immortal creature who was probably thousands of years old and who could fry him in a span of fifteen seconds. But Krolia calling Keith ‘her son’ seem to irk Keith off.

She left them. Ryou was left to raise him and died too early when Keith was seven. He had to fend for himself after that. Keith believed in the saying; ‘The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb’ and this woman who sat before him wasn’t there when he needed her.

“I cannot give you an immediate answer for the alliance that you offer.” Krolia changed the subject, her tone shifting to business as originally discussed. Her expression remained distant to match her tone; truly a general who put her people before anything else.

“The offer stands anytime you wish to take it.” Shiro replied coolly, his own expression, unreadable. “However, we would have to hear your answer another time. We can’t stay here because we need to go back to Altea to deliver the antidote and save the queen.”

“I imagine so.” Krolia nodded. There was a shift in the tension when Keith, who had looked away from his mother, felt the attention on him once more. “Now, sir Shiro, I would like to request a moment with Keith. I believe that he has some things he wishes to talk about in private.”

“Of course.”

“Shiro, wait-!” Keith immediately turned to the Archangel who had gotten up to his feet in one fluid movement.

“You came here for answers, right?” Shiro placed a hand on top of Keith’s head and ruffled the top lightly. “This is your chance. Don’t take long; we will leave in two hours.”

Keith wasn’t able to say anything more as Shiro left. The room felt slightly bigger with just him and
Krolia inside.

“You haven’t touched your tea and it’s gotten cold.” Krolia broke the silence while she took the pot and poured herself another cup. “Don’t you like it?”

“Thanks but I’m more of a coffee person.” Keith replied. He stared at his reflection on the surface of the dark green liquid that had cooled down.

“Ah yes, quite a strong drink.” She said without a spare of a glance. “I had the luxury to drink it when I was in the human world. Your father brewed it perfectly every day.”

More awkward silence ensued but Keith’s mind buzzed with so many questions that all reverted into a single one;

“Why?” he suddenly blurted out. “Why did you leave us?” quietly he added and the words did struggle out; “Did you know that dad’s dead?”

Krolia froze before she could even take a sip but then Keith continued.

“Don’t you even care?!” Keith slammed his fist on the table impatiently.

“Manners, Keith.”

“I’ll act however the fuck I want!” Keith seethed with anger that his eyes were bright violet flames that burned from within. “You have no right to mother me, Krolia!”

The Galra general’s expression twisted for a moment with emotion that Keith wasn’t able to read well. She looked forlorn and distressed but at the same time, aloof. Keith’s plan of breaking through her defenses didn’t work because his own emotions got the best for him. But it seems that he and his mother were the two sides of the same coin;

“Don’t you understand, Keith?” Krolia set down her cup and lashed her hand to side in a fit of emotion. “I did to save you and your father!”

Keith kept his mouth shut but glared. Krolia continued; “I have powerful enemies. If I stayed and they tracked me to your realm, they will not hesitate to kill you and your father!” She shook her head and Keith saw tears film her eyes but she blinked them back. “It was the hardest decision I had to make, Keith. I had to choose between my selfish desires and keeping you safe.”

Krolia gestured around her. “And this, I have to think of this. I’m the leader of this rebellion, Keith. I can’t abandon my people too. I have a duty to them.”

“And what about me? Did you know that I grew up with unseen things chasing me?” Keith asked quietly this time. “I grew up not knowing what I am. I just know that I can do this.” He lifted his hand and a tongue of flame flickered to life at the tip of his finger. “When I was seven, the cops came to my house and told me that dad was found dead.” The flame died out and Keith stared at his hand, trying to avoid the torture of even seeing his mother’s expression. “I was passed around and never found a place to fit in until I was old enough to get away from all of that. I met Pidge and Matt; they were the closest thing I had to family.”

Keith paused and a wave of emotion washed over him, his hand closing in to press against his chest. “And then, I met Lance and he brought me to a world that accepted me, a world that didn’t judge me as a freak.”

“I’m glad you did.” Krolia’s tone was soft and it was the first sign of gentleness Keith had witnessed
from the general since he got here. “I have accepted that you might never forgive me. I’m sorry for leaving you and your father but I do not regret it. I will never regret giving up my own happiness if it meant that I could keep you safe from those who are after me. I can never live with myself if prince Lotor or his henchmen found out about you when you were a defenseless child and took your life because of my selfish recklessness.”

Keith lifted his gaze now and his lower lip trembled. Tears threatened to fall, and fall they did. He couldn’t contain the pain that he had kept all his life. He had always thought that his mother didn’t want him but now, he got to his answers as to why she left.

“Dad,” The single word was a thick sob. “did you…did you love him?”

“Very, much, Keith. Ryou was the only man I allowed myself to love,” Krolia replied. “And you were born from that love. You were never a mistake, my beautiful boy. You never will be and I’m sorry that you grew up thinking that you were.” No tears fell from Krolia but her words were sincere even though she struggled with emotion she wasn’t used to. “There wasn’t a day that I didn’t think of you and your father.”

Keith nodded; he had heard enough. “Okay.”

“I will never ask you to call me ‘mother’, Keith.” Krolia added. “I don’t deserve it but maybe we can start with what we have right now.”

“Yeah, that sounds okay.” Keith wiped away the tears from his eyes with the back of his fingerless gloves. “If you ever decide to accept the alliance and go to Altea, maybe I can introduce you to Lance.”

Pain stirred in the secrecy of Keith’s heart; he couldn’t feel Lance. The bond wasn’t there and his intuition nagged at him to haul ass and get back to Altea as soon as possible. “I need to go.” Keith got up from the cushion where he sat. “I have something urgent to fix in Altea.”

“If you’re fighting with your lover, then I can have him tied down and interrogated.” Krolia frowned.

“Whoah, easy there, general.” Keith let out a shaky laugh. “I got this.”

Krolia, too stood up. “I’m glad we finally had this talk, Keith.” She said. “If ever you decide to join the Blades, I’m open to—“

“I don’t think it’s worth the investment.” Keith cut her off right there and sighed. “In case you forgot, I’m that Vessel thing they call and I’m human.” He gave the truth straight to her. “I’m not going to last long.”

“Keith…”

“It’s alright.” Keith swallowed the hard lump in his throat and forced a positive smile. “I’ve lived more now than I have when I was growing up. I found someone I love, friends, and people who accepted me as one of their own.” He looked at her. “And I found you. If I’m going to die soon, then I’m going to live out the rest of what’s remaining of my life trying to bring down Lotor and keep Altea safe.”

Silence ensued in the room and Keith’s mother stared back at him with bright, wide eyes, clearly amazed at what he said. “You’re not as selfish as I thought you would be.”

“I guess I used to only think about myself.” Keith shrugged. “But I found people… I found someone I want to protect the way he protects me.”
“I’m proud of you. I want you to know that.”

Keith took in a deep breath and tried to take a step forward towards his mother. He met her gaze, his eyes unyielding in sincerity. “Thank you.”

Keith wasn’t sure what to do next for this was the most that he was comfortable with right now. However, their moment was interrupted by a loud explosion and the alarms blaring. Keith and Krolia rushed to where the commotion was and were greeted by a gaping hole that had enlarged the entrance of the Marmora hideout.

Several Blades laid wounded if not dead on the entrance while Shiro stood back to back with Kolivan while they fought against Galra who bore the royal seal of the demon lord. Shiro’s wings glowed dangerously and his right arm flared with white Angelfire that crackle with lightning. When several soldiers came at him, he thrust his arm into the chest of one and with that demon impaled, it burst into flames before Shiro thrust it to the others that followed and they all burst into ash.

“Stop, you barbarians, the prince did not order this!” A voice commanded from a high rising cliff. When Keith looked up, he saw a cloaked figure, her face shadowed by her beaked hood. Yellow eyes glowed from within which sent chills down Keith’s spine. But the worst part was that the hooded figure carried an unconscious Pidge. Their glasses were cracked, their lips pale, and their eyes were matted brown, devoid.

“Haggar!” Shiro hissed. “Let the human go!”

The witch merely glanced at him with a look of disdain. “Ah, well if it isn’t the Champion. I see that you’ve found a way to replace the arm which I took from you.”

Shiro growled in sheer anger and his eyes turned molten with a glint of rage. The Angelfire that enveloped his metal arm grew brighter and the lightning crackled threateningly like serpents of electricity waiting for their master’s command to strike. He wanted to attack but Haggar had Pidge hostage.

“You have no business being here, Haggar!”

“I have every right, trespasser scum! I would rip off your wings as well right this very moment and add them to prince Lotor’s collection if I wished to do so!” The witch hissed back. “But my business isn’t with you, it’s with him.” Those empty yellow eyes locked onto Keith. Haggar shifted her arms and Pidge groaned in pain when tendril of black magic slithered around their neck and solidified into a thick metal shackle.

“Pidge!” Keith cried out and immediately awakened his blade which was then enveloped with flames. He prepared to charge forward but Haggar spoke and stopped him on his tracks.

“The human lives, Vessel.” Haggar’s voice was clear yet it echoed with dismembered voices that weren’t hers. “Another step and I will not hesitate to break your friend’s neck like a twig.”

Keith held his ground. “What the fuck do you want?!”

“The demon lord, his highness, prince Lotor, has extended his good graces to you, Vessel.” Haggar replied as she spoke the titles with respect. “He is inviting you to a private banquet at his royal palace. Come alone or your precious Pidge dies without question.” She gestured at the small army that lurked in the shadows of the trees where they retreated. With them finding out where the Marmora hide out was, the Blade would have to move to another location.

Haggar stared at Keith with those eerie eyes of hers. “Do not disgrace the demon lord’s terms to his
Then, in a swirl of smoke, she disappeared with Pidge in her arms along with the soldiers that surrounded them. The Blades were left without a place to go, their base desecrated and Keith would have to make a choice that would most likely get him killed.

~

Hunk stood leaning on an arch pillar at the base of the long granite staircase that led to the shrine that housed the former king’s quintessence crystal. He heard footsteps from afar and he sensed the air slither with a familiar aura; water and ice. But there was something off, it felt tainted. Corrupted.

A figure appeared from behind the trees and approached. He staggered, his steps far from the confidence he always carried with him. Shay was right.

Lance stood before him and clearly, it wasn’t him. His eyes were sunken, their whites now blood red. The silver ring around his blue irises bled black and sickly veins stood tautly around his eyes. He was panting, clearly struggling with whatever was inside. There were sores around his mouth and Lance twitched with little convulsions.

“Lance, hey, buddy.” Hunk pushed off from the pillar and took a careful step towards his friend but his guard was up, his eyes, wary. “I’ve been looking all over for you. You don’t look so good, why don’t I take you to the healers to get you fixed up, huh?”

Lance didn’t say anything and just stared at him with deadpanned silence. Every sign of the cheerful, lively angel was gone. Now, there only stood an empty bag of meat that was starting to rot from the mind and out.

“Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat.” Hunk tried again and this time, he smiled but his brows furrowed over his eyes with worry. His wings were flared out slightly in preparation to make a quick move in case negotiation with Lance failed. “We should get you cleaned up too; you smell like something just died and I don’t think Keith would find that very sexy.”

Hunk hoped that the good natured joke would work and it could be that it did because he saw Lance’s eyes flicker at the sound of Keith’s name.

“Where’s… Keith?” Lance’s voice cracked.

“He left, buddy.” Hunk told him the truth.

“Where…?”

“TO the Galra realm. He went with Shiro----” But Hunk stopped when Lance gave a painsed cry and grabbed the sides of his head while he stared at the floor like a crazed man.

“He… left… me…” Lance breathed the words and he sobbed and laughed at the same time like a complete madman. “Nyma was right. Keith… left me. He said he never will… HE LIED TO ME!”

“Lance, no!” Hunk cried out but it was too late. Black light glowed around Lance’s hands as he summoned his pistols but when he did, he threw up black blood and his form staggered, falling to his knees.
“Lance!” Hunk half ran, half flew to where Lance was only to barely dodge a bullet when Lance shot at him. Hunk quickly maneuvered to the right, the bullet grazing his cheek. Blood trickled down his cheek but the scar’s regeneration was slow since the bullet was fired from an angelic weapon.

“Stay away from me, Lotor!” Lance wobbled up to his feet, one pistol down and the other one aimed at hunk. His eyes were bloody but wild with crazed bloodlust. “You took Keith from me too, didn’t you?!”

“Lotor—what?” Hunk stared in shock. “Lance, it’s me, Hunk! Your best friend!”

Lance threw back his head and laughed insanely. “I know what I see and what I see isn’t Hunk. It’s the scum that took everything away from me!”

Before Hunk could even argue, he drew his war hammer to deflect Lance’s kicks and the bullets that flew when the angel rushed to attack him in his disillusioned state.

“Give him back!” Lance yelled at Hunk within the flurry of his attacks. “I want my Keith back!”

*

However, while Hunk was distracted by Lance, a slithering spy ghosted through the hidden corridors of the shrine. Nyma sauntered into the heart of the sacred shrine where Alfor’s crystal was kept.

Her violet eyes glowed bright with malice and she licked her lips at the site of the source of the shield that protected the angelic realm.

“Hello, king Alfor.” Nyma cooed as she walked towards the crystal. She placed her palm on the smooth surface and smirked. The crystal throbbed with life underneath her touch. “You don’t know me but let me help you cross over to the Sea of Stars.” Then, underneath her palm, black veins of poison webbed out and were absorbed into the crystal.

Alfor’s crystal started to flicker and the light within started to become dim. There was sickening crack as the surface started to crumble away. Nyma’s eyes grew bright with power as she dispensed her poison. “You and your daughter are not needed here anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

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forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
Chapter Summary

There is no hope, only darkness. But the flame, no matter how small, can ignite into a raging fire that can burn through and give light.

Keith has one chance to save Lance or his deranged angelic lover will be executed by the queen and her general.

Chapter Notes

I'll be honest, I was going to give up on this but for some reason, I just can't find it in me to drop it. It's been really hard for me to write lately for all the crap that this fandom gives and the shadow I live in despite the hard work of writing. But I'm still here and I want to finish this. I want to give Keith and Lance and everyone what they deserve.

Thank you for all the love and support. Thank you to Sasuhina and Winter for giving me the peace of mind that it's okay to quit if something proves to be too toxic. And I want to thank Angel for accepting my decision to quit back then but when I decided not to and told her that I'm going to continue, she was still there and she was still so happy to create beautiful art for this chapter and the last few chapters that are about to come. I love you guys.

And to YOU, whoever you are reading this, even if you're just here for the first time since you binged it or have been following the story since it's humble beginnings, thank you, for giving it a chance, for still being here, and for joining me, US, in this adventure.

Without further ado, Angel and I give you Chapter 11 of Vermilion Gate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11

“You can’t go in there unarmed, Keith, think about this.” Shiro gritted and his obsidian eyes were hard as granite as he stared at the human. “We need to think of a plan.”

“Shiro, you and I both know that we don’t have the time for that.” Keith argued back, daring to meet that near-immortal gaze. “I'll just wing it. March in there, get Pidge and bail out.”

“You say that like it’s a stroll through a meadow.” Krolia shook his head. Beside her, Kolivan stood in silence but the way his eyes stared at Keith made it look like he agreed. The general’s expression was stoic, a cold mask that did not betray her thoughts and Keith secretly admired her that she was able to keep a cool head over her shoulders despite the dire situation they were in. Pidge had been abducted by the demon lord’s witch, Haggar, and Keith had to fucking show up for dinner or his
best friend dies.

Keith sighed and crossed his arms over his chest while he glared at his mother who inevitably rolled her eyes. For a moment there, Keith was actually glad that he was able to inspire a subtle signs of emotion from Krolia even though he had only met her. As much as Keith wanted to try and rekindle the mother-son flame that he and Krolia didn’t have the chance to start with before, Pidge’s life was on a balance.

“We have received intel from our spy within the demon lord’s court.” Kolivan spoke for the first time. He stepped into the light from where he kept his silence in the shadows just moments ago. “Thace had sent a harem slave to us; an angel woman with her wings cut off.”

Keith froze and he stared at Kolivan with wide eyes that reflected the silent horror he felt. Memories flashed in his mind; stories from a wingless angel who held his heart and who had suffered for six hundred years with Lotor. Keith felt the tugging ache in his again and he felt the tension in his own body rise. He wanted to return to Lance but he just couldn’t leave Pidge to die.

“Ulaz is tending to her as we speak.” Kolivan continued. “She may have important information we can use.”

“Is she well enough to speak?” Shiro asked this time.

The Galra nodded but Keith was already on his way, pushing past the others to speak to the rescued angel. He thought he heard someone call after him; whether it was Krolia, Shiro, or Kolivan, he wasn’t entirely sure. It didn’t take long for him to track down the infirmary from the vague memory of what he saw in Pidge’s floor map. Ulaz was already there along with Vea and Ivy who were wordlessly moving in swift, sure motions with fresh bandages and salves. The cots were all occupied by Blades who were injured from the attack earlier while those who lost their lives had their faces covered by a white cloth. Their hands rested on their chests, clutching their luxite blades that they will bring with them to the funeral pyre.

The woman sat on one of the medical cots with her head bent low. Copper locks fell around her face like a curtain of curls and when Keith saw the bandaged stumps where her wings were supposed to be, he gulped back the bitter taste that churned on his tongue from the anger the bubbled.

This misery; Lance went through the same thing for six hundred years; a short time for an angel but an eternity of suffering for a harem slave.

Carefully, Keith approached the woman who lifted her head and his gaze locked with green ones ringed with silver. But they were dull, tired, and afraid. Keith noticed freshly knitted cuts and fading bruises on her face which made his hatred for Lotor burn hotter.

“Hi, there.” Keith began with a gentle smile. “What’s your name?”

The woman shrugged and turned her head to avoid Keith’s searching eyes. Keith tried again;

“I heard what happened.” He said and took another step forward but nothing more than that so that he didn’t overstep his boundaries. “I’m really glad that you made it out of there.”

“Th-there,” the woman spoke for the first time and her voice cracked with broken sob. Keith caught glistening tears roll down her fine boned face. “There are others left back there. He tried to dispose of me and he…he will do the same once he tires of the others.”

She buried her face in her hands. “I hate him. I was so foolish to fall for his false promises. I-I believed in him; he said that...H-he...” she choked back more sobs.
“It’s not your fault.” Keith said softly. “He was fucking piece of shit here that manipulated you.” He wasn’t very good with words and he wasn’t an expert in comforting other people but Keith had to try. Keith needed this angel to know that she wasn’t alone.

“I know someone like you.” He continued. “He escaped like you did. He’s survivor and you know what? He’s wingless and he became one of Allura’s royal guards.”

The woman stiffened. “A wingless man…who esca---“ she paused and lifted her damp face from her hands to stare at Keith with wonder in her teary eyes. “Are you talking about Lance? He’s real?”

Keith nodded. “Why would you think he isn’t?”

“I have heard whispers about a harem slave who escaped many centuries ago.” She said. She lowered her hands to rest on her lap and her slender fingers fiddled with the loose threads of her ripped dress. “He escaped with another slave, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s what he told me.”

“You know him?” Her eyes widened now.

Keith nodded again and reached back to scratch the back of his head. “He’s uh… he’s my…” his cheeks tinted with a soft pink.

“Ah.” The word was quiet and when Keith mustered it through the fluster he felt to look at the woman again, he saw that she had a small smile on her lips. “You are fortunate, human. The mermaid and your lover are heroes who give hope to those like me that Lotor had reduced to nothing. He is wingless; a blemish most angels look lowly upon but that did not stop him from fighting back and taking what he deserved.”

Heartbeat thudding faster with pride, Keith felt the corners of his own lips tug up with a smile. “You can do it too. You’re a fighter and you’re a survivor. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

Green eyes shining from within, the woman reached forward and the tips of her fingers brushed away the stray strands of hair from Keith’s eyes; a gentle gesture of thanks. “Thank you.”

“You can call me Keith.”

“And I’m...” the woman shook her head. “I have not been called by my name for centuries, I believe I have lost it along the way.” She sighed. “Well, maybe I’ll remember it someday and then I will tell you.”

“Keith.” Shiro stepped into the infirmary along with Kolivan and Krolia. The moment the woman saw Shiro, she immediately bowed her head. “S-Sire!” she paused to push back the shock. “I am humbled that you are here.”

“At ease.” Shiro’s reply was gentle. “You will be brought home. Your suffering is over; you can begin to heal.”

“She’s strong, isn’t she?” Keith followed. “And she knows Lance.”

“She is.” Shiro agreed. “And I am proud of her for surviving.”

“Oh.” The single word trembled softly as it left her lips. “Thank you, sire.”

Shiro nodded once again but this time, his eyes were shadowed with grimness. “However, I
apologize that we would have to ask you some questions. You see, Keith’s friend was abducted by
Lotor’s witch and his presence is being demanded in exchange.”

The woman paused and her hands clenched and the fabric of her skirts and it crumpled from her
quivering fists. The dull silver around her irises glowed brighter. “He took another one?”

There was a streak in the bustle of the infirmary when the fabric ripped. She was angry.

“H-hey,” Keith began to reach forward but stopped midway when the woman snapped her head up
and he was pinned by a near-immortal’s gaze filled with hatred for the demon lord who made her
suffer. “I’ll tell you everything I know.” Then, her eyes shifted to Shiro. “And I know something that
you, of all people, must know.”

“What is it?” Shiro’s mouth pursed into a hard thin line and his eyes narrowed. However, the whole
infirmary paused and a cold electric silence fell upon the room when the woman replied;

“The witch is currently trying to reform and revive emperor Zarkon. They are going to take the
throne from the prince first and then take Altea and the human realm.”

~

Keith stood in front of a towering citadel with high iron gates and walls made out of black stone. The
silhouettes of the twisting spires pierced the shattered moon in the sky and the guards by the entrance
watched him with wary eyes. As instructed, he had come alone; or that was what Keith hoped he
gave the impression of because Shiro, Krolia lurked in the shadows of the surrounding perimeter.

Fear was adrenaline in his veins. Keith was terrified but he had to do this; for Pidge, the trapped
harem slaves, and for Lance. He was about to come face to face with a being who was capable of so
much vile evil and Keith wanted nothing right now but to run. His knees buckled but he clenched his
fists and took a step forward, and another, and another. He walked towards the gate in halting steps
until it was too late to turn back.

But then, something flickered in his mind; a connection filled with a feeling that made his heart flutter
not with the fear that he currently felt, but with something warmer.

‘Keith.’

Keith halted and looked around for the familiar voice. He didn’t hear it with his hears, but with his
heart.

‘Lance?’

No answer.

‘Lance?!’

‘Is that you, Keith? I can’t…move.’

Keith felt a tinge of unrest that wasn’t his. Slivers of fear and confusion floated within him and he
immediately knew that this was what Lance was feeling.

“Lance?” Keith said this time, although, it was soft so that the guards by the gate wouldn’t hear him.
However, they glanced at each other when Keith started to talk without anyone with him like he wa
mad but he couldn’t care less. Lance’s voice disappeared in his mind and so did the slivers of the
other’s emotion. It left Keith feeling empty, frustrated, and worried. He was sure of it now; he and
Lance had a connection.

That fact gave him strength.

“I’m here to see Lotor.” Keith said once he walked up to the guards. He craned his neck up to meet the scrutinizing gazes of the towering Galra before him but then, one of them grabbed Keith by the collar of his shirt and yanked him up. He struggled for air and his feet dangled from the ground.

“That’s Prince Lotor to you, you shit bag insect! Ask properly!”

Keith did not stand to be handled like that. He grabbed hold of the guard’s hand around his collar, his fingers scrambling. The guard yelped in pain when vermilion flames erupted from Keith’s fingers and engulfed the guard’s arm. The yelp became a screeching howl of pain as the fire burned his armor and licked at his scaly skin but Keith didn’t will the flame to burn his arm off just yet.

“I said ,” Keith repeated slowly through gritted teeth. “I’m here to see Lotor.”

“Alright, alright!” the other guard tried to frantically pat away the flames on his comrade’s arm but to no avail. “Just make it stop!”

Keith snapped his fingers and the flames died out but the asshole guard’s arm was covered in blisters.

The second guard bared his grimy teeth at him, each point sharpened like a predator’s. “Follow me, Vessel.”

The citadel was nothing like the shimmering metal, glass, and white stone that made up the Altean royal palace. This one was elegant in its own dark way; black stone embedded with glowing violet gems, gothic spires whose silhouettes speared through the montage of the shattered moon, and the tapestries paraded stark dark colors that blended in with the images that displayed the conquests of Emperor Zarkon. But what Keith noticed the most was the sickly sweet scent of flowers that lingered in the air.

A veiled woman greeted them at the end of the hall and the guard nudged Keith’s shoulder towards her.

“Greetings, Vessel of fire.” The woman bowed slightly, the silk veil around her head jingled from the tiny ornamental bells that adorned the hair pains that held the fabric in place. She was Galra and she was beautiful but her eyes held fear and sadness within them. “My name is Ilun, one of the royal harem. The prince has requested that we adorn you in preparation for his banquet.”

“Thanks but I don’t-" Keith began to decline but then he noticed the bruises and healing cuts that peppered Ilun’s arms. There was no manacle around her neck but Keith saw the dark bruise that was evidence of something tight and heavy. There was a change in the shadows that flickered in her eyes when she saw Keith eye her injuries. “I mean, uh, sure. I guess I need to shower.”

Once the guard left Keith to Ilun’s care, she led him down a long corridor and two flights of stairs. In the silence of their walk with nothing but the echoes on their footsteps, Keith decided to start a conversation and his opening remark was something short from polite but it wasn’t exactly rude either.

“You’re angry.”

Ilun halted in her steps, her back turned to him. Keith noticed the way her fingers clenched into fists. “Not too bad, human.” She said without looking at him but the corners of her lips quirked into a sardonic smile that was gone before it was evident. “You’re perceptive with a keen eye for detail.
Maybe you’ll survive after all.”

“Thanks.” Keith’s reply was just as humorless. “You’re not going to answer, are you?”

“Not here. These walls have eyes and ears.”

They did not exchange any more words until they reached a room on the other side of the palace. Ilun knocked in a pattern on the polished wooden surface and the lock clicked from the other side. The harem room was something out of a Greek paradise. White marble pillars draped with red tapestries held up the lavishly painted ceiling that displayed sparkling constellations. Every inch of the floor was covered with a plush golden carpet that Keith’s boots sank in. There was a pool on the outdoor patio that swirled with hot steam.

But as beautiful and extravagant this place was, Keith felt a heavy atmosphere that made his chest clench. Ilun clapped twice and several other harem slaves emerged from behind the doors that led to their quarters, each holding things that will be used for Keith. A handsome Galra man with a collar around his neck and whose gaze shied away when Keith smiled at him, carried folded clothes; a woman with stark blue hair and with the way her legs waved like an illusion, made Keith guess that she was a mermaid wearing a glamor spell, carried a tray of scented oils.

Another woman with deep black hair held a box with the lid open to reveal the beautiful jewelry that rested on a red velvet cushion while another man who stood near the open veranda which led to the hot spring held up plush towels. When Keith took a second look at him, he noticed the same stumps on his back like the woman they rescued.

“Of course, I’m angry.” Ilun’s voice was hard now. The bells on her veil tinkled when she whirled to face Keith. “We all are. We are angry and we are terrified; unsure if we will still live tomorrow and even if we are fortunate enough to be spared, we are not sure if the world outside would still accept us.” Ilun’s gaze faltered and she glared at the ceiling as if she cursed the constellations. “We have been desecrated like play things. Our very sense of self, stripped from us.”

“I know one of your own that escaped; an angelic woman.” Keith lowered his voice to make sure that no one but them heard. “She is with the Blade.” Keith’s tone softened. “There is a world out there that’s waiting for you to return.” He paused for a moment and his gaze turned solemn. “Healing will not be easy but it’s possible. Someone will accept you, scars and everything.”

The harem glanced among themselves when the Galra with the collar spoke up. “Are you here to help us?”

Keith nodded. “And I’m also here to save my friend. Do you know where they are?”

This time, the woman with the black hair and the box of jewelry spoke; “I’ve seen the witch drag in a small human, even smaller than you. I think the human is being kept at the royal banquet room.”

“Then there is no time to waste.” Ilun said and she gestured at Keith. One of the harem carefully approached and started to lead Keith to an elegantly painted screen where he can change out of his clothes but he shook his head.

“I appreciate all of this but I’ll just take a bath and keep everything else.” Keith declined the jewelry and lavish Galran clothes offered to him. “I’m not much for dressing up.”

“But the prince ordered us…” The mermaid woman piped in meekly. “It might anger him.”

“If he has a problem, he can take it up with me.” Keith said. “You have no fault if I declined.”
The harem still looked unsure. “Listen to me,” Keith added as he faced them. “We’re all going to get out of here.” He started to relay the plan that he, Shiro, Kolivan, and Krolia came up with. “There’s a sleeper agent in here named Thace. We already made contact with him to help get you all out, alright?” the next few minutes was spent laying out the plan and Ilun who also had knowledge about the secret lab that Haggar kept volunteered to meet Shiro and the rest of the Blade to lead them there.

An hour later, after he had washed up, Keith glared at this reflection on a full bodied mirror. Ilun and the rest of the harem stood behind him with grim expressions.

“Are you ready, Keith?”

Keith nodded, fire a deep blaze in his violet eyes. “Bring it.”

~

Allura heard the explosion and her senses screamed at the tainted power in the air. When she looked up, she saw a faint crack on the dome of the sky.

“My queen!” Coran burst through the double doors and into the courtyard where Allura stood while being briefed by one of the squadron leaders that guarded the west side of the kingdom. “There is chaos at the shrine!”

The ground crumbled beneath their feet at the mass of the magical power that erupted from the direction of Alfor’s crystal. Dark clouds started to gather all over the sky and it blotted out the sun like an ashy blanket.

“Did you guys feel that?!” Matt burst from behind Coran and skidded into a stop when he saw the sky. Lightning webbed through the clouds before a loud thunder boomed. At this rate, even Allura wasn’t sure if it was an explosion or thunder. “Holy motherfu—“

“I’m going to the shrine.” Allura spread her wings as she regarded the squadron leader in front of her. She was a brown winged angel with a hardened expression on her face and twin rifles that crossed on her back. Flight goggles pushed back the bangs that framed her face. “Captain Olia, take your men and women and secure the barrier along with the others.”

“Yes, your highness.” Olia replied with a military salute. She whirled around to face her troops. “You heard our queen, secure the barrier!” She spread her wings; the color of chestnuts tipped with burgundy at the primaries. A strong gust blew from her flight followed by the angelic army that she led.

“Coran, I’m placing you responsible of the castle and the city while I’m gone. Take charge of the remaining guards and evacuate the citizens once things become dire.”

The royal adviser’s expression was grim but he bowed. “Yes, your majesty.”

“Allura,” Matt stepped forward. “I know I’m not powerful but I want to help.”

The queen looked at Matt and met his dedicated gaze but Allura noticed the light in them flicker. Matt had doubts in him but she saw the way he pushed his fears back. Humans, no matter how fragile their mortal bodies were, are stubborn and the fires in their hearts are courageous when they blaze.

“Matt,” Folding her wings back in slightly. She walked to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I admit that I can feel the poison running through my veins and I’m far from peak health.” She lowered her voice and squeezed Matt’s shoulder. “I need your support to grant me healing.”
“I can help you fight too.” Matt nodded. “Just let me know what I need to do.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at him. Coran gave one final acknowledgement before Allura spread those dove wings of hers that shimmered like white gold. She held out her hand to him and Matt took it, his staff on his other hand. Locking her arms firmly around Matt’s waist, Allura shot up into the sky and the land zipped by beneath them like a blur as the sped to the direction of the shrine.

However, nothing prepared them for what they saw.

Hunk and Lance were engaged in battle; bullets being deflected off from the steel of a war hammer. There were ten dead angels that were scattered on the ground around them; all with bullet holes concentrated on their hearts and their heads. The way of their execution had been brutal and precise to make sure that they did not regenerate.

Lance was emanating a miasmic aura but Hunk was holding out his ground as expected from an exceptional royal guard. However, Lance appeared to have the upper hand since Hunk was on the defensive in hesitation to attack Lance back.

“Oh my god.” Matt breathed in horror. “Allura, we have to help them!”

“What in the blazes is happening?!” Allura demanded. “Why is Lance attacking Hunk?!”

“I don’t know! But we need to get down there right now!”

Allura was about to swoop right in when there was a shrill shattering sound and the luminescent cracks on the façade of the sky grew bigger. “Lance is obviously not himself.” Allura said. “I can feel the rot in his aura. I’m going to drop you off so you can help Hunk.” She told Matt over the noise of the wind and the clashing weapons. “I’m going to fly to the shrine and check the crystal!”

“You can’t go in there alone, Allura!” Matt protested. “What if there’s an enemy inside? You’re poisoned!”

“Then I’ll deal with the enemy but Hunk is outnumbered. You need to assist him!” Allura left no room for argument and dropped Matt when she dipped from the air and sent Matt tumbling to the ground.

“Allura! You’ll need healing!” Matt cried out in protest but Allura gained altitude and sped off towards the temple shrine. His senses piqued and he was barely able to avoid a bullet. His eyes quickly turned to the direction where it came from and he extended his staff, spinning it in the air through his fingers. But when his gaze locked with black and red ones, he froze.

“Matt, so glad you could drop in, buddy!” Hunk pushed himself off from the ground and the moment that Lance was on the move again, he slammed his war hammer on the ground and erected sharp rock spires that hurled towards the maddened angel. Lance was able to avoid some and punched through another. Matt felt his stomach churn at the sound of cracking bones but Lance looked unfazed even when his broken knuckles started to regenerate at angelic speed.

“I guess you could say, he got the punch line.” Matt snickered but then scrambled up to his feet and jumped behind the rocky shield that Hunk erected from the ground when a flurry of bullets came at them. He turned serious: “What the fuck is wrong with Lance?!”

“We have reason to believe that his mind has been poisoned.” Hunk panted as he peeked over the edge of the barrier he made. “I honestly don’t know how to stop Lance without killing him.”

“I never knew Lance was this powerful.”
“Shiro told me that he sensed great power inside Lance.” Hunk admitted. “But the absence of his wings trapped that inside. Considering that our wings are the mediators of the power that lives inside us.”

They were interrupted by a pained cry and when Matt peeked behind the wall again, he saw Lance crouched on the ground, clutching his head. Tears ran down his sickly eyes and he was breathing hard as if trying to keep himself at bay.

“Make…it stop.” He pleaded. “What’s…happening…?”

“Lance!” Hunk stepped out from behind the barrier. “Come on, buddy, I’m here. You have to fight it!”

He felt a shiver run down his spine and Lance stared at him from where he was crouched. Then slowly, he got up to his feet with those eerie eyes never once breaking eye contact with Hunk’s. His fingers twitched and the pistols he held slithered with shadows and morphed to form two black curved blades. The edges were serrated and the tips dripped with black muck. Lance’s expression twisted painfully.

“Lance?” Hunk tried again but raised his war hammer in preparation for another attack. He watched as the air turned cold and the sky swirled with dark clouds. One by one, the wind of power that swirled around them formed jagged spears of black ice behind him, all aimed at Matt and Hunk.

Lance smiled maliciously. “Who?”

~

Allura was horrified at the sight of wounded acolytes on the sacred halls of the shrine. They were unconscious but were regenerating. However, some weren’t as fortunate as they lifeless. She glimpsed of a movement in the shadows and when Allura stepped closer, she picked up the sound of sobs. Shay knelt on the floor, her wings drooping behind her while she held her brother’s hand.

“Shay!” Allura half flew half ran to the priestess. She dropped to her knees and immediately placed her hands on Rax’s chest but was rendered speechless at the sight of a gaping hole. There was nothing she can do, Rax was gone.

“He and some others died to protect the shrine.” Shay spoke quietly. “I rushed over here when I heard that Hunk was engaged in battle with Lance only to chance upon this.” She gestured at the destruction that surrounded them.

“This is all Nyma’s doing, is it?” Allura’s wings glowed dangerously with the Archangelic power that manifested in her. “First, she poisoned me and now this?!”

“She also poisoned Lance with spore.” Shay added quietly. “I don’t know if I can save him.”

Allura was rendered speechless and the words she spoke were dangerous. “That’s why he’s lost his mind.”

“It’s dragged on long enough.” Shay murmured, her eyes narrowing. “We have to put an end to this. She is dividing the unity among us and once a gap appears, Lotor will use it to break in.” Gently, she reached down to close Rax’s eyes and placed his hands down to his side.

Beside her, Allura slowly got up to her feet and with a stark flash of light, she summoned a spinning glyph and a handle jutted out. Allura took hold of it and slowly pulled it out, revealing it to be an elegant silver bladed spear. It whistled in the air as Allura spun it and it stopped midway with the dull
end being held out towards Shay.

The priestess looked at the holy weapon being given to her and she took it, getting up to her feet as well.

“Come on,” Allura’s tone was steely and determined. “Let’s put an end to this.”

~

The banquet hall wasn’t hard to spot. Keith found himself standing in front a towering door gilded with luminescent violet gems that glowed eerily. Keith took a deep breath to try and shut off the nagging feeling on the back of his mind that his angel was suffering. He had one shot at this; the faster that he can finish the mission, save Pidge, and foil the witch’s plans, the sooner he can return to Altea.

Nothing else mattered right now but the mission.

Keith took a single step forward and started to reach for the knob but he immediately pulled back when he heard a loud creak and the door opened by itself as if expecting a visitor. The banquet hall was grand; fit for royalty and nothing less. Towering black pillars webbed with gold veins in the marble, lush red curtains that framed the ceiling to wall windows, and rugs that were coats of hunted creatures. But what sent Keith reeling back were the angel wings that hung on the mantle like trophies. In the center of the room was a single table set up with food for two. White roses stood out from the black vase that was the centerpiece. However, what sent made anger boil in Keith’s veins was the sight of Pidge suspended in the air by a miasmic fog. Blacklight chains bound their wrists and ankles while their unconscious body levitated ways on top of the table.

Keith swallowed the bile that threatened to make him sick and bravely stepped into the threshold.

“My, you are beautiful as you are courageous, Vessel.” A deep, velvety voice hinted with an aristocratic accent, spoke. The demon lord appeared in front of Keith in a swirl of smoke and streaks of violet light. Lotor was stunning; there was no doubt that he was royalty and that he was the one who ruled this realm but the only thing that he inspired in Keith was disgust. Lotor took a step towards Keith, took his hand, and to his distaste, pressed his lips against the back of it in a flirting kiss.

“I am prince Lotor, the demon lord who rules this realm. It brings my heart great joy that an interesting and dazzling creature such as yourself accepted my invitation and graced my citadel with your presence.”
Keith narrowed his eyes in irritation. Willing his flames to life, the hand that Lotor still held close to his lips burst with vermilion fire. The demon lord’s eyes widened and he quickly let go with a hiss as the flames grazed his skin.

Keith scowled to the point that the gesture made him cringe. “The name’s Keith and I don’t like you.”

Lotor’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I will not take offense in that, Keith.” He let his name slide with poison as it left his lips and Keith did not like the sound of it one bit. “But patience must be shown towards lesser creatures, after all.”

Oh wow. This guy is a huge prick.

“Look, asshole, I’m just here to get my friend and leave.” Keith crossed his arms over his chest while he glanced at the Pidge who hung almost lifelessly in mid-air. “Wouldn’t want to repulse you too much, your majesty.”

“And let all this fine food go to waste?” Keith wanted to gag at the hurt that Lotor feigned. “You must understand that my empire is struggling; so many are going hungry and resources are slim in the barrenness of the landscape. I have my best chefs scour the kingdom for the best ingredients to serve
you.” Lotor coolly went over to one of the chairs and pulled it out for Keith like a gentleman. “And besides, you must be tired from your journey. Please, sit. We have much to discuss.”

“Like what?” Keith refused to budge and held his ground. “Me, joining your crusade to destroy Altea? Talk me into being your bitch?”

“Goodness, it’s hardly a crusade and I will not force you, Keith, but to convince you of this noble cause.” Lotor’s expression became solemn. When Keith still refused to budge, Lotor appeared to have reached the end of his patience. With a wave of his hand the chains that bound Pidge tightened and the miasmic atmosphere around them grew darker, making them choke.

“Hey!” Keith gasped. “Cut it out!”

Lotor merely gestured at the chair he held out. “Then, would you honor me this meal, Keith?”

Keith growled underneath his breath with a curse and wordlessly made his way to the table. He felt his heart slam against his ribs as he sat down and Lotor took his place in the seat across him. Keith can only narrow his eyes at the demon lord in pure unadulterated anger. Lotor smiled charmingly at him, sharp canines gleaming.

“Please,” the prince gestured at the food and picked up a goblet to sip some wine. “Eat to your heart’s content.”

“No, thanks.” Keith stayed still. “I don’t have an appetite right now. So, what is that you want?”

“I can offer you much more, Keith.” The prince said. “If you’d only allow me, I can give you a realm of your own to rule. I can offer you everything your mortal heart can ever desire; so much more than Lance can ever give.” he sighed. “You’re exquisite, my dear. It would be a shame to settle for something...less.”

“How fucking dare you!” Keith slammed his fist on the table, making the gold cutlery clatter against the porcelain plates. “Why would I listen to a monster like you?!”

Lotor did not appear to be fazed by Keith’s outburst. He simply lifted his hand and elegantly swirled his fingers in the air to summon a black orb. The center rippled and displayed something so horrific that Keith felt his very soul shatter; Lance was attacking Hunk and Matt in a maddened frenzy. His eyes were bled black and red, he was wounded and bruised, and blood and muck oozed from him. Corpses of angels scattered around them while the once beautiful surroundings was destroyed. Keith felt helpless as he watched the other half of his soul fight his own best friend and Pidge’s twin brother. Lance gave a soundless scream when Matt landed a blow on him with his staff and a sonic boom blew off the trees from their roots when Lance’s blades clashed with Hunk’s hammer.

“Who’s the real monster here, Keith?” Lotor asked and Keith can only stare at him with frozen shock and angry tears filming his eyes. But the smug smile was wiped away from Lotor’s face when he noticed the powerful red aura that surrounded Keith’s form.

“You did this.” Keith’s whisper shook. The cream table cloth burned underneath his fists on the table as fire sparked around his fingers. “You did this to Lance, didn’t you?”

“Why, of course not.” The image disappeared between Lotor’s fingers. “Nyma did.”

“You lied to her as well and planted illusions and promises of power and glory just like what you’re trying to do to me.” Keith lifted his head and dared to meet Lotor’s golden gaze.
Keith glanced outside the window and saw a whip of lightning thrust through the sky despite the absence of storm clouds; the signal.

Slowly, he stood up from his seat. He reached behind him and pulled out his Marmora blade which he awakened and it elongated into its scimitar form enveloped with vermilion flames. Lotor stood up as well and stepped away from the table. “Keith, didn’t your mother teach you that weapons on the table are considered ill manners?”

Keith said nothing nor did his gaze waver and Lotor frowned now, sensing that something wasn’t right. He lifted his hand and summoned his sword in a flash of violet light.

“I will give you one chance to withdraw your challenge, Keith.” The demon lord warned. “You don’t stand a chance against me. You may have an unlimited reservoir of quintessence but that’s useless if you don’t even know how to tap into its full potential.”

“You sure are full of yourself, aren’t you?” With that, Keith kicked the table towards Lotor and when that distraction got him, he raised his blade to hack down. But Lotor was fast and their weapons met in a series of sparks. Keith pulled out everything he knew and went all out at Lotor but the demon lord had centuries of experience over Keith.

Keith yelped when Lotor kicked him back but he countered the fall with a roll and immediately got up to his feet to lung forwards. He blasted fire at Lotor and when he raised his arms to cover himself, Keith brought his sword down. Lotor parried it just in time but the tip of Keith’s sword slice his cheek.

“You insolent disgusting piece of--!”

Keith immediately got down on his knees to dodge the explosion that went off behind him. The mantle and the fireplace exploded which threw Lotor off balance to dodge the Angelfire that shot past his head. The demon lord manage to manipulate the air to redirect the debris coming towards him while Keith summoned a barrier to protect him.

Shiro stood on the massive gaping hole where the mantle and the fireplace used to be which revealed a passage. When the dust cleared, Shiro stood on top of the debris, night sky wings flared. His metallic arm glowed white and hot with the Angelfire licked with slithering serpents of electricity. His other hand clamped around Haggar’s neck while she clawed desperately to remove it. Krolia pinned the witch down with a dormant Marmora blade thorough her chest while the other was awakened into its blade-fan form. Haggar was alive and panting, glaring at them with pure malice in her empty eyes.

“You speak so highly of yourself as if you’re so adored.” Shiro gritted, the silver around his dark arises were molten with Archangel power. “And yet, you don’t even know that those working closest to you are betraying you.”

Krolia yanked off her blade and Haggar gave a pained cry. Shiro then chucked her towards Lotor and she skidded on the floor, her hood falling back and her blood staining the carpet.

“My lord…” she wheezed but Krolia cut her off.

“She is reviving your father so he can take back the throne. Who knows what they plan to do to you.”

“Lies!” Haggar hissed so in return, Shiro gave one powerful flap with those wings of his to clear the dust faster. Behind them, at the end of the passage was a room with a glass capsule. Several medical
equipment and tubes filled with quintessence infused liquid flowed into the body in the container.

And sure enough, he was there.

Zarkon was still half formed. His eyes were closed and the mask to let him breath obscured half of his face.

Lotor became very still; his form was shaking but his eyes had become sharp and his pupils were like a snake’s. Anger filled the air with a malicious aura and Keith took that as his chance. He shot a stream of flame towards Pidge and burned through the orb of miasmic atmosphere around them. When it shattered and they fell, Keith was quick on his feet to catch his friend. He burned through their chains and shook them awake.

“Pidge, Pidge! We gotta move!”

“H-Huh? Keith?” Pidge opened their eyes and stared at him with half lidded tiredness.

“Come on!”

The next thing Keith knew, Krolia had lifted him up to his feet while she took Pidge her arms. “Hurry!”

They bolted out of the banquet room not daring to look back into the anger that was about to burst nor did they decided to watch what Lotor would do to the witch and Zarkon.

“The hostages?” Keith shouted over the wind as they ran.

“Kolivan and Thace got them out already. They must be back in Altea by now!” His mother answered as she kicked down a door and Shiro rushed in and broke the guard’s neck that was guarding it.

“How?!”

“I gave them the last quintessence feather.” Shiro grunted. “You’re our only hope of escape now, Keith.”

Suddenly, when they were just about near the final exit, they heard Haggar’s shrill scream before a sickening crack bounced through the ancient walls. Keith had to fight tooth and nail to hold down the bile in his stomach as images of how Lotor could have ended her life flashed in his mind. But then, the earth shook beneath their feet and Lotor’s anguished scream lifted into the heavens. A powerful explosion burst from the heart of the citadel followed by breaking glass and crumbling walls from the blast of power beams and magic.

“He’s gone batshit!” Keith cried out. When he tripped over a fallen piece of furniture, Shiro hauled him back up. They made it out into the open courtyard and true enough, the citadel was crumbling to the ground as Lotor was taken over by his rage. Who knew what he did to his father?

“We need that gate Keith!” Shiro cried out. “Who knows what else might come out of there!”

Keith steeled himself and tried to focus but then his resolve wavered. “I…don’t know. I don’t remember how to do it!” He was starting to panic but Shiro fell a step beside him and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, don’t give up on yourself.” He smiled at him and gave a gentle squeeze. “I believe in you, you can do this.”
“He’s right, Keith.” Krolia nodded at him. “You’re one of a kind. Also, there’s someone who needs you on the other side.”

Nodding, Keith tried to focus despite the sinking castle and the shattering ground. Lotor’s power clashing with the quintessence and the smell of blood in the air as he murdered his sleeping father was throwing the whole place into chaos. Keith closed his eyes and tapped into the power inside of him just like he did before. He tried to picture Altea in his mind and let the quintessence that run through his veins expand from the light that was enveloping his form. The light took the color of his flames and reformed into an iron gate right in front of them which Keith willed to open. The force of the wind from the other side made them waver and Keith’s hair whipped back from the force.

The proud white marble, steel, and glass of the palace was on the other side.

“Go, go, go!” Shiro pushed through the wind and so did Keith and Krolia.

The eternal night of the demon realm disappeared behind them to be replaced by a different kind of chaos. There were cracks on the sky and Alfor’s barrier gave off a sickly, flickering glow like a dying light bulb.

“Sire!” Coran cried out as he flew down from the main balcony. “You’ve returned!” he looked at Krolia. “General,” he nodded in greeting. “I’m glad you and your son are reunited.”

“I’m glad too.” Krolia handed the unconscious Pidge to the royal advisor. “We’ll exchange pleasantries if we live through the day. This child needs healing.”

“Where’s Allura?” Shiro asked hurriedly. “I got the antidote.”

Coran looked at him with panicked eyes. “Her majesty rushed to the shrine with Matt to stop Nyma from whatever heinous plan she hatched out.” He glanced at the darkening sky and the neon blue cracks.

Keith felt his knees buckle from the using so much of his power to open the gate but despite the toll it took on his body, he blurted out after a huge gulp of air; “Coran, where’s Lance?”

The royal advisor’s eyes turned grim and he tore his gaze again.

“Where’s Lance?” Keith shouted. “Coran, please, you have to tell me. He’s in danger, Lotor showed me---!”

“One of the guards returned with a report.” Coran replied, briefly brushing away the strands of hair that obscured Pidge’s eyes. “Lady Shay and Hunk found a jar of poison spore in Lance’s home. It rots the mind plunging the victim in blood lusting madness.”

“I’ve heard about those; it’s mostly sold in the black market.” Shiro clenched his fists. “There is no cure, Keith; Either Lance is destroyed or he destroys himself.”

“No…” Keith’s voice shook and his eyes went wide. “No! Lance is still in there! He spoke to me!” he turned and despite his legs feeling like jelly, he started to run towards the direction of the shrine.

“Keith! It’s too dangerous!” Krolia called after him angrily.

“I don’t care!” Keith shouted back. “Lance and I are connected in a way, I can do something. I have to try!”

Keith tripped when he felt his legs give in only to be caught by the collar of his shirt after he heard a
loud growl. He yelped when he was thrown into the air only to be caught as he landed on Blue’s back. The fairy cat was in her lioness form; polished blue coat, golden eyes, and two pairs of wings flared out in flight.

“Blue!” Keith cried out. He grinned when the lioness tilted her head back to wink at him. “You’re amazing, girl! But I need your help. I need you to take me to Lance!”

“Keith!” Shiro cried over the noise of the wind and when Keith looked back, he saw Shiro following them in flight. “Go to him but if he proves to be too far gone, I’d have to kill him.”

“I won’t let that happen!” Keith shouted back and tears stung his eyes. “Our souls are connected! If you kill him, you’d have to kill me too!”

Shiro’s expression rippled with shock but Keith didn’t see any more when Blue lowered in altitude. However, Keith spotted Shiro dip his wings and he angled down as fell back to go to the shrine building where Allura was supposed to be. Blue took Keith straight to the courtyard and she gave an angry growl when she dipped her wings into a steep dive to dodge a curved blade that spun towards them. Keith spotted Hunk and Matt cornered back behind a protruding wall erected from the ground.

Blue dropped him off and Keith saw him; Lotor wasn’t lying, Lance really looked like he’s lost it.

He unleashed a flurry of attacks as he blindly lunged towards the new arrivals. Keith quickly summoned a barrier of flames to receive Lance’s attacks and he fell back on his ass on the ground. He could only stare as Lance kicked, punched, and stabbed the barrier he created. Keith looked into those eyes and felt his heart break when he couldn’t find a trace of the man he loves.

“Keith!” Hunk cried out. “Get behind here!”

But Keith didn’t listen. He stood up, placed his hands on his side of the barrier and with the force of his power, pushed Lance back. The maddened angel flew back and slammed against a tree with a pained cry.

“Lance.” Keith slowly approached him, dissolving his shield. “Lance, it’s me. I’m home.”

“Keith, what are you doing?!” Matt jumped out in panic. “He’s not Lance anymore!” but Keith continued to walk towards Lance slowly as much as his tired body would allow him.

“Lance, baby, I missed you so much.” Keith spoke softly. “I’m sorry I left so suddenly. I thought you really hated me; hated what I am because I came from beings that hurt you. But you know what? Not all of them are bad. I even found my mom. Can you believe it? I hope you’ll meet her, she’s strict but she’s not so bad.”

Lance did not reply but his chest was rising and falling slowly with shallow breaths and he remained slouched against the tree trunk, his head bent low.

“Baby, please.” Keith was so close now. “I know you’re in there. You said you’d never leave me as long as I’ll have you and goddammit, I’ll have you until this quintessence kills me off.” Tears fell from his eyes.

“I love you, Lance. Please, baby, please …”

Lance slowly lifted his head and Keith saw the malicious grin on his face; his eyes were just empty pits now. Gripping the blades in his hands, he charged towards Keith and slashed his weapons at his lover’s throat. Suddenly, the ground rose beneath Keith and vines sprouted which wrapped around his torso and yanked him back.
Hunk willed the rocks to mold and caught Lance before he got to Keith. The ground rippled like water as Hunk manipulated them to cover up Lance from his neck down and solidified it, locking him in place. A stream of magical light shot past Keith’s head and once it reached Lance, it formed a sphere around him that solidified. Keith couldn’t even see Lance anymore because of the milky surface of the orb. Shay stood beside Hunk, the stream disappearing from her hands as the barrier that locked Lance inside.

But then, the hairs on Keith’s nape rose when the air became electrified with power and when he looked back, he saw Allura being helped up by Shiro. Her wings were ablaze as a glyph of light spun behind her. Six swords slowly protruded out, point first, all aimed at the sphere and the prisoner inside. Once the swords propelled out at high speed, Shiro enforced electricity on the angelic steel to make sure that not only did it pierce, but also rigged to burn and explode.

Everything happened in slow motion and before Keith knew it; he was already moving to cut Matt’s vines that were around him with his luxite blade and he ran so fast towards the orb that contained Lance.

“NO!” Keith cried out and with flames enveloping his fist, he punched through Shay’s barrier. Once he had broken through, he was sucked inside before the barrier regenerated and solidified once more. The orb swirled with miasma inside until the milky color was completely devoured by black and it throbbed with dark power. Allura quickly maneuvered the electrified blades to avoid the giant black pearl in front of them with Keith now inside.

The swords spun around the orb slowly, points aimed like guillotines waiting for their command to drop at the first sign that Keith has failed to pull Lance out of the madness.

Chapter End Notes

Please do not repost art. Instead, please support the artist through her tumblr page!

forsakenangel88

Also, feel free to say hi on my tumblr! I love talking to you guys!

See you next update and please tell your friends!
Archangel

Chapter Summary

Heaven gains another angel.

The final arc begins...

Chapter Notes

Hi there! So Angel and I decided to make this chapter our Julance piece and a birthday gift for Lance. We're putting it up in advance since we're both so excited for you guys to read it! (Also, I'll be away on a con this weekend so I won't be able to post ion time anyway)

We hope that you enjoy this chapter; it's shorter than most chapters and it's probably going to be one of the short ones but it is necessary. This is the beginning of the final arc that will eventually lead to the final battle that will decide the fate of Altea and our heroes. So without further a do, we present to you, chapter 12.

A/N: In light of Shiro's reveal (HOLY COW IM SO HAPPY AAAAA), this chapter will remain Shallura where he is concerned romantically because:
1. JDS and LM left Shiro's sexuality open for interpretation as long as the fact that Shiro likes men is respected.
2. The story is nearing the end.

You have been warned and it is in your discretion if you want to continue or not.

Seriously, I'm so happy we got LGBT+ rep in the show! I'm happy to be part of the generation that's witnessing the freedom of love. ALSO PLEASE GIVE ANGEL SOME LOVE BECAUSE SHE MADE THIS BEAUTIFUL ART THAT'S SO FITTING <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Chapter 12

This was not how everything was supposed to turn out. Nyma dragged herself while she made her way through the thick canopies of trees in an attempt to get as far away from the shrine as possible. There was a crimson trail on the ground behind her from the gushing wound on her wing. Captain Olia’s squadron were now hunting her down like a beast and to make matters worse, the queen managed to still be alive.

“My plan was supposed to be perfect.” Nyma hissed under her breath. She cursed her wounded wings and out of spite, she gave an inhuman screech when she reached back and yanked out the long dagger that was lodged in the muscle that connected her wings to her back. She chucked the blade aside, breathing hard. Her pupils were slits like a serpent’s in rage and she gritted through her teeth.

“Everything was supposed to be perfect!” Nyma breathed. “Perfect!”

She heard a rustle behind her and realized that her pursuers were close when the sounds of the voices the lifted in the air. Everyone was supposed to be dead; that bitch Allura should have keeled over and died and her pathetic mate was supposed to be trapped in the Galra realm and killed there. It was all that meddling human’s fault. Had Nyma only known the extent of Keith’s abilities, she would have killed him first but that wingless guard was in the way. Everything spiraled out of Nyma’s control.

Pushing forward and pushing the low lying branches out of her way, Nyma reached an open juniberry field where the barrier touched the ground. It was flickering sickly which was a sign that Nyma did one thing right. She pressed her hand against the barrier and felt the weak surge of power underneath her hand.

“Alfor, you blind fool.” She muttered every word like a curse. “You make my job really hard but that’s not going to last. Once your crystal is fully consumed by the virus,” her smile was malicious. “Lotor will take what is rightfully his and I will be queen!”

“There!”

Nyma heard weapons being aimed at her. She was hunched from where she was losing blood on the spot from the wound that was not regenerating; she knew that that damn priestess threw an enchanted blade at her when she killed her brother in front of her. She swore to make Shay pay for that once she is queen; better yet, he’ll make her damn mate watch while Nyma cuts off her wings.

“Halt!” Olia broke away from the group, her twin rifles raised and aimed at her. “By the orders of her majesty, queen Allura and his grace, general Shiro, you are hereby under arrest for your crimes of treason.”

“Kill me then.” Nyma challenged and she fully faced them now. She smiled; “If you can.”

“You sure are arrogant, Nyma.” Olia narrowed her eyes but her tone was dignified. She wasn’t going to let a traitor ruffle her feathers so pettily. “We have orders to bring you back to the kingdom where you will be executed by general Shiro’s hand.”

Nyma guffawed. “That piece of shit? He gets lucky being plucked off from the streets and now he lets his power get into his head? Who is he to play executioner? He just warms the queen’s bed!”

“Enough!” Olia snapped. “You have forfeited your right to a fair trial after you poisoned the queen, the royal guard, Lance, and the king’s barrier!” Olia advanced forward but halted the moment Nyma
burst out into gleeful laughter.

“You have all forfeited your lives! You don’t know the immense power that you’re dealing with!” Nyma pulled out a small vial filled with luminous purple liquid inside that swirled with miasmic energy which she crushed in her fist. Blood and the liquid trickled down her arm like grotesque veins and they grew like tentacles that wrapped around her whole form, encasing her into a slithering cocoon which began to morph.

“Get back and prepare to attack!” Olia yelled at her soldiers who raised their weapons. However, they all watched in horror as the black cocoon grew in size, towering over them. It started to reform like liquid and there were sickening sounds of bones cracking from within. Olia and the others stepped back and some flew up to covering the air due to the thing’s massive size. There was a light when the cocoon’s surface cracked and a giant basilisk emerged. It struck forward and snatched the nearest airborne angel before he was able to dodge out of the way. The soldier gave a panicked cry for help before the basilisk’s jaw snapped shut, impaling him with rows or jagged fangs.

Olia stared in horror and she wasn’t able to drown out the dying screams and the sound of meat and bones being crushed. The basilisk’s throat moved down when it swallowed its prey and stared at them with those familiar violet eyes that were once Nyma’s. The monster was quick to move with its strikes and Olia ordered her soldiers to scatter. When they fired their weapons and their angelic, they barely made a scratch against the armor of its thick onyx scales. If they stayed here without any form of reinforcement, they will surely die because the basilisk was too powerful for them.

When the angels were scattered in the sky, the enormous serpent took this chance to slam against the barrier wall repeatedly. Olia cursed under her breath in old Altean as more and more cracks webbed towards the sky and the ground. Another slam and a chunk fell off revealing the void on the other side which morphed into the inky sky of the demon realm.

“Oh, no.” Olia realized it now while she watched the monster ram its head against the barrier. Every impact made the earth quiver beneath them, threatening to cave in. She shot back to avoid falling debris and called out to one of her soldiers. “Azrael, get the sire and the queen!” and with a panicked salute, the soldier flew away.

~

“You need to step back and rest.” Shiro said gently to his wife as he helped her up to her feet. Allura accepted the support, took deep breaths and focused all her energy in trying to work with the antidote that Shiro gave her.

“I’ll be fine.” Allura replied but never took her eyes off the orb in front of them. “We have more important matters to be concerned about.” The look she gave Shiro spoke volumes; the intensity of her gaze was filled with relief that her mate was back from the nether realm and the pureness of the love she felt for him. Shiro understood despite the lack of words, feeling Allura’s emotion reverberate in the intimacy of the mating bond that connected their souls.

“What do we do?” Matt spoke up in worry. He gripped his staff and ground the butt on the ground to support himself from the exhaustion. “Keith is in there!”

“What else can we do?” Hunk chimed in with a frustrated question. “We can’t do anything without hurting Keith too!”

Shay took a deep breath and bravely approached the orb. Hunk’s eyes widened; “Shay, wait!”

But the priestess did not listen; she carefully reached forward and tried to press her palm against the
surface of the orb only to yank it back with a hiss when she was burned by the acid that sheened it.

“I can’t get through.” Shay pursed her lips together in a frustrated line and glared desperately at the orb. “There’s no way to tell what’s happening inside but one thing is for sure; that thing is pulsing with life. No one is dead yet.”

Yet.

And to make matters worse, a sentry from Olia’s squad flew towards them in desperate haste.

“My queen and sire,” she quickly saluted. “my squad was able to track the traitor. She is at the barrier wall at the edge of the realm. She…” she huffed,


“She transformed into a basilisk and is breaking the barrier from the inside out, sir!”

Shiro cursed underneath his breath but when he saw that Allura was already on the move to fly out, he held her wrist. “Love, I’ll go.”

“I can go, dear, I’ve taken the antidote,” Allura’s eyes burned bright and the silver around her irises were molten. “You stay here and watch over Lance and Keith.”

“Is that an order or a request?”

Allura stilled and she looked at Shiro who in turn, gave her a silent pleading look. “I-”

“I can’t heal, Allura.” Shiro lifted his right arm and brushed the cool metal of his fingers against Allura’s cheek. “I can only destroy.” The tone was almost sad. “But you can. If those two emerge from there, they’ll need you to step in and help Shay.”

Allura considered Shiro’s proposal and her gaze bore deep into his. “A request, general,” her tone was strict.

“Yes, my queen?” Shiro dipped his head and the words were whispers. Their eyes met and unspoken words passed between them and echoed in the privacy of their minds.

‘You will return to me.’

‘Don’t I always?’ Shiro quirked a silent smile, his black and silver gaze unwavering against the queen’s.

‘Cocky.’

‘Bossy.’

Shiro passed a telepathic kiss which made its mark on Allura’s heart.

‘I love you, Allura.’

‘And I, you, Shiro.’

Had they been alone, they would’ve done so physically but with others present and in a time this dire, they are queen and general; the rulers of Altea.
“Deliver justice in Altea’s name.”

“As you wish, my queen.”

Those night sky wings spread to reveal the glittering specks of silver within and Shiro shot off into the sky with one flap of an Archangel that burned with power. Allura turned to glare at the black orb in front of them with the holy blades she summoned hovering in a circle above.

~

It was so dark and constricted. This was the first thing that Keith realized when he opened his eyes. He was in an empty void with nothing but darkness and the dank smell of miasma that got under his skin and made it crawl. White noise surrounded him but at the same time, he drowned in a suffocating silence. Across him, was Lance with his head bent low while trapped in the rock cone that Hunk encased him in. He wasn’t moving and Keith felt a cold wave of fear slide down his spine when he noticed that Lance was awfully quiet from the lack of breathing sounds.

“Lance?” Keith called out but he was only answered by silence. “Lance!” Keith dragged himself towards the unconscious angel. The orb wasn’t that spacious but it felt like miles for Keith’s sluggish body. The effects of opening the quintessence gateway had already taken a toll and his vision was spinning but he didn’t care; right now, Lance needed him. Keith refused to believe what Hunk and Shay said about the hopelessness of the situation. There was a way to save Lance and Keith was going to try to find it no matter what the cost.

“Baby, come on, you gotta wake up!” Keith carefully cupped Lance’s face and tilted his head to make the angel look at him. Lance’s eyelids quivered and they opened to reveal empty black voids dotted by twin crimson irises. There was a sick gurgling from the bottom of Lance’s throat and he ground his teeth like he was trying to hold through the pain.

“Don’t touch me!” Lance snapped at Keith and the other took a step back, frowning deeply. “I’ll kill you, Lotor! I’ll make you suffer the same pain you put me through twice over!”

Lotor? Was Lance hallucinating? Did he honestly see Lotor in Keith? There was no time for questions because when Keith assessed his angelic lover, he saw that the sickly veins became more enlarged and pulsed on Lance’s forehead, around the eyes, and his neck like they were about to burst.

“I’m not Lotor, Lance.” Keith’s voice was firm. He took a stubborn step forward. “Your mind is poisoned; it’s me, Keith.”

“Fuck you!” Lance spat out but even if those two words hurt Keith, he threw his arms around Lance’s neck and the angel stilled. Keith held on and refused to let go even if Lance thrashed in his arms. Even if he was constrained, he was still strong and Keith’s own strength was failing.

“Lance,” His voice trembled. “we first met in a park when you saved me from a demon. I summoned you with a feather that Shiro gave me and when I passed out, you brought me home and watched over me.” Keith tightened the embrace. “You were such an asshole; you saw me as liability and the whole job as a waste of your time because I was a lesser being than you but you stayed. We went through crazy shit together; the club, the cave, the fall into Altea…” Keith’s voice wavered. “We fought together, man. That’s gotta count for something. We kissed, we…” he trailed off. It took him a few seconds to find his voice from the emotion that the memory inspired.

“Lance, come on, you can’t just forget about that! All my life I’ve been alone then you showed up and you changed my life, okay? Lance, please, listen to me; I lo-“
But Lance thrashed in refusal. “You can’t sway me with you words, Lotor!”

“I’m not Lotor!” Keith held Lance’s head and the delusional angel look at him. He cringed at the sight of those bottomless eyes. “Lance, please.”

Something flickered in those pits and for a brief moment there, Keith thought he caught a glimpse of the endless blue of Lance’s irises. He felt some sort of hope stir in his heart; Lance was still in there. Keith leaned in and pressed their foreheads together. He had an idea which was a long shot and but he was going to take a huge risk for the man he loves.

“Lance, you have to let me in.” he pleaded, each word trembling with tears that threatened to spill but Keith fought it back to be strong for the both of them. “Let me help you.”

When Lance stayed still, Keith closed his eyes and he found himself in his mind, floating like a ghost. He couldn’t feel the air in his lungs but he was calm and light. He floated in there, searching, with his heart willing for a way. Then, as if his silent wanting was answered, he saw the faded blue ribbon of light floating aimlessly as he was. He imagined himself reaching out and when the tips of his fingers brushed against the phantom velvet, Keith felt emotions and thoughts that weren’t his rush into him.

**Keith**

**Lance, I’m here.**

The stream of blue did not shy away this time and Keith took hold of it. Once he did, he was pulled into a vortex that carried him through such a wind of force that it knocked his breath out even if he wasn’t even breathing. He gasped and the narrowed his eyes at the wind and the blinding streaks of color that soaked into his very being. The darkness burst into an array of prism lights and Keith found himself in front of Lance who was sitting in the middle of the bright emptiness; scarred, shivering, and with his knees pulled up to his chest and his face buried in them.

“Lance.”

The angel stilled. “No. Don’t look at me.”

Keith sighed and knelt so they were levelled. “Hey, been looking for you, baby.” He offered a soft smile. “Whatcha doin’ here?”

“I don’t know.” Lance admitted. “I don’t know where I am. I feel like I’m disconnected. Are you a memory too, Keith? Am I dead?”

But Keith shook his head and carefully scooted closer to Lance, taking him into his arms. He savored the warmth of Lance’s skin, missed his scent, his voice, those eyes, everything about him.

“No, you’re not.” Keith replied. He reached out and relief washed over him when he threaded his fingers in the tangle of Lance’s hair. He felt real as day even though they existed in the mental plane. “You’re just a little lost.”

“And you found me, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Heh,” a bitter chuckle. “You’re such a show-off.”

Lance lifted his head now but there was a sad smile on his lips. The bright space around them
flickered and shifted like a river of colors until a familiar scenery filled Keith’s vision; a crystal clear lake surrounded by lush trees and a small wooden dock. A cozy cottage lay not far from it with potted herbs and a hammock on the painted porch. This was Lance’s memory; his home by the lake.

Their home.

“I tried getting out but I can’t. I’ve been going around in circles but I can’t seem to leave.” Lance admitted. “It’s like I’m going around in circles.”

Keith met those sapphire blue eyes that threatened to pull him under the current of the ocean. It always left Keith breathless. “I can get us out of here but once we are out there, you have to take back what’s yours.”

“I’m not strong enough.”

“Yes, you are.”

Lance looked unsure but he got up to his feet when Keith helped him up. However, Keith felt the hairs on his nape stand like the way they did when he first met Shiro and Lance or Lotor, or any other near immortal in that matter. It was a mortal’s natural response to something that is more powerful.

There was immense power that thrummed in here and it was trapped underneath.

“We have to—” Keith wasn’t able to finish when they almost stumbled from the tremors that shook the ground. Miasmic smoke emerged from the woods and the sky started to close in on them. The space of serenity around them shattered like glass until there were surrounded by inky darkness once again. Lance dropped to his knees and grabbed his head on both sides.

“K-Keith!” He called out desperately. “I don’t know what’s happening, everything hurts!”

“Shh, baby, I got you, I got you…” Keith threw his arms protectively around Lance’s trembling form and glared at the rot that slowly consumed Lance’s mind. He could see it now; there were blotches and thick acidic goo that oozed out. When Keith felt something wet on his leg, he saw that it has started to seep out below them as well in the form of thick and dense sludge.

“I’m not strong e—“

“Yes, you are!” Keith cried over the howling wind and the fading light from the mirage of Lance’s memory of the lake. The space was nothing more than the emptiness it was earlier but the fumes around them were toxic and sharp to the scent that it made Keith reel. The fact that his body ached all over did not help their situation.

“To hell with Lotor; you beat him! You’ve made a name for yourself! You’re one of Allura’s royal guards, you’re my guardian angel!”

“I meant that I don’t have enough power to fight back the rot!” Lance raised his voice in a snappish wail but his eyes were wide and rimmed with tears. The sludge was up to their chests already and at this rate, they will suffocate. Their consciousness will be snuffed out and their physical bodies will drop dead on the outside.

“I won’t let you die!” Keith swore and his whole body started to glow with a soft red light as he tapped into his quintessence for the second time that day. He grew brighter and brighter while he used an immense amount of power. In return, his vision started to blur and he felt like his whole body was on fire but not in a good way. The pain was agonizing as the quintessence seeped out of
his mortal body and flowed into Lance.

“Keith, what are you doing?!” Lance demanded while the glow spread from Keith to him.

“Use it to break free, Lance.” Keith said. “Take all you need!”

“No!” Keith felt his knees buckle when Lance rejected the quintessence and forced it to flow back but Keith pushed at the stream of power and he drew more to infuse into Lance. The sludge was already nearing their chins and the darkness around them solidified into some sort of wet wall that was closing in on them.

“Don’t fucking argue with me!” Keith snapped but he grinned and his eyes were bright with the quintessence flames the burned in his core. “I’m the damn Vessel, man. I’m not going to keel over and die!” He was relentless. “Fight, Lance, I’ll be right by your side.” He took Lance’s hand and placed it on his chest, over his beating heart underneath the thick muck of the rot.

The intimacy that laid deep within was fortified by Keith’s acceptance. He wasn’t about to let Lance take the hit. He wasn’t going to take heaven for himself and leave Lance to suffer in hell.

If Lance burns, then so will Keith.

The frayed blue ribbon swirled with a stream of vermilion flames and just as the sludge covered them both and pulled them towards the dark maw of death, the mating bond snapped into place, paving a soul deep connection that acted like a pathway for the immense amount of quintessence to smoothly flow from Keith to Lance.

Raw power spread from within and burst out of Lance’s body. The rot was burned away by the flames which cleansed them and healed the sickly veins that were throbbing with the poison.

Outside, the oceans in all the realms roared songs of praise through crashing waves that battered and shattered cliffs.

*  

The orb cracked and Allura prepared to attack while Hunk erected rock barriers as their defense but a powerful gust of wind that was way beyond natural blew down on them, almost sweeping Matt away had if Shay didn’t grab him by the collar of his shirt and held him down. The surface of the orb cracked with webs of blue light crawled all over the matte surface. They were all pushed back with the force the sonic boom that came when the orb shattered and something shot out into the sky like an arrow of light that speared through the dark clouds. It tore a hole in the darkness, revealing the sun hidden on the other side and it casted warmth in the world below.

“What the hell?” Matt muttered. He hauled himself up to his feet and squinted through the glare cast down by the sun and the silvery blue light from the sky.

“Is that…” Hunk breathed, no other words from the utter shock.

“I cannot believe my eyes.” Shay slowly sunk to the ground on her knees amidst her colorful skirts that pooled beneath her. “Never have I thought this to be possible.”

Something descended from the sky from where the clouds were torn. Allura lowered the hovering swords, the words shaken from her as she watched. There was a cocoon of light that stretched and broke off to reveal the personifications of a complete miracle. Vibrant blue wings tipped with silver flared out majestically behind Lance. His eyes were like molten sapphires ringed with glowing silver and his form radiated with power that made Shay, Hunk, and Matt feel electricity slither undermine their skin like a flowing river that will threaten to wash them out of existence. The aura that
surrounded Lance made the very air burn both hot and cold and phantom flecks of blue flame floated from the silver edges of his wings like glitters of embers flying off into the sky.

This kind of power…

Angelfire.

Lance was an Archangel.

*

The landing was gentle. Soft wind swayed the blades of grass like graceful dancers and the clouds closed up once again to remind them about the danger that lurked in the realm of the angels. Keith was cradled in Lance’s arms, carried like a precious bride and a lover to be treasured. His arms were around the Archangel’s neck but despite the exhaustion that made his body slack and out of commission, Keith wore a wicked, weak grin. He gazed at Lance and the other gazed down at him with a smile on his lips. Their hearts beat as one with the mating bond fresh and strong in their souls. Something in Keith felt different; he felt like there were two heartbeats inside him and that he could see Lance’s blue in his hazy mind of red.
“Well, look at you,” He rasped. “Nice wings, babe.”

“That was reckless.” Lance’s smile disappeared. “What were you thinking?”

“How to get us out of that shit storm.” It was soft coming from Keith’s parched throat. His muscles felt like jelly and his bones creaked like unoiled metal but he hid it underneath. Lance shook his head and chuckled;

“Well, you certainly got us out.”

Keith rolled his eyes and he wanted to say something clever but extreme nausea and fatigue plagued him. He was shifting in and out of consciousness.

‘Take it easy.’ Lance’s voice filled his mind and warmth flooded his heart when he felt Lance’s emotion wash over him like tide. His mate was worried. Was this how it felt like to be soul bound to someone? Keith could get used to this.

“Lance?”
Keith turned his head to the source of the voice and saw Hunk, Shay, Matt, and Allura watching them with disbelief in their eyes.

“Lance, are you—?” His best friend took a step forward but his movements were careful.

“The one and only, buddy.” Lance beamed brightly, folding his wings in and closing them against his back. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“I thought… we thought…” Shay spoke now. “There was no way to save you!”

“Apparently, there was.” Lance fondly looked at his mate. Keith wiggled in his arms in a gesture of wanting to be free. He helped him to his feet but kept his arms around him so that Keith didn’t fall to the ground when his balance was non-existent. He turned to Shay; “My lady, Keith used too much quintessence. He needs medical attention.”

“I’m fine!” Keith piped up stubbornly.

“Nonsense!” Shay shook her head. “You know how your body gets worn down when you overuse your abilities. Give him here, Lance.”

The Archangel carefully entrusted his heart, his Keith, his beautiful mate, to the best healer in Altea. Matt was quickly by Keith’s side and helped Shay haul him up with one arm over his shoulder while Keith’s other arm was around Shay’s.

“Damn, Keith,” Matt smiled with a wave of relief. “I’m so glad you’re okay! Pidge will be too.”

“Are they okay?” Keith looked up at his best friend’s twin.

“Yeah, they’re with Coran in the palace. You saved my twin.” Matt looked like he was about to cry. “I owe you a lot.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” Keith shook his head. He glanced towards Lance who watched them with a fond smile on his face. He looked so radiant and handsome. He was noble and loyal and pretty much everything Keith never thought he’d have in a significant other. He couldn’t help but chuckle when Hunk started to bawl and yanked Lance into a tight bear hug.

“Lance.”

The graceful voice made them halt in their reunion. Allura stood before them, the six swords that were meant to execute Lance no longer around. But the queen held herself with grace and an unreadable expression behind a cool aristocratic mask.

Lance straightened and met the queen’s gaze briefly. Then, he slowly made his way towards her only to stop at a distance before he knelt on one knee, placed his hand on his chest, and bowed his head in the most respectful curtsy. “Queen Allura, I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was doing; I wasn’t in control.”

In terms of angelic power, Lance was now at par with Allura and Shiro but the blue winged Archangel remained humble. He was a royal guard, a soldier under the queen and the sire’s joint command. He wouldn’t want to threaten their authority despite the power he never knew was inside him all along.

“Rise.” Allura said softly and Lance did so without a word. She gave him a one over with enigmatic eyes before she threw her arms around him and pulled him into a hug.
“A-Allura?!” Lance was dumbfounded.

Matt leaned to whisper at Hunk. “Is she allowed to do that?”

“Our queen is our friend, our commander, our ruler and in a way, the mother of this realm.” Hunk replied with a smile and a shrug. Keith could only watch and smile as Lance’s gladness filled him that he too, felt happy.

“Queen Allura took Lance in when Shiro found him in the woods that served as the boundary to the Galra realm. She taught him most of the magic he uses now and to see Lance bloom and ascend to become an Archangel like her, I believe that she is proud.”

“I’m glad you’re alright, Lance.” Allura pulled back and fondly ruffled her fingers through the brown mop of his hair.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for my mate.” Lance glanced at Keith who smiled at them. “He saved me.”

“You both saved each other.” Allura nodded in approval. “You two have chosen well.”

But the pleasantries were cut short when they saw lightning crash far down to the eastern barrier and there was a loud boom that shook the sky. Dark gray clouds swirled and a bright flash illuminated the gray sky with webs of electricity. The barrier over their heads flickered with a dying light.

“That’s Shiro, isn’t it?” Keith asked and worry bloomed in Allura’s eyes.

“Nyma transformed into a monster and is now in the process of breaking down the barrier from the inside. Shiro is trying to stop it along with a squadron.” Allura shook her head hopelessly and her jaw was tight with frustration. “My father’s crystal… it’s…” she clenched her hands into fists and small embers of white angelfire slithered around her fingers.

“I’ll go.” Lance offered without thinking twice. “I’ll help Shiro.”

Allura looked at him. “Are you sure?”

Glancing at Keith, he gave a single nod of encouragement and Lance grinned before he turned back to Allura. “Of course!” Then, he motioned at the wings on his back. “I’m going to test these babies out!”

“Then, go forth.” Allura nodded. “Bring justice in the name of Altea.”

“I thought you’d never ask, my queen.” Lance saluted with a menacing grin on his face. He turned to walk where Keith was being hauled up by his friends.

“Hey,” he leaned in and pressed his forehead against Keith’s. “are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah.” Keith closed his eyes and savored the warmth of the contact. “I’m in good hands.” Beside him, Shay smiled while Hunk hummed gladly. Matt looked the other way to give his friends some privacy.

“Are you?” Keith asked now and Lance laughed lightly.

“I will be.” He replied. “I’ll be home soon.”

Keith leaned in and closed the distance between their lips despite the weakness that was pulling him under. The kiss was deep and loving but it was brief due to the lack of time. Lance broke the kiss,
stepped back and spread his wings. The sapphire silver tipped feathers caught the light and glittered like the ocean under the noon sun.

“Kick some ass, baby.” Keith grinned and Lance returned it with a wink before he shot off into the sky with a streak of blue light on his trail. Keith followed the blue light that pierced through the sky until it disappeared in the distance while pride swelled in his chest.

“Let’s head back to the palace so Keith can get the care he needs and I can help Coran manage the panic in the kingdom.” Allura turned and spread her dove white wings.

“Matt, I’ll carry you. Hunk and Shay can fly with—-“

She was interrupted when Keith doubled over. His body was wracked with coughs and he gasped in pain, desperately trying to breathe. Keith’s hand flew to cover his mouth when the coughs turned into dry heaves.

Blood seeped out from the gaps between his fingers when Keith vomited into his hand. The last thing he saw with his wavering vision were the sickly blotches of crimson that stained his hand. His breaths were loud in his skull and he struggled while his lungs labored for air. The world around Keith turned black as he lost consciousness, unable to comprehend the startled cries of the people around him.

Chapter End Notes

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