A Song of Storm and Ice

by BreakTheDawn

Summary

Quintessence.

It's the basis of everything right? Integral to the very nature of Voltron. They all have it, it means something for all of them, regardless of whether or not they realize it. So would it not follow that they should learn how to use it?

Aka

The Voltron team goes to undertake an ancient training program to learn more about their Lions and themselves, and of course shit happens.

Notes

I'm back baby! Lol Hello to all!
If you've come from "So Here's What You're Not Going To Do", then first and foremost,
thank you for taking interest in this continuation. It took longer than I would have liked to get it out here finally, but I'm at a point where I feel like I'm confident in presenting it to you guys. If you did not read the story that comes before this, then your best bet might be to do so if you want a full understanding, as several events from that story are directly connected to this one. That being said, this is a different sort of story. It is plot-driven, and focuses more on team relationships as a whole than just everyone's individual relationship with Lance, though that will still play a big part in this narrative. I'll attempt to delve into one of the more vague elements of the show, and as such, I'm going to be working with a lot of headcanons and personal theories yet again lol. This is naturally canon-divergent, and will not be canon with anything that comes out after season 2.

Now without further ado, please enjoy!
“Pidge?” Hunk calls, quietly ambling into the Green Lion’s hangar leisurely.

There’s no answer, but he didn’t really expect one. Hunk knows that Pidge has been working on some strange radar modification for her lion the past week. She’d had some weird breakthrough not too many days past, claiming that she could possibly track Shiro through some frequency on his arm. Allura had been all for the plan, but suggested trying the modification on Green as opposed to the actual Castle radars. Something about quintessence. Hunk hadn’t really listened to the conversation very well, he was too preoccupied with his own activities at the time.

All he really needs to take away from it is this; Pidge has a project. Something she cares immensely about. And when Pidge has a project that she cares immensely about, anything and everything else falls to the wayside. He’d be surprised if she’d even realized that someone else is in the hangar just yet.

Their green paladin is definitely one of the most brilliant people Hunk has ever met, but she’s quite terrible at taking care of herself. Hunk has lost count of how many times someone in the castle has found her curled up in some weird position about the castle, having passed out from exhaustion and overworking herself. And that was when Shiro was around and making an active effort to hunt her down.

Hunk gulps, taking a second to breathe deeply. **Don’t think about the leader right now.**

Lance would normally be the one to do this, seeing as Hunk himself can be very enabling when he’s also interested in whatever project Pidge is working on at any given time. But the blue paladin is somewhere hunting down Keith for the same reason that Hunk is hunting down Pidge. He does not envy Lance one bit.

“Pidge?” he calls again, looking around the hangar for a tiny figure of some sort. “I think it’s time to call it a night...” he pauses, looking down at his castle-time watch, “...or morning.”

There’s no answer. No movement. Hunk sighs.

“Of course it’s not that easy,” he mutters, walking further into the space. Green angles it’s head
ever so slightly in greeting, something it only seems to do with himself or Lance besides Pidge. “Hey Green,” he greets, feeling a subtle thrum of acknowledgement. It’s nothing at all like the hulking and warm presence of yellow that’s constantly there, it’s extremely under pronounced and something that he only experiences when in direct quarters with the Green Lion. “Any idea where your pilot is?”

There’s a slight tick where something that feels a lot like exasperation runs through his mind. Yellow seems to hum in amusement afterwards.

“I’m not so sure I know what you meant by that,” he looks up at the mechanical beast, “is that your way of saying like, ‘Oh she’s in here and she fell asleep again’ or more like a ‘She’s not here, she’s somewhere else ignoring her health?’”

Green does not respond, but Yellow is acting far too amused at the moment.

“I feel like it just rolled its eyes at me,” Hunk murmurs, “figuratively of course. Or can you Lion’s actually do stuff like that?” he wonders aloud, continuing his search. “I don’t think you can, it would require a lot of mechanisms in your sockets that I’m not sure whoever built you guys would find very important.”

Yellows hums in fondness while he feels another jab of exasperation from Green.

“Oh,” he stops and focuses on a rather dark corner of the hangar, “that was totally a mental-eye-roll if I ever felt one.”

There’s totally a small person curled up in the corner.

“But it’s cool,” Hunk waves a hand, “I totally found your pilot.”

Who looks completely passed out.

“Oh Pidge,” Hunk frowns unhappily as he walks up closer. She’s still in her day clothes, which means that she has to have been here since he saw her last at breakfast. Which was over sixteen hours ago. “Please stop doing this to yourself…” he murmurs uselessly. Not only can she not hear him, but Hunk knows that she’s not going to stop doing this to herself for as long as Shiro is missing.
He gulps, feeling his chest tighten with anxiety again. Yellow attempts to invite him into a wave of calm, but Hunk can’t even focus on that.

“Why did this have to happen?” he asks sadly, bending to close her dead laptop and scoop the girl up into her arms. She weighs basically nothing, which is weird for Hunk. No one on this ship but Shiro and himself has any type of substantial weight to them. She’s probably only a little bit lighter than she should be at her age and height actually (because for all her distraction and hardheadedness, it really isn’t that hard to get Pidge to eat. Sleeping is where they have the issues), but Hunk’s mind still jumps to the worst conclusion of her eventually becoming malnourished and underfed and becoming unfocused in a fight as a result and then what would happen? Would they be able to save her? Certainly not as they are now. She’d get hurt, or worse-

There’s a wave of forced calm and logic that pushes through his increasingly muddled and panicked thoughts. Pidge will be fine, she is the Green Paladin. Just as much a fighter as everyone else. She is clever and smart and more determined than any of the last Green Paladins and-

“Whoa,” Hunk breathes out.

That is not the Yellow Lion.

He turns with Pidge in his arms to face Green, who has turned to him and seems to be staring at him imploringly. The wave of emotion recedes, Yellow’s grounded warmth returning in it’s wake.

Hunk stares at the lion with wide eyes. Green just talked to him.

And not some random and subtle acknowledgement or nudge as he’s become accustomed to whenever he finds himself in close quarters with the Lion. No, Green actually spoke to him the way Yellow speaks to him just now. He felt the Green Lion for a few seconds, so strongly that his bond with Yellow receded for a moment.

“Well that’s new,” there’s a ridiculous amount of changes around here lately. Their main focus isn’t Zarkon anymore, but Haggar. They aren’t trying to liberate Galra occupied planets or break through prisons at the moment, but focusing on establishing some sort of intergalactic alliance. Shiro is gone, and Keith is acting leader (which would carry more weight if the Black Lion would actually let him in). And now this.

His watch beeps, signaling the passing of another earth hour.
Hunk doesn’t have the time or the energy for this at the moment.

“Thanks Green,” is all he says to the sentient machine, before turning heel and making his way out of the hangar. There’s another nudge of acknowledgement.

The yellow paladin sighs as he walks castle halls with Pidge cradled closely.

“I just want everything to be ok,” he murmurs aloud, “is that too much to ask?”

He looks down at the girl’s face. Her glasses are completely askew, mouth wide open as soft snores pass through it. If he couldn’t visibly see the very stark signs of her exhaustion in the bags underneath her eyes and the unhealthy pallor of her skin, Hunk might actually think that the situation was funny.

His heart starts to beat fast again.

Hunk gulps. He’ll take her to her room, and then he’ll see if Lance wants to help him cook something.

....

“The planet of Kislev has been an ally to Altea for as long as our records show,” Coran explains cheerfully, gesturing to some rather abstract images on the holo-screen, “Their population and the Altean population actually share some evolutionary roots with one another. It’s quite fascinating.”

“But how can that be?” Pidge questions curiously, “where we are now is galaxies away from where Altea used to be, how is it possible that the two planets share ancestry?”

Her tone is skeptical, but her eyes are shining with a bright determination to understand. Shiro smiles a bit to himself, feeling happy that she’s taking a genuine interest in this mission. Maybe she’ll pull back from the algorithm she can’t seem to perfect. He knows she’s been losing a lot of sleep over it.

“Kislev is actually a colonized bio-planet similar to the Balmera,” Allura responds, “It is the result
of ancestors from Altea and the surrounding systems testing and researching both quintessence and wormholes.”

“So that’s why it’s in it’s own self-contained wormhole?” Hunk asks.

“Not quite a wormhole my boy,” Coran answers, “though the base principle is the same, the anomaly that surrounds Kislev is very different from the wormholes. Firstly, because only certain craft can pass through it without being decimated and lost within the aether.”

Shiro still finds himself shocked at just how pleasant Coran can make imminent death sound.

“So what’s so special about the lions that they can do that when the castle can’t?” Keith asks skeptically, eyebrows raised.

“The Lions were within the anomaly when it was first erected,” Allura explains, “Kislev was commonly used as a training haven for the paladins of past in times of peace. A sort of hub world, if you will.”

“So we’re going to see Voltron’s original home base?” Lance asks, eyes wide as he stares at the pictures of the world, “it looks pretty.”

Shiro has to agree. It’s hard to tell exact details with the painting style, but the world does seem to be lush with green wildlife and even seems to have spots with what seems to be bodies of water. One could almost mistake it for a vibrant and green Earth. He looks at Lance, sees the childlike wonder in his eyes as he stares at the pictures. He doesn’t want to ask the question he knows needs to be asked. Let the blue paladin be excited about a mission for once. He certainly deserves it after the disaster that was last week.

“But how do we know it’s even still there?” Keith asks bluntly. Lance’s face goes thoughtful, and then he visibly deflates. Shiro sighs. May as well keep it going.

“It’s been a rather long time Allura,” the black paladin suggest gently. He’s always hesitant to reference the sheer amount of time that the Princess and Coran had been asleep, but knows that it’s something they need to take into account when going to planets. Especially lately, when the goals aren’t so much about fighting.
“I am well aware,” the Princess states confidently, “but the anomaly around Kislev is impenetrable, only the Lions and very few craft that were lost in the fall of Altea can get through.”

“Would life on there survive this long?” Pidge questions next, “there’s residual traces of a supernova in galaxies kind of close to here, and there’s no visible Sun in this part.”

“Kislev is an environment enriched with quintessence,” Coran, “all of it’s residents understand and can manipulate quintessence as well. When such a balanced cycle occurs, it’s rather impossible for time to chip at a civilization.”

“How so?” Hunk asks.

“That is one of the things you will learn,” Allura responds. Keith huffs in response, and Shiro is about to cut in before the red paladin starts complaining about the lack of information but Lance beats him to it.

“Can we trust the people there though?” the blue paladin asks, “I mean. It’s not like we’ve been in constant communication with them this entire time. What if they see us coming and shoot us down or something? Voltron is supposed to be lost to the universe, right?”

“You need not worry yourself about that,” Allura dismisses, turning to point at the images. “We will take the Lions through the anomaly at the start of Kislev’s cycle, which would mean the end of our cycle tonight.”

Lance is the one who huffs this time. Shiro himself is a bit offended on his behalf, honestly. Allura doesn’t need to be discounting his words like that.

But then again, she does that all the time, Shiro realizes. In her defense, Lance does have a habit of asking some rather odd questions from time to time, but many of them are legitimate and get brushed off in the same fashion. He’s noticed a lot about the team dynamics that trouble him in the hindsight that the previous week brought up. He knows that Allura had made more of an effort to talk to Lance since then, but all of them have in some way, so no one individual person has come to a new and comfortable dynamic with the blue paladin (save for Hunk and Coran, who don’t need to change their approach).

It seems that with them not finding a new ground for their relationship just yet, Allura has unconsciously reverted back to what’s worked in the past. That marks the third time in this
discussion that she has not answered or talked around a direct question from him, and Shiro can see that Lance, having displayed a much shorter tolerance level than usual since last week, is starting to get annoyed.

“Have you had any communication with these people at all?” Shiro questions. It’s really just another way of asking what Lance did, and the blue paladin definitely knows it if the way he glances at Shiro is anything to go by.

“Yes,” Allura answers him blandly. Shiro has a feeling that there’s something strained about his own relationship with her as well. “I reached out to them when you were missing,” she does continue on though, “we have had an open invitation to enter for quite some time now.”

There’s a pause.

Shiro didn't know that. Why didn't he know that? Why wasn't he told that?

“And we're just hearing about it now?” Keith has been rather testy with Allura lately. It's something that Shiro had noticed when he returned from Black, but it's even more apparent now after the whole training room debacle.

“It was not a focus,” Allura states calmly, not entertaining the irritation in the red paladin's voice. “The only reason to go to Kislev is for training purposes. Learning about quintessence, practicing with your bayard, enriching your bonds with your lions and each other.”

No one says anything.

“I had planned to bring it up later,” Allura explains, “but in light of recent events, we've determined that the best course of action is focusing on bettering ourselves as a team.”

Allura does not believe in talking around a situation, but she is impressive in how she manages to not cut a glance at the blue paladin like everyone else in the room does.

Shiro finds himself just the slightest bit frustrated. When Allura says “we”, he assumes she's referring to the talk he had with her and Coran that night, when they'd completely scrapped the upcoming missions in favor of working on the team. Only he hadn't been given any of the information that had been presented just now.
“And anyway,” Coran says cheerfully, “this is something most Paladins have done in the past. A right of passage if you will, to become true Paladin's of Voltron.”

“Are you saying we aren't yet?” Keith demands, eyes wide and voice offended. “After all of this?”

“Well becoming a Paladin normally involves quite a bit more formal training, my boy.” Coran explains, “You lot were thrown into it, and have been forced to learn much of it as you go. You've done spectacularly, but there is still much you can learn in the effort to bring the universe to true peace. We were always going to have you go to Kislev, the timeline just moved up a bit, is all.”

“Is it really necessary?” Pidge asks, “I understand in theory how it's a good idea, but will it really make that much of a difference that it justifies putting everything else on hold?”

They all know what “else” she's referring to. Lance steps a bit closer to her, letting their arms brush.

“Learning about quintessence will afford you all to one of the most powerful sources of energy known to the universe,” Allura responds. “This will in fact throw us off our projected schedule, but should you be successful, we will be more than capable of making up the time.”

“As true Paladins of Voltron, huh?” Lance's voice has a oddly somber tinge to it. Shiro catches it, but finds himself still focused on the fact that this is truly the first time he's hearing about any of this.

He certainly hadn't been in the right mindset and mood to be able to be able to retain all of it when they talked about changing their plans, but some form of information would have been appreciated. Up until now, he'd been under the impression that they were going to an uninhabited area away from outside influence to work on paladin bonds. And now he's hearing that they're in fact putting their well being in the hands of some odd group of aliens who haven't dealt with Voltron in over 10,000 years? And that Allura has apparently had contact with them for going on three months now? And they've apparently had this place in mind for who knows how much longer?

“When was your most recent contact with them?” At some point, he'll bring this up to Allura. He's more focused on making sure that they aren't running headlong into a trap right now.

“Before we called this meeting, in fact.” She answers. “If it will help set your minds at ease, I can
certainly open up another audio channel?"

The paladins take a moment to share looks with each other. No one seems opposed. Hunk even shrugs.

“Works for me,” he states, “I have a feeling that we're going down there regardless, but I won't say no to hearing a voice.”

Shiro fights the urge to sigh. Because Hunk is absolutely right. Allura's posture is strong and unwavering. If she has anything to say about it, they are going to cross that anomaly tonight.

“Is it a lady we're gonna call?” Lance grins, doing some impressively weird thing with his eyebrows.

“Ugh…” Pidge groans, “I hope it's some old monk-type man. Just because you said that.”

“And who says I'm not an equal opportunist?” Lance slings an arm over the girl's shoulders, “ever think about that?”

Hunk snorts. Keith groans alongside Pidge and rolls his eyes. Shiro merely shakes his head, lips quirking at the ends.

A seemingly ever present thrum of tension in the room ebbs with Lance's cackle. Even Coran grins, though Allura gives a minute but amused shake of her head.

“Please open the channel Coran,” the Princess wisely decides not to comment on Lance's joke.

“At once, Princess.”

The elder Altean keys in a complicated sequence of commands that Pidge tracks hungrily with her eyes (he's going to need to keep an eye on her). There's a whirring sound as the castle seems to make a sort of phone call. Shiro will never get used to Altean technology.
It doesn't take long before a young and distinctly male voice answers sternly.

“Please state your identity and intent.”

“Aw man…” Lance murmurs near silently, earning him an elbow from Pidge.

“Princess Allura of Altea,” Allura answers regally, “I wish to speak with the elder.”

“Ah?” the boy's voice loses all stiffness, “Princess?”

“Faraj,” Allura says kindly, “I am delighted to hear you.”

“You act as though you didn't just call not four isers ago,” the voice responds wryly.

There’s a moment of shocked silence in which the Paladins stare up into the air at the unseen voice. Then Lance snorts.

“Did he just…” the blue paladin asks quietly, “sass Allura?”

“Bro,” Hunk mutters in awe, “he totally did. That was total sass that I just heard.”

“Pleasant as ever, Faraj.” Allura responds, voice just as dry. Shiro is floored. How often do these two talk? “Is Katal present?”

“She is not,” Faraj responds, “Katal has retired for the night. She assumed that you had discussed all that was meant to be discussed. You know,” he snarks, “back when you called not four isers ago.”

Lance and Hunk burst into giggles at that, prompting Allura to send them a scowl. Pidge does a bit better, but Shiro can see that both her and Keith are visibly biting their lips. The leader himself is more unamused though.
These two obviously have a familiarity, and Shiro still isn't quite sure why they haven't heard of these people before.

“Well then,” Allura somehow manages to keep her tone pleasant even though her eyebrows are furrowed, “then perhaps you can explain to the Paladins of Voltron the plans for their training?”

“You can't do that yourself?”

Pidge loses it, pressing her face into Lance's side to hide her giggles. Allura's mouth twists.

“It need only be a general summary,” she requests stiffly, “just to put their minds at ease.”

“Their minds could have been set at ease when Katal when through the entirety,” Faraj says jovially. “You know,” he says casually, and they all know what's coming. “Back when you called not four isers ago.”

Keith finally bursts into goofy giggles, which sets Lance, Pidge, and Hunk off again. Even Coran gives an amused huff. Ok, it's pretty funny.

“Faraj!” Allura snaps, losing all niceties.

“My apologies,” the boy says completely insincerely, “it's getting closer to five isers now.”

Even Shiro has to chuckle at that.

“You are just insufferable,” Allura complains, “why must you be like this?”

“The quintessence doesn't lie, Princess.” Faraj chuckles himself, “this is exactly how I'm supposed to be.”

Shiro's curious as to the meaning of that statement, but Allura answers too fast.
“I have with me the Paladins of Voltron,” she announces, apparently done with the back and forth. “Including their leader, please show some respect.”

There's a dark little part of Shiro's psyche that wants him to chuckle derisively at that. But he has that part under lock and key, so he just doesn't.

“Ah...but of course,” Faraj says sarcastically. Despite this, his voice does sharpen up a bit when he declares “Paladins of Voltron, I am humbled.”

The respect being a defender of the universe carries is hard to fathom sometime, if Shiro's going to be completely honest. The other four stop laughing immediately and look up towards nothing. And then towards Shiro.

“As are we, Faraj,” so he answers, ready to get some progress and some solid information. “We've heard that we'll be joining your people in order to train?”

“Indeed,” Faraj answers calmly, “historically speaking, the Paladin of Voltron go to Kislev in times of peace or the times between war in order to practice their skills.”

“I'm told we'll learn about quintessence more?” Shiro asks. He's honestly very curious about this, and knows that Keith has expressed interest in it as well. The red paladin stands at attention, focus completely on the voice.

“That would be the crux of it,” Faraj responds, “you'll be working on a multitude of different skills, but they all revolve around understanding and manipulating quintessence in the end.”

“Shiro is becoming rather capable with traveling to the Astral Plane,” Allura points out.

“Excellent,” Faraj compliments, “you have more experience than paladins that generally come here do, then. You all will spend time learning how to access the Astral Plane through your lions.”

“So I'll be able to talk with Blue face to face and share her memories and stuff?” Lance asks aloud, voice awed.
Shiro watches Allura open her mouth, likely to scold Lance from interrupting. But she pauses for a moment, before closing her mouth and saying nothing. Good.

“It's true that accessing the Astral Plane will foster those occurrences,” Faraj doesn't even question the new voice, answering Lance with the same level of respect as he answered Shiro, “but it is also possible for you to accomplish them without it. You will learn all methods.”

“Sweet!” Lance fist pumps.

“So our bonds will get deeper with our Lions, right?” Keith takes Lance's cue and questions freely.

“Ideally,” Faraj responds, “yes.”

“Ideally?” Hunk asks anxiously, “is there a way for things to not go ideally?”

“Yes,” the boy answers in an almost bored tone, “there are many ways.”

They all stop to stare at each other once again. And when no elaboration is given, it's Pidge's turn to question.

“Will we or our bonds get weaker as a result?” She asks.

“There's no clear cut answer to that,” Faraj says. Which is exactly the type of thing Shiro knows that Pidge hates to hear.

Sure enough, she purses her lips before challenging, “what does that mean?”

Allura opens her mouth again, but Faraj doesn't miss a beat.

“Everything you'll do will revolve around quintessence,” he responds easily, as though he was ready with the answer. “It's a very individual and personalized experience. Your success will be reflected differently based on who you are. As will your failures.”
Shiro frowns. That makes sense based on what he already knows about quintessence (which is admittedly not a lot). But it's also saying that there's little way to predict how this training will affect them.

“The chances of failure are astronomically low,” Faraj explains, as though he could read Shiro's thoughts. “Your Lions will be a constant companion throughout your training. And they chose you all for a reason.”

The knowledge that Black will have an active role in this relaxes Shiro in a way that almost shocks him. But he's come to feel closer to his lion than ever these days, and he's not all opposed to the idea of her being his partner in this new experience.

“Anyways,” Faraj’s tone goes sarcastic again, “I hope that I’ve helped settle your team's minds, Princess. Even though they could have also been settled when Katal explained them.”

“Are you quite serious right now?” Allura asks irritably, “Faraj?”

“You know,” Faraj goes on as if he didn't hear her, “when you called not five isers ago .”

...

“What's going on with you?” Keith stares up at the Black Lion.

Shiro's Lion (because it's Shiro's Lion, no one else's) is huge. It's a looming and intimidating thing. Keith has always respected the power and intensity that the Black Lion has effortlessly exhumed. Like a powerful storm just barely controlled, ready to burst out at any point in time.

But now.

“Come on!” He shouts, staring up at the Lion's chin. All his respect is slowly shifting towards anger and rage. Keith doesn't understand what the hell is going on, he's piloted Black before. And for the same reasons!
“I just want to help Shiro!” Keith pleads. “I need to help Shiro!”

Silence.

“Fuck you!” Keith screams, kicking at the Lion's paw.

“I just want to help Shiro!” He says desperately, “why won't you let me!?”

It's been two weeks. Two whole weeks since they entered Black just to find their leader missing. And Black hasn't let anyone in since. They've had to make do with just four lions and Keith taking the mantle of temporary leader.

He didn't realize just how much the loss of a lion would hurt their battle formations, especially since no one seems to want to listen to Keith during a fight nowadays.

“We can't do this without him,” Keith murmurs, looking down at his clenched fists. “...I can't do this without him.”

“Keith?”

Keith sighs heavily.

“What do you want, Lance?” He asks. Keith has been evading the blue paladin all day so far. Figures he wouldn't be able to keep it up. Lance is stubborn when he has a goal. And his current goal seems to be geared towards making Keith waste time.

“Geez,” Lance scoffs, walking into the hangar with his ridiculous robe and slippers. “Happy to see me much?”

“What do you want, Lance?” Keith asks again, rubbing his aching eyes. He can't sleep yet. He needs to either make a breakthrough with Black, or get through another few levels on the training deck.
“These hangars are super gloomy ya’know?” Lance ignores him, coming to stand next to Keith. The red paladin tenses in frustration.

“What the fuck do you want Lance!?!” Keith asks loudly, turning on the blue paladin. He sees a brief flash of something painful cross over Lance's face before the hispanic boy schools his face into a scowl.

“For you to go to sleep, Keith,” Lance says sternly, “you've literally been up for going on twenty hours now.”

“And I'm going to be up for more than that,” Keith snaps back, turning away to look back up at the Lion.

“Doing what?” Lance asks incredulously, “yelling at a giant robot cat?”

“Until she lets me in,” Keith grits out, “I will. And you're bothering me.”

“I'm good at that,” the blue paladin grins, but something is odd about it. Keith doesn't have the energy to put his full focus on it though.

“Just leave,” Keith says sternly, “I'll sleep later.”

“Then so will I,” Lance says stubbornly, crossing his arms.

“What?” The red paladin asks.

“I'm not leaving this room without you,” is the response. “So I guess I'm not sleeping either “

Keith scoffs. Always so fucking dramatic.

“Get out,” he orders.
“Nope,” Lance says cheerfully.

“Seriously?” Keith's voice is harsh as he advances on the blue paladin, “I don't have time for you, Lance!”

“Yeah?” Lance's voice is just as harsh, “no one does. But guess what?”

“What?” Keith growls.

“You're stuck with me,” the blue paladin hisses. “Whether you like or not. So don't sleep. Fine. Stay here and yell. Stay here and be angry. Stay here and do nothing but make yourself miserable!”

Keith grinds his teeth and bites back a very rude retort.

“But you better be prepared to do it all with me!” Lance finishes, unrelenting as he stands before Keith. “But you're stuck. With. Me.”

Keith just wishes Shiro were here.

The red paladin scoffs, pushing past Lance and storming out of the hangar. In his haste to get away from any and all things Lance, he manages to miss the blue paladin's words.

“Yeah,” Lance nods, turning back to look at the Black Lion. “I know.”

…

“Hunkaroo!”

Hunk grins, but doesn't look up from where he's examining Yellow’s armor. The lion's natural warmth bolsters ever so slightly at the presence of the blue paladin.
“Hey Yellow,” Lance feels it too apparently, smiling up at the beast.

“I’m starting to think you love Lance more than me bro,” Hunk teases his lion. Yellow grumbles amusedly in his mind. “I’m not hearing any denials.”

“Of course Yellow loves me,” Lance preens, patting the hulking lion's paw. “I’m just that lovable of a guy. You know he loves you very best though, Hunk.”

“I know,” he grins happily. “So what brings you to my side of the castle?”

Because Lance is deviating from his usual rounds of visiting residents of the castle. Hunk is generally the second to last stop on his list, and before him should come either Pidge or Keith depending on the day and the mood. Of course there's been some deviations the past week (they've been seeking out Lance more than he's been seeking them out). But the order is generally the same. Hunk wasn't expecting him for another hour at least.

Which means.

“Are you hiding from Keith?”


Hunk doesn't need to turn and look to see that Lance is rubbing the back of his neck and looking away sheepishly.

“Because he won't leave you alone lately?” Hunk suggests. He finds it quite adorable really. Everyone has been taking steps to spend more time with the blue paladin lately, but none more so than his so-called ‘rival’.

Keith throws himself into the things he cares about passionately, and he really cares about making up with Lance. So he's been practically forcing his company on the blue paladin the past few days. Hunk's been wondering when his friend would start trying to dodge it.
Lance doesn't keep up the ruse for long. He knows that Hunk knows him.

“He wants to spar or race, Hunk.” The blue paladin whines, throwing his hands up in the air. “He only wants to spar, or race! He doesn't want to do hardly anything else and the things he does want to do give me grief!” Lance's face is the odd mixture of exasperation, irritation and disbelief, but if Hunk tries hard enough, he can see the underlying fondness beneath it all. “I tried to play that Altean puzzle game with him-”

“The one with the little pig-things?”

“-The one with the little pig-things-” Lance nods, “and he sucks at it Hunk!”

“And you're not all gung-ho about the fact that you're better at it than him?” The yellow paladin asks curiously.

“I would be,” his best friend groans, “if only he didn't make me play seven rounds with him just to see what he was doing wrong!”

The rounds of said Altean board game seem to be on the shorter side, so Hunk isn't quite sure why that's so bad.

“And then seven more rounds to see if he could beat me! Spoiler alert! He couldn't!”

So Hunk now sees how it can be kind of bad.

He snorts, “Did he challenge you to another seven rounds today?”

It's oddly fitting that Keith would take something like winning a board game this seriously. (Especially considering that none of them are quite sure that they've been playing it right. Coran's explanations were...unhelpful. To say the least.)

“He didn't,” Lance shakes his head, “but he was, Hunk. He was so going to. I could see it in his
eyes! So I waited until Pidge asked him her daily biology question and then dipped!"

Hunk throws his head back with laughter. The things that happen on this ship.

The yellow paladin is borderline giddy with excitement for how things are going to go from here. A lot of issues were laid out all at once last week. And while it had the potential to be so very bad-

_Don't think about Lance lying passed out in Blue's cockpit, just don't_ - Hunk is actually beginning to believe that it's going to help them in the long run.

Lance sits down next to him and flops half his weight onto Hunk's shoulder, to which the yellow paladin smiles softly as his laughter tapers off. He just wishes that it didn't have to happen in a way that hurt his best friend so badly.

The blue paladin has been doing well, but Hunk knows that his equilibrium is still thrown off. Knows that Lance is still on guard against the others in a way he's never been before. He's responded to Keith's jibes and bickered back easily, but has yet to start with the red paladin himself. He treats Pidge pretty much as if last week never happened, but Hunk knows that Lance has skipped quite a few moments to nag her about sleeping. Lance has been pleasant and admiring to Allura as well, but something is just completely missing there at the moment.

And despite the epic cuddle-fest, Shiro and Lance have actually rarely spoken to each other since last week. With the black paladin still doing his daily Astral trips, and Lance not seeking their leader out very much at all, Hunk is almost positive that the only times they've spoken since that night have been in the presence of the others. Which have all seemed to be pleasant interactions thankfully, but Hunk can see that they're both waiting for something. Maybe this mission will provide that something. For all of them.

“What do you think about this Kislev thing?” Hunk asks. Lance hums thoughtfully, taking a moment before answering.

“I think it can turn out to be pretty awesome,” the blue paladin states, “we're going to just become even bigger badasses, if everything is legit.”

Hunk nods. Strengthening their bonds, learning to connect with their Lions on an even better level, changing their bayards, manipulating quintessence? It all sounds pretty badass.

But.
“But we're in for a long haul though,” Lance's tone grows somber as he steals the thoughts right from Hunk's head. “Going to advanced paladin boot camp,” he chuckles humorlessly, “just in preparation for us to have to do more. You don't send troops to train if you don't plan on having them fight. There's no way we're going back anytime soon.”

And there it is.

Hunk swallows hard. Yellow hums in sympathy for the both of them.

“We're going to get to go home!”

No they're not. The war isn't over yet. And after this training goes down, they won't be just five earthlings who took up the task of saving the universe.

No.

“We're going to be true Paladins of Voltron after this mission, bro.” Lance murmurs quietly. There's a soft but fierce determination in his voice. A willingness to go the distance that Hunk has always admired about his friend. But his face is so, so sad.

Because a true Paladin of Voltron's job won't stop at just becoming better. It won't stop at finding Haggar. It won't stop at defeating Haggar. It won't even stop at completely ridding the universe of those Galra who still hold onto their fallen Leader's ideals. No. A true Paladin can only rest when the universe is at true peace.

And they have 10,000 years going against them.

Hunk sighs sadly. He wonders how his parents are doing. Wonders how his fish are doing. Are his fish still alive? His mother has never been very good at judging how much to feed them and his father has never had the time for them when Hunk was away for some reason.

Hunk's going to be away for a long time.
“We can do this,” Lance says strongly. Much stronger than Hunk feels at the moment. Geez, how did the mood drop just that fast? “Hunk.”

Can they do this? The yellow paladin's hands clench. If the most recent months, Shiro's disappearance includes, have showed him anything, it's that they don't always know how to be around each other. He's not going to see his family for a long time, Hunk had been ok with this fact by focusing on his team as a family. But are they really capable of being a family? He knows that the others can make it up to Lance, but can they avoid letting the same problems spiral up again? Hunk knows that he can help fix it if need be, but they're at war. What if something happens and he's not around anymore? Coran is great, but he doesn't have the history that Hunk has with Lance. What if something happens to Lance? It's possible for this training to go wrong, what if failure means irreparable damage to their minds or something or worse? What if-

“Hunk,” Lance's face is in his sight suddenly, voice firm. “Breathe.”

Hunk finds himself now aware of the fact that he hasn't been breathing, and his lungs are quite angry with him. He tries to take in a gulp of air, but it doesn't seem to work. Oh no.

“Hey,” Lance grabs one of Hunk's clenched fists and pries his fingers open before placing the yellow paladin's palm flat on his chest, “With me. You're ok. I'm ok.”

Lance is ok. His heart is beating steadily. Hunk's throat unlocks itself a little bit. The rhythm of his friend's heart is all he needs to start taking in slower and more productive breaths. He could almost cry in relief. Not a full anxiety attack then.

Hunk fixes, but only because Lance supports. He doesn't know what he would do without his best friend up here. Lance is literally invaluable to Hunk's very survival.

“Hey,” Lance smiles softly, though his eyes are concerned.

“...Hey,” Hunk mutters back. He's a little bit upset with himself. Lance still hasn't fully brought himself back from the dark place he falls into sometimes, and here Hunk is about to have a freak out just because he thought himself into a corner. It's been awhile since he's upset himself enough to need to his friend's direct intervention.

Looking at Lance now though, seeing his unabashed concern and care, completely free of judgement, Hunk can’t find it in himself to be too upset. They both have issues. They both have
each other. Helping Hunk probably helps Lance just as much.

“We can do this,” Lance asserts. “All of us. You, me, Keith, Pidge, Shiro,” the blue paladin looks upwards to Hunk's Lion, “the Lions. Coran and Allura. All of us. Together.” Lance holds his fist out, “We can do this.”

Hunk smiles, feeling Yellow pur in agreement and fondness for the blue paladin that almost rivals his own. Hearing Lance reference everyone settles a worry that Hunk has held since the blue paladin's meltdown in the training room and Blue's cockpit. They can all come back from that awful day. His friend isn't giving up. So neither will he.

“For sure,” Hunk nods.

He bumps his fist against Lance's.

Chapter End Notes

This is definitely going to have a more ensemble feel to it like the last one, but the main point characters will be Shiro and Lance. Like I said at the end of the previous story, things are not magically fixed, and a lot of work is necessary for the Paladins to reach the level of teamwork they had before. There's a lot more to the breaking down of the team unit than what was shown in the previous entry, and we'll be exploring those things within this one.

Here we have an exploration of Hunk, he and Lance both rely on each other in many ways, and I feel like Hunk's anxiety shown in the show and his habit of getting sick or emotional are a very under-explored facet of his character. To me, it seems like he holds Lance in a very high regard, and I feel like a lot of it comes from him being able to rely on Lance in a way he can't rely on others. Lance can't be the only one who is homesick, and I do believe the idea of having to stay out in space even longer would get to both of them. That being said, neither of them are quitters, and they'll roll with it as long as they're capable.

This story is going to likely end up on the long side, and I'll try to keep a semi-steady update rate of two to four days between updates. Your comments will be loved and read and appreciated, but I may not be able to respond to all of them in a timely fashion lol, though it is my goal to have at least a little acknowledgement for everyone who comments. Thanks for reading, and stay tuned for more!
Anticipation

Chapter Summary

Keith looks at Shiro like he thinks that the black paladin knows the answer to that question. Once upon a time, he might have been able to answer.

“I honestly don't know,” Shiro shrugs helplessly. The red paladin’s eyes widen minutely.

“Really?” He asks, “Gotta admit, that's kind of shocking.”

“How so?”

“Allura tells you about everything,” Keith responds, “right?”

Chapter Notes

Here we go with another chapter! We're still on the set up side of things. I enjoyed exploring a variety of perspectives in one chapter. I won't say much right here for right now, but do enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro ducks under the blade, bringing his left hand up to grip the wrist of his opponent. He throws a leg out in hopes of sweeping his opponent's feet from beneath him and following through with a twist of the arm to pin him.

But of course something like that won't work on Keith.

The red paladin jumps over Shiro's attack, arm still restrained and all, swinging his left hand with his galra blade all in the same movement.

Shiro pulls back, releasing Keith and just barely avoiding the swing. The red paladin regains his footing and stands at the ready almost immediately, giving Shiro a dangerous grin.

The leader has a brief thought that maybe Keith is a bit too happy on a battlefield, but allows his own lips to pull up the same. Shiro doesn't particularly like to fight, but he can't deny the thrill he gets from facing someone who won't kill him, but isn't afraid to mark him up a little.
They clash again, Shiro using his right arm to deflect a swing from Keith's bayard and kicking out to cover some ground.

Keith is fast and brutal, but predictable in many ways, so he does exactly what Shiro thought he was going to do. He pulls all of his weight back and halts his momentum to avoid Shiro's kick, perfectly poised for a back flip.

But Shiro also has perfect control of his own body, he has to, with how violently he his instincts tell him to fight. So he halts his own kick just short of Keith and throws himself forward, catching Keith's open middle with his left fist.

Though they made the agreement a long time ago to not hold back during sparring, Shiro still pulls the punch just the slightest bit. It still completely winds his opponent though, and the split second it takes Keith to groan and gasp for air is all Shiro needs to take him down.

The red paladin struggles and thrashes, but Shiro eventually has him pinned with a knee on his chest and his arms pinned to the sides of his head.

They take a moment to catch their breaths, and Shiro stares down at Keith's sweaty face.

He wants to believe that this person will be his official second one day.

Keith attempts to do some maneuvers with his legs for a few moments, but it's no use. He isn't flexible enough to bring them up far enough to wrap around Shiro's middle, which is the only way out of this hold seeing as though the black paladin has a significant edge in physical strength.

Shiro grins down at his friend as a drop of sweat from his own forehead drips down and hits Keith's cheek. “Do you yield?”

The red paladin groans and huffs.

“Fine.”

Shiro presses his knee a bit harder, earning a wince. “That doesn't answer my question.”
“Ugh!” Keith rolls his eyes, “I yield.”

Shiro chuckles as he takes his weight off of his friend and helps him up.

“So what's up?” Shiro asks, ten minutes later after they've toweled themselves off and emptied some water pouches.

“What do you mean?” Keith asks back. His tone is normal, but he isn't looking at Shiro's face.

“You know what I mean,” the leader responds, voice amused. Keith is such an easy read sometimes.

“I don't,” the red paladin denies, “I asked you to spar. We sparred. I don't understand why you're asking what's up.”

“Because you don't really ask me to spar all that often anymore,” Shiro explains. It's true. Back when they'd first began this Voltron thing, Keith had wanted to practice with Shiro all the time. They'd spar at least once a day, sometimes twice if the red paladin was feeling restless.

Their daily sparring had began to wane a bit after the wormhole incident and finding the other paladins. Shiro thinks that it's probably because Keith was working through his galra heritage suspicions while Shiro himself was feeling insecure and bad about his status as leader. It had eventually picked back up, but Shiro had tried to push Keith into practicing alone with the others as well. A leader needs to know his team's capabilities.

Keith had reluctantly approached the others about sparring, but Hunk talked himself out of it and Pidge tried it twice before simply refusing to try again. Which meant that there was a period of time where Keith only sparred with Lance if not Shiro, but still very adamantly preferred the black paladin.

Things are different now. With the Blade being in close contact, Keith is never really hurting for a training partner. Especially this past week, where he has hunted down Lance multiple times a day. Shiro's not upset about it or anything, he likes sparring with Keith but taking on advanced gladiators works just as well for him, but today is the first time in a while that Keith has approached him for a match.
“Ok,” Keith says quietly, “I admit that I asked you today for a reason. But you can't use me not asking you much anymore as a reference Shiro,” he mutters, “you're always in Black's hangar when we aren't doing team stuff lately, and I don't know how to get a message to you like Lance seems to know. So I just stopped.”

Shiro's eyes widen as his heart drops.

“What?” He asks softly, turning to look at Keith. They're sitting against the wall of the training deck. It's about midday castle time, and he was just about to suggest that they only do one more round after finding out what Keith wanted so that they could rest for tonight. But this. This is something that needs to be addressed while it can be.

Keith's gaze is pointed downward, and Shiro's heart clenches. He can't possibly be doing wrong by the red paladin too?

“Don't get yourself all upset over it,” Keith says firmly, apparently knowing where Shiro's thoughts are going. “Being with Black is good for you,” he states, “otherwise I would have said something.”

That's true. Keith has never been shy about voicing his displeasure when he feels like it's necessary. Even to Shiro. Still.

“I don't want you to feel like I'm not around enough for you Keith,” the black paladin insists. “I'm sorry, I didn't realize.”

And in hindsight, Shiro's not sure how he didn't realize. Being on the Astral Plane with Black has never taken less than six hours out of his day, and it often tends to take more. Of course there's been things he's neglected. Sparring with Keith. Lance in general.

“I said it's fine,” Keith says in exasperation. “You sleep through the night because of Black now, right?”

That's true. It's actually a large part of why Shiro makes it a daily habit. He never used to remember his nightmares before, but that didn't mean they didn't affect him. Before coming back from the Astral Plane with Black, it was a regular thing for Shiro to wake up gasping and frantic over some demons that haunted his sleep. And because he never remembered them clearly, he'd never been quite sure how to deal with them other than to not sleep.
Now that he always dreams of the memories and conversations he has with Black, Shiro tends to get almost a full night of sleep every night, his late night rounds being more out of habit than necessity anymore.

“Right,” but surely being there for his friend is worth some discomfort. “But I can stand to skip a few days every once in awhile.”

Even as he says it, Shiro can feel anxiety grip his chest at the very thought of skipping any of his daily meetings with his Lion. He knows somehow, that the moment he skips one, the nightmares will return with a vengeance. The black paladin has to wonder when his Lion's comfort and protection became necessary to maintaining a healthy state of mind.

“You don't need to do that,” Keith shakes his head, throwing a small smile his way. “Really Shiro,” the red paladin insists when Shiro goes to protest, “Black is a good thing for you. You heard that guy from earlier. Connecting with Black like that is a good thing. I wasn't complaining about it, I still see you often enough. I was just pointing out a fact.”

Shiro sighs. Keith's tone and face are honest and open, so he knows that his friend's words are true. He just can't help but feel like he's been letting a lot of people down lately. He's not used to feeling like this.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Shiro asks. He'll focus on what he knows he can do right now. If this training is legit and goes the way that they all want it to, then perhaps he'll be able to learn a way to better manage his time on the Astral Plane.

“Have you and Lance talked very much?” Keith asks bluntly. Shiro fights the urge to sigh again. Speaking of letting people down.

“No,” and he feels awful about it, “not really.”

It's not like they don't talk. In fact, Lance seems perfectly ok with talking and joking with the leader around the others. But they've yet to have another talk alone since that night, and Shiro knows that Lance's persona around the team is not always indicative of how he feels around an individual.

Shiro has been forced to face the uncomfortable reality that he can't read the blue paladin as much as he thought he could, so there's a very real chance that Lance is still pissed at him and is just
keeping a pleasant front for the team.

“Oh,” Keith's demeanor seems to drop alongside his shoulders. Shiro's immediately worried.

“Why?” The two haven't argued, have they? “Is something wrong?”

“Not exactly wrong. Just…” Keith sighs heavily.

Shiro is just barely able to keep himself calm. He came so close to losing Lance in a way last week. They all did.

“...He hasn't called me ‘mullet’ at all lately.” Keith states.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh.

“Oh Keith,” Shiro says sadly.

“It's not like we don't interact or compete lately,” Keith explains, voice mildly frustrated. “He just doesn't initiate anything anymore! And I'm pretty sure he ran away from me today.”

The red paladin crosses his arms, and Shiro would find his literal pouting amusing if he didn't know that Keith is probably genuinely worried about this.

“It's just going to take some time for you guys to get back to normal Keith,” Shiro says gently, “you're both trying, but it's not going to be a magic recovery.”

“It just feels like I'm the one trying at the moment,” Keith says irritably. *Uh-oh. Can't have that.*

“Keith,” Shiro has to make this clear before Keith does something out of frustration and makes
things worse, “Lance is trying too?”

“Did you miss the part where I said that I think he ran away from me today?” Keith asks incredulously.

“Keith,” Shiro says patiently, “you made Lance very angry,” he himself made Lance angrier, “and more than that, you hurt his feelings,” Shiro knows it's hypocritical of him to say this, but it needs to be said. “And yet he's still letting you approach him without rebuking you or being snappy with you.”

Keith remains quiet for a moment, face going thoughtful. He's got it.

“Don't you think that constitutes as trying?” Shiro asks, if only to be completely sure. The red paladin lets out a groan.

“Yeah,” he grumbles, “I know that I would be a total bitch in his place.”


“Lance is so emotional,” he complains, choosing to talk around Shiro's nagging, “and I don't know how to deal with emotions. We're a bad mix.”

“Keith,” the leader chuckles, “you can be just as emotional as Lance.”

“What!?” Keith practically shrieks, eyes wide. “You take that back!”

“It's true though,” Shiro laughs even harder at the pure betrayal on his friend's face. “You may focus your emotions differently than him, but I promise that you feel them just as intensely.”

“Then why is it so hard to get to know him!?” Keith throws his hands up, the perfect picture of exasperation.

Shiro stops laughing, shoulders drooping as he ponders the question.
Why *is* it so hard to get to know Lance? The blue paladin is social enough and open enough with himself that he should be one of the easiest people to get to know. That’s apparently not the case.

“I don’t know Keith,” he answers honestly, “maybe this mission will provide an opportunity.”

A task taking place in what should be a peaceful environment. With the goal of bettering the team as a whole. Certainly sounds like a chance to get to know someone better.

“I guess,” Keith shrugs noncommittally. “Still not convinced that this isn’t a trap, but Allura seemed to know that guy pretty well? Who was he anyway?”

Keith looks at Shiro like he thinks that the black paladin knows the answer to that question. Once upon a time, he might have been able to answer.

“I honestly don't know,” Shiro shrugs helplessly. The red paladin's eyes widen minutely.

“Really?” He asks, “Gotta admit, that's kind of shocking.”

“How so?”

“Allura tells you about everything,” Keith responds, “right?”

Shiro's jaw clenches, “I thought so at one point too.”

“Oookay ,” Keith looks away, “not touching that one. Nope. You can figure something out about that yourself.”

“Why thank you,” Shiro deadpans, “you are the most helpful. Best leader-to-be ever.”

Keith flinches slightly at the word “leader”, but the black paladin doesn't see an opening in this particular conversation to ask more about the time when he was missing. So he lets it go, resolving
to bring it up another time.

“Tch,” Keith snorts. “Maybe you should have Lance yell at her again on your behalf.”

A startled laugh forces it's way out of his chest. “Keith,” Shiro admonishes anyway, “that's not funny.”

“I'm literally so serious right now,” the red paladin insists, bringing his arms above his head in a stretch. “I've never seen Allura take him as seriously as when he got in her face last week. You can't tell me that it wasn't impressive.”

“Keith,” Shiro warns. Even though a very small and mildly sadistic part of him (that he tries to ignore all the damn time) finds Lance's enraged outbursts fascinating in a way, the larger whole is aware that such vitriol bursting out so suddenly from a person who is generally the most laid back person on this ship is more worrying than it is impressive. He didn't even know that the blue paladin had the capacity for that much anger before last week.

“I bet if he learned how to channel that anger in a fight,” Keith continues on anyway, “he'd be a pretty scary opponent.”

“He shouldn't need to be able to channel it,” Shiro explains, “because he shouldn't be getting that angry in the first place. That much of a build up can't be healthy.”

“A long time coming…” Keith says quietly, likely to himself. Shiro still hears it.

“Keith?” Does the red paladin know something that Shiro doesn't?

“Just something that Pidge said,” Keith waves a hand, “I don't really know what she meant, so you should ask her yourself about it sometime if you wanna go down that road.”

A long time coming.

Shiro figured that. Lance let out too many grievances that night. There had to have been a build up starting back well from that particular day. He just doesn't know when it started exactly. Does
As the black paladin stands in response to Keith's request to go one more round, he resolves to add Pidge to the growing list of people he has to have a long talk with.

“May I speak to you,” Allura asks one night, “Keith?”

The red paladin stops in the middle of the hallway, resisting the urge to groan. Another person bothering him.

“Can it be quick?” He asks, trying to keep his voice as respectful as possible. He’d been on his way to try and get Black to answer him, for like the fifth time in less than twelve hours. Coran had appeared and talked his ear off until he went to go eat, then Hunk had asked a bunch of unnecessary questions about where they were going next, and then Lance had hunted him down for his now daily nagging sessions about taking care of himself, as if it’s not something that Keith has always been capable of doing. Now this?

“It will be as quick as it needs to be,” Allura responds, voice calm but firm. “We need to talk about our plan after our next jump.”

Keith sighs. At least he can respect that Allura wants to talk about action, and not how greasy or not greasy his hair looks today.

“Has Pidge gotten a lead on Shiro’s arm?” He asks hopefully. Keith knows that she hasn’t been working on it very long, but Pidge is Pidge. Which means she doesn’t need very long.

“Unfortunately not,” Allura shakes her head somberly, “there seems to be something muddling the signal. Something that her instruments cannot filter past.”

Keith’s throat tightens. Two weeks and two days. Two whole weeks and two whole days.

“What about your magic sense thing?” There's a lot that Allura knows and can do that they don’t
know about, Keith has realized. And he'd be more angry about it if they weren't so useful.

“I am afraid not,” Allura responds, “while the Lions are connected to my life force, you paladins have not yet reached such a level of symbiosis that I can track you through them.”

Keith clenches his jaw, resisting the urge to snap. It's not her fault. It's not anyone's fault, but Zarkon's. And he's not around anymore, so Keith can't even tear him apart with his bare hands like he wants to.

(The brutality of his thoughts has increased exponentially lately, but it helps him against the gladiators, so he's not complaining. Red always agrees with him anyway.)

“Then why are we making a jump?” He asks tersely.

“There is a possible lead on Haggar-”

“Her again?” Keith has to work very hard to keep his voice down, “Allura. We never catch her.”

“We've come close in the past-”

“No,” Keith denies, “No we have not. All three times we've thought we had her, they were traps! We barely made it out!”

“Not having access to the Black Lion has certainly harmed our efforts,” Allura states, “but we cannot-”

“I'm trying!” Keith snaps. The princess stops talking, looking at him in shock. She didn't mean it like that. Keith knows that she didn't mean it like that. “It won't listen to me!” So why can't he stop? “I go down there all the time, and the damn thing just won't listen to me! It doesn't even say anything worthwhile! Always telling me to wait!”

“It speaks to you?” Allura chooses not to focus on his outburst, face serious and driven. Keith remembers at that point that he hasn't really been telling the others about his attempts at bonding with the Black Lion.
“Just barely,” he murmurs. Black's mental messages are so muddled and hard for him to discern, and they tend to overwhelm him if he tries too hard. “It's more of a feeling, really.” But the one commonality in them is an imploring need for Keith to patient. He just doesn't know what he's being patient for.

“Allura,” Keith insists, “I'm getting nowhere.”

“I know Keith,” Allura says softly, “but it's all we can do right now.”

…

“This glorified team bonding better make it easier for me to expand Green’s radar,” Pidge grumbles under her breath, stalking the halls of the castle. “Where the hell is Hunk?”

The yellow paladin had agreed to take a look at Yellow's navigational radars and report back to her over two hours ago. Pidge knows that one of those hours can be attributed to his obsession with
figuring out the exact mechanisms behind Yellow's claws and armor, but two is a bit excessive.

“Not even in his hangar,” the green paladin continues to mutter. Hunk hadn't even been there when Pidge had visited, and Yellow only answers her questions about half of the time, so no help on that front.

(Which is so not fair, because Pidge has heard Hunk have entire conversations with Green. Yellow just laughs at her most of the time.)

“Lance probably knows where Hunk is,” if there's one thing that Pidge can count on, it's that Lance somehow almost always knows where everyone is on the ship at any given time. And if he doesn't know, then he can find them. Especially Hunk. If Pidge believed in things like it, she would swear that Lance has a sixth sense for his best friend.

“But where is Lance?” Is her next dilemma. Pidge is bad at finding Lance. He's never where she thinks he'll be on the off chance that she has to seek him out. Even at back at the Garrison, she could find herself searching for her squad leader for hours before he somehow just popped up somewhere close to her.

She normally just asked Hunk.

And upon not finding either of them in the kitchen or the sitting room, Pidge finds herself storming back to the bridge to ask Coran to scan for them. She's not the most patient person, and she's exhausted all of the places she's willing to try on her own.

“Why are you both impossible to find?” Pidge doesn't know what Lance does when they aren't hanging out in some form of group or when he isn't going around mom-ing people, but Hunk always sticks to the same places, and never spends much time in his room unless it's for sleep.

She finds both Coran and Allura, which isn't surprising.

“Ah, Green Paladin,” one of these days Pidge is going to figure out exactly why Coran rarely calls them by their given names. Maybe it's an Altean thing. “What brings you here?”

“Yes Pidge,” Allura frowns, “you all should really be resting.”
“I need to talk to Hunk about something,” Pidge responds dismissively, “I'll sleep afterwards.”

After she's taken his results into account and began applying them, of course.

“Well as you can see,” Coran says lightly, “the Yellow Paladin is not present.”

“And I was hoping you could me find him?” Pidge asks hopefully.

“Ah, I see,” Coran smiles, “you wish for me to scan for his presence.”

“His or Lance’s,” because she wants to look at Lance and see that he's ok. It's a ridiculous urge that she's had since he dropped that bomb on her last week, but Pidge isn't going to question it at the moment.

“I will indeed scan for Hunk,” Coran says cheerfully, turning to tap at the holo-screen, “but I'm afraid that I promised Lance that I would never scan for him unless I feel his life is in danger.”

The advisor pauses.

“His life is not in danger,” he asks, “right?”

“No,” Pidge frowns. What a weird request, only Lance. “It shouldn't be. I just wanted to know where he is?”

“Might I ask why Lance forbade you from scanning for his presence?” Allura asks, expression curious. But Pidge knows better, she has her diplomat face on and her diplomat voice going. There's a clear motive to the question. The green paladin hums to herself. She'll need to keep an eye on that.

“His exact words were,” Coran clears his throat, “‘Coran, that's like, a super invasion of privacy! Promise me you won't scan for me unless you think I'm dying or something!’”
Pidge snorts. Sounds like Lance. With his weird views on privacy.

“Just Hunk then,” she concedes, paying close attention to the curious draw of Allura's eyebrows. “At the very least, he'll probably know where Lance is.”

“He certainly might, small one!” Coran says happily. Pidge huffs. “For it would appear that the Yellow Paladin is in Lance's quarters right at this instant!”

Why does Coran always address Lance by name? Pidge literally hasn't heard the advisor refer to Lance as “Blue paladin” or something else for ages now. He doesn't even call Shiro by his name all the time.

“Thanks Coran,” she'll add that to her list of things to tackle later. For right now, she knows where Hunk is. “I'll see you both later.”

“Please consider resting soon Pidge,” Allura insists gently, “I would hate for you to experience the lagging.”

The what?

“Yeah ok,” Pidge doesn't have time to try and analyze that. She's too busy thinking about getting the results from Hunk, trying to figure out Coran's name thing, and making notes of Allura's odd behavior regarding Lance. Words can come later.

The green paladin leaves without ceremony, setting a course for Lance's room. It makes sense, she doesn't know why she didn't consider it.

It's probably because she sometimes forgets that Lance even has a room. No one goes there except for Hunk, Coran and Keith occasionally. It's not like they need to, Lance finds his way to all of their rooms enough to cover the discrepancies.

Pidge finds herself a bit worried despite herself. It sucks. There's no reason to think that Hunk is there to comfort Lance. The blue paladin was fine earlier, joking and acting just like himself, albeit a bit reserved with certain people. She hates this trepidation in her chest as she speeds down the halls to the part of the castle where their rooms are located.
She walks up to Lance's door, hands poised to knock, but she hesitates.

“*My little sisters upset me so bad that I ended up in the mental ward for the night.*”

Pidge shakes her head harshly, “Pull it together,” she berates herself. And then she knocks.

There's a moment of silence, before Lance's voice answers.

“It's open,” his voice seems surprisingly soft. Pidge snorts a bit. Of course it's open. Lance has never once locked his door.

She walks in, completely prepared to give Hunk the third degree for not getting back to her.

“Stop,” Lance says firmly, voice still quiet. “You have your *'about to yell'* face on. Don't do that.”

Once upon a time, Pidge would probably huff in displeasure and sass him for ordering her around. She thinks better of it this time though, eyes focusing on the large lump of blankets curled up next to Lance on his bed.

The room is dark, but Pidge knows well enough to be able to tell that it's a Hunk-shaped lump. Her frustration ebbs a bit.

This was her team, back at the Garrison. Pidge didn't talk to them very much outside of required meetings (which she regrets terribly now), but she knew that they were each other's biggest source of comfort. Upon getting to know them both better here on the castle, she'd learned quite a bit more about their dynamic.

Namely, that while Lance went to Hunk's room and invaded his bed for any reason at all (from not wanting to walk the extra few steps to his room to more serious matters), the only reason that Hunk ended up curled in Lance's bed was when the yellow paladin felt upset enough to need his best friend's support.
Pidge gulps, hoping it isn't serious.

“He ok?” She asks, approaching the bed slowly. Lance is in his pajamas, seemingly sewing something together in his hands. As she approaches, she can see that Hunk's head pops out from the blanket lump, and lies pillowed on the blue paladin's thigh. Hunk looks alright, but Pidge knows that he deals with anxiety, and thus looks can be deceiving.

“He's fine,” Lance smiles somberly, “he just got himself a little worked up earlier. Wore himself out.”

“Oh man,” Pidge murmurs. She hates hearing that Hunk went through anything. It's always pretty disheartening. But it doesn't surprise her. Pidge has come to learn that Hunk’s anxiety tends to spike due to certain circumstances. It normally goes down rather quickly, be it either by him getting ill and immediately getting over it, or by Lance's nigh perfect intervention. Seems like this is the latter.

“Did you need us for something?” Lance asks, turning his attention back to what Pidge realizes is one of Keith's shirts. She's always found it comical that the red paladin never notices when his clothes go missing until they turn up fixed. But Lance had sworn her to secrecy ( “I just can't stand the sight of him going around like his shirt doesn't have a hole in it,” he'd said, nose upturned ).

“It's nothing that can't wait,” Pidge responds. After all, they should more than enough time and opportunity to work on their Lions with this mission. Kislev is probably even more technologically advanced than all that they've seen so far.

“Ok,” Lance responds simply, “wanna hang out here then?”

Pidge fidgets for a second.

“I should probably get back to work,” she murmurs. This setting seems very intimate, in a way she's not sure she should intrude on.

“What you should do,” Lance says dryly, “is sleep. And wash your face.”

Pidge huffs, “thanks for the advice, mom.”
Lance chuckles quietly.

“Come on Pidge-a-tidge,” he insists. Pidge has never met someone so creative with nicknames before. “You can chill right here, Hunk should wake up in like an hour, then you can have your nerd-talk,”

“Really, Lance?”

“And then Hunk can whip us up a big pre-mission lunch,” Lance continues as though she'd said nothing at all, “if this training is anything like Altean training, then we're probably not going to have much time to relax. They're probably slave drivers.”

Pidge snorts.

“They probably are,” she agrees. There's a moment of silence as Lance continues to work on fixing Keith's shirt, not looking up at her. Pidge takes a moment to examine him.

His skin is flawless, trust Lance to make sure of that despite everything happening lately. Pidge is mildly surprised to see that his hair has grown enough to cover his forehead and curl just over his eyes. He always seems so gung-ho about trimming Hunk’s hair all the time, that she figured he'd never let his own grow from it's normally close-cut style. His face is calm and focused. Pidge would never think...

“My little sisters upset me so bad that I ended up in the mental ward for the night.”

“I'll go get my laptop,” she states, watching Lance grin and nod.

Pidge doesn't understand.

....

“Might I be privy to whatever is on your mind,” Coran’s voice comes as the advisor enters the
bridge, “Princess?”

Allura doesn’t answer immediately, keeping her focus on the signals projected before her. There’s no reason to think that Shiro ended up in any of these places, and she’s come to realize that there might be some merit to what Keith had said earlier about Haggar always leading them into traps.

“I am attempting to decide where we will go next,” she murmurs, “this is all very frustrating Coran, I don’t understand how Shiro could have disappeared without a single trace like this.”

“Perhaps you should rest, Princess,” Coran’s voice is concerned, and Allura forces herself not to look at him. His expressions remind her too much of her father at times like this, when she is so tired that her mind blurs and her legs tremble. He’s right, the amount of jumps they’ve been performing have taken a toll on both her and the castle, but Allura doesn’t know what else to do. They need to find Shiro, and they need to find Haggar. They can do neither by staying in place.

“I will rest when we have found a solid lead,” she states, focusing her sight on a star system known for powerful electrical storms. A Galra base could avoid detection there with a Druid on their side.

“Or when you keel over,” Coran states firmly, and Allura finally turns around to catch a glimpse of his look of disapproval. “You must rest, Princess,” her advisor insists, “we will get nowhere if you kill yourself doing this.”

“That will not be a worry,” Allura responds, but her voice isn’t as firm as she would like.

“It most certainly will,” Coran retorts, “you are still very young Allura, and you never did complete your training with quintessence and the metaphysical forces.”

Allura clenches her fists. She knows this, has always known this, but it was never more clear than in her struggle with Haggar.

“There is no way to remedy that,” she grits out. Just the thought of Haggar sends her thoughts spiraling into rage. “There is no one who can teach me further, I just have to keep trying.”

“Which is admirable,” the elder states, coming up closer. “But unrealistic. You can only try until you cannot anymore. And I am afraid of what will happen to you when you cannot try anymore.”
“Coran,” Allura sighs. She doesn’t want to worry him, but she just doesn’t know what else to do.

“You must think carefully about this, Princess,” Coran’s face is serious, “the paladins need you. You cannot keep putting your life on the line like this. Especially if you are not yielding results.”

Allura wants to cry at that. She wants to shout. She wants to do so much, but what she really wants is rest. The Princess is tired. So very tired. She’d never felt a weariness like this before. And she could be ok with it, if they were getting somewhere. If they were making progress.

But they’ve been getting nowhere. And the progress they’d made up until this point has come to a grinding halt with Shiro’s disappearance. Sure, the defeat of Zarkon is a huge boon for them, but there’s an entire Empire to deal with now. And she doesn’t know what they’re capable of, now that their chain of command had been so severely crippled. Allura just knows that they must get ahead.

“It’s a shame that you never made it to Kislev,” Coran mutters.

Allura sighs. Back when he father had first made the decision to make her the Contact for Voltron, they’d come to the conclusion that she should accompany the paladins of old to their training at Kislev. Sadly enough, none of them had made it in the end.

Wait.

“Coran,” she whispers, “that’s it.”

Kislev. One of the oldest places in the universe. Kislev. Where everyone is born into a society built around the manipulation and preservation of quintessence. Kislev. Where Paladins and Druids of the past have gone and learned how to shape the most powerful force of the universe. Kislev. Where the theory and practice of wormholes and metaphysical planes are rich and well-explored. Kislev. Perhaps the most impenetrable place Allura has ever heard of. Kislev.

“What do you mean?” her advisor asks.

“Kislev,” Allura breathes. If there’s any place that can help find Shiro and deal with Haggar, then it’s Kislev.
“You cannot mean to try and go there,” Coran says cautiously, “It’s been 10,000 years, Allura.”

Even as her heart falls at the reminder, Allura still finds herself saying, “There is no one on Kislev that doesn’t know how to manipulate quintessence to some degree, the years cannot have taken it away.”

If there’s any group of beings capable of surviving and thriving for 10,000 years, then it’s the populace of Kislev.

“That may very well be true,” Coran nods, “but what guarantee do we have that they will even consider us allies?”

“Kislev was built around Voltron,” Allura states firmly, “It’s very conception was based around raising Defenders of the Universe.”

Coran hums thoughtfully, “I suppose it may be worth a try.”

Allura doesn’t comment immediately. She knows that Coran is being positive outwardly, but is very skeptical on the inside. She will probably never be privy to his actual thoughts on the situation until it becomes absolutely necessary or until she’s about to make a grave mistake. But he will help her, which is all she really needs.

“It won’t be a focus,” because training on Kislev takes quite a while, and has the potential for some horrifying consequences. They don’t have the time for either of those things. “But we should at least attempt to come in contact with them, perhaps they will be able to shed some light onto what happened to Shiro.”

“Shall we tell the Red Paladin?” Coran asks. Allura already knows what he thinks about it before she answers.

“No,” and she agrees with him, thinking about the air of desperation about Keith earlier. “He is already having trouble taking up the mantle of leader,” she explains, “we do not need to add more to his mind. Especially something that might not be a certainty.”
“I concur,” Coran states, “I think I remember the approximate area of where Kislev should be. Perhaps we can go past there and attempt to make audio contact?”

Allura nods, “that would be best. Hopefully we will receive a positive response.”

Something needs to go well for them. Soon.

...

“Make sure you check on Katlenecker,” Lance says sternly, poking Kolivan’s chest audaciously. “She should be fine in the garden, but I don’t want to come back to a dead cow.”

Keith has to keep himself from chuckling at the blank stare the galra is currently giving the blue paladin. To be fair, Lance had stormed up to the guy and started rattling off very specific instructions.

“There’s a hopping pepper around here somewhere too,” the hispanic goes on, ignoring the confused noise that Kolivan makes, “we’ve all tried to find it. More than once. If you can catch it, you’ll be Hunk’s hero.”

They’re all in the main Hangar, preparing to go off to this special training place. Keith is still a bit skeptical about it, but he can feel Red’s restlessness and excitement. If his Lion really wants to go to this place, then he supposes it must be worth something.

“Seriously man,” Hunk states from his place next to Lance, “you’ll be like, my fourth favorite person.”

Keith watches them curiously. It’s no shocker for the two to be standing together, but Hunk seems to be borderline....clinging to Lance, who is acting like there’s nothing out of the ordinary. The red paladin doesn’t know what’s going on there, but he hopes that everything will be ok with it, there’s been enough breakdowns in the castle the past week.

“Very well,” Kolivan mutters. His voice is gruff and his face is still blank, but Keith can see the way his eyes light up in amusement when both Lance and Hunk grin at him.
“I really hope that something down there will help me expand Green’s radar,” Pidge murmurs from her spot a few paces away from Keith.

“I’m sure you’ll find something,” Shiro says supportively. Keith sighs.

Everyone seems to have some type of goal in going down to this place, but Keith himself still isn’t sure it’s necessary. Sure, the team dynamics need some work, but he doesn’t get why they can’t do that on the way to finding Haggar or something. His talk with Shiro earlier assured him that he and Lance were on the way to recovering, and he’s sure that the others are making progress as well.

“Alright Paladins,” Allura grabs their attention, dressed in her own armor. Coran stands next to her, still in normal attire. “We will depart shortly, so I hope you’ve all rested well and prepared accordingly?”

There’s a small chorus of affirmative statements. Keith himself was able to catch a quick nap after separating from Shiro, but he’s pretty sure that the leader went and did the mental thing with Black, and has been there until just an hour or so again actually. But Shiro still looks refreshed and alert, so Keith can’t really complain.

“Coran?” Allura gestures, and the elder Altean steps forward.

“The flight path has already been sent to all of your Lions,” Coran explains, “the dimensional anomaly should ideally just open when we approach, though there may be some initial resistance that we may have to push through.”

“Not the type of resistance that will tear us into pieces,” Hunk questions anxiously, “right?”

“There should be no worry of that,” Coran responds easily, “it’s a similar process to wormhole jumps, but made specifically to accommodate the Lions, so while you will likely feel a bit of pressure, nothing should damage you. Hopefully.”

“Why do we always let Coran explain the things?” Hunk groans.

“The Black Lion will cross first, making way for the other Lions,” Allura continues on around him, “we should go by size, so it will be Shiro, Hunk, Lance, Keith and then Pidge.”
“Shortstuff bringing up the rear,” Lance says humorously. Keith finds himself wanting to snort as Pidge flips the blue paladin off in response.

“Coran and I will accompany Shiro in the Black Lion,” Allura, having learned to just talk around all their interjections, continues on. “It should not take that long, the whole process is quite simple actually.”

“If I may?” Kolivan cuts in. Allura’s form tenses just the slightest bit, which quite frankly both annoys and saddens Keith. But she waves to the rebel nonetheless. “Would it not be wiser to send a scout first?” the galra asks. “I understand that you have spoken to these beings, but is that really enough of a guarantee?”

“That is a fair question,” Allura nods, “but I assure you. They are our allies, trusted allies of Altea from ages past. They will not harm us. They wish to see the Universe at peace as well, it is the basis of their society.”

“If you’re certain,” Kolivan doesn’t sound convinced, but he doesn’t make a habit of questioning Allura more than once, so he says nothing more on the matter.

“I am,” Allura assures, before looking around the room. “If there are no other questions, they shall we depart?”

No one voices anything, but Keith can see that Shiro wants to say something. He can see his friend visibly hold himself back from saying something, apparently choosing to save it for later.

“I think we’re all ready,” the black paladin says instead of whatever question he wanted to ask. Keith hopes that he and Allura figure something out over the course of this mission, he really doesn’t want Shiro having more worries on top of trying to make things up with Lance.

Allura makes eye contact with their leader and nods, but something is definitely off about their interaction. A quick glance to his side shows Keith that Pidge seems to be examining them as well. So he’s not the only one.

“Then let’s go,” the Princess says, “And you shall all become True Paladins of Voltron.”
And so we get some background on the whole Kislev thing and why it's a thing in the first place. Flashbacks will tell the story of the team while Shiro was missing, but every chapter won't have them. Here we get a bit more into the thoughts of Allura in a different state of mind. I think it would be easy for her to get overwhelmed with all that's going on and all that she has to deal with, and so her go to reaction is just push harder. Whether it be the others around her, or even herself, so it's a good thing that Coran is around.

Another thing I will be taking a look at in this story are some headcanons regarding Shiro and Keith as individuals and as friends. To say them here now would be spoiler-ry, but just know that some things were implied here, and they will be elaborated upon.

As always, I love you guys and thank you so much for reading! Stay tuned for more!
“That depends on what Katal thinks you should all individually work on,” Faraj answers, grinning at Keith’s enthusiasm. “You’ll meet her very soon, we’ll get all the housekeeping things squared away, and after that…”

He pauses, letting his eyes drag appraisingly over all of them, paying a special type of attention to Shiro. The black paladin stares back. Faraj grins again.

“Welcome to Day One.”

Shiro has learned a lot of things in being the leader of Voltron. But of those things, the fact that something always goes wrong sticks out in his mind.

“Aaaagh!” Hunk’s voice screams over the comms, “Why do we let Coran explain the things!?”

The elder Altean huffs from where he has a death grip on both Shiro’s seat and Allura’s waist as the Black Lion jostles and spins from the intensity of the...whatever, that they’ve just flown in.

“You question should be,” Pidge chimes in next, voice irritated, “Why do we believe the things that he and Allura explain!?”

Allura makes a noise that is somewhat like an indignant squawk, but still somehow too dignified to be called a ‘squawk’.

Back at it again with another update! lol
My apologies for how long it took to get this out. I had a bit of trouble trying to decide where to stop this chapter, and ended up re-writing several parts of it because I felt some things would be better left for future updates. But we’re complete now, so enjoy the update.

p.s. I am not a scientist lol, so please bear with my attempts to try and go into futuristic tech or Lion / wormhole mumbo jumbo. I tried.
Shiro has just enough control over his Lion to guide it down the way that’s programmed into the radars, but he immediately finds himself worried for the other paladins.

“How’s everybody holding up?” he asks. The Black Lion is the largest. If Shiro’s having this much trouble, he can’t imagine what it must be like for Keith or Pidge.

“Badly,” Pidge groans, “very badly. But still probably not as bad off as you.”

“Keith?” Shiro asks anxiously, worried about the lack of infuriated swearing.

“I’m good,” the red paladin responds. Shiro can tell that his teeth are clenched. “Red says that Black is taking most of the pressure,” Keith explains, “as long as we stay behind you guys, we should be good.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Lance complains, “something about this gate or whatever is screwing with Blue’s sensors, I can’t see on screen where Shiro’s expected course leads!”

Shiro’s heart jumps in panic for the blue paladin, “What? Is anyone else losing visuals?”

Because his radar seems to be projecting just fine.

“Not me,” Keith says.

“Me neither,” Pidge cuts in.

“My visuals are good,” Hunk answers.

“What!” Lance cries indignantly, “why is it just mine then!”

“I don’t know,” Shiro mutters. He wants to turn around, just from hearing that. But he’s not so sure that it’s an option at this point.
“I may be able to offer an explanation for that,” Coran says cheerfully. All of the paladins but Lance and Shiro groan.

“Well lay it on me Coran!” Lance says anxiously, “because I’ve already lost sight of where Shiro is, and Hunk seems to be fading out too!”

“The Dimensional Gate around Kislev works in waves,” the Altean explains, voice steady despite the intense shaking of Black’s cockpit. “It surges at certain points in order throw off sensors attempting to breach it, as well as to keep large masses from making it all the way through.”

“So it’s basically made to tear things apart,” Hunk cries, “Great!”

“We’d be quite dead by now if not for the Lion’s quintessence,” Coran continues, “Shiro’s visuals are working properly because the Black Lion’s quintessence is the closest match to that of the Gate. Unfortunately, the Blue Lion seems to be located in the perfect spot in our formation to catch the pressure surges that the Black Lion is brushing off.”

Shiro has to yank on the controls in order to keep Black from doing a barrel roll at that moment. Coran calls this brushing something off?

“So what do I do!?” Lance asks loudly, “I can barely see Hunk now! What happens if I fall out of position because I can’t see?”

“You won’t be harmed physically,” Coran assures confidently, “All of the Lions are capable of surviving within this anomaly.”

“I feel a but coming on,” Pidge mutters.

“You will however, be pulled into the anomaly” Coran continues on simply, “And likely be trapped there for a great deal of time. Without your visuals, you’ll probably just drift until you find some exit, and the path to and from Kislev is never the same. So we likely won’t find you if we try to come back for you.”

There’s a silence amongst the comms. Shiro himself is horrified.
“I’ll be stranded,” Lance sums up, “alone?”

There’s naked fear in his voice, and it makes Shiro feel awful. Why does the universe seem to be gunning for their blue paladin lately?

“All of that would have been nice to know before we all entered this thing!” Keith’s voice snaps. “What is it with you guys and the not sharing of information lately!?”

“This should not have been an issue,” Allura says, voice frustrated. “The paladin bond should be enough to guide you all.”

Shiro finds himself starkly aware of the lack of something at that one moment.

He can’t feel the other paladins.

They’d gotten to the point that they didn’t need to fully form Voltron to be able to sense each other on a mental and emotional level. Shiro’s been so focused on keeping his Lion on path and making the ride as smooth for the Alteans as possible, that he he didn’t notice.

Black’s powerful and enveloping presence is there as always, steely and composed even as the space around them comforts and tries to force them away. In the back of his mind, Yellow’s grounding warmth. Blue's cool support. Red’s fiery determination. Green’s sharp curiosity.

Black feels the other Lions just fine, and passes on confirmations of their presence to Shiro.

What he doesn’t feel. Hunk’s subtle strength, always tinged with just a little bit of anxiety. Lance’s excitable optimism, still somehow controlled and focused. Keith's unsuppressable drive, that occasionally spikes with anger and impatience. Pidge's analytical focus, often accompanied by some form of mischief or triumph.

This is their first time out in the Lions since last week, and it’s never been more obvious to Shiro that things are not where they should be yet.

“Our paladin bond isn't exactly in the best state right now,” Keith's voice is harsh. Shiro acts
“Keith,” he warns, before the red paladin says something that causes an issue.

“I can't see Hunk anymore,” Lance's voice says shakily.

Shit.

“Is there anyway around this situation, Coran?” Shiro asks, impressed with his own ability to keep his voice calm.

“Lance, dear boy,” the Altean calls.

“Y-yeah?”

“You've become quite adept at looking through the Blue Lion's eyes, yes?”

“I guess so?” Lance responds. Shiro thinks he knows where Coran is going with this.

“Then trust in your Lion, dear boy,” Coran says calmly, “she has not done wrong by you yet, correct?”

“...Right,” Lance says softly, “Let's do this, beautiful.”

Shiro thinks they all feel Blue's swell of affection and assurance.

“This is worse than I feared,” Allura murmurs softly. Shiro is almost positive that no one was meant to hear the statement, so he doesn't acknowledge it.

But he certainly won't forget it.
Looking through Blue's eyes is a disorienting but rewarding experience every time.

Lance has always had superb eyesight and formidable spacial awareness. It's what prompted his stepfather to even let a fifteen year old go to the gun range with him, the summer before he moved to the states.

But the Blue Lion's eyesight is something else entirely. She sees in a mix of abstract hues and sharp tones that gave Lance a major headache when he first began regularly seeing through her eyes. He eventually got used to it, but the area around them is admittedly doing it's best to take him back to those first few exercises.

Blue can see the quintessence of the Gate around them, as clear as day but not really, because it's a blinding swirl of colors moving so fast that they meld into one muted shade of black. It's grating on the mind, to see black but still somehow perceive that it's also every single color on the spectrum. Lance instead chooses to focus in the warm golden hue of the Yellow Lion's quintessence.

The pressure and shaking of the cockpit seem to fade away just by looking at Yellow. Instead he feels both his own and Blue's affection for both the Lion and Hunk. It manifests as a guiding heat in their chest that somehow stills their course and just like that, they no longer notice the area around them.

Everything will be ok as long as they keep their eyes on Yellow.

The awareness of Red and Green behind them, as well as Black in front of Yellow is there, but faint. They almost can't feel them at all. Is it because their own thoughts and feelings have formed a wall around their own quintessence? The bond between paladins and lions is not a one-sided phenomenon. All must be open in order for it to work. But they are not open. Black does not seem to be open either.

The area around them pulses and beats, as though alive. It's familiar, but foreboding. They're skeptical, but hopeful at the same time.

Memories of a beautiful land flow like waves through their shared mind. Of grassy pillars and platforms suspended high above rushing waters. Of magnificent architecture crafted of stone and
steel. Of strands of light arching over the horizon, in sync with the very soul of the planet.

“Lance?” Little Green calls.

“What's up with him?” Little Yellow asks. They can feel Yellow assuage the little one's anxiety with calming waves of assurance.

“He gets like this,” Little Red explains, “when we race and look through our Lion's eyes. He's super sensitive to Blue's mind or something.”

“I would imagine so,” the Helpful One supplies, “Lance's main quintessence is almost a perfect mirror image of the Blue Lion's.”

“Is this a recent thing?” Little Black asks carefully, “The spacing out afterwards?”

“I don't think so?” Little Red responds, “It's not like it happens all the time, just once in awhile.”

“We never really have a need to use sight-sharing in a fight,” Little Green says, “and we don't do that training exercise all that often either. It's no surprise that we haven't experienced it in that case.”

“He should emerge from the connection soon enough,” the Contact states, “this is good. I did not realize that Lance had bonded with his Lion so well.”

It's at that point that Lance finally manages to pull himself back from Blue. They become Paladin and Lion, He and She once more.

“Oh yeah,” he calls out breathlessly, feeling a bit dizzy. That Gate thing was no joke. “Me and Blue's bond is solid,” Lance states proudly.

If there's one thing he knows he can be proud of, surrounded by such overwhelming talent and skill, it's that Lance has a spectacular bond with his Lion.
Blue purrs in affection. Lance grins.

“Knew you'd get me through it,” he says lowly, just for her.

“Hey Lance,” it's at that point that he notices that everyone has brought up a visual feed, and they're all staring at him.

“What?” He asks Hunk cautiously. Why is everyone looking at him with such anticipation?

“Check it out,” Keith is the one who answers. Oh. They must be here now.

Lance taps at his console, bringing back up Blue's visuals. And promptly gasps.

The planet before them is small, maybe the size of Earth's moon. In fact, it's not really so much a planet as it is a series of interconnected land masses connected by lines of light. Almost like a cluster of islands in space.

But what really grabs his attention is the surface. It's a lush and vibrant green with an almost ethereal glow to it. He spies several silver clusters of what seems to be buildings, probably the composite temples that popped up in Blue's memory. But what inspired his gasp.

He sees water. Water the perfect shade of blue, bordering and resting underneath the green, floating almost delicately in the pockets between the formations. Lance smiles softly. Finding a planet with water that isn't some odd color is a rare thing, and it's normally only found on dangerous and inhospitable places.

But he knows that they can go in this water. Something in it draws him, maybe more residual sentiments from his Lion, and Lance knows that he can go in this planet's water and not melt or something.

It’s beautiful. One of the most beautiful places they've been too. Lance is floored.

“Whoa…” he hears himself mutter. His eyes move back and forth over his screen. And then he happens to look over at the visual feeds.
Where everyone is staring straight at him.

“W-what?” Lance flushes. They're all literally looking right at him, and smiling! Even Keith!


“Is there something on my face!?” He asks. There shouldn't be. He's been following his routine to a tee. Sure, he may have missed a few nights with his mask or so, but not enough to start breaking out or something!

“In a manner of speaking,” Keith smirks.

“What!?” Lance panics. He worked so hard on those masks. He knew that he shouldn't have gotten that weird seaweed substitute from the last space mall they went to!

…

Shiro watches on amusedly as Keith unabashedly teases Lance about a completely non-existent blemish.

It's not true, naturally. Shiro has not once seen Lance with so much as the beginnings of a pimple since he met the boy.

“I haven't had the pleasure of seeing such a happy face from the dear boy in quite some time now,” Coran mutters. Saying aloud what everyone is probably thinking.

“I myself have not either,” Allura murmurs, “who knew it would take something so simple?”

Shiro agrees. It almost hurt, to see such a genuine smile on Lance's face. Because he doesn't think he's seen a similar look in months now.
“I do not blame him,” Coran says, “Kislev is quite the sight.”

“It certainly is,” Allura states softly. Shiro turns to look at her, taking in the wistful look on her face. “It looks as though nothing’s changed.”

“You’ve been here before?” Shiro asks. He almost hopes that the answer is no.

“Once,” Allura responds, “this is where my father connected the Lions to my life force.”

Shiro sighs sadly. Even with Zarkon and Haggar, he finds it hard to believe that beings can just survive for 10,000 years. Anyone the Alteans know here is probably long dead and gone by now.

“How does that work anyway?” Pidge asks curiously, reminding Shiro that the feeds are still up. “Like, what does that whole life force thing entail?”

Shiro is curious about that too.

He’d been curious, back then. When Allura had mentioned without ceremony that she could sense the Lions because they were connected to her in some way. There had been no time to ask though, and it never came up again.

“Does that mean you can pilot the Lions too?” Hunk asks, “because you know, that may have been super helpful when Shiro was gone and K-”

“How about this Kislev place then!” Lance asks loudly, cutting the yellow paladin off. Shiro sees Hunk wince and cover his mouth over the feed, just as he registers Keith’s smirk dropping.

Shiro really needs the full story on that month. Like, as soon as possible.

“Ah yes!” Coran says cheerfully, “we should be able to land safely at their port!”

“We should get an audio transmission soon,” Allura states.
Right on cue, a signal pops up on Black's dash. Shiro taps it.

“Paladins of Voltron,” Faraj’s voice rings through their Lions. “I see you've made it through the Gate well enough.”

“Hey Faraj!” Lance calls as though they're old friends and though twelve hours ago wasn't the first time they've ever spoken.

“Paladin of Blue,” Faraj acknowledges, and Shiro sees Lance grin.

“So you remember me huh?” The blue paladin asks, sounding more like himself than Shiro has heard in awhile.

“Certainly,” Faraj answers. “You were quite excited about the prospect of getting closer to your Lion,” his voice is amused, “it's an impressive attitude to bring with you.”

“Faraj,” Allura calls, apparently ready to get things going.

“Ah Princess,” Faraj's voice immediately goes sarcastic. All of the paladins grin. “It's an honor to hear your voice again. Even though I seem to be hearing it quite often lately.”

Shiro sends a sharp to Pidge across the feeds as she begins snickering. Though he can't lie to himself. Faraj's blatant and apparent disregard for Allura's status is inappropriately funny.

“Faraj,” the Princess does not agree though, evident by the irritation in her voice, “please do not start. We just want your clearance to land.”

“You have literally had clearance to land here for a ridiculous amount of time now,” Faraj snarks, “Your asking is very polite, but quite unnecessary. The port is at the apex, please proceed.”

The transmission cuts out. Allura huffs.
“He certainly acts very familiar for the small amount of time we've been acquainted,” the Princess says, pointedly not acknowledging Hunk's and Pidge's giggles.

“I find the youth rather charming,” Coran chimes.

“So you haven't been speaking to him very often?” Shiro asks as casually as he can. He's not so sure what the “apex” is supposed to be, but he can certainly see that one of the buildings on Kislev seems to dwarf all the other ones near it from here. Seems like a good start.

“It's as I said,” Allura responds, “I first established contact with Kislev in hopes of finding another method to recovering you. We were within range to pick up the dimensional anomaly at maybe one and a half of your Earth weeks. I spoke to him and Katal once every Castle Cycle until you returned.”

“And they just believed that you were, you know…” Lance asks carefully, “you?”

They start moving towards the largest structure.

“I am not sure what you mean,” Allura answers.

“Like,” Lance says slowly, “You're supposed to be dead. If these guys were friends with Altea, then they must have known about it falling. How did you prove that you were who you said you were since this is the first time we're physically coming here?”

“Ah,” Allura nods, “My quintessence.”

“We've been throwing that word around a lot lately for us to know barely anything about it,” Keith gripes.

“And that is why the wonderfully enlightening experience of Kislev will be good for you paladins,” Coran says as they all near what Shiro can now see is definitely a landing port of some kind, “It's difficult to explain the aspects of quintessence to those with no experience handling it.”

“What do we do when we form Voltron then!?” Keith asks in exasperation. The red paladin is
getting frustrated, and though she's being quiet at the moment, Shiro is almost certain that Pidge isn't too happy about the conversation either.

They aren't like Hunk and Lance, who seem ready and willing to accept what's said to them and not lose sleep over it. Keith and Pidge have to know. They can't function well with the unknown. The fact that they're learning more facts about what they've so far thought that they understood is probably grating on them both heavily right now. Especially since the facts that they're all learning right is just that they don't really know what they've been doing apparently.

Shiro himself is bothered by it, but he can't find himself to be too terribly upset when he can feel Black's presence in the back of his mind, strong and unrelenting. He's ok not knowing exactly what all goes into the paladin bonds because he trusts his Lion, but having a concrete answer has never hurt.

“Quintessence is an underlying basis for everything that you all do with your Lions,” Allura explains calmly, “this is what you're hear to learn, paladins. Do not fret, we will be better for it.”

“But you said that this wasn’t a priority originally,” Pidge cuts in, “How long we were going to go without trying to come here?”

“I had hoped to establish a larger Intergalactic Alliance,” Allura muses, “perhaps correspond with some planets not touched by the Galra, or some with a Militia. So that we could be assured that your time spent training would not result in Haggar gaining more ground on us.”

Shiro pays close attention to his visual feeds, sees Lance bite his lip.

“But with the paladin bond damaged as it is,” Allura continues on frankly, “I believe it would be dangerous to ask you all to form Voltron until we can recover it.”

Lance looks down. No, that won’t do.

“But it’s good that we’re coming here anyway team,” Shiro states confidently, “If quintessence is the basis of Haggar’s skills as well, then coming here can only help us in the long run.”

“Yes my boy,” Coran says happily, “when you put it that way, it does quite seem like this trip could have come at a better time!”
“What’s that in the planet’s atmosphere?” Hunk asks suddenly. Shiro finds his attention drawn back to their destination.

It isn’t hard to see what Hunk is talking about. There is a very apparent ring of lights that rotate in the air above the surface vertical from the planet. And it looks like they’re going to have to pass through them.

“I imagine that to be a climate ring,” Coran answers simply.

“It controls the weather?” Lance questions.

“Amongst other things,” Coran states. His voice takes on an awed tone, “It’s quite spectacular, if that is what it is. I’ve never had the pleasure of seeing one to such a scale. I suppose 10,000 years is long enough to find a way to stabilize the potential fluctuations, but to put one over an entire planet? Marvelous!”

“Coran dabbled in the Sciences and the Experimentations during his free time,” Allura offers, “this will be as much a learning experience for us as it will be for you all.”

Shiro nods to himself. The implications are huge. If this place has truly escaped any interaction with the Galra because of the Gate, then they must have an amazing well of knowledge and history on the Altean Culture, both what was lost and what they’ve preserved. The leader personally hopes they’ve preserved a lot. Allura and Coran both deserve some familiarity in this universe.

The climate ring does nothing to them as they pass it, and Shiro finally feels the thrum of Black adjusting her own thrusters to account for the gravity of the place. His Lion seems content with the idea of landing on this place, which eases many of his doubts.

Is that perhaps why Allura kept this place from them until they were ready to come here? The idea of this being the only last direct connection to Altea is sobering. Maybe she’s been trying to hold onto this idea that it would always be there for them to go to eventually? A sort of hope that can only come from not knowing the whole story. Shiro hopes that this place is at least close to what Allura remembers.

“The air here should be breathable,” Pidge murmurs, “at least that’s what Green is saying to me, but I can’t get a clear reading on the composition of the atmosphere.”
“It’s almost like there isn’t one,” Hunk chimes in, “but that can’t be right. Plants can’t be that green or water that blue without at least some form of gases in the air.”

The largest structure is a magnificent temple, from what Shiro can see. It’s nothing less than a work of art. Resting on what seems to be the main formation, he can see that it seems to be rooted to the ground, composed of a grey and marble-like stone and towering above everything around it. The temple seems to be about as big as the castle, with several arches of some metal positioned at edges.

Shiro frowns slightly. It seems like more of a fortress than a temple the more that he looks at it, and he finds himself wondering what a place that is supposedly unreachable might need to defend itself from. There’s a platform at the peak of the fortress, bordered by a floating ring of the same metal with various carvings etched into. The black paladin assumes that to be where they are landing.

“Game of Thrones meet Star Wars much?” Lance questions, “This place is so cool!”

Shiro is inclined to agree. Surrounding the fortress are several smaller temples, but they are all framed by magnificently green and towering trees and foliage. The black paladin can also see streams of water flowing through the air around some of them. He’s mainly curious about the spheres of glowing lights that seem to be changing colors that he can see the closer that they get.

“It looks very much the same,” Allura says softly, “give or take a few modifications, this is the Kislev I remember.”

They guide the Lions to the platform at the top of the fortress, passing through the middle of the ring surrounding it.

“Whoa!” Pidge’s voice is distinctly impressed, “Hunk! Are you looking at the composition of this thing?”

“It’s pretty fricking impressive!” Hunk responds excitedly, “I wonder how they can fit so many diagnostic devices into one apparatus like this and have it be completely unmanned?”

“It would have to be an autonomous, self-sustaining AI to run as many scans as it’s doing right now!” Pidge says, “the programming for this thing alone has to be insane! And it seems like there
are multiple located on this planet, how can a network sort through so much information?"

“Ok nerds,” Lance says jokingly, “Care to share with the rest of the class in words that make sense?”

Shiro himself is curious. He’d figured that the ring had to serve some purpose, but Pidge and Hunk are acting like they’ve achieved enlightenment just from doing what had to have been a simple scan of the thing.

“Ok so that thing is basically a giant diagnostic scanning system,” Hunk elaborates without hesitation, “It just scanned us all the moment we passed through it, probably taking into account the composition of the Lions and all of us in it. But like, that’s not the only thing it scanned!”

“From what I can tell,” Pidge says, voice intrigued. “It also pulled all of the previous diagnostic data from our Lions just now in the matter of seconds it took us to go through in order to compile a history and a profile on each of them.”

“One,” Keith mutters, “that’s creepy.”

Shiro finds himself having to agree. Why go through such lengths. The Lions should be some of the only things capable of coming here right? The fact that they made it through should be enough of a diagnostic, right?

“Two,” Keith goes on, “How? We literally have to work for hours or days when something goes wrong with our Lions just to find out what’s wrong! And they did it in ten seconds? All of it?”

“There’s like, a crap-ton of hardware in that thing!” Hunk answers, “it's not just scanning us either. It looks like it’s running an active-time diagnostic that stretches out way past the planet too! It probably picked us up even outside the anomaly, that's how strong it is!”

“And for it to look so simple and unassuming,” Pidge states, “that's impressive. If the Lion's didn't have such an amazing capacity for scanning and processing information, we wouldn't have been able to tell what it was for.”

“I've got to find out how they built that thing!” Hunk proclaims.
“I’ve got to find out how they programmed it,” Pidge murmurs.

“I’m sure the Kislevians would be most willing to foster your little minds,” Coran says kindly, “you are Paladins after all, this place was created around the concept of making Paladins the best that they could be.”

Shiro hums. So what have they been doing without any Paladins to raise, then?

The platform seems to act as a simple landing pad, so Shiro touches down Black gently, aware of the others doing the same.

There’s a figure standing next to what appears to be an elevator of some sort towards the top edge of the platform away from them. Shiro assumes it to be their escort.

“Let us go,” Allura stands up to her full height, brushing her hands across her dress and looking every bit the Princess that she is.

“You’re absolutely positive that we can trust these people?” Shiro asks one more time. It's just a precaution, something to settle his own unrest. They're already here, so they're going through with this. He just needs to hear her say it.

“If we cannot trust these people, Shiro,” Allura says quietly, “then we cannot trust anyone else in the universe.”

That's not quite true. But the Black Paladin refrains from pointing it out. He imagines that there must be many thoughts going through her head at the moment.

“Oh,” Shiro trusts Allura though. At the end of the day, no amount of awkwardness between them will change that.

He opens the cockpit, and they depart.
Kislev is beautiful.

Shiro is astounded as he walks out of the Black Lion, Allura and Coran close behind him. The stone beneath their feet does in fact look and feel like some type of marble, and it makes an odd chime with each step on it. From their vantage point, they can see the entirety of the place. Everything seems to be washed in colors. Shiro’s never seen so many greens and blues and varying shades since they left Arus. It’s somehow light outside, despite the fact that there’s no Sun to be seen. He doesn’t remember seeing one when they finished crossing the anomaly.

“Is this a part of the climate ring thing, Coran?” Lance asks softly. Shiro spares a look at the rest of the paladins departing from their Lions and then follows the cuban boy’s gaze up to the sky.

The blue sky.

“The sky definitely wasn’t blue when we came down here,” Hunk breathes out.

“This place doesn’t have an atmosphere,” Pidge murmurs, “my helmet isn’t picking anything up, it seems like it’s just sitting in open space, so how…?”

Shiro glances over worriedly to Allura and Coran, neither of whom have helmets on.

“Are we sure that this air is breathable then?” he asks skeptically. There’s a warm purr in the back of his mind. Black. Reassuring him that everything is ok. Everything is as it should be.

“Red insists that it is,” Keith shrugs, before reaching up and snatching his helmet off his head.

“Keith!” Shiro scolds, heart rate skyrocketing. But the red paladin’s head does not explode. In fact, Keith merely takes a deep breath and grins slightly.

“This feels like the most normal air I’ve breathed since we’ve been in space,” he states.

“Really?” Lance asks, before reaching up and removing his own helmet. “Whoa…”
Pidge and Hunk follow suit, and no one is worse for wear. In fact, they all seem mystified after they take a breath. Shiro removes his own helmet and *breathes*.

It feels like Earth.

One thing they’ve come to expect from space. Not one atmosphere feels like the Earth’s atmosphere. Even if the air on a particular planet is breathable, there is always some hangup that makes it awkward in a way that only the Paladins have ever understood. One planet’s air left a damp and warm feeling in their throats, another had an odd taste to it that nearly left Pidge vomiting by the time they finally left. Another one had some type of microscopic rock mixed in with the air (it’s how Lance caught a positively terrifying case of the space flu, because he’d incidentally spent the most time down there). But this.

This air feels like Earth air. Like fresh Earth air. The air one would find themselves breathing when away from all forms of industrialization. The crisp freshness of mountain air without the added difficulty due to the elevation. It’s amazing. Shiro has to take a moment and just breathe. In a way he can’t even remember breathing before.

“I forgot what fresh air is like…” Pidge says softly. Shiro smiles sadly over at her.

He thinks about it sometimes. About the fact that Pidge is only fifteen years old now. How much she must be missing. How much she had missed because of Kerberos.

“We’re staying here a while,” Lance mutters, “right?”

A quick glance at the blue paladin is all that Shiro can bring himself to handle. Because Lance has that wistful and sad look on his face that he gets sometimes. Shiro thinks that it comes up everytime Lance has to remind himself of how long he’s going to be away from Earth. The black paladin bites back a sigh.

Does Lance understand? What this mission means for them?

Shiro looks at Hunk, who’s still looking up at the sky in awe, but breathing deeply at the same time.
Does Hunk get it? Keith and Pidge have always been in this for the long haul, Keith with having very little to return to, and Pidge with her determination to bring her family back with her. But Lance has a family, and Shiro sadly doesn’t know the yellow paladin’s family situation, but he does know that Hunk doesn’t seem to like space very much. Do they realize that they can’t go back until they take out Haggar, however long that might take? Do they realize that they have a duty to Voltron for as long as Voltron is needed? Which is looking like it’s going to be a long time?

The leader tears his gaze away. Of course they know. They’re both aware enough to know that their job isn’t over.

Shiro chooses to focus on the figure instead, who is now walking towards them.

Right away, Shiro processes the fact that it seems to be a male. The alien is one of the most humanoid they’ve ever seen. In fact, he looks almost Altean, Shiro realizes. He has Allura’s skin tone, thick silver hair that seems to go all the way to his waist, tied at the end with bangs that frame his face. He’s dressed simply enough, with a white cloak rimmed in blue. What really grabs Shiro’s attention.

“Oh my god,” Lance mutters, all of a sudden right next to Shiro. “He has bunny ears.”

“Lance,” Shiro scolds softly.

“Look at them Shiro,” Hunk insists, suddenly on the leader’s other side. “They’re legit bunny ears.”

“Hunk,” Shiro hisses. The guy is almost right there, he can probably hear them.

“He can probably hear us,” Pidge says his thoughts aloud, squeezing herself between Hunk and Shiro. “They’re huge.”

“Pidge,” Shiro whispers desperately.

“I wonder if they’re soft?” Keith asks, plastering himself to Lance’s other side and pushing the blue paladin into Shiro. “Bunnies are pretty soft.”
“Keith!” Shiro breathes. But. They’re right.

Sticking up from the alien’s thick hair, are very tall and thin ears with fur the same silver color lining them. They look like bunny ears.

“Bunny?” Coran questions.

“I’m quite lost myself,” Allura states.

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard that before,” the alien guy states with a smirk. That voice.

“Faraj?” Allura asks.

“In the flesh,” Faraj smiles a smile that looks way too much like Lance on a day where the blue paladin is feeling particular mischievous. It’s all the more menacing because his grin reveals very sharp looking incisors, and his irises are a crimson red color.

“Are you well, my boy?” Coran asks kindly.

“I’m well,” Faraj comes to a stop in front of them. He’s about two inches taller than Shiro. “Not quite sure what a bunny is,” he continues to smirk, “but I’m well.”

“Oh crap,” Lance murmurs. Shiro is mortified.

“M-My apologies, Faraj,” the black paladin hurries to say. What type of first impression!?

“Nonsense,” the alien boy cocks his head to the side, red eyes moving over all of them in amusement. “I’m told that most beings that see a Kvarian for the first time are taken aback by our ears.”

He focuses on Keith.
“They’re pretty soft,”

The red paladin stiffens, face flushing.

“Faraj,” Allura says sternly, “may we see Katal now?”

“So impatient,” Faraj says without shame, before shrugging. “I suppose you’ll want to jump right into it?”

“If we may,” Allura nods.

“As you wish,” Faraj gives her a small smile, before turning to regard them with a startlingly serious face.

“Paladins of Voltron,” he states, “my name is Faraj, of Kislev. I will be your primary guide and one of your trainers for your time here.”

Shiro nods, eyeing the person before him. Are all the aliens here like Faraj? The boy is tall, and his gaze is piercing. He’s on the thinner side, but it does not stop him from commanding a certain...presence. He feels Black’s respect for the guy from the back of his head, so this must be a person to take seriously.

“The lovely Princess here wants you all to just hop right to it,” Faraj smirks at Allura again, “so that’s what we’ll do. Consider this a preliminary introduction.”

“We’re going to start today?” Hunk asks anxiously.

“You’ll naturally be filled in as to what the expectations and the schedule is,” Faraj gives him a sympathetic look, “but yes. I hope you’re well rested.”

Shiro can tell that the red paladin is getting excited at the prospect of intensive training and making progress. He himself has to admit, it does seem intriguing.

“That depends on what Katal thinks you should all individually work on,” Faraj answers, grinning at Keith’s enthusiasm. “You’ll meet her very soon, we’ll get all the housekeeping things squared away, and after that…”

He pauses, letting his eyes drag appraisingly over all of them, paying a special type of attention to Shiro. The black paladin stares back. Faraj grins again.

“Welcome to Day One.”

Chapter End Notes

And so wraps up the introductory chapters! The story is going to follow a very specific structure from here on out! I have a lot of things planned for each paladin as well as Allura and Coran. Everyone still has a few issues to work out, and they will be explored and delved into. I don't want to make Allura come off as untrustworthy or unreasonable, I promise that there's a reason for her not being more forthcoming with information in this timeline.

If you didn't catch, everyone was staring at Lance just to see his reaction at that one point. I hope the transition to him sharing his mind with the Blue Lion wasn't too jarring or ridiculous, but a big part of this narrative is the paladins and just how close they can get to their Lions and what can come from it.

Anyways, thank you so much for reading! Please anticipate the next update, which should be coming your way soon!

(P.S. the Viera Race from the Final Fantasy series. Yeah, Faraj's alien race is blatantly based off of that for the most part lol)
Chapter Summary

“Er…” Shiro begins awkwardly, but Tanterian cuts him off.

“Let's see the Paladins in action now,” he grins, all teeth. Oh god.

“Um…” Hunk says meekly, “Now?”

“Now,” Tanterian begins to walk around the table, heavy cloak lined with golden borders flowing about his huge form. Villia sighs and shakes her head. The two sets of twins merely stare after Tanterian. Katal says nothing. Faraj looks ready to fall out laughing.

“As in,” Pidge says slowly, “right now?”

“The Green Paladin has it right!” He stalks around and starts walking down the steps to them.

Chapter Notes

Wow. I am the worst. To begin, I am so sorry this is so late lol. I'll spare you all my college woes, but the basic gist is that I had a lot of projects come up at once and had literally no time to sit down with this and write. But fear not! I'm done with the most time consuming things of the year and now I know that I'll have time to devote to updating this, so I'll keep going for my two to four days with updating because at the time of posting this chapter, I have a lot past it already started.

I've been reading the comments and the response is lovely, as always, I certainly hope you don't think I've forgotten y'all. So without further ado, please enjoy my attempts at world-building and try to explaining pseudo magi-science things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The main fortress of Kislev is just as awesome on the inside as it is on the outside.

Pidge is surrounded by people taller than her, and is quite used to feeling small every once in awhile. But this is ridiculous.

“Whoa,” Lance mutters, mouth open and eyes wide as the elevator they’re on descends. There’s no borders or walls, it’s really just a platform, probably based on a gravitation principle or something. Which means that they can see everything as it drops slowly from where they got on into the colossal building.
And man, is it huge. Pidge had expected that perhaps there would be levels of some sort like the castle. Layers of rooms and hallways and turns to fill in the size. But what they drop into can better be described as a huge stadium. The ceiling must be several dozen stories from the bottom, and while there are bridges and pathways at varying heights that seem to lead to smaller area of some sort, the majority of activity seems focused right where they are.

“I must say,” Coran states, “this is quite impressive.”

Pidge agrees. The place seems to be made primarily of an odd mix of stone and metal. It’s dimly lit within the fortress, not with lamps or torches, but with odd little spheres of light of varying colors floating around the huge space. She can’t tell where they seem to be going from this high up, but the closer they get, the more she starts to notice the actual order of things.

They seem to be descending from a point centered in the perfect middle of the place. She can't really tell north from south at this point, but Pidge is able to see what appears to be a set of huge metal doors across the space to one side of them, so she's going to work under the assumption for that the front of the building is that way.

As they descend a bit further, the green paladin is able to make out the more minute details, but she keeps care to listen to their guide.

“This is the primary temple of Kislev,” Faraj explains, “It’s the epicenter of activity as it pertains to regulations and management of activities.”

“So this is where your leadership gathers?” Allura asks attentively. Pidge has to wonder how the Princess is feeling about coming here. Apparently she’s been here once before, but Faraj does not look Altean. Will there be Alteans here? Coran said that they shared a similar ancestry, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that Alteans actually lived here. And if there are in fact Alteans here, what are the odds that they know anything about the old Altea that the Princess and her Advisor remember? It's been 10,000 years. Pidge has to imagine that the answer to that is astronomically low.

“Leaders, representatives, researchers, the whole lot,” Faraj explains as they get about halfway down. “All of those things get taken care of here, in one hub. We operate on an elected Round Table system, so it’s best to promote transparency, as well as cross-proficiency.”

“Cross-proficiency?” Coran asks eagerly. Pidge has to believe that their coming here is just as
poignant for him as well.

“You’ll find that our commerce representatives are just as capable of performing maintenance on the Lasthalis as they are on keeping inventory of the planet’s resources,” Faraj grins.

“The Lasthalis?” Hunk chimes in.

“The ring of quintessence that you all passed through when you arrived here,” the bunny-eared man responds.

Pidge remembers the ring of lights that bordered the planets.

“Ah, the climate ring?” Coran questions.

“The climate ring was certainly the basis of the Lasthalis’ creation,” Faraj states, “but only in principle. The actual implementation is completely different. I’ll tell you more about it when we get a chance.”

“Are you a scientist?” Pidge asks curiously. Faraj certainly talks like he knows a lot about the machinations of this place. But going off of his words, he could easily hold some other role and just have a passing knowledge of the most important technical aspects.

“Not by trade,” is all the guy offers in response.

“Then what is your role here, if I may ask?” Shiro questions. Pidge looks at their leader, taking in the tension in his posture. It’s very subtle, probably unnoticeable to anyone who isn’t looking for it, but the green paladin knows that he’s likely still on the skeptical side about this place. They’ve left the comfort of their Lions and completely entered Kislev’s stronghold, and while Pidge can feel Green extremely well, even as they move farther away, she knows that Shiro is just covering all of his bases. He and Keith have never been the type to be immediately comfortable in the new places that they visit.

“If I may be so crass as to answer your question with another question,” Faraj turns and smirks at Shiro, “What do you think my role is? Just from what you’ve observed so far?”
“Faraj…” Allura warns.

“It’s all in good sport, Princess,” Faraj doesn’t look at her as he answers.

“Well,” Shiro says somewhat awkwardly, probably not too comfortable with Faraj’s amused gaze. Keith looks distinctly unamused, while Lance looks completely unbothered. Pidge can already tell that some of them are going to end up loving this guy, while others...not so much.

“Are you some sort of law enforcer, or guard?” Pidge finds herself asking.

“What gives you that idea?” Faraj asks, crimson eyes lighting up with mirth.

“It kind of makes sense,” is all she answers with. And it does. Faraj has apparently been one of Allura’s main contacts to Kislev. From the sounds of it, he’s been present during her conversations with this Katal person as well. He’s also the person that’s supposed to guide them, and while they’re apparently welcome here, Pidge can’t see just anyone coming to meet them face to face. All of them as Voltron have to be just an enigma to these people as Kislev is to them.

Plus, Pidge thinks, looking at the guy who’s taller than all of them and gazing at them all with amused eyes but firm posture. Faraj looks like he could be a guard.

“You do kind of have that demeanor,” Lance mutters. But he doesn’t appear wary or suspicious of Faraj in the slightest. Pidge isn’t really, either. It’s odd, but something in her (probably has to do with Green), is at ease in this place. Faraj chuckles, looking fondly at them.

“Something like that,” the alien guy responds simply. “You’ll find out the details soon enough,” he states, “but for now.”

“This place is awesome,” Hunk says, wide-eyed. Pidge takes that one moment to realize that they’ve reached the ground. Hunk is right.

Now that they’re close enough to see the activity, Pidge can admit that there is a lot of activity. They’re definitely in the middle of the structure. On their seems to be a cluster of very tall and
imposing machines manned by people similarly dressed like Faraj. Pidge isn’t quite sure, but she’d wager that to be a communications area from the looks of the technology. Behind them is where the huge set of doors she spied earlier are located, and extending from them is the largest stretch of open space in the huge room. One their left seems to be some type of lab setup, with oddly shaped pods and shelves of flasks containing some colorful glowing material.

“Quintessence,” Keith mutters, following Pidge’s gaze.

“In one of it’s more...volatile states,” Faraj states, “you’re going to want stay away from that area without the proper equipment, quintessence isn’t really meant to take a physical form such as that, and will do some nasty things to those who touch it when it’s like that.”

Keith looks down at his own hands.

“What state is it meant to be in?” Hunk asks curiously.

Faraj points upwards, directing their attention to one of the glowing orbs of light floating through and illuminating the place.

“Quintessence really shouldn’t be out of a conduit or it’s origin source,” the guy explains, “but life doesn’t really work in ideals. So in the case that you live in a place where quintessence is in fact the main energy source, which requires for it to be out of a conduit or origin source a lot, the safest and most productive form is the Phi you see here.”

“Amazing,” Allura murmurs, “to be so advanced now that you have all found a way to give constant physical form to quintessence.”

“It’s quite the spectacle!” Coran says, “These Phi are your primary power source?”

“They are,” Faraj nods with a smile. “But I digress,” he waves a hand, “you’ll have more time with others far more informed than I on that matter. For now, let’s go see Katal.”

The alien turns and walks forward, towards the back part of the place. Pidge takes a second to look at the many, many other aliens hustling and bustling around them. No one seems to look at the Voltron crew more than once, but Pidge can see quite a few acknowledge Faraj with some sort of greeting.
To her surprise, Pidge can see that there’s an entire range of alien species in the room right now. Honestly, she’d expected them all to be like Faraj or similar, given that this place is supposed to be impossible to get to through normal means. But the green paladin doesn’t spot one alien that looks like their guide.

She does however, see that the majority seem to be another humanoid sort of being, just with varying colors of skin that actually looks more like scales when Pidge gets a closer look here and there.

They pass what looks to be a meeting area, with large desks and pews and aliens chattering and gesturing away as they wave and tap at tablets in their various hands. The activity in here is impressive, she has to admit. They probably get so much done.

Shiro doesn’t seem so comfortable in the chatter. It doesn’t surprise Pidge, he’s really not one for settings like this. Keith seems to be taking in the entire area with narrow eyes, likely looking for any sign that he may need to pull out one of his blades. Hunk is still looking between the Phi and the technology like he wants to know every single thing about them like, now. And Lance is actually looking more comfortable than Pidge can remember seeing him in a while. Something about an amiable crowd has always brought the blue paladins spirits up. The green paladin supposes that it’s a family thing.

“My little sisters upset me so bad that I ended up in the mental ward for the night.”

Pidge cringes, and turns her attention back on their guide. Another time, Pidge has a long list of things to do, and she’s content for as long as Lance looks calm to keep that closer to the bottom of it.

Faraj leads them past all of the activity, towards what Pidge can see is a hallway leading downwards, further into the fortress.

“We will be able to speak with the entire Round Table, will we not?” Allura questions. Pidge assumes that this is something that is consistent with the Princess’s memories of this place.

“Is Katal not enough for you?” Faraj asks without turning to look at Allura, “She is the one currently in control of the Militia, after all.”
“This place has a formal Militia?” Keith asks suspiciously, “What do you have to fight?”

Pidge can see where the red paladin is going with this, but he could stand to have a bit more tact. Shiro agrees with her, from the warning look he shoots at Keith. But their leader doesn’t try and back track, because he wants to know the answer as well.

“Just because we’re supposed to have an impenetrable defense,” Faraj murmurs, “doesn’t mean that we should get careless. Our enemies can’t find or get to us, doesn’t change the fact that we still have enemies.”

Shiro nods, “That makes a lot of sense.”

“Glad you see it that way,” Faraj turns to grin at them first, and then at Allura. “To answer your question,” he states, “you’ll be meeting with Katal and her personal council, as well as all the trainers involved with this process. You will not be having an audience with the entire Round Table today though.”

“May I ask why not?” Allura asks, apparently unpleased with this answer. It’s at this point that Pidge realizes that the Princess probably also wants an official alliance with Kislev. It makes sense. The green paladin can already tell that this place’s technology is some of the most advanced they’ve seen yet, and it may end up being even more advanced than the Galra’s. Even at first glance, it’s obvious that Kislev would make a great ally, if only for their advances.

“You can,” Faraj’s voice loses a bit of it’s playfulness, “but now isn’t the time. If we’re going to get your Paladins started immediately, there’s no time to talk politics.”

“I suppose you’re right about that,” Allura concedes, but Pidge can tell from her voice that she’s not going to just let this one go.

The rest of their walk is spent in silence for the most part, broken by the surrounding chatter as well as Hunk occasionally pointing out something he finds cool to Lance. Pidge grins to herself. Hunk’s always been a big lug of adorable when he gets excited about things like this. Lance has always been the yellow paladin’s go to for marveling at a new discovery, while Pidge herself got Hunk’s attention when he wanted to talk details about it.

“You said that you were a trainer,” Shiro asks after a moment, “I assume that there are multiple?”
Of course there are multiple, Pidge thinks, but does not say. Their leader is just talking to see what Faraj will say at this point. The green paladin thinks that it's equal parts discerning the alien’s intention and making Shiro himself feel more comfortable.

“You're right,” Faraj seems more than willing to humor them though.

“What are you responsible for training us for?” Lance inquires. Pidge perks up from where she was examining the walls. She'd like to know this too actually.

“You likely won't see me much until your later days,” Faraj responds, “I'll be popping in to observe and answer any questions your trainers may miss, but I'm more of a review person than anything.”

Pidge finds herself wondering just how he's capable of answering this anyway. This seems like a very organized set up considering Voltron has been lost to the universe for such a long time now.

She supposes that if the purpose of this planet is in fact just to be a resource for Voltron, it makes sense that they have some groundwork ready. And there's also the fact that they've been in contact with the Princess for a few months now. That probably has something to do with their preparation.

But then it goes back to the question of how? How did they confirm that Allura was Allura just by quintessence when they've been galaxies away from this place? How did they decide to be so accommodating to what should be the biggest ghost of the universe by now? Pidge assumes that they're aware of the state of the universe. The fact that there are different species of aliens here means that there must be some way that they make contact outside of the dimensional anomaly. But just how much are they aware of? Had they heard of Voltron prior to this? Do they know that Zarkon is gone now? Do they even know who Zarkon is?

Pidge huffs to herself. Too many questions. She needs answers soon.

By the time she's tuned back in, the green paladin finds that they've all arrived at a much smaller room than the main one they entered through. It can't be called anything but an audience hall in her opinion, with the wide open space and the huge steps leading up to a table of cloaked aliens.

“Our guests have arrived,” Faraj singongs, gesturing for the team to stop a few feet away from the edge of the steps while he walks up them leisurely.
There are nine aliens sitting before them, Pidge counts. And they're all of the same species with the colorful scales for skin.

The one sitting to their far right is who Faraj immediately goes to stand by, and Pidge imagines this to be the one in charge.

It looks like a she, with scales a gentle silver hue and thick green hair done in some fancy up do that Lance probably knows the name of. Getting a closer look, Pidge can see that these aliens seem to have eyes like Alteans.

“Paladins of Voltron,” her voice is melodic and honestly kind of weird in Pidge's opinion. “What a marvel.”

“Lady Katal,” Allura acknowledges, stepping forward to offer a slight bow. Pidge wonders what the customs for Kislev are. Under normal circumstances, they'd know all about the cultural practices of this place (or at least what Allura and Coran remember to be the cultural practices, which means that it's always at least a little bit of a toss up), because they would have been discussed in detail before even coming down here.

The green paladin figures that Kislev must have practices similar enough to Altea that Coran and Allura aren't worried about it. Or practices lax enough that there really isn't a need for strict instruction.

“By the Five,” Katal’s heart-shaped face remains blank, but her tone becomes a bit awestruck, “the heir to the Altean throne herself. Princess Allura, I am truly humbled.”

Pidge feels a level of tension amongst the paladins lift at Katal's warm acknowledgment. She figures that they had all been sort of worried about how this was going to go. They won't let their guards down completely, but it certainly seems like these beings actually believe the the Princess and the Paladins are who they say they are.

“The honor is mine,” Allura says with a courteous smile, “I must extend my thanks for your welcoming us to this place.”

“No thanks is necessary,” Katal raises one hand, six inch talons extending from her fingertips, and waves nonchalantly. “There is always room for the Defenders here.”

Her lips quirk in what might be a smile as she examines all of them.
“If we may know the names of our guests?” She requests kindly.

“Of course,” Allura smiles and trades a small look with Shiro. Pidge stares. It's only a moment. Maybe even less than a full second, but she knows that she sees some odd tension in the interaction. So minute that she would have missed it if she hadn't been looking at the exact right moment.

*Interesting*. Her “to know” list just keeps growing.

“It's a pleasure,” Shiro says amicably, if not a bit awkwardly. Pidge has always found it a bit funny that their leader can be so comfortable and in control on a battlefield and in just about any situation other than social interactions.

The black paladin has always done best at being a strong and silent presence at Allura's side while the Princess did all the talking, but he tends to tense up a bit when put on the spot himself.

“My name is Takashi Shirogane,” but Shiro retains enough social skills so that only they can hear his slight discomfort, “I go by Shiro. On behalf of the team, I'd also like to thank you for hosting us.”

At one point in time, they would all make the misstep of saying which lion they piloted when introducing themselves, as though they weren't color-coded.

“Shiro of Black,” Katal acknowledges with that weird half-smile, “wonderful.”

Her gaze moves onto the closest paladin to him.

“Uh…” Keith does not retain enough social skills to hide his awkwardness. “I'm Keith. The red paladin.”

Ok. So some of them still make that mistake.
Pidge sees Faraj grin in amusement. Katal's face remains the same.

“Keith of Red,” she states, “splendid.”

Her eyes zero in on Hunk next.

“Hi,” Hunk greets with a smile, “I'm Hunk of Yellow.”

Pidge has to bite back a snort.

“Hunk of Yellow,” Katal repeats, “marvelous.”

Pidge has to wonder of the seemingly random descriptors actually mean something in the grand scheme of things. She finds herself meeting Katal's eyes and-

Oh.

“Oh,” she hears herself and inwardly swears. This happens every time she has to introduce herself! “Hello,” the green paladin greets blankly, “I'm Pidge. Of Green.”

How is it that the Defenders of the Universe are so bad with words?

“Pidge of Green,” Katal doesn't seem to notice or care that they're all socially inept. She probably can't tell by their standards. “Excellent.”

“And I'm Lance McClain,” of course Lance is last. He's always the last one when they introduce themselves and he always makes them all look sad by comparison. “At your service,” he grins easily, “It's a pleasure to be in such wonderful company.”

Yeah.
“Lance of Blue,” Katal nods, “Amazing. The pleasure is ours.”

She looks at Coran.

“My name is Coran,” the Altean states with a nod, “Personal Advisor to Princess Allura and the Paladins of Voltron.”

“A spectacular position to undertake,” Katal nods back, “You’ve quite the well-rounded team.”

“I must say,” Coran says cheerfully, “Kislev is quite the marvel. I am so impressed.”

“I'm glad,” is the response, “please make use of what you find here to whatever extent suits your needs. Allow me to introduce the people that will take of you during your stay.”

She gestures to the two aliens on her right. They both have pink scales and matching white braids down their backs.

“This is Pomel and Yumel,” Katal says. Pidge is going to assume that they're twins. Or their alien version of twins, because they literally look exactly the same.

“Well met,” they chime in perfect unison. Voices the exact same pitch and timber.

Pidge exchanges a wide-eyed look with Keith.

“They will work with your Paladins on the way of the arms,” Katal says to Allura, “they are both pioneers in the field of quintessence-based weapon manipulation.”

“The bayards?” Keith murmurs.
“Sounds like it,” Hunk answers quietly.

“The next two are Yubelle and Porelle,” and then there's two more aliens that look exactly the same as Pomel and Yumel. Just with green skin instead of pink. Perhaps an entire set of four? What's with their names? Does this alien race generally all have two syllable names?

“They will instruct you in the ways of using your armor as a catalyst for your quintessence,” Katal explains. Hunk “oohs” under his breath. Pidge has to admit, that sounds pretty cool and potentially very useful.

These two aliens do not verbally acknowledge them, but they both nod in tandem. Oh boy.

The next down the line has a sandy bronze color to it's scales. It appears to be male, and he's much bigger than anyone else seated at the table with the build of a wrestler. Unlike the rest, he also offers them a large grin that reveals razor sharp teeth.

“Tanterian there will push you all to improve your use of quintessence while piloting your Lions” and there goes the two syllable theory, “he is also partial to hand and hand combat, so he'll likely touch on that as well.”

Pidge can feel Keith and Shiro’s interest levels go up.

Tanterian continues to grin sharply as he speaks in a gruff voice, “Never had the honor of training the actual Defenders. Can't wait to get started.”

The green paladin looks at Hunk and finds his face looking as nervous as she feels. She knows that this guy is going to stress her out.

The next is a female with deep purple scales and a lighter shade of purple hair intertwined in an intricate system of braids and twists about her head.

“Villia is astounding at connecting and manipulating natural quintessence in the environment,” Katal explains, “I believe you'll find your time with her especially fruitful.”
“They certainly will,” the aforementioned alien states dryly, “if they really are paladins.”

Pidge tenses, can feel how everybody tenses, Shiro takes a tiny step forward protectively. They relaxed too soon.

“Don't mind Villia,” Faraj says nonchalantly, “she likes to posture herself aggressively, but she's excited to help you guys.”

“Why do we let you come to these?” Villia demands, and the sheer exasperation in her voice is so reminiscent of Keith talking to Lance that Pidge can't help but let herself relax.

“You don't let me do anything,” Faraj chuckles, “I just show up, and then you keep me.”

“Regrets,” Villia shakes her head.

“The final two are my personal council team,” Katal does not acknowledge the two alien's bickering, but rather gestures to the far end of the table at the last two aliens.

One has scales the color of snow, and doesn't seem to have hair so much as...spikes? Protruding from the top and back of his (Pidge thinks) head. His voice is a smooth baritone when he speaks.

“Well met, Paladins.” He acknowledges, “I am Lieen.”

The other is a female with gunmetal gray scales and free-falling black hair goes down her back.

“And I am Mirjn,” she speaks and wow. Pidge is impressed by just how husky and powerful her voice is.

“They are experts in the way of the Lion Bonds and the mental link between Paladins,” Katal explains, “they have proposed and planned the training cycles for you all.”

There's a pause.
“And?” Faraj prompts, “Aren't you forgetting something?”

“You've already introduced yourself to them!” Villia protests. Tanterian just laughs.

“It isn't official until the boss does it,” Faraj retorts.

“Katal ain't your boss,” Tanterian cackles

“For the purposes of this conversation,” the bunny-eared (he said Kvarian?) alien responds, “she can be.”

“And you all have had the pleasure of meeting La Ba'Gamnan Faraj,” Katal cuts in, voice taking on a slightly exasperated but distinctly amused tone. “He will be your personal guide during your stay here. Should you have any questions or requests that arise outside the scope of your training, he will take care of you.”

Faraj grins at them, “At your service.”

Pidge wonders how rank works here. Katal introduces their trainers, but let her council introduce themselves, so it would be safe to assume that there's some chain of command there. But Faraj doesn't seem to answer to anyone in this room. Does he outrank them? Or does it have something to do with the fact that he's clearly not the same species as all of them?

What ranks do they as Paladins have? Villia’s little comment definitely put into perspective that they aren't completely well-regarded here if she doesn't quite believe that they are Paladins. Pidge supposes that she can't blame her. Voltron has been lost for 10,000 years. There was no way that they weren't going to meet someone here who doesn't believe that they're who they are. Even with the Lions.

“Have you been well, Shiro of Black?” Katal asks suddenly. “I'm told you spent an alarming amount of time unreachable in the Astral Plane.”

Lileen and Mirjn exchange looks while Shiro smile uncomfortably.
“I’m better now,” their leader answers, “and grateful for the deeper understanding that came out of it.”

Katal hums thoughtfully, “It was by your hand that Zarkon is now indisposed?”

Shiro nods, “It is.”

“As expected of the Black Paladin,” Mirjn states, voice carrying over the room, “It’s no wonder your Lion acted to preserve your life. To triumph over a previous Paladin is generally unheard of.”

Shiro flushes a bit as all of the seated aliens give him appraising looks. Pidge secretly thinks it's adorable.

“Do Paladins fight previous Paladins often?” Lance asks quietly. It's probably meant for Hunk to hear only, but Pidge thinks that their blue paladin has forgotten that there's someone with ridiculously huge ears present.

“It happens more than you'd probably think,” Faraj answers simply. Lance startles, exchanging a wide-eyed look with Hunk to his left.

“What?” Villia gives Faraj a look.

“I was answering a question,” bunny-ears waves her off. Villia looks like she wants to respond, but Tanterian beats her to it.

“Is Zarkon really as the stories say?” He asks curiously, directing his attention to Allura and Coran.

“He is much worse unfortunately,” Coran responds. “Or...was much worse I suppose.”

Tanterian claps his hands together, making a large cracking sound that seems to pulse through the air. Pidge jumps. The strength in his hands and arms needed to make such a sound...
“Excellent!” The big alien cheers, standing up to a whopping seven feet by Pidge's humble guess. “You must be something then, kid!”

“Dude,” Hunk murmurs, “he just called Shiro a kid.”

“Dude,” Lance whispers back, “I know.”

“I haven't heard someone call him that since the Garrison,” Keith says lowly.

Pidge watches Faraj's ears twitch each time a word is spoken and resists the urge to face-palm at the smirk on the alien's face.

“Er…” Shiro begins awkwardly, but Tanterian cuts him off.

“Let's see the Paladins in action now,” he grins, all teeth. Oh god.

“Um…” Hunk says meekly, “Now?”

“Now,” Tanterian begins to walk around the table, heavy cloak lined with golden borders flowing about his huge form. Villia sighs and shakes her head. The two sets of twins merely stare after Tanterian. Katal says nothing. Faraj looks ready to fall out laughing.

“As in,” Pidge says slowly, “right now?”

“The Green Paladin has it right!” He stalks around and starts walking down the steps to them.

“Don't we get like,” Lance waves his hands, “a tour or something first? I know he said that this was day one and all but…”

“That's Faraj's territory,” Tanterian stops in front of them, hands on his his and smile wide. “I can introduce to the skyfield but that's about it. I want to get a feel for your capabilities sooner rather
“No easing us in or telling us what we're getting into?” Hunk asks anxiously.

“You lot have been taking on the Galra Empire all this time,” Tanterian pats the Yellow Paladin's shoulder lightly. “I don't really know that easing y'all into anything exists anymore.”

“I guess you're right about that,” Hunk slumps over.

“Well I'm ready to start,” Keith chimes in. Pidge snorts. Of course he's ready.

“Any Red Paladin worthy of the title would be ready!” The alien grins at Keith, before turning to look at Allura and Coran.

“I'm sure Katal and y'all have got some details to hammer out here, mind if I borrow your Defenders for a few eres?”

“Not at all,” Allura looks pleased at progress being made as soon as possible. Pidge would like to see how the Princess would react to being handed off to someone who looks like he can step on all of them to death.

“Do be gentle with the humans now,” Coran advises, “their kind does not regenerate like yours.”

Thank the stars for Coran, Pidge thinks as Tanterian’s eyes widen.

“No foolin’?” The alien asks incredulously, “thanks for saying something. Might have been bad otherwise.”

Pidge gulps. What have they gotten into?

“Bad?” Lance mutters, eyes horrified. Keith to Pidge's right looks happy. Why does Keith look happy!?
“Well then,” Tanterian turns to look at Shiro, “What say you, Black Paladin? Ready to show me what you're made of?”

Shiro looks between them all and exchanges a few glances with Allura and Coran before he nods determinedly.

“I'm ready to show what we're made of,” the black paladin states. And just with that one statement, Pidge feels herself relax.

Keith smiles a small but dangerous smile. Hunk perks up a bit. Lance hesitates a bit, and Pidge wonders what's on his mind, but the moment passes too fast for her to really examine it.

Tanterian nods approvingly.

“No problems with me making Day 1 a group thing, right?” He asks without turning back to look at the rest of their trainers, “Once you guys get everything situated, we can figure out who is gonna go with who for tomorrow.”

“That will be fine,” Katal answers. “Please proceed however you see fit.”

“Try not to break them,” Faraj cuts in jovially, “ok?”

Pidge feels her confidence drop a bit with her stomach as Tanterian eyes them all with excitement.

“No promises,” he says.

Fuck.

...

Tanterian kind of looks like a sleek and advanced version of The Thing from the Fantastic Four.
Which, Hunk thinks as they all follow the alien down a large hallway, is a little bit cool. But a lot bit terrifying.

“What do you think he wants us to do?” Lance asks curiously.

“Probably a diagnostic session of some sort,” Pidge is the one who answers.

“But like,” his best friend goes on, “the have-us-do-a-little-bit-of-everything session? Or the throw-us-out-there-and-see-what-we-do session?”

“Nothing quite so major,” Tanterian answers. Because apparently he has super good hearing too. “I'm going to have y'all fly a course for a spell, and then I'm going to have you guys come at me.”

“Come at you?” Keith sounds way to interested in this

“Yep,” the alien answers. “From what we've been taught of Voltron, most of your biggest fights happen in the stars, yeah?”

“That's right,” Shiro nods from his position just beside Tanterian.

“I'm sure you've got some on-foot fighting stripes,” Tanterian says thoughtfully, “but I wonder just how good they are.”

“So we're sparring with you today?” Lance asks. Hunk can see him staring at the alien's rather large arms.

“Won't be much of a spar,” Tanterian says nonchalantly, “you'll attack. I'll defend. But I won't attack back.”

“One by one?” Keith asks curiously.
“All at once,” the alien responds easily. As though asking for a five on one single-sided battle is the most normal thing in the world.

“We're not weak, you know,” Pidge grumbles.

“Pidge,” Shiro scolds. Tanterian just laughs.

“Ohohoho! Big talk,” he turns to grin at them, “Now as long as y'all can back it up, we'll get along just fine.”

Hunk hopes that they can back it up.

The hallway (which Hunk swears was not next to the audience stairs when they first came in) eventually opens up to what he imagines is the back or the side of the fortress.

Unlike when they'd first arrived, this path is not filled with Aliens of all different species. In fact, Hunk's yet to see anyone else but themselves and Tanterian.

Outside is just as beautiful as the rest of this place. They find themselves standing on a large stone balcony overlooking what can only be described as a valley. The plants here are colossal, Hunk can see from here, and so vibrant in color. The yellow paladin really wants to know just what in the atmosphere could possibly result in foliage like this when there didn't seem to be any atmosphere when they first arrived.

A glowing green orb floats past his vision.

The Phi. That's what Faraj called them. Hunk wants to know how these little guys can manage to be the main power source on this planet. Especially with mechanisms like that diagnostic ring they passed through present.

“Balanced towards nature today, huh?” Tanterian says with a grin, staring at the Phi.

Oh? Question time.
“Question?” Hunk raises his hand, “What does that mean? Balanced towards nature?”

“Never heard of the Phi before today, I take?” Tanterian asks, walking to edge of the balcony and looking down at the steep drop. Hunk can’t see the ground from where he is. He doesn't think that there is a ground down there to be seen.

“Faraj says that they're the main source of energy here,” Pidge steps forward, eyes shining her “need to know” shine.

“That they are,” Tanterian reaches up and pokes at the orb. “The whole process behind them would take too long to explain right now, but what you need to know to answer his question is this,”

The alien points out several more green Phi floating about the air.

“The Phi are all connected to the Lasthalis,” he explains, “they monitor and maintain ambient quintessence levels in the air in order to keep a balance of elements in the air. These are all attuned to Nature, or Forest. Which means that another element of quintessence began rising a bit too high in this particular area for the Lasthalis’ tastes. Generally speaking, it’s not ideal to have so many Phi of the same color in one area. It means the balance was thrown way out of whack or that the balance is being thrown way out of whack.”

“How can another element of quintessence rise to such levels?” Pidge asks without missing a beat, just a few seconds before Hunk planned on asking himself.

“The Phi aren't just affected by the Lasthalis,” Tanterian explains, “they're sensitive to the quintessence of beings here as well. Most likely answer? Too many people with fire quintessence gathered around this area probably, and the Phi stopped balancing this area right.”

“What happens if it gets too out of balance?” Hunk asks.

“In the case of Fire quintessence getting too high here?” Tanterian shrugs, “the valley would probably be set ablaze.”

Ok. That's intense. Hunk would rather not be right here if that were to happen.
“Things like that don’t happen often,” Shiro asks worriedly, “right?”

“Nah,” Tanterian looks up to the air, “it’s nigh impossible for it to get that far. The Lasthalis and the Phi are too in sync for that.”

“This place is so cool,” Lance marvels, and Hunk has to agree.

“That it is,” Tanterian continues to angle his head up, eyes slipping closed. “That it is.”

There’s a mildly awkward silence afterwards during which they all stare at the guy. What is he doing?

Hunk’s just about to whisper something to Pidge when a whirring sound reaches their ears. It starts out faint, undoubtedly coming from low in the valley, before escalating steadily and quickly.

About five seconds pass. And then a hulking machine jets up past the balcony, nearly tossing them all but Tanterian up into the air with the force of it.

“Oh gosh!” Hunk yelps as he stumbles, reaching out and steadying Pidge as much as he can on only one leg. (Which isn’t much). They both still fall.

“Is this another bonding moment?” He hears Lance ask. Hunk turns to see the blue paladin lying on top of Keith, looking like he fell backwards and Keith tried (and failed) to steady him. “You seriously need to learn how to use your words, Keith.”

“Oh shut up,” the red paladin groans.

“What was that?” Shiro asks cautiously. He’s the only one other than the alien who kept his bearings, only looking a slight bit unsteady on his feet.

“Hobbs,” Tanterian answers simply. As if that means anything to them.
“Huh?” Lance questions, pushing up from his position.

“Watch it!” Keith wheezes, “I'm gonna need that lung!”

“Hobbs,” Tanterian repeats, just as the whirring starts up again.

“Still not following,” the blue paladin says dryly as he finally gets to a standing position, extending a hand to Keith. If Hunk wasn't too busy trying to pick himself up and help Pidge up as well (something about the force that hit was very disorienting for some reason), he'd smile and feel relieved at seeing the two help each other. Maybe this mission is just what they need in more ways than one.

Just as Hunk gets his feet back under him, the machine drops out of nowhere to hover behind Tanterian. Leaving them all (this time including Shiro) on the ground again.

“Stop falling on me!” Keith complains from Hunk's side. The yellow paladin looks up to see Lance sprawled over the red paladin's middle. Hunk himself has a Pidge on his back.

“Can't really help it man,” Lance snarks, “why don't you stop falling for me!?”

“That doesn't make any sense!”

“You don't make sense!”

“Oh my god,” Pidge murmurs as she attempts to push off of Hunk's back, “I can't decide whether I want to cry of frustration or happiness.”

“A little bit of both?” Hunk responds as he tries to drag his own suddenly heavy body up. This is the most normal they've all been since last week. And all it took was getting knocked over by a giant beetle robot.

What.
Hunk looks again.

Behind Tanterian is a flying robot the size of Yellow just about. It's got an oval-like body, with two extensions from it's back that are currently acting as thrusters to keep it airborne. It has thin Appendages that could pass for multiple sets arms and two sets of legs. But most noteworthy are the giant pincers extending from the head, looking very sharp and foreboding. The whole thing is a shiny copper tone with black and gold accents.

It's a giant beetle ship.

“As if we weren't straight out of the Power Rangers enough,” Lance says incredulously, staring up at the machine.

“This is your…” Shiro struggles to stand to his feet for a second, so Hunk knows that something must be off. He doesn't feel as bad anymore.

“Hobbs,” Tanterian repeats with a grin, “Sorry ‘bout that. Should have warned y'all about his gravitational field.”

Hunk's eyes widen as he takes in the ship. *Gravitational Field* !?

‘*Could we learn to do that?* ’ He asks Yellow mentally. His Lion hums in amusement, but does not answer. Hunk sighs. Yellow likes to make him figure things out for himself.

“This is your ship?” Keith asks, eyeing the machine.

“Yep,” Tanterian says proudly. “Didn't build him, but they followed my design for his looks perfectly!”

“You wanted it to look like that…” Pidge says slowly.

“Sure did,” the alien grins. “But enough about Hobbs! Call your Lions! I gotta see them up close!”
“Call our Lions?” Pidge mouths at Hunk with a frown. The yellow paladin shrugs. That's obviously what Tanterian was doing when he staring up into the air, but they’re probably a bit out of the Lion’s range to do that. Hunk has felt and been aware of Yellow in the back of his mind this entire time, but it's kind of like that in the castle too. And besides.

“We don't really call our Lions from a distance,” Lance explains.

Tanterian stares. “How do you fly them then?”

He sounds dumbfounded, and Hunk has the sinking feeling that they skipped something very basic in their haste to learn about forming Voltron.

“We go to them and get into their cockpits?” Lance shrugs, “I mean, sometimes they come to us when they want but we don't really like, call them, you know?”

“Ah I see,” Tanterian nods, “sounds like your Lions are aware enough of you that you've never needed to call them.”

A pause. The paladins look awkwardly at one another.

“I guess that's a way of putting it,” Pidge shrugs.

“It's more like they sense when we're in danger with no way out,” Keith says, “and then they come.”

“Being able to call them at will like that from a distance would actually be pretty helpful,” Pidge murmurs.

“Well then it's a good thing y'all are gonna learn that eventually!” Tanterian grins. “But for now, it should be good enough for y'all to just call them aloud. Your Lions are just up there, after all.”

He points up towards the roof of the fortress, where they landed.
“Since you guys don't call them mentally, I suppose it's safe to assume that y'all speak to your Lions verbally more often than not?”

They all give a confirmation. Hunk's never really thought too deeply about it, but now he supposes that they do talk aloud to the Lions a lot considering that their minds are connected to them. Sure, he’d just asked question through the link just a few minutes ago, but he almost never does it.

“Ok,” Tanterian nods, taking a few steps backwards. “Call out to them.”

Hunk looks around, catching Lance's eye. His friend shrugs, and then angles his head up.

“Blue,” he calls, “say beautiful, would you come down here please?”

And despite all the times that Hunk has watched Lance have entire conversations with Blue, he still can't help but feel a bit awkward in the first few seconds of silence as they all wait to see what happens. How have they never tried this before?

“...Babe? Lance prompts. Hunk wishes he had someone who would sweet-talk him like Lance does his Lion.

There's another pause in which the blue paladin looks like he's about to say something else, but it ends up not being necessary, because Blue just appears.

Hunk yelps as the form of the nicest Lion flies up behind them, radiating playful delight and happiness at Lance calling her.

“There's my number 1 girl,” his best friend grins up at her. Hunk feels the faint purring from the Lion in response, it's nothing like what he gets from Yellow. But enough for him to sense her immense affection for her paladin.

“Yeah!” Tanterian cheers. “That's what I'm talking about! She's a real beauty indeed.”

Lance preens.
“She is,” Hunk nods excitedly, wanting to get in on this. “But Yellow's a looker too,” he says loudly, “aren't you bro? Come down and show it off!”

There's a slight pause, and then Yellow's presence in the back of his head seems to surge forward for a second. And then his Lion is at his back.

Hunk turns his head back to look at the form of his Lion, gleaming in the light of this planet and looking like an all-out badass surrounded by the glowing Phi in the air. He grins.

Yellow responds with waves of amusement and gentle warmth.

“Haha!” Tanterian pumps one of his massive fists in the air, “keep ‘em coming, Defenders!”

“Red,” Keith shouts up into the air. And then promptly scowls. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

Hunk snickers. “Sounds like Red is being moody again,” he mutters to his own Lion. Yellow seems to chuckle in his head.

“Let's show them how it's done Green!” Pidge calls, and the Green Lion's inquisitive and sharp presence appears with the Lion as it lands in between Blue and Yellow.

“Really Red,” Keith huffs, “now? Of all times?”

“Black,” Shiro says quietly, intimately. Hunk supposes that his bond with the Black Lion has to have gotten to that point by now. “I need you down here,” their leader mutters.

Hunk doesn't perceive Black's presence in his head subtly like he does with Blue and Green, but he does feel Yellow acknowledge the head Lion's presence as Black descends leisurely from the sky.

“Now that's a leader's ship if I've ever seen one,” Tanterian says in awe. “Amazing.”
Black lands next to Blue, and then they all look at Keith.

The red paladin looks one hundred percent done. “Seriously Red?” Keith sighs, “why are you being an ass?”

“Language,” Shiro corrects.

“Probably because you haven't asked nicely?” Lance snorts, “You've got to treat her delicately Keith. She's your number 1 Lady, right?”

“Delicately!?” Keith says incredulously, “She melts things with lava breath, Lance!”

“Just try it,” the blue paladin insists, “all she can do is ignore you.”

Hunk giggle alongside Pidge. He sees Shiro smile slightly at the suddenly rekindled dynamic between the blue and red paladins. It's a bit on the sad side, but Hunk promised Lance that he wouldn't worry about that particular thing, so he looks back to Yellow instead.

“How much do you want to bet that Red comes when Keith asks nicely just to spite him?” He asks his Lion. Yellows purrs in agreement.

“Fine!” Keith groans, “Red. Would you come down here and help me. Pretty please?”

The Red Lion descends immediately.

“Told ya so!” Lance cackles. Hunk takes one look at Keith's gaping mouth and joins the blue paladin in laughing his ass off.

“You paladins are a riot!” Tanterian throws his head back with his laughter, “I’m glad. Expected a bunch of stuck up stiffs when we were planning out your training.”

“Was this a part of your plan?” Shiro asks curiously.
“Nope,” Tanterian grins, “Villia was supposed to get you guys first. We’re going completely off script at the moment.”

“You guys are flexible enough to do that?” Pidge asks skeptically.

“Flexible ain’t the word for it,” Tanterian turns and starts to walk to Hobbs, “there’s no standard to follow. You guys are the first Paladins to show up here in thousands of years. We know what you’re supposed to learn, how you’re supposed to learn it, the recommended order that you learn things in, and the entire history of Voltron and it’s different Paladins of course.”

The alien stands underneath his ship.

“The implementation is a little more...undefined,” Tanterian explains, “We’re just gonna see where this takes us.”

“So you’re winging it?” Hunk asks. Because it seems like they’re winging it. He wants to feel more nervous about trusting these people to make them into “True Paladins” at that, but Yellow calms him before he can even think of the things going wrong by sending him waves of trust directed towards Tanterian.

Hunk decides not to worry about it at the moment. After all, their Lions are the best authority that they all have on this place. So if Yellow is cool, the yellow paladin will be cool too.

“Don’t really know what that means,” Tanterian shrugs, “something got lost in the Lasthalis’ translation with that one. But enough talk,”

They all gasp as Tanterian disappears in a flow of golden particles that move up and into Hobbs.

“Alrighty!” the alien’s voice projects from the beetle ship. “Hop up in your Lions and let’s do this!”

“Hunk,” Pidge mutters, “How the heck did he do that?”
“I’d like to know that myself,” Hunk responds, “maybe it’s something like what happens when Shiro goes to the Astral Plane? The division of atoms and molecules and reforming into metaphysical material?”

At least, that’s what Hunk thinks is the basis of Shiro’s trips to the Astral Plane. Coran wasn’t very clear in his explanation, and the concept boggles the yellow paladin’s mind anyway.

“Do you think we could all learn to do that?” Pidge asks, with the “glint” in her eyes. “Does it have a maximum range? How much easier would things be if we can just teleport to our Lions in a pinch? We wouldn’t need to waste time with escape routes and contingency plans—”

“Slow your roll there, Pidgeys,” Lance interrupts, placing a hand on her head. “We’ll have more time for you to get into your nerd flow later,” the blue paladin gestures to where Shiro and Keith are moving to board their respective Lions, “right now? We’ve got things to do.”

The green paladin shakes Lance’s hand away, giving the blue paladin a little scowl. “What is it with tall people and touching other people’s heads?”

Lance chuckles, but doesn’t seem to have anything to say back. Pidge eventually huffs and goes to her own Lion.

A pause.

“It would be useful,” Hunk suggests with a shrug.

“She doesn’t need to be trying to replicate anything else Hunk,” Lance shakes his head, face serious. “Her sleeping is the worst it’s ever been lately.”

Hunk nods. He should know. He’s had to carry her back to her room a countless amount of times the past few months.

“Besides,” Lance gives a little grin, “this guy is totally going to hand our asses to us at some point today, we should be focusing on that.”
Hunk chuckles. Tanterian certainly does give off that air.

“I guess you’re right,” the yellow paladin nods, bumping fists with his best friend. They then put their helmets on, turning and boarding their own Lions.

“Ready to show me what you all are made of?” Tanterian’s voice comes through their helmets once Hunk is settled. How?

“How are you communicating through our helmets to us?” Pidge asks suspiciously.

“To answer that would mean that I would need to understand enough science mumbo jumbo to completely explain the Ridoriana to you,” Tanterian’s voice chuckles, “and I don’t. So you’ll have to wait on getting that question answered.”

“The Ridoriana?” Hunk repeats to himself. They sure are getting a lot of terminology thrown at them.

“So what are we gonna do?” Keith asks impatiently. Hunk can’t perceive Red or Keith over the paladin bond at the moment because it’s been ridiculously faint since last week, but he can hear with his ears just how eager the red paladin is to get started.

“I’m glad you’re so eager,” Tanterian says approvingly, before his voice grows serious. “Listen up, Paladins.”

Hunk sits up a bit straighter in his seat.

“We’re ready when you are,” Shiro states confidently.

“Good,” Tanterian says, “the name of the game is ‘Don’t fall behind.’”

“Oh?” Hunk can hear just how interested Keith is by listening to that one word.

“Our goal is the skyfield,” Tanterian explains, and Hunk sees through Yellow’s screens that
Hobbs’ thrusters seem to be gathering energy. “We all have to get there, but only I know where it is,” he states, “y’all getting me?”

“So we have to keep up with you,” Pidge concludes.

“You have to not lose sight of me,” Tanterian corrects, “and keep to my specific path the entire time.”

“Like,” Hunk gulps, “very specific?”

The yellow paladin can pilot well enough, but he knows that maneuverability and speed are not his or Yellow’s strong suit.

“As specific as you can keep to,” Tanterian confirms.

“Sounds easy enough,” Keith states. And to him, it probably does.

“Easy for you to say,” Lance grumbles.

“Only the Paladin of Red would be bold enough to say that before seeing the entire path,” Tanterian chuckles, “You’ve got heart, kid. Hope you can back it up.”

“Watch me,” Keith growls back.

“Watch us all,” Lance cuts in.

“That’s the spirit,” Tanterian cackles, “your team’s got the mindset down, Black Paladin!”

“Because they know what I know,” Shiro answers calmly, “that we can do this. Whatever you ask of us.”
Hunk is not so sure of that, but Shiro’s confidence in them is contagious.

“Ready Yellow?” he asks under his breath. Yellow purrs in confirmation.

“In that case, Defenders,” Tanterian says, “come on then.”

Hobbs jets away from them, charging down and into the valley.

Hunk gapes.

…

Hobbs is fast.

Shiro doesn’t know what he was expecting from the beetle-themed ship, but speeds that easily match the Red Lion was not it.

“Damn he’s fast,” their red paladin says over the comms. Shiro decides not to try and correct his language, instead focusing on Red in front of him and following her maneuvers through the large trees down here.

Tanterian’s chosen a path down and through the thick collection of dark green towards the bottom of the valley, which gives them all the added challenge of not just reduced visibility due to the low light, but also having to fly around the rather scary looking plants down here.

“You still have eyes on him though?” Lance’s voice asks.

“Of course!” Keith scoffs.

Shiro had directed them to take loose position behind Red, allowing their fastest to pave the way for them. Their trainer didn’t really say too much about the ‘specifics’ of his path, which leads Shiro to believe that there will eventually be obstacles that need navigating. No one is better at that than Keith.
Black is almost directly behind Red, Shiro poised to match Keith’s movements whenever need be, with Blue taking up position a bit behind them, then Green and then Yellow.

“He keeps going slightly lower,” Keith states over the comms, “can anyone tell what’s at the bottom of this?”

“Green’s scanners aren’t picking up anything from the bottom of this,” Pidge explains incredulously, “It’s like this valley has no ground level to it.”

“That would mean that all these plants are floating,” Hunk states curiously, “I can’t get a read on any gravitational features here, though.”

Red makes a sharp turn and goes in between two colossal trees with astoundingly big branches and leavers. Shiro maneuvers Black to do the same, and they barely fit through the gap.

“It’s a tight fit there guys!” Shiro warns. Blue and Yellow are both smaller than Black by a bit, so they should make it, but. “Make sure you follow my trail as closely as you can, Lance!”

Because while he trusts in Lance’s piloting abilities enough to know that the blue paladin can make it through there without necessarily following Shiro to a tee, Green needs to mimic what Blue does closely so that Yellow can do the same, so they need to keep it as close as possible to shorten the margin of error as much as they can.

“Gotcha!” Lance calls back. This would normally be the point where Shiro would feel a cool wash of control and focus through the paladin bond. But despite the team acting more normally than they have in a while just now when they were calling their Lions, he still can’t feel the paladin bond.

It sucks, quite frankly, because Shiro has to wait a few moments and ask, “Did you all make it ok?”

“Yeah,” Lance answers.

“We’re good,” Pidge responds.
“Just barely,” Hunk states.

Whereas with the bond, he would have been able to feel their respective feelings of success. And Black is so overwhelmingly present in his mind right now, that it’s hard to be aware of the positions of the Lions like normal. Something in this place has kicked his and Black’s bond up to eleven, and they’ve been here for less than an hour now.

He’s not sure how he feels about it. Not being able to feel where the other Lions are really isn’t ideal, but Shiro has the feeling that someone here can talk him through fixing that without lessening the connection to his own. It’s relieving, in a way. Black’s powerful presence has completely washed away all of his anxious feelings from arriving in such a crowded area.

“Well brace yourselves,” Keith warns, “he just did some crazy moving through a bunch of vines.”

“Great,” Pidge says sarcastically, “it’s a good thing that Green is handling super well right now. I think these Phi have something to do with it.”

Shiro finds himself looking at the green glowing orbs dispersed in the air, illuminating the darkness of the valley in a faint green glow. But he doesn’t have much time to admire the gentle beauty, because the Red Lion proceeds to weave it’s way through a web of giant vines hanging from some titan of a plant that extends up way farther than they can see.

He immediately moves Black in the same fashion, feeling wary as he sees Red spin and roll in a way that makes Keith close a lot of distance very quickly, but is also likely too difficult for anyone but Shiro himself to pull off..

“Try and keep in mind that everyone has to be able to do what you’re doing eventually Keith,” he warns, taking Black into a less complicated string of movements that still puts him behind Red, just a little farther back due to the lessened speed of his choices. “Go fast to keep track of him, but don’t prioritize speed over everything else,” he explains calmly, “not all of the Lions can fit through the spaces you’re going through.”

Keith sighs, “Right. Sorry.”

Black hums out a feeling of warning in his head as they start going lower into the valley
“Can you tell if he’s taking us further down still?” Pidge asks, “Because Green is giving me some weird vibes right now.”

“He's still going down,” Keith responds, “Seems like he's slowing down a bit though—shit!”

Shiro’s eyes widen as he watches the Red Lion spiral out of the way of something. He doesn't even get a chance to say anything before Black sends a spike of urgency through his mind and urges him to move left.

Shiro does so, narrowly avoiding being impaled by what looks giant, green, thorny vine.

“Whoa!” He hears Lance yelp. “That was a close one!”

“What!?” He hears Pidge cry, “killer vines!?”

“Of course there's killer vines!” Hunk's voice despairs, “We're Voltron, and we're in a magic valley with a bottomless pit. Why wouldn't there be killer vines!?”

The yellow paladin sounds stressed. Shiro isn't feeling much better himself.

“Is everyone ok!?” He asks clearly, searching Black's screens for any sign of where the vines just came from, simultaneously keeping an eye on Red.

“I'm good!” Lance responds.

“I'm ok,” Hunk says.

“I'm alright,” Pidge answers.

“He just slowed down again!” Keith warns, “I think there's more comin-”
The Red Lion twists in the air as Keith stops his sentence short, avoiding several other vines shooting from the abyss beneath them. Shiro has just enough time admire the sight of Red arcing and weaving through the obstacles like they're nothing before Black warns him again

“Stay sharp!” Shiro orders, maneuvering Black accordingly as the same amount of vines go for them. It’s difficult in the sense that the vines are flexible and fast, but Black is just a bit faster. Shiro manages to get his Lion through it without taking a hit.

Lance yelps over the comms.

“Lance?” Shiro asks, following behind Red as Keith thankfully begins making his way upwards.

“I’m ok!,” the blue paladin grunts, “Blue’s ok! They got us a little bit but it didn’t really do anything.”

“You’re sure?” the leader prompts. Lance has a habit of not saying when things are bad.

“I’m sure,” the blue paladin insists, “they kind of just brushed off.”

“I second that,” Pidge chimes in. “Green’s controls are super sensitive right now, and I accidentally dodged into one. Didn’t really feel anything other than a tap.”

“I don’t think these are meant to hurt us,” Hunk answers next, “Because I just got hit by like, a lot. Yellow seems OK though.”

“Are you alright then, Hunk?” Shiro asks.

“Yeah,” the yellow paladin responds, “It really is just a tap like Pidge said.”

Shiro hums as Red flies through a low-hanging arch of branches, directing Black to follow. Just a test of their skill as pilots? Not meant to do any lasting damage? He wonders how much control Tanterian has over what’s happening at the moment.
“He landed,” Keith says.

Shiro watches as the Red Lion slows down as it comes closer to a floating stretch of land. It appears to be a flat grassland, which very few structures on it that he can see. Hobbs is stationary in the middle of it when Shiro directs Black to descend to it.

“Looks like a skyfield if I’ve ever seen one,” Lance states over the comms, “but I’ve never seen one...so...”

Shiro can’t help but chuckle a little bit.

“And he laughs!” Lance says triumphantly, “About time!”

The black paladin is floored.

“What?” he asks, completely confused.

“You haven’t laughed at my jokes in a little bit Shiro,” Lance explains, directing the Blue Lion to land next to Red. “I was beginning to think I’d lost my touch.”

Shiro sighs a little bit, smiling to himself. Lance isn’t wrong, the leader has been slow to let himself react to the things that his younger friend has said over the past week, despite being able to have an amicable conversation with others around. The blue paladin made it sound nice by not giving the actual time frame, but Shiro knows like they all probably know what isn’t being said aloud. This is Lance making an effort, seeing a chance and taking it.

“I guess you haven’t then,” he responds, “keep them coming, yeah?”

“You got it,” Lance responds, before redirecting his attention. “Pidge-a-tidge? Hunk-a-funk?”

“Someone needs to come up with ridiculous three syllable nickname for Lance like, five minutes go,” Pidge groans as the Green Lion comes to a stop on the field as well.
“I like it,” Hunk chimes in as he brings Yellow down, “We’re OK, by the way, since that’s what you were asking.”

“Of course you like it, it’s delightful,” the blue paladin says cheerfully, “and I guess we all know that Keith and Shiro are good, right?”

“I’m fine,” Keith answers, apparently hearing the unspoken question as well as Shiro.

“We’re all ok then,” the black paladin states, focusing in on Tanterian standing in the middle of the field. Things have gone well so far. He sincerely hopes that it stays that way. “Ready to see what Tanterian has in store for us?”

“Yeah, uh, no,” Hunk says immediately, “He looks like he can throw a mean punch.”

“If he can hit you with a punch,” Keith says confidently.

“Isn’t he supposed to be not punching us at all or something?” Pidge chimes in.


They all leave their Lions, coming to stand clustered together across from their trainer in the middle of the field. It’s surprisingly barren compared to the area around, with nothing but bright green grass and an occasional white flower here and there. They still seem to be on a lower level than the main fortress, because the light here is still on the lower side, though the illumination of the Phi more than makes up for it.

“That was pretty good,” Tanterian grins at Shiro, “you’ve got some skill there, Black Paladin. Maneuvering a craft of that size through the Gorge? Impressive.”

“It was a team effort,” Shiro responds confidently.
“That it was,” Tanterian nods, turning to look at Keith. “That was some masterful flying there, kid.”

“You’re not too shabby yourself,” Keith acknowledges. The alien laughs in response.

“I appreciate that,” he looks at Lance, Pidge and Hunk, “None of you got caught in the snares. That’s better than anyone who take the course their first time.”

“Those killer vines?” Hunk asks.

“Some of them got you,” Tanterian explains, “but not enough for them to constrict. Most aren’t capable of making that happen. You Defenders are the real deal.”

The alien’s smile turns into a smirk.

“At least,” he goes on, “in the cockpit your are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keith challenges. Shiro sighs inwardly.

“Means that the past Defenders tend to be notoriously bad at fighting on foot before coming here,” Tanterian shrugs, “wonder if you guys are any different?”

Shiro wants to know what their education on the previous Paladins entails. It doesn’t seem to line up exactly with what Black has shown him. Perhaps their knowledge predates even what he saw in that vision?

“You want us to come at you, right?” Keith asks, “Sure you don’t want to fight back?”

“You won’t hurt me,” Tanterian says dismissively.

“Says who?” Lance crosses his arms.
“Says me ,” Tanterian grins.

“Well let’s find out then,” Pidge huffs.

Shiro shakes his head, inwardly grinning at just how easy it is to bait his team into action in a relaxed state like this. He thinks that they all trust Tanterian enough to let themselves get baited, and that’s a good thing in the black paladin’s book. Hopefully all of their trainers can build such a great rapport with them so fast.

“Look Pomel,” a monotone voice comes out of nowhere, sending them all on their guard. “Tanterian has attempted to start without us.”

“I see Yumel,” a voice that sounds exactly the same responds, “he is quite rude for this.”

Tanterian snorts as two figures make their way onto the field from...nowhere.

Shiro focuses in on the pink-scaled, white-haired twins from earlier, and relaxes a bit.

“Oh no,” Pidge murmurs, “it’s the creepy twins.”

“Pidge,” Shiro scolds.

“She’s not wrong,” Keith grumbles.

“Keith,” Shiro scolds again.

“I thought that I got dibs on the Defenders today?” Tanterian chuckles good-naturedly as the two significantly shorter aliens come to stand on his left.

“We will merely observe,” or maybe the other one is Yumel?

“Wanted to see an actual bayard in action, eh?” Tanterian grins, “Well, looks like we got an audience, Defenders. Y’all better do well then.”

Shiro exchanges looks with Keith.

“I think we’re ready,” the leader states, able to see the energy just waiting to be let out of his friend.

“Oh, we’re ready,” Keith nods.

Shiro looks at his other paladins. Lance gives a thumbs up, Pidge is already reaching for her bayard, and Hunk shrugs with a look that says “go-for-it”.

“That we are,” the black paladin confirms. The twins exchange a look and then move away from Tanterian, who grins dangerously.

“Come at me then,” he prompts, “Paladins of Voltron.”

Chapter End Notes

And so we have the introduction of the main players in this story. There are a lot of OCs present, but I promise that they are all there for the plot, the focus is definitely still on our paladins. We get to see a bit team dynamics at work here, with everyone putting in the effort to do well as a team despite the awkwardness. These chapters will be divided into days, and as of now Day 1 is the only two-parter planned. Stay tuned for an update soon, and I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

“A Contact?” The guy repeats, “Think of them as your personal advisor during your time here.”

“Like our own Corans?” Hunk asks happily, examining his plate meticulously. Probably trying to see how he can mimic this recipe. “I'm in favor of having my own Coran.”

Tanterian laughs loudly, “these Defenders are a riot!”

“That they are,” Faraj says amusedly, “Yes. Like your own Coran.”

“Score,” Hunk holds his hand out for a fist bump. Lance meets it without even thinking about it.

Chapter Notes

I'm here! I haven't been neglecting this story!! I promise! I apologize for the wait, but writing a fight scene took way longer than I thought it would, and took me a while to get through. But enough of my rambling! On with the chapter!

P.S. Please remember that I am not a scientist of any kind lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I'll attack first,” Keith suggests, “get a feel for how he moves.”

“That's fine,” Shiro responds, “but don't underestimate him. We still don't know the capabilities of his species.”

The red paladin nods, examining Tanterian's relaxed stance. The guy looks like a hit from him could be brutal, but only if he can get a hit in. He's an exceptional pilot, so Keith has to believe that Tanterian has solid reflexes.

“One of them is healing,” Hunk murmurs from behind them, “which we can't do.”

“Is it really ok for us to be using our bayards on him?” Lance asks.
“He says he wants to see what we're capable of,” Pidge reminds, “and he doesn't seem to think we can hurt him. So I personally think bayards are fine.”

Keith is inclined to agree.

“Something seems sketchy about the fact that he says he won't fight back,” Hunk mutters, “I can't be the only one who think that, right?”

“Very much so,” Shiro nods, “that's why we're gonna attack in waves, hopefully to see what he can take and to get him to show his hand.”

“You'll take point Keith,” the leader goes on, “I'll be at your back.” As it always should be, Keith thinks. “Pidge,” Shiro calls, “I want you to bring up the rear. Keep an eye on what he does, and slip in when you see an opening.”

“Gotcha,” the green paladin responds.

“Lance and Hunk,” Shiro says, “I want you to guys to hold back for a bit at first. Wait and see how he moves, and then shoot to keep him confined to one spot.”

“Bayard set to stun,” Lance states.

“I'll aim for his feet,” Hunk nods.

“Ready whenever y'all are,” Tanterian waves.

“Good,” Shiro says confidently, “Go for it, Keith.”

It's all the invitation he needs. The red paladin takes a breathe, meets Tanterian's relaxed gaze, and lunges.
He keeps his aim simple and predictable, just to see what the bigger guy will do. Keith closes the few feet between them nigh instantaneously, swinging his bayard, sword erupting in particles of red. His arc is wide, and not at all meant to connect.

And it doesn't.

Keith doesn't put much power behind the swing, and it's the only reason he doesn't lose his footing when Tanterian casually leans out of the way of the blade.

But the red paladin expected this, and wants to know just how many times the alien can do this.

Keith swings again. Miss. And again. Misses again. Tries a horizontal swing towards Tanterian's mid section. The alien's bulk should make this a harder attack to dodge, but Tanterian hops back nonchalantly, putting a surprising amount of distance in between them.

The red paladin narrows his eyes. Good reflexes like he thought, and an unexpected level of agility to back them up. Keith can already tell that he should be fighting this guy like he would fight Shiro. And Shiro never leaves an opening to himself unless he's attacking. If Tanterian doesn't plan on attacking…

“What's your take?” Shiro asks very lowly, just enough for their helmets to pick up.

“He's fast,” Pidge answers over the comms, “but we could probably all tell that.”

“He doesn't really seem like he's putting much effort into avoiding Keith's attacks?” Hunk offers.

“Keith isn't trying that hard either,” Lance states. Keith smirks to himself. He knew that the blue paladin was paying more attention during their sparring than he acted.

“I doubt I'll be able to hit him just going for it,” Keith mutters, “his reflexes are great. I'm not going all out, but I think he'll be able to keep up with me even when I am.”

“I'm noticing that too,” Shiro murmurs, “go for him again, Keith. I'll join in this time.”
“Done already?” Tanterian taunts with a grin. Keith smirks in response.

“You wish.”

The red paladin puts a great deal more effort into his strikes this time, going for quick and brutal with thrusts of his bayard.

As he expects, Tanterian dodges every strike. It mildly annoys Keith, how nonchalantly the alien moves, even if it's something he knew was going to happen.

Shiro comes in silently and dangerously, somehow crossing the distance without Keith hearing him until the faint buzz of his galra arm belies his attack.

“Whoa!” Tanterian says delightedly, managing to duck under Shiro's swing from the side while simultaneously curling his body in a way that sends Keith's bayard flying harmlessly past his midsection.

Keith, who'd been keeping in mind that this guy can apparently regenerate, hadn't held back in his attack. The momentum sends him pitching forward, and it's only years of practice and instinct that keeps him from face planting.

Oh. And the fact that Tanterian catches the blade of Keith's bayard in his left hand.

“We're screwed,” Hunk says simply.

Keith stares wide eyed at the firm grip that Tanterian has on his weapon, before looking up and feeling his jaw drop. Because the alien has also caught Shiro's forearm.

The galra arm isn't fully activated, Shiro never fully activates when sparring, but Keith knows that it still has to be uncomfortably hot to the touch. Tanterian either doesn't notice, or doesn't care.

“You guys went for it, eh?” The alien chuckles, releasing them both. Keith and Shiro immediately
jump back to put distance in between them and Tanterian. “Not terrible,” the guy hums, “not too impressive either though.”

Keith scowls.

“Are you alright?” Shiro asks cautiously, “you grabbed both of our weapons with your bare hands.”

On the surface, it seems like the leader is just being a good sport, but Keith knows better. Shiro wants to know what about Tanterian makes it possible for him to do that.

“Pay attention,” the alien smirks, “you’re here to learn, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shiro answers, eyes narrowing as he examines their opponent. Tanterian kicks his legs out idly.

“Then watch and learn.”

The alien jumps, ascending a good ten feet into the air and landing a great deal of distance across the field.

“Whoa…” Pidge murmurs.

“We’re screwed,” Hunk repeats leisurely.

“How did he…?” Lance asks lowly.

“New plan,” Tanterian shouts from where he stands, “You gotta catch up with me to hit me. First to land a blow gets first pick on who they want to train them for the next two days!”

“Tanterian,” the creepy twins (who Keith had managed to forget about) chime in perfect unison, “You should not make plans like that without discussing it with the others.”
Keith doesn't like them.

“They’re so creepy,” Pidge whispers, voice horrified.

“Don't worry your identical faces over it,” the bigger alien waves the disapproval off, “Katal is accommodating. And besides,“

Keith can hear Tanterian's smirk.

“It's not like I think that they can actually pull it off.”

Pidge huffs, “Ok. I'm going in with you two this time. I'll try to get his legs from under him.”

“Be careful,” Shiro warns, “to jump like that, he must have a lot of power in his legs.”

“Something was off about that though…” Lance murmurs.

Keith doesn't bother trying to pick the blue paladin's brain, Lance will say what he means only when he's sure that it's relevant.

“Here I go,” the red paladin mutters, charging forward. Footsteps crunching in grass from behind him gives away that both Shiro and Pidge are right behind him. Keith grins to himself.

Fighting alongside Shiro is one of the things that Keith looks forward to everyday, and Pidge fits in so well into the dynamic. Definitely not the best or strongest, but able-bodied and resourceful enough to cover the few gaps that he and the leader leave when it comes to close range combat.

Tanterian doesn't move from his spot, so Keith immediately knows that there's more to his casual stance that what it seems, but he hasn't made it this far by hesitating.

The red paladin takes his bayard in both hands. Shiro and Pidge will be attacking too, so if
Tanterian tries to pull that grabbing thing again, Keith is prepared to put all his strength into making the alien realize why that's a bad idea.

Getting there first, Keith starts with an overhead strike downwards, hoping to catch the alien in the shoulder. Tanterian naturally sidesteps this, but Shiro is right there on Keith's right, extending his arm and swiping at Tanterian's midsection.

Shiro misses too, but Keith has recovered momentum at this point and angles his blade diagonal and wide to try and catch Tanterian's chest. Doesn't work. But the leader immediately follows up with a high kick. And misses .

It goes like that for a manner of drawn out seconds. Keith strikes, then Shiro strikes. Their rhythm is perfect, no opportunity to attack left un-taken. And yet somehow, they still miss. Each and every time .

Keith finds his irritation growing with each missed blow. Their combined assault flows flawlessly. He doesn't understand how neither one of them can even clip the alien.

“On your left,” he just barely registers Pidge's voice enough to angle his next attack to the right. Tanterian ducks under it, leans away from Shiro's arm, and balances on one leg, evading Pidge's swipe at his other one. All in the span of three seconds.

And just as Keith is about to let out a growl and attack again, Tanterian throws his body weight into a nimble spin in the air, moving away from them.

The red paladin's eyes widen.

“Maybe we should have asked Coran to explain his species,” Hunk mutters, “because I swear he doesn't have bones in like, twenty key places.”

“Lance?” Pidge prompts for some reason.

“Well ten of those twenty places are definitely in his spine,” the blue paladin says, and something in his voice tells the red paladin that he's not joking around. But how the hell can Lance say that confidently? “I think that's how he's dodging every hit to his torso.”
“So don't go for the torso?” Shiro asks, sounding mildly bewildered (good, Keith isn't the only one).

“I mean, I'm not like an Orthopedist or something,” Lance says mildly, “so don't take my word as law or anything. Just something I noticed.”

“Well you're technically the most qualified to speak on that, health-nut,” Pidge retorts, “so I'm totally taking that as law.”

Keith pauses at that. He knew that the blue paladin was in fact a health-nut, but Pidge is speaking like Lance has the actual in-depth knowledge to back it up. Does he?

“Then we won't target the torso,” Shiro decides. Keith can get behind that. “Should we focus on the limbs?”

“Um,” Lance says nervously, “I haven't looked enough at them to tell you that yet.”

“That's cool,” Keith cuts in, eyeing as Tanterian starts whistling. “You're about to have that chance.”

The red paladin lunges, Pidge following close. Keith goes for Tanterian's arms and shoulders, again going with thrusts as opposed to swings. As he's coming to expect, the alien dodges the attacks, looking no worse for wear.

Pidge hazards another strike at Tanterian's legs, and the alien hops back in response.

“Let's see you dodge this,” Pidge murmurs. Keith watches as she extends the grapple, sparks arcing over the surface of the weapon.

“Who~a,” Tanterian grins, somehow managing to jump back again, even though Keith swears that only his toes touched the ground for a millisecond.
“Fascinating,” the creepy twins state.

“I see what you mean, Lance,” Shiro mutters, “he's incredibly flexible. And most of it seems to come from his spine.”

“Yeah,” the blue paladin responds. Keith supposes that Shiro stood back this time to observe and see if he could see what Lance saw. Keith himself can't really tell how Tanterian's moving since he's focused on himself and his own space as well, he just knows that the alien can move spectacularly.

He thought it was just speed, but if it's flexibility, then that changes things. Tanterian doesn't seem the slightest bit tired yet, so speed would have been hard to get around. But flexibility has limits.

“Let's go for the legs Pidge,” Keith decides. If most of his flexibility is found in the upper body…

“Right behind you,” the green paladin states.

“I think I'll see how much he wants to protect his face,” Shiro states.

“Savage,” Lance murmurs.

“Hunk,” Shiro calls, “can you try to keep him from jumping too far away?”

“You got it,” the yellow paladin agrees.

Keith lunges forth again, angling his body low. This isn't his favorite way to fight, because unlike Tanterian, Keith is not very flexible. He makes up for it with speed and agility, but in he doesn't generally like bending his legs this much.

Pidge has no such hangups, and they both quickly develop a flow of strikes to Tanterian's legs. The alien doesn't dodge so much as he moves back, and Keith knows that this is one of his more vulnerable spots.
A whir and a displacement of air above them draws his attention, and he sees Shiro aim a brutal punch at Tanterian's face with his galra arm.

Keith watches as the alien bends his entire body backwards over a inhuman angle, avoiding Shiro entirely.

Gotcha, Keith thinks. Because the maneuver leaves Tanterian's legs open to assault. He and Pidge both go for one.

And miss.

“What the hell!?” Keith demands as Tanterian somehow manages to push off of his legs and jump away.

“How did he do that!?” Pidge asks loudly, “he shouldn't have had the leverage to be able to do that!”

They watch as Tanterian lands safely a few feet away from them.

“That's the best you can—whoa!” The alien begins to taunt them, but stops short as he throws himself out of the barrage from Hunk's bayard. Keith smirks. He doesn't know how Tanterian is moving the way he's moving, but there's no way he can overcome the sheer volume of Hunk's assault and dodge them at the same time.

“Let's move!” Shiro orders, apparently coming to the same conclusion.

Keith charges alongside Shiro, slightly wary of the yellow plasma bullet hell surging from behind them. Hunk's never really hit anyone by accident before, but has come dangerously close a few times. Not that the red paladin blames him, it's hard to account for friendly fire when Hunk's weapon is all about crowd control.

Maybe those creepy twins can help him change his bayard into something a little more precise.

It does the job beautifully now though. Keith gets right to Tanterian just as the alien lands from another jump. The red paladin aims low, and while Tanterian spins out of the way, Keith can tell that it takes a lot more effort than before.
Shiro comes in high then, forcing Tanterian to dance around and away from them, which gives Pidge the chance to slide in a go for the alien's knee.

Tanterian once again manages to jump away from them all, but just barely stops himself from going right into Hunk's barrage. Keith grins, breath heavy as sweat starts to collect on his face. The alien put up an excellent fight, but it'll be over soon. And it didn't even take all five of them.

No, something in the back of Keith's head reminds him.

The red paladin swings for Tanterian's legs once more. It has taken all five of them, something tells Keith that they wouldn't have noticed Tanterian's flexibility so fast if not for Lance. The blue paladin is just full of surprises these past few months.

Keith misses.

Apparently so is Tanterian. The red paladin watches in utter shock as the alien manages to twist between both a hit from Pidge and one from Shiro, and then jump about fifteen feet into the air.

“What.” Hunk deadpans.

“How the…?” Lance murmurs.

“Are you serious?” Pidge grumbles under her breath, “what's it going to take to land a hit on this guy?”

Keith himself is lost as he watches the alien land harmlessly a few meters away. Other than slightly faster breaths, Tanterian seems unaffected by the activities. While the red paladin feels his own legs starting to ache from just how much he's had to chase this guy around.

“Lance,” Shiro calls, “can you get a shot?”

“Something's weird about the way he's dodging,” the blue paladin murmurs over the comms, Keith
realizes that they've moved across the entire field basically. And it is not a small area. Even Hunk seems to have moved closer, but Lance is still standing by the Lions. How can he see anything?

“What do you even mean by that?” Keith asks impatiently.

“He's not relying on speed,” Lance states, “and now he's not relying on flexibility either.”

“That doesn't make any sense!” Keith growls, frustrated.

“Kei-” Shiro goes to scold but is cut off.

“Shut it Keith,” Lance snaps, voice annoyed. The red paladin would normally snap back, but Lance's tone sounds too much like the tone in the hallway from last week. There's no way he's going down that road again so soon. Keith shuts it.

“It's like he's not moving himself at times,” Lance goes on, “like something else is moving him at the last second, just when you guys are about to hit him.”

“Oh!” Hunk says, “now that you put it like that, it does look that what's happening!”

“But how is that even possible?” Pidge questions curiously, “and how do we get around it?”

“I suspect that it's one of the things we're meant to be learning,” Shiro states, voice abnormally irate.

“Can you get a shot on him, Lance?” Keith asks. Because the red paladin is beginning to think that none of them but Hunk or Lance have a chance at hitting this guy.

“I might be able to?” The blue paladin answers, voice surprisingly unsure for what's being asked of him. Lance is always ready and eager to live up to his sharpshooter title. “I still don't know what he's doing, and I feel like I'm gonna miss.”

“If you miss, then I don't think the rest of us stand much a chance,” Pidge states simply, “we
haven’t landed a single hit on him so far, even with four of us.”

“I guess you're right.” Lance hums. “Ok, I’m going for it. Get him up in the air again.”

It's all they need to hear.

Hunk opens up a pre-emptive volley towards the area directly behind Tanterian. Keith grins, he already knows where this is going. The red paladin charges forth, making a beeline for the alien. He registers Pidge coming in from his left and Shiro from his right.

“Interesting,” the twins state. Keith wishes that they would go away.

Tanterian weaves himself around Pidge and Shiro's attacks, but the process leaves him open to Keith, and with Hunk firing at the area behind him, the alien will have no choice but to jump.

And jump he does.

Keith thrusts his bayard forward, meeting nothing but air. Which is fine, because he wants to meet nothing but air. The red paladin smirks as Tanterian jumps up high in the air again. He's still not seeing what Lance is talking about, but as long as his teammate can make this shot…

“Got him,” Lance says softly over the comms, and Keith watches triumphantly as not one, not two, but three blue plasma bullets hit Tanterian.

Or. No.

They hit the space around the alien. It's obvious that the bullets hit a solid surface, but from Keith can tell, that surface seems to be some invisible wall that stops them just short of Tanterian's knees and his right shoulder.

“I missed ?” Lance asks incredulously, “I thought I had those shots!”

“You did!” Keith shouts. The red paladin huffs and dismisses his bayard. He's officially calling
shenanigans. “You totally hit him, all three times!”

“Or you would have,” Pidge states, “if he didn't have some force field around him.”

“Whoo!” The alien in question cheers as he lands away from them all, completely unharmed. “Now that was impressive, mighty good teamwork you guys got there!”

“What are you doing?” Keith demands, “he hit you just now! How did he hit you and not actually hit you?”

Tanterian blinks a bit, before throwing his head back, cackling so hard his entire body shakes.

“What is so funny?” Shiro asks, and Keith can tell that their leader is getting frustrated.

“You really don't know anything about quintessence do you?” Tanterian asks, but his tone isn't mean. “I'm impressed y'all made it this long. To fight someone with druids on their side and to not know the basics of quintessence...that's wild.”

Then alien crosses his arms, grinning at them.

“You guys didn't do half bad when you all worked together,” Tanterian states, “I thought you guys were having problems with your teamwork?”

Shiro inhales sharply, “who told you that?”

The alien shrugs, “We were warned that you guys picked a tense time to come here, and that you may need time to get back to the level you were at before.”

Keith huffs, “did she tell you the exact location of our home planet too? Maybe shared some data from our mindmeld helmets?”

“Keith,” Shiro sighs. The red paladin bites back the rest of his words, but makes no attempt to stifle his sound of irritation.
They had one really bad training session last week, sure. But they had been going through the normal exercises as a team for the past few days easily enough. Sure, they weren't full-fledged training activities, but they should have been enough to show Allura that they could work together.

Because that's always been something that they're generally good at (minus the time where Shiro was gone, but Keith does his best not to dwell on that month). When they're on the ground and in a situation where it counts, they can move past their differences. They all take this job seriously enough for that. Most of the time.

Sure, they can't really feel the paladin bond at the moment. Sure, Keith doesn't actually know where he stands with Lance right now, and neither does Shiro. But they all work hard, and they are all capable. Allura shouldn't be going around telling people that they don't or that they aren't. Especially people that they don't know.

“I see you're not too happy about hearing that,” Tanterian states, “sorry. But if it's any consolation, anything your Princess told Katal is something that someone here would have found out eventually. Especially Villia or Lieen.”

“It's nothing to apologize for,” Shiro answers, “it won't do us any use to pretend. We are in a more difficult state than usual at the moment.”

Keith stares at the side of the black paladin's head. Why is he saying this!? They still don't know what everyone here has in store for them. Why is he putting that out there?

“Well I couldn't really tell from this,” Tanterian shrugs. “Could you?”

Keith doesn't have the chance to wonder who he's addressing.

“Pomel,” one of the twins says as they both walk up leisurely to the left of the bigger alien.

“Yumel,” the other one (who is apparently Pomel) responds. They both have the same white cloak trimmed in orange, so there's literally no way that Keith can see to tell them apart.

“The bayards are truly marvelous,” Yumel says, voice a perfect monotone.
“Marvelous indeed they are,” Pomel responds, equally monotonous.

“Ok,” Lance whispers, “so one of them talks like Yoda. That's Pomel.”

“We have not adequately mimicked the technology,” Pomel continues on.

“A suitable model of the technology, we have not yet produced,” Yumel answers.

“Nevermind,” Lance mutters.

“Oh noooo,” Hunk laments.

“I want them to talk in unison again,” Pidge grumbles.

“You'll get your chance to watch them use their fancy toys again,” Tanterian grins, “but what did you think of their teamwork?”

“They were well equipped to combat you as a group,” Pomel responds.

“Together as a unit, they were able to face you,” Yumel adds. Shiro lets out a tiny sigh that Keith only hears because of their helmets.

“Oh dear,” their leader murmurs.

“But only because you did not fight back,” Yumel states.

“It was due to your non aggressive actions, that they performed well,” Pomel adds.

Keith grinds his teeth. He'd like to see these two creeps fight.
“And how do you find that?” Tanterian asks curiously.

“Yes,” Pidge huffs, “do tell.”

“The paladins are adept at compiling their strengths,” Pomel answers.

“Covering their allies weaknesses, they seem less capable of,” Yumel says.

Keith opens his mouth to say something snippy, but Tanterian talks over him.

“I noticed that too,” the alien states with a shrug. There's a squawk over the fees that could have come from Pidge or Lance. “It's nothing that can't be worked on, though.”

“May I ask what exactly all of you observed?” Shiro asks seriously. Keith rolls his eyes. It's just like their leader to take something like this to heart. As if he doesn't have enough to worry about. Their group effort just now was great, ideal in a way that they haven't experienced in a while.

“There'll be time to get into that later,” Tanterian answers, “at the end of the day, I'm not your only go-to guy here. I'd like to let the others get a chance with you all first.”

The alien actually sounds very serious here, and Keith has to begrudgingly admit to himself that Tanterian is good. Very good.

“After all,” the alien shrugs, “this is the last time for a few days that all of y'all are going to do an exercise together as a group.”

Keith tenses.

“You're splitting us up?” Hunk asks anxiously.

“I thought that would have been clear,” Tanterian answers with a chuckle, “it's not really an
individual training track if you all do it with one another.”

“Yeah,” Pidge states, “but we thought it was…” she pauses, “wait, no. I actually don't know what we thought this was going to be. What you're saying makes perfect logical sense.”

Keith thinks back to Faraj's words, back when they were on the bridge discussing this place.

“It's a very individual and personalized experience. Your success will be reflected differently based on who you are. As will your failures.”

Now that he really thinks about it, that certainly makes it sound like they're all slated to do things by themselves.

“You'll spend the beginning of your cycles after the day's starting meal with your trainers,” Tanterian explains, “and likely have your midday meal with them as well. Then you'll spend some time with your Contact, and then time with another trainer. At the end day meal and meditation, that's where you'll get back together again.”

“Contact?” Lance questions. Keith wonders why they didn't get the rundown of this before coming here. Allura must really trust these guys.

“Just accept it for now,” Tanterian yawns suddenly. “That's too much for little me to explain in one sitting.”

“Little.” Pidge snorts.

“Besides,” the alien looks up, “it's likely time for the midday meal by now anyway. I should let you guys get to that.”

“No complaints here,” Hunk chimes in. Keith snorts a bit to himself, but doesn't disagree. He's pretty hungry himself by now.

“Are we going to do more training later?” Pidge asks.
“Not with me,” Tanterian shakes his head, “I’ve observed all that I need to observe for today. Villia may pull you guys aside to ask a few questions, but the rest of your day really should be about housekeeping.”

“Ok,” Shiro nods, “then can I ask just one more thing-?”

A sound interrupts the black paladin.

Keith would normally tense at noise coming out of nowhere, but what they here can only be described as a bell. It resonates through the air in an odd way, almost as though it's coming from within their very minds. The red paladin looks around, watching as the Phi in the air blink in time with the chiming.

“Ah,” Tanterian chuckles, “we're late for midday meal. Sorry, you guys must be starved.”

“Is this how you guys communicate over distances?” Pidge asks, eyes locked onto the nearest orb of light.

“The Phi are how we do a lot of things here,” Tanterian stretches his arms above his head. There's a small gust of air, and then Hobbs is coming down to rest behind the alien. “Anymore questions will have to wait for now, Paladins. Which is fine, because there are a lot of people who can answer them better than I can.”

“It was pleasure going up against you, Tanterian,” Shiro says politely with a nod of acknowledgement. Keith is helpless to do anything but mimic Shiro. That was the best fight anyone has put up since they took out Zarkon, and Tanterian wasn't even really fighting. He likes to give respect where it's due.

“You're good,” Keith states. The alien grins.

“You too,” Tanterian responds, “you're all impressive. But I'd be lying if I said that I'm not looking forward to taking you and the black paladin on by yourselves.”

The red paladin agrees.
“Anyways,” the alien looks to the twins at his side, “I don’t know how you both got here without Telos, but wanna ride?”

“We would be thankful,” the twins state in unison.

“I have conflicting feelings about them,” Pidge murmurs.

“Ok,” Tanterian nods, turning to look at Shiro next. “Follow us carefully on the way back, it can be easy to lose your way in the Gorge.”

“Right,” Shiro nods, “thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem kid,” the alien grins. Keith snorts again.

The red paladin ignores the unamused glance he gets from Shiro, instead focusing as Tanterian does his weird teleport thing again. Is this one of the works of quintessence? It must be. Apparently the alien owes his godlike maneuverability to it as well, if Keith was following correctly.

“Why are we just now taking the time to learn about this?” Hunk asks, snatching the words right from Keith’s thoughts. “I mean,” the yellow paladin goes on, “it makes sense from before, we literally didn’t have the time to learn anything other than how to form Voltron and how to defend ourselves. But why not after Shiro came back? We’ve been doing the diplomacy thing, but we know that Haggar is the big bad now, so why not introduce us to this more in between that?”

Hobbs lowers one it’s many arms down, inviting Pomel and Yumel to take a seat on the palm of it. Keith wonders if they’ll be safe like that, but the ease of the movements speaks of a lot of repetition. So they’ll probably be fine.

“Maybe Allura was hoping it wouldn’t be necessary?” Pidge offers, “We were doing well enough with just Voltron, so she probably thought that this could be more of a ‘learn-as-we-go’ thing as opposed to a ‘take-an-indeterminate-amount-of-time-to-hammer-it-in’ thing.”

The beetle ship flies and hovers at the edge of the skyfield, Tanterian probably waiting for them all to board their Lions before he leaves.
“Well enough against Zarkon,” Lance states, “and even that’s pretty up for debate, honestly. I don’t know about you guys, but if I’d known a month ago that we had the option of learning about space magic right here, I’d have probably wanted to come and learn about it before trying to hunt down the space witch.”

The blue paladin is absolutely right, but Keith finds himself surprised at the fact that he’s not defending the Princess right now.

“I’m surprised that you aren’t speaking on Allura’s behalf,” Keith states. He means it halfway as a joke, and half as a serious observation. Lance’s huff of irritation is a little startling though.

“You shouldn’t be,” the blue paladin states, voice mildly annoyed. “It’s not like that’s even something that I do most of the time. It’s Shiro that does it.”

The red paladin feels himself get a bit defensive at Lance’s tone. What did he do now?

“You so do,” he insists. Lance worships Allura. Maybe not so much lately, but definitely in the past.

“Name one time,” the blue paladin retorts.

“That one time when…” Keith says irately, unsure of why Lance is being like this now. They were literally getting along so well earlier. The red paladin has to pause though.

Now that he really thinks on it. Like, really, really thinks and tries to recall. Keith can honestly say that he doesn’t remember a time where Lance has defended Allura’s plans against the other paladin’s questions. Shiro has, but Keith is sure that those times were warranted.

In fact, now that the red paladin thinks on it, Lance usually falls in with Hunk in constantly trying to convince everyone that they’re running into a trap. Or questioning their knowledge or intel.

“No?” Lance prompts, crossing his arms over his chest. Keith wants to snap, tell him to stop being an asshole, but Shiro subtly shakes his head when the red paladin looks at him. “Ok then,” the blue paladin mutters, turning and starting for the Lions.
A pause.

“*Well,*” Hunk says uncomfortably, “*let's go eat!*”

The yellow paladin turns and follows after his friend, but not before shrugging sympathetically at a dumbfounded Keith.

“What the hell?” Keith asks quietly, arms out in exasperation. “We were getting along, how did I make him mad?”

“I think he's a bit sensitive to people jumping to conclusions lately,” Pidge shrugs. “He didn't really have to get all huffy, but the Allura comment probably wasn't necessary.”

“He didn't snap at you,” Shiro reminds, watching after the two Legs seriously. “So I doubt he's really angry with you, just a bit annoyed. He'll be over it in no time.”

Keith rolls his eyes. Emotional people.

“So you should be over it in no time too,” the leader says significantly, “there doesn't need to be any hard feelings over a few unfortunate words.”

Keith merely hums in response. Shiro gives him a small smile, before heading away in the direction of the Lions himself.

The red paladin finds himself searching Pidge's eyes for an answer. On what question? Keith doesn't know. He has a lot, and only a few of them are about Lance.

His ally merely shrugs her shoulders, walking away for the Lions as well afterwards.

“He isn't in a mood, this isn't some sad phase. This was a long time coming, and if it didn't happen today, it would have happened eventually.”
Maybe they are bad at accounting for each other's weaknesses, Keith thinks. Red hums noncommittally in his mind, and the red paladin sighs.

“How are they gonna teach us that?” He wonders, moving to follow the rest of his team.

…

It's admittedly kind of a relief to see just Faraj's amused face when Tanterian leads them into a dining room found in a small corner of the main fortress.

Lance is all about meeting new people, or aliens rather, but something about the particular group they met earlier admittedly kind of turns him off.

He's not sure if it was Villia’s skeptical gaze, Katal's expressionless face, the two sets of twins’ expressionless everything, or Mirjn’s intensity. But the blue paladin can honestly say that he's glad that apparently everyone else has already eaten, leaving only their guide and Tanterian (the twins slipped away at some point) to eat with them.

He thinks that he's overwhelmed. Lance has felt a bit too stretched for a while now, and last week made it infinitely worse. He hasn't had anything close to an episode since that awful night, but it's always taken him awhile to work himself back up to normal.

It hasn't helped that the team has been weird ever since. Hunk, Coran and Pidge have treated him normally, if not a bit more doting than usual. But Allura has been too busy preparing for this trip to really follow up on the conversation they had last week. In fact, in all her stress (because the Princess is stressed out lately. He knows it started when Shiro vanished, but it hasn't gotten better over time at all), she seems to have temporarily forgotten about it entirely. Lance can't blame her really. Her team did kind of fall apart right before her eyes last week, so it's no wonder that she's desperately trying to keep them together. He's ok with not being a priority. He wishes that they could be friends, but there'll be time for that later.

Shiro, for all that they're able to talk and be cordial around others, has barely looked Lance in the eye since last week. The black paladin has been staring at Lance constantly when he thinks that the blue paladin isn't aware, but doesn't seem to know how to approach him. Lance hopes that Shiro gets his thoughts together soon, because he really does miss looking at their leader and feeling admiration, respect and a sense of friendship (as opposed to feeling guarded and blank).
Keith has been borderline overbearing in his attempts to get close to Lance, and the blue paladin doesn't have the heart to tell his friend that he doesn't want to spar or race or play games. The red paladin has been trying so hard, so Lance has been allowing it for the most part.

The blue paladin sighs, poking at his cherry red pasta. It's really good actually, has the consistency of actual noodles and everything. It's sweet, which was a bit off putting, but Lance can confidently say that it's one of the best alien meals they've had that wasn't prepared by Hunk. He just wishes he could sit and enjoy it instead of thinking so much.

He and Keith were able to act normal today, like actually normal. In a way that hasn't existed between since before Shiro vanished. They all worked well on the battlefield, and Lance was finally starting to feel like things were mending well. And then Keith had to ruin it with that jab about Allura.

And whether the red paladin knows it himself or not, it was totally a shot at Lance's character. The blue paladin's former crush- turned admiration for the Princess has always been one of the things that Keith has judged him for. Whenever the red paladin wanted to make a point about Lance not taking things seriously, he tended to slip Allura's name into it about a fifth of the time.

And maybe he didn't mean for it to be taken the way Lance took it. Keith's tone wasn't harsh or anything, but he shouldn't have said it anyway. Because for one, it was uncalled for.

And for two, it's just not true .

Lance has flirted with Allura, complimented her, made it obvious how highly he regards her. But not once has he ever defended her when she was in the wrong. Nor has he ever not voiced his honest opinion about a plan just because it came from her.

Looking at Keith now, as the red paladin picks at his own plate, Lance feels a bit like he may have overreacted. But after last week, he's absolutely done letting others come at him for something that isn't true.

So he looks away from Keith, instead focusing in back on Faraj, who is answering a question Pidge posed.

“A Contact?” The guy repeats, “Think of them as your personal advisor during your time here.”
“Like our own Corans?” Hunk asks happily, examining his plate meticulously. Probably trying to see how he can mimic this recipe. “I'm in favor of having my own Coran.”

Tanterian laughs loudly, “these Defenders are a riot!”

“That they are,” Faraj says amusedly, “Yes. Like your own Coran.”

“Score,” Hunk holds his hand out for a fist bump. Lance meets it without even thinking about it.

“A Contact is a point person,” Faraj goes into more detail, “you'll be helped along by everyone, but your Contact's role is to be your go-to for reviewing any concepts that you may be confused or uncomfortable with. Depending on where you come from, the information drop here tends to be steep, so a Contact should ideally help bridge the gap.”

“So you're not the overall Contact then?” Pidge questions thoughtfully, “You told us to think of you as a review person, but we're still getting personal ones?”

“As your guide,” the bunny-eared alien responds, “I'm available to you all. And I will step in to reiterate some of the finer training aspects towards the end of your tracks. But yes, you will all have a personal Contact specifically tailored to you by need and quintessence. There's a chance that I'll fill that role for one of you as well.”

“Geez,” Lance whistles, “you sure do a lot.”

The blue paladin can't help but hope that Faraj ends being his Contact. For two reasons.

For one, the guy's just cool, Lance aspires to have his level of sass at the ready. And for two, he seems to really know how this place works.

The information dump has been steep, Lance feels. He's honestly having a lot of trouble following all the terms and technology that they're hearing and seeing. It doesn't help that they still don't have a basic definition of quintessence, which runs everything around here!

Lance thinks back to the whole Tanterian thing. The way he moved was impossible, and yet it was
possible because of quintessence. Can all of their trainers use space magic like that? Will they themselves as paladins learn to use space magic like that? Or will they just learn how to identify it and work around it?

And how will quintessence play a role in their piloting more? They're supposed to all access the Astral Plane eventually, how does quintessence work with that? And why are these guys even so prepared to train Paladins of Voltron? Voltron hasn't been a thing for eons.

Lance takes another bite of the pasta.

He feels like Pidge, with all these questions running through his head. It's admittedly a little stressful.

How did he not hit Tanterian earlier?

“I do what's needed of me,” Faraj acknowledges with a shrug. “Now, for the training schedule for tomorrow. Lien, Pomel and Yumel, Villia and Mirjn will take point.”

“The council members are trainers?” Shiro asks curiously, “I thought they just came up with the schedule?”

“They are,” Faraj nods, “and they don't come up with the schedules, we as trainers do. They came up with the entire cycle, basically what you all should know by what time.”

“I see,” Shiro nods.

“So the Paladin to go with,” Faraj starts, but Tanterian cuts him off.

“Gah! Wait!” The alien says, face-palming. “Faraj, you gotta give Blue the choice of who he wants to train him tomorrow.”

Lance sits up a bit straighter in his seat as Faraj glances at him curiously.
“Dare I ask why?” Their guide asks.

“Because I told them that the one to hit me would get first pick,” Tanterian shrugs, “I'm a man of my word.”

Lance's jaw drops. He exchanges dumbfounded looks with both Hunk and Pidge.

“I didn't really hit you though?” He says. Because he didn't. Those plasma bullets stopped a least a few inches short by Lance's calculations.

“You hit my armor though,” Tanterian insists. *What* armor? “Three times,” the alien goes on, “and those shots would have done me in without it. So they count.”

“They do?” Lance murmurs, feeling a bit better about the situation. He'd been pretty irate over missing.

“Like I said,” Keith mutters, “Lance totally hit him.”

The blue paladin turns to look at his friend from across the table, seeing a tentative grin.

*Truce?* Keith's eyes say.

Lance stares back for a second, before giving a small smile in return

*Truce.* Lance nods.

He doubts that Keith knows why Lance reacted badly earlier, and that's something that they'll have to discuss eventually. But as long as he can still trust Keith to make an effort, Lance is sure that they'll be fine.

“Well since I don't want to make you into a liar,” Faraj chuckles good-naturedly, “How about it, Lance? Who do you want to start with tomorrow?”
Lance takes a second to think about it.

The creepy twins are totally out. Lance is content in avoiding them for as long as he can. He doesn't really want to be the first in Villia's sight either, so that's a no-go. Mirjn was just scary.

“I guess Lieen?” The blue paladin answers. Lieen didn't make him feel at all more comfortable than the others. But Lance is super excited about really getting in depth with Blue, more so than before, so the less frightening of the Lion bond experts it is.

“Fair choice,” Faraj nods, “then it'll be as such. Lieen with the Blue Paladin. Pomel and Yumel with Red and Green.”

Keith's face drops into horror, and Lance has to bite back a snicker when the red paladin looks at Pidge in shock.

“Oh no…” the green paladin mutters. Lance does not envy either of them.

“Villia with Yellow,” Faraj ignores them, “which leaves Black to Mirjn.”

Hunk sighs heavily, “Well at least I get the less scary lady.”

Shiro merely nods, still not quite looking comfortable (he hasn't since they arrived), but not seeming to have a problem with the choice.

“We'll probably announce your Contacts tomorrow,” the bunny-eared alien adds, “it's probably best to get your more acclimated to this world at this point.”

“Yikes,” Tanterian murmurs, standing up from the long table quickly. “That means touring and questioning and explaining, which means no more Tanterian for today.”

The alien makes his way for the door, giving them all a wave.
“Good show today,” he says as he walks out, “but make sure you're ready for things to get serious next time!”

And the he's gone, just like that.

“What's his deal?” Keith asks curiously.

“His deal?” Faraj cocks his head to the side, “I'm not sure what you mean.”

“It's a way of asking more about Tanterian,” Shiro explains.

“He's a fun one,” their guide grins, “once he heard that we were looking for volunteers to take on the task of helping the Defenders, he jumped at the chance.”

“Volunteers?” Lance repeats quietly. How many people capable of training are around if they can accept volunteers?

“All of your trainers are volunteers from different sects of Kislev,” Faraj explains, “Tanterian is a Captain in the Militia. He normally runs rescue missions.”

They all seem to pay a bit more attention at that.

“Who do you rescue?” Shiro asks.

“Ah,” Faraj says with a grin. “On that note,” he stands, “the easiest way to answer that is to show you. Follow me when you're ready. Don't worry about the dishes, we have a keeper who takes his job very seriously.”

The alien wanders out without any more preamble, leaving just the paladins in the small dining area.

“Guess there's more to this place than we know,” Pidge huffs.
“Did you really expect anything different?” Lance asks, knowing what she's talking about. “It's been 10,000 years.”

“It makes sense that they wouldn't stay completely isolated,” Shiro says thoughtfully.

“And there's more than one species of alien here,” Hunk chimes in, “they have to come from somewhere.”

“So are they fighting against the Galra,” Keith asks, “or are they picking up the pieces left?”

Sometimes they can all be so in sync, Lance thinks. Sometimes it really is like their thoughts are as one. He's never more comfortable with his team than he is in these moments. It's too bad that it doesn't happen too often.

“Let's find out,” Shiro decides, placing his fork down and standing up to follow Faraj.

The other paladins exchange looks, before getting up and following suit.

...

“Whoa,” Lance murmurs softly, as they all follow Faraj out of the main fortress entrance. Shiro is inclined to agree.

The fortress opens out to wide area, once again filled with green. Down the steps and across the grass is a stone bridge that connects this section to another one. Shiro can see much smaller stone buildings amongst tall trees there.

There's a wide variety of aliens walking around outside the fortress, all dressed in the same style of cloaks except for the odd few that are wearing other types of clothing. A huge and intricate fountain composed of stone and steel rests a few meters out, and Shiro finds himself breathless at the sheer beauty of the crystal clear water reflecting the gentle glow of the Phi in the air.
And to top it off, the sky is no longer blue, but a stunning swirl of gold and red. Like that one moment just before the sun dips below the horizon, but captured at the perfect time.

“Is this the Lasthalis too?” The yellow paladin asks as they all descend a huge stone staircase behind their guide.

“You catch on fast,” Faraj compliments, “yes. The Lasthalis is set to take Kislev through several skies throughout a cycle.”

“Do you think we could study it?” Pidge asks in awe.

“You'll have several stretches of free time over the course of your training,” Faraj answers, “so I don't see why not.”

Shiro hears the clap of a high five from behind him, and smiles slightly. Hunk and Pidge will have similar technology in the castle in no time if they have the opportunity to really learn about it.

“So as you can probably tell,” their guide begins when they reach the bottom of the stairs and begin crossing the field towards the bridge, “this is a refuge planet.”

Shiro nods even though the alien can't see him, “We figured as much.”

“Kislev has a long history,” Faraj explains as they reach the bridge, “and long-standing traditions. The originally species that first colonized this planet and created the Gate no longer exists. Their descendents are the Bomora, who make up the majority of the population here.”

Just from looking around, Shiro can make the assumption that the Bomora are the humanoids with scales as opposed to skin.

“But while the Bomora are enriched in the ways of quintessence,” Faraj continues, “they can only reproduce under very specific circumstances. Life on this planet came dangerously close to extinction some 5000 years ago.”

“What are the circumstances?” Hunk asks, coming up to stand by Shiro.
“It’s convoluted and ridiculous,” Faraj responds easily, “but the basic gist is that they can only reproduce within their species a limited amount of times before the newborns start getting born without the necessary level of quintessence to stay alive. Reproducing with other species capable of handling high levels of quintessence overcomes this issue.”

Shiro blinks a bit, but ultimately chooses to focus on looking at the small village they're approaching. From above, there seemed to be several of these scattered around the planet. Will they get an opportunity to see them all?

“And so they started traveling back and forth across the gate,” Faraj states, getting Shiro's attention back. “They didn't fight the Galra Empire,” he says, “still don't. The focus has always been on going to remnants of planets, places the Galra left behind or places that they didn't reach just yet.”

Shiro's eyes narrow as he remembers something Faraj said earlier.

“So when you said that your enemies can't get to you…” the leader mutters.

“Not the Galra,” Faraj sees where he's going with this, “there's a lot of species out there that want what we have here. But the rule has always been to never engage the Empire.”

“Why not?” Keith asks sharply, “You guys would have been the most equipped to fight them, right?”

“That's right,” Faraj responds as they reach the end if the bridge and step onto the grass of the other platform, “but while I don't pretend to understand decisions made almost 5000 years before my time, I can tell you that they had good reason for it.”

The village is quaint and charming. Compared the hustle and bustle atmosphere of the main fortress, the aliens here a great deal more relaxed. Almost no one is in cloaks, instead in generally loose and flowy clothing fitting for the warm temperature. Shiro can see children running about and playing amongst the glowing Phi, while the adults seem to be leisurely talking to each other and trading goods.

“But look at what happened,” Keith insists with a frown, “maybe the Galra wouldn't have gotten as far if…”
“Let me stop you right there,” Faraj says firmly, stopping them in the middle of town. No one seems to care much. While some aliens give their armor a curious glance, none seem to be too concerned. Shiro wonders how many outsiders they see to be this comfortable.

“You don't know enough to make such statements,” the alien turns to give them all a look, “so don't make them.”

Shiro sighs, elbowing Keith at his right when the red paladin doesn't say anything. This always happens at least once when Keith gets taken on a diplomatic mission.

“Sorry,” Keith says shortly.

“Apology accepted,” Faraj nods, “but I have to ask that you all do not mention the Galra Empire where civilians can hear.”

It's Shiro's turn to frown, “May I ask why not?”

“Because the war is not something we allow the public to know about,” Faraj states, “When we bring new refugees from dying planets in, we ask that they keep it to themselves.”

“Like the Last Airbender,” Lance whispers.

That was not the first thing that popped into Shiro's head, but he can't deny that it's a fair observation.


“Under no penalty,” the alien states, “if you really want to talk about it here, I'm sure a good fraction of them will know what you're talking about. We don't police what civilians talk about, we merely ask in order to make sure that everyone feels safe. Emotional balance is important here. Panic is dangerous.”
“So not too much like the Last Airbender,” Lance murmurs.

“I see,” Shiro nods. He doesn't quite know how he feels about that, but he’ll respect the request. He’s about to ask about where the majority of their refugee missions take place, but is completely distracted when Faraj’s ears visibly twitch. The alien tilts his head to the side, face thoughtful, ears twitching the entire time for about ten seconds.

Shiro has to look at his team at that, just to make sure that they all saw it too. And judging by Keith’s completely engrossed face, Pidge biting her laughter back, Hunk and Lance’s wide eyes, yeah. They saw it.

“History lesson will have to wait,” Faraj says after he’s done listening to whatever he was listening to, “There’s still some details to hammer out with your Princess and Advisor. So I’ll show you to the lodge where you’ll be staying.”

“Ok,” Shiro nods.

Faraj takes them past the border of the village, over a much smaller bridge connected to another landmass. There’s only one building on this one, not too much bigger than a house, though it looks more like a shrine from the outside.

“This is where you’ll be staying,” their guide explains as he directs them up to the door, “You’ve the freedom to go wherever you please around your training, but we do ask that you take meals with us in the Round Table Hall.”

Shiro assumes that to be the official name of the fortress that they first encountered.

Faraj pushes open the door and gestures the paladins in. For all the technological marvels that they’ve seen so far, the place is rather simple. Despite the way it looks on the outside, there’s no doubt that this is a house when one walks into it. They find themselves walking into a foyer that extends and stretches out into a circular living area. The decor is toned down, shades of gray with a splash of color here and there. There’s a circular couch resting in the middle of the room, with a stone coffee table (though they probably don’t call it that) in front of it.

There’s a hallway off to the side of the couch that seems to lead to a staircase, and the right side of the living area seems to open up to what Shiro is going to guess is a kitchen. The black paladin is surprised to that there are even Phi in here as well, all of them glowing a very faint white. There are
canvases and paintings on the wall with odd imagery to them, but with a few common themes to them. Shiro himself focuses on one large one on the wall when the first walk in.

It’s a sand painting from the looks of it. Depicting what looks to be a large and formidable storm. The lightning from the darkened clouds are shown in various color, arcing across the surface in hues of red, blue, green and yellow. Beneath the storm is a rolling sea, raging alongside the air above in perfect destructive harmony. Shiro feels floored at the sheer aggression that he senses within this work, and a bit disturbed to feel a similar aggression start to build in his own chest.

The black paladin tears his eyes away, accidentally meeting Faraj’s crimson gaze.

Shiro swallows heavily. Faraj’s eyes are calm, but probing. The look of someone who’s trying to figure something out, and knows that it’s only a matter of time.

“Whoa! This kitchen is awesome!” he vaguely hears Hunk cheer, and Shiro has the awareness to realize that the other paladins have gone on to explore the rest of the house. And yet he can’t seem to look away from their guide’s eyes.

“Your rooms are on the second level,” Faraj states quietly, “I think your Blue Paladin has already called the one closest to the bathing hall.”

“Right,” Shiro responds, unsure of what’s happening here. “Lance is like that.”

“Please join us later for the end of day meditation and meal,” Faraj goes on as if he didn’t speak, “It’ll be a good time for everyone to get to know each other better.”

“Sure,” Shiro mutters.

“You’ll find more appropriate dress in one of chests located on the second floor,” the alien states, and Shiro clenches his jaw as those eyes narrow a bit.

“Check out the new duds!” Lance’s voice cuts through a sudden ringing in his ears, “Faraj! Can we wear these?” There’s something oddly grounding about hearing the younger’s voice for whatever, and Shiro finds himself hoping that Lance would keep talking.
Faraj’s expression goes curious, “Go for it,” he calls back, without taking his eyes away from Shiro’s eyes.

“Sweet!” the blue paladin responds. Shiro blinks.

“Well,” Faraj takes a step back, but still continues to stare. “I’ll see you later, Shiro of Black.”

“Sure,” Shiro breathes. A tension leaves his body as Faraj finally turns around and begins walking towards the door. The leader stands there for a moment, listening to Keith and Pidge bicker about some room from the second level. Hunk’s still raving about the kitchen. Lance...is quiet. Where’s Lance?

Shiro moves towards the opening to the steps, but Faraj’s voice stops him in his tracks.

“These paintings tend to be very telling, Shiro,” the alien states calmly, “you’d do well to pay attention to how you react to them.”

The door closes, and Shiro knows that Faraj has left.

“Hunk!” Lance’s voice, “come check out this tub man!”

The black paladin feels heat at his side, and looks down to see his right arm fully activated.

Chapter End Notes

So we've got some things moving along here. A bit more history on Kislev. Still no conclusive definition on quintessence, but that's certainly coming! And a look into the team dynamics in various situations. They're still trying to recover a level of normal, and since not that much time has passed and they haven't really had a good opportunity to work on themselves, things are still kind of tense. However, I like to think that the paladins are serious enough about their task that they look past this tension in a fight.

I'm going to avoid commenting and explaining too much in the notes, because we're officially getting to the point where it would end up being spoiler-ry for this story lol.

And on another note, I apologize because it's been brought to my attention that there
are a few mistakes that make the chapters flow awkwardly. I naturally don't have a
beta reader, but I'll definitely take myself back and fix them if I or others find them. I'll
definitely go back over my work now, and try to pay more attention in the future!

And lastly, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to officially amend my update schedule to
a week in between chapters for right now. If I get them done before that time frame,
then I'll definitely post them, but it's that time of year for college kids like myself lol,
and I just don't have the time right now to get them out like I did with the previous
story. But thank you all for your comments and your kudos and your patience.

Stay tuned for the next update! Where we'll see some bonding and some flashbacks!
Interlude 1

Chapter Summary

Keith looks thoughtful at that, as though he might actually consider it. It lasts for about a second before he sighs.

“Shiro’s got a lot on his plate right now,” the red paladin murmurs, “I don’t want to put that on him too-”

“So?” Pidge cuts in, unable to help herself. This type of rationalization is probably how one of her best friends ended up so damaged by those around him (intentional or not) that he spiraled downwards in mood for a week before finally having a meltdown.

Chapter Notes

Wow wow wow! I am just the most terrible person. First off, I apologize profusely for how long it took to get this chapter out here! I don't even know how much time passed! Finals killed me, and then I went out of town, and by the time I sat back down to work on this story, I had so many other story bugs in my head that I literally could not focus on this one for the life of me! But fear not! I have since expelled these story bugs and now I'm ready to devote my attention to making this story the best it can be! I finally have a set schedule for like, life now, so I can work on things more consistently.

So what we have here is a chapter that doesn't focuses on the training, but rather the time in between. I'm going to throw in a warning for some brief pondering on mental illness in this chapter, but see the end notes for more on that! Now without further ado, let us go with learning and the relationships!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The Smoking Hot Hunk rocking the head scarf!” Lance cheers from his spot on the couch.

Keith looks up from where he's attempting to tie this ridiculous thing that may or may not be a shirt, to see that Hunk has encountered no such problems with getting dressed in the Kislev clothing.

Generally, they all somehow manage to get clothing centered around their colors, even when they visit other planets. So it's a bit odd to see Hunk in a complete absence of yellow. He's dressed in black pants with white geometric designs extending down the outside of the legs, and a white short sleeved tunic tied at the chest with black cords, over which he has a black vest. His hair is in fact pulled out of his face by a long white scarf adorned with black beads tied around his head.
Keith has to wonder what Lance means by that. Hunk's for sure a handsome dude, but the glint in the blue paladin's eyes and the half-fond, half-nostalgic look that Hunk shoots him speaks of an inside joke or memory.

“Is there a story behind that?” He asks Pidge, who's regarding them with her patented “gotta-find-out” look.

The green paladin has white pants on, and a billowy white long-sleeved shirt, over which she has a dark grey shawl-thing. Her ensemble also seems to have come with a head scarf, as Pidge’s hair is gathered up in a bun on the top of her head with a similar scarf tied around her head.

“Yes,” Pidge grumbles in response. “Not that I can tell you what the story is, because it's a secret.”

Keith's eyebrows raise, “A secret?”

_Hunk_ can keep a secret?

“One of the only secrets that Hunk has on lockdown,” Pidge huffs, apparently having read his thoughts. “He's only good at keeping secrets that Lance wants him to keep.”

She then focuses in on Keith's struggle.

“Having trouble?” Pidge smirks. The red paladin huffs in response.

“I don't know what this is,” he groans, once again tugging his fingers from the loops of string. The white pants and grey sash had been easy, but there's entirely too much material and thought going on with the top.

“Get Lance or Hunk to help you then,” the green paladin shrugs.

“I don't need help _putting on clothes_,” Keith protests. Even though he almost _always_ needs help putting on alien clothes. The person who generally helps though…”Where is Shiro?” He demands.
They've been hanging out in their little house for about half an hour now, and the leader has yet to appear from wherever he walked to after Faraj left.

“You guys,” Hunk says, eyes wide. “The kitchen is stocked with things that actually look like food! I think I have enough space ingredients to make cookies!”

Keith perks up a bit at that. Hunk makes good cookies.

“We should try and find a semblance of time here,” Pidge suggests, “if we can figure out how long the space in between training and meals are, then we can plan out our time better.”

Keith snorts despite his ire at the fabric in his hands. He can already tell that Pidge is adopting her usual approach to snoop around as much as possible around their duties. He wonders who she's going to pick as her partner in crime this time.

Probably Hunk, the red paladin thinks. There's a lot of technology and unknowns here, even compared to some of the more extravagant planets they've been to. Pidge tends to drag the yellow paladin along when she wants to study and mimic things. Lance gets dragged along when she wants to cause mischief, and Keith himself is picked when Pidge doesn't want to be bothered with the locals.

“I wonder if there's anywhere we can go swimming?” Lance ponders, eyes wide. “Blue says that the water here is safe for us to be in.”

Their blue paladin is dressed in black pants, and looks quite comfortable in his own white tunic with an open collar and black geometric designs bordering the low dipping neckline.

“You can hear Blue from all the way over here?” Hunk asks curiously. Keith listens in absentmindedly as he once again tries to distinguish the head from the arms in his shirt.

“It's like, super easy on this planet,” Lance responds happily, “I bet you guys could talk to your Lions too from here if you tried.”

Keith pauses at that, mentally nudging for the tell-tale sharpness that he associates with Red.
He's pleasantly surprised to hear his Lion hum groggily in response, wondering what her paladin wants badly enough to rouse her. Ok, maybe not so pleasant.

“You're right!” Hunk says in awe, “it's like I'm in the hangar with Yellow, his thoughts are so clear!”

“Could this be because of the quintessence here?” Pidge ponders, “I wouldn't be surprised at this point if that was one of the things it can do on top of everything else.”

“That's the only explanation I see,” Lance shrugs, “like how Green was super sensitive to your controls?”

“It probably had something to do with all the Phi aligned to nature,” Hunk continues, “if they're a power source, and quintessence is a big part how the Lions work, then it makes sense that things like that would happen here.”

“But do you think it's that the Lions run on quintessence?” Pidge questions, “Or are our bonds with them stronger because of the Phi in the atmosphere?”

“Probably both,” Hunk answers, “but which one is the primary factor?”

“Well let's operate under the assumption that quintessence as a power source works like every other power source…” and that's where Keith stops listening. The green and yellow paladin do this quite often, and have never been good at discussing theory in a way that anyone but Coran can understand.

Lance apparently stops listening too, instead finally turning to smirk at Keith.

“Need some help?” The blue paladin questions smugly, to which Keith groans in response. He'd been hoping to get the shirt on or see Shiro before Lance decided to to finally chime in. “Or do you just want to go around shirtless?”

“Oh shut up,” Keith grumbles, face flushing as Lance chuckles.
“I suppose you have the abs for it,” the Cuban boy says delightedly, “but there are probably rules about decency here.”

“Why are you like this?” Keith asks (and totally doesn’t whine). Go figure that Lance only acts normal when the perfect chance to make fun of him arises.

“The quintessence doesn't lie,” the blue paladin shrugs. Keith groans again. “This is exactly how I'm supposed to be,” Lance says with a grin.

“You stole that from Faraj,” the red paladin accuses. Because Lance completely ripped that one off. “You don't even know what he meant by that!”

“I know enough,” Lance waves nonchalantly, “but seriously. You're not getting anywhere like that, c’mere.”

Keith sighs in defeat, balling up the evil shirt and standing, moving towards the couch.

“Ok first off,” Lance yanks the material from Keith's hands and gestures for him to sit, “doing that will not help you figure out how to put this on.”

“I know,” the red paladin huffs in return, crossing his arms.

Lance doesn't respond, instead un-balling up the shirt and examining it for a moment. It only takes a second before his eyes light up and he holds the shirt out.

“Up,” the blue paladin orders.

Shiro said the exact same thing when they had to wear the ceremonial robes of some bird planet not too long ago, and Lance's face isn't teasing in any way (he looks oddly pleased in a way?). So there's no real reason for Keith's face to flush with embarrassment as he reluctantly lifts his arms up.
The fabric of the clothes here is soft and feels clingy despite the fact that most of it is open and loose. But what goes over Keith's head can only be described as an apron with a crap ton of extra material.

“Is this even a shirt?” he demands as Lance manhandles him so that his back is facing the Cuban boy. It was in the folded bundle that the blue paladin handed him earlier, but Keith is calling shenanigans. How is it that he's the one who always ends up with the alien clothing that requires a manual to put on?

“Cool your jets,” Lance says nonchalantly, fingers deftly bringing the loose sides of the shirt together at Keith's back. The red paladin feels as his teammate starts tying the strings in the back, and the shirt starts to actually feel like a shirt by the time he's done. “Arms,” Lance says.

Keith turns back and holds his right arm out, watching as Lance begins to tie strings on the outside of the sleeve together and that too starts to feel like a sleeve.

The blue paladin looks calm, in that content way he sometimes gets at random. Keith wonders what he's thinking about.

“What are you thinking about?” His mouth asks without his explicit permission.

Lance looks up, gives Keith a small smile.

“I used to help my little sister get dressed too,” the blue paladin responds.

Keith's face flushes. A part of him wants to take offence to that, because he is both older than Lance and a boy. A bigger part though, feels oddly pleased that his teammate is sharing this with him. Lance often looks somber and sad when he talks about his family, it's rare to see him actually look happy when referencing them.

“Keith?” Pidge says suddenly, and the red paladin looks over to find her and Hunk watching him with matching grins.

“W-what?” he demands.
“Dude,” Hunk says happily, “you totally have a girl’s shirt on!”

Keith’s face flushes again, “I do not!”

“You so do!” Pidge cackles.

“Now that I look at it,” Lance murmurs, “this is kind of a girl’s shirt.”

“What!?” Keith huffs, looking down at the thing. It’s a really soft white shirt with a small v-neck to it and no real adornments, but his attention is drawn to his exposed shoulders and the intersecting lines of stings going down the outside of his poofy sleeves. If he pays attention, he can also feel a bit of a draft on his upper back. Keith groans.

He’s not sure how gender and gender norms work here, but this would definitely be a girl’s shirt back on Earth.

“Why did you give me this one?” Keith complains. Now that he’s noticed the open feeling on his back, he can’t ignore it anymore.

“Hey man,” Lance chuckles, “I just gave everyone what I thought would fit them by eyeballing it. There were only five outfits, couldn’t really be picky.”

“It’s so becoming of him,” Pidge teases.

“What a nice back you have there,” Hunk joins in. Lance throws his head back in laughter.

Keith groans. These three together are a collective menace to every single society.

But, the red paladin thinks, watching them smile brightly while they continue to tease him lightly about the shirt. It can be all bad if it makes them happy. Keith allows himself a small smile, taking in the relaxed feeling while it lasts. Because it never lasts.

Where is Shiro?
“Where is Shiro?” Lance asks quietly, “I feel like you know.”

The Black Lion remains silent save for the odd thrum of acknowledgement he affords Lance whenever the blue paladin is near.

“I feel like you know,” Lance repeats softly, “and that you’re waiting for us to figure it out.”

Black hums noncommittally, unwilling to either confirm or deny. At least that's how Lance interprets it. Shiro's Lion is admittedly a bit hard to understand sometimes. There's the normal muddled feeling that comes with communicating with a Lion that's not Blue, on top of the fact that Black’s presence has always been heavy and hard to think through.

The Head of Voltron has always been like Blue on steroids or something. Whereas Lance's Lion is generally gentle and calm while being prone to moments of bubbly excitement or murderous coldness, Shiro's is almost always commanding and stoic while occasionally slipping into moments of faint amusement or supercharged protectiveness.

Both are extremely aware and present though, at least as far as Lance is concerned. Blue's always there, soft wave of attentiveness that he can feel at all times when they're close enough. He gets a similar vibe from Black whenever he pays enough attention.

“You're not upset,” Lance points out, “Yellow gets all jittery when Hunk is in danger, Green gets all erratic about Pidge, Red goes crazy when Keith is in trouble,” he chuckles lowly, “I'm not sure what the others get from Blue when I'm in danger, but I've felt her get super intense or really sad before.”

He stares at the Lion's eyes. When did Black look down at him?

“But you're perfectly calm,” Lance states, “you don't feel any different than usual. I think that means that you know where Shiro is, and that you're not that worried.”

Black looks back up at the wall.
“Keith won't listen to me,” Lance sighs, “he wouldn't believe me anyway, but he won't even give me the chance to tell him what I think.”

The blue paladin looks over to where Keith lies to his left, finally asleep. It had taken a whopping two hours of Lance stubbornly sitting here and refusing to move before the red paladin had leaned over and dozed off.

“I think the stress is starting to really get to everyone,” the blue paladin says absentmindedly, “Pidge completely ignored something Keith said the other day when we were checking a potential prison camp. They haven't been getting along very well lately, but this time was bad.”

Lance sighs, thinking on how Keith had lowered himself to get right in Pidge's face. The blue paladin didn't allow it to continue for very long when he'd finished checking over Hunk, forcing his way between the two and refusing to move until they walked away.

“Something is off, I think,” he admits. “I don't know why I feel that way, but I just know that something is off.”

Because Keith generally falls on the more aggressive side, but the spike in his temper since their leader's disappearance is frankly a little scary at times nowadays.

“I've been searching for you for nearly a varga,” Coran mutters, “I see you've come across our missing Red Paladin.”

“It's not too hard when you know where to look,” Lance responds. Even though he knows that Coran knows this. They all know this. But there seems to be an unspoken agreement amongst the rest that only Lance and Allura are fit to deal with Keith at the moment. “Did you need me for something?”
“Not particularly,” Coran shakes his head, “I just wanted to check in with you.”

Lance smiles. They have the best space uncle.

“I’m ok Coran,” the blue paladin mutters, “same as I was yesterday when you asked.”

“You’re certain?” The advisor asks, looking up at Black. “Have you learned anything from our Head?”

“Nothing concrete.” Lance shrugs, “he doesn’t really talk like the other Lions do. Everything he thinks is kind of just...there.”

“The Black Lion is a powerful being,” Coran states, “you’re unused to communicating with it, so it would make sense for it to be a bit overwhelming.”

“Could that be what’s holding Keith up?” Lance wonders, “Apparently he piloted Black once before, but they were both focused on protecting Shiro. Maybe their focuses aren’t lining up this time, and Keith can’t understand Black because of it.”

Because that’s what seems to be the problem, from what Lance has heard when Keith actually wants to talk about it.

The red paladin apparently can’t make sense of what Black is asking him to do, and he thinks that Black won’t let him in until he does it. Just from being the Lion’s presence, Lance can see how it would be difficult for Keith to discern what Black wants. He himself is in a relatively calm state of mind, he’s not too worried about Shiro (not that he would ever tell Keith that unless he absolutely has to for some reason), and he still can’t quite grasp what Black is saying most of the time.

For Keith, who has been frantic with worry and annoyed at the universe, it must be impossible.

“It could be that,” Coran says noncommittally, “or it could be something else.”

“Black used to tell him to wait not too long ago apparently.” Lance mutters, “and now Keith can’t understand him anymore. What if he stops trying for a bit?”
“Do you honestly believe that our Red Paladin would be willing to do that?” Coran asks curiously.

“I mean,” Lance shrugs, “if I can convince him that it’s the best way to get to Shiro, then I think he’d do it.”

“Will you attempt to convince him then?” the Altean questions. The cuban boy hums thoughtfully.

“I don’t know,” Lance answers after a minute, “It would be a bit easier if I could get a straight answer from Black myself, if only to know that I’m right?”

Black hums in response, but the sentiments that Lance picks up are blank and unconcerned.

“But of course it can’t be that easy,” the blue paladin nods.

“The life of a Defender of the Universe,” Coran states calmly.

“No kidding huh?” Lance murmurs, turning to look at the slumbering Keith again. “How’s the Princess doing?” he asks, partly to change the subject in case the red paladin stirs, and also because he really wants to know.

They jumped really far in order to search the automated Galra prison in hopes of finding a lead on Shiro or the Holts, and the last he saw of Allura, she looked dead on her feet.

“I’ve managed to convince Allura to take a bit of time before she attempts to use the teladuv again,” Coran responds, “the next jump will back to rendezvous with the Blade, and then we will travel alongside them to the next destination.”

Lance frowns a bit, “ok.”

He’s not sure if he really likes Keith being around the Blade nowadays. A lot of them are unfeeling assholes who don’t know the meaning of taking it easy and are particularly brutal in their training regimen and fighting style. The red paladin already has enough aggression by himself. Lance is
worried that getting more in touch with his alien side isn’t the best choice right now.

“You worry quite a bit, dear boy,” Coran notes. Lance snorts.

“Like you don’t?” he asks with a chuckle.

“And yet,” Coran goes on seriously, “I’ve noticed a startlingly lack of concern for your own well being.”

Lance quiets quickly.

“I have never seen you be quite so docile in response to our Red Paladin’s more…” the Altean pauses. “careless comments.”

Lance sighs. Hunk has tried to bring this up as well.

“I’m trying to be the bigger person for once,” he mutters, “and I don’t want to argue with a guy who just wants to know that his best friend is ok.”

“Lance,” Coran says quietly, “that moment in the hallway…”

The blue paladin stiffens. He knows exactly what Coran is talking about and he does not want to talk about it right now. Or ever.

“I just had a moment ok?” Lance whispers, “It happens, people cry a little, and then they get over it.”

“I hardly count what I heard to be ‘a little’,” Coran sighs.

Lance looks over to the man, ready to argue, but is stopped by a finger poking his forehead once.
“I will not force the subject on you if you really don’t want to talk about it,” the advisor states, “but you must understand that at some point, things will need to change.”

Lance remains silent.

“And who knows?” Coran begins cheerfully out of nowhere, “perhaps our Red Paladin will benefit from what you Earthlings call ‘tough love’!”

And with that, the advisor bids him goodbye and excuses himself. Lance takes a moment to simply stew in the silence that follows. Black prods at him mentally, giving no actual thoughts away, but the blue paladin is able to get the gist. He looks down at Keith once more.

“Tough love, huh?”

…. 

“Lance gave me a girl's shirt to put on,” Keith's voice complains.

Shiro looks up from he'd been keeping his gaze trained on his own right arm. His friend is standing in the doorway to what Pidge and Hunk had decided would be the “Leader Room”.

The decor is much the same as the rest of the house, surprisingly quaint and subtle compared the impressive architecture and technology of the outside. The frame of the bed he's sitting on appears to made of some type of dark wood, with a desk of the same construct placed near an opening that seems to act like a small window. It keeps to the theme of the place as well in that it is lit dimly with Phi of various colors.

Shiro would appreciate the aesthetic if this place didn't make him so ridiculously uncomfortable.

“But it looks like you got something normal,” Keith continues on, voice petulant.

Shiro looks down at the fitted black pants and wide-collared white tunic he'd changed into. The fabric is soft, almost like silk but somehow not feeling anywhere near as fragile. The top falls about his torso a bit too loosely for his comfort honestly (he's not the biggest fan of his chest being this exposed), but he likes the clothing other than that.
“I’m sure he didn’t do it on purpose,” Shiro answers ardently, eyes moving back to his arm.

Why did it activate on its own? Was it in response to that painting? It had to have been. Or maybe it was in response to Faraj. The guy felt almost dangerous in that very moment, but Shiro isn’t sure how much of that was real and how much can be attributed to the fact that this place makes him so uncomfortable.

“Shiro,” Keith calls, prompting him to look up at his friend. “Are you alright?” The red paladin's face is serious, attentive.

This isn't the first time that Keith has approached Shiro on a new planet like this. In general, the Black Paladin hasn’t retained much of his sense of exploration from his Garrison days, and so he’s always hard-pressed to find a level of calm when they go to new places. He wishes he could have Pidge or Hunk’s curiosity, or maybe the sense of adventure that Lance and Keith share. Maybe then he wouldn’t always find himself in a situation where Keith feels the need to check on him like this.

“I’m ok,” Shiro responds with a small smile that Keith does not return, “this place is just taking a lot of getting used to, is all.”

And that’s not quite a lie, the Black Paladin has to wonder if having them all jump right into this was a good idea after all. It’s how this all started, with them just getting and Blue and going for it, and it’s pretty much been that way ever since. But Zarkon’s gone now, and while it’s obvious that Haggar is plotting something, Shiro thinks that they can afford to slow down every now and then. Everything about Voltron so far has been about learning as they do. But at what point are they simply doing too much?

Shiro doesn’t think that he’s ever felt quite so much dark aggression before looking at that painting, not even back during his time spent in the clutches of the Galra (even though he can’t remember much from that anyway).

“Are you sure it’s just that?” Keith asks carefully, “You looked kind of…” he hesitates.

“Kind of…?”

“Haunted,” his friend states, “You looked haunted when I first came in. You were staring at your
“The arm,” Keith explains quietly, “but you didn’t look like you were having a flashback.”

“I…” Shiro doesn’t know how to explain his feelings from earlier. Other than the fact that he didn’t feel like himself. “I think everything is just starting to get to me,” the leader explains carefully. Which isn’t a lie exactly.

“Well,” Keith mutters, “we’re all about to go and hit the town, see what we can find before we have to go meditate or whatever.”

It’s unlike his friend to let Shiro tell him a half-truth when he’s so obviously worried about him, but Keith must be able to tell on some level that Shiro has no idea how to explain what he’s feeling right now.

“Oh ok,” he mutters. He should go with them, if only because they all tend to get wrapped into something unfortunate when not supervised by him or Allura. Or if only because he just doesn’t trust this place very much, despite how welcoming and nice the people they’ve met have proved to be.

But that anger, the vitriol he’d felt for those brief moments. Shiro doesn't know if he should do much exploring before he figures out what exactly prompted it. What if they find something else that inspires such a reaction?

“Might be good to get your mind off of whatever is,” Keith suggests quietly. “Get a lay of the land,” the red paladin shrugs, “you'll probably start to feel better if you know where everything is.”

That's a good point. But Shiro has never been completely unaware of his arm activating before. It's connected to nerves and synapses and a bunch of other things that Pidge and Hunk could explain better.

From the tiny sharp pricks of pain where he should have organic veins but doesn't, to the slight tugging feeling on all of the major muscles on the right side of his torso, to thrum of heat that pulses up his shoulder. The Black Paladin has never felt something when his arm activates.

“I’ll sit this one out,” he mutters finally. Keith brow furrows in both confusion and concern. He knows something is wrong but doesn't necessarily know what.
“You sure?” His friend asks.

“Yeah,” Shiro nods, “I'll join you guys next time.”

Keith stares for a long moment.

“Look out for everyone ok?” Shiro gives a small smile, “I'm going to be looking to you to keep the order.”

The red paladin's face immediately screws up into the same sour expression he always makes when Shiro talks about passing leadership on.

“Me?” Keith snorts, “keep order?”

Shiro's smile dims a bit at the underlying harshness to Keith's tone. His friend turns to leave the room.

“We'll meet you at the Hall?”

“Sure,” Shiro watches the red paladin's back carefully until it moves out of sight.

He's no fool. Shiro knows that Keith gets particularly uncomfortable when the elder makes a comment about passing leadership on. At first he'd assumed that it just because his friend didn't like the idea of Shiro being put into a position where Keith had to take over.

But that's happened, and now Keith doesn't just get uncomfortable when Shiro brings it up, he seems to get almost...resentful. The leader just can't tell who his friend is resentful towards.

Adding that to the mental list of things he has to try and confront while they have the chance here, Shiro goes back to staring down at his arm.
Pidge isn’t one for scenery and aesthetics really, but even she has to admit that Kislev is pretty fucking gorgeous.

The Lasthalis must be a truly marvelous piece of technology, to be able to create such a perfect sunset lighting on a planet that seemingly has no natural atmosphere. She finds herself thinking back to their interactions with Slav and Antok. How they explained that the current universe had only begun to create technology of same caliber as Altean Tech.

Focusing in on the multi-colored Phi that inhabit their way as the four of them walk down what appears to be a small merchant’s ally, Pidge has to believe that Kislev’s technology has to be nigh impossible for the rest of the universe to mimic. It is Altean tech with an expansive amount of time behind it to perfect it, after all.

“Check this out!” she hears Lance call from ahead of her, and Pidge looks up to see him dragging Hunk along to another table of trinkets.

The green paladin smirks, turning to share the normal judgy look she’s normally see on Keith’s face at a time like this, but instead finds the red paladin looking down instead.

His expression is far too serious for him to not be thinking about something heavy, so Pidge takes the time to simply examine him to see if he gives the topic of his thoughts away eventually. Keith tends to be obvious like that more often than not.

Sure enough, not even a minute passes before the red paladin casts a troubled look over his shoulder. Back in the direction of their little house.

Shiro, then.

Pidge isn’t surprised. It was obvious to all of them that their leader had somehow gotten perturbed by something back at the house. She’d seen Keith go up to talk with Shiro, and immediately knew that something was wrong when he came back down looking frustrated.

The question is…
“What was wrong with Shiro?”

Keith looks startled by her question, eyes wide. It’s always amusing when he gets surprised that people notice what’s on his mind like he’s not one of the easiest people to read that Pidge has ever met.

“Well?” she prompts when he doesn’t immediately answer. The annoyed frown that settles on her friend’s face is a little startling.

“I don’t know what his problem is,” Keith huffs, voice almost bitter.

Oh great. Yet another thing that Pidge has to examine and learn about.

“Did he make you mad or something?” she asks plainly. Keith *never* uses that tone when talking about Shiro. The rose-colored-glasses are strong with this one.

“A little bit,” Keith says honestly, “yeah.”

His voice is kind of breathless, as though he’s shocked to hear his own self say the words aloud.

“How?” Pidge demands. Because she simply has to know what this is all about. The day that Takashi Shirogane does something that makes Keith Kogane genuinely angry with him is…

Well.

It’s probably the day that they end up going to a magical space planet with magical space beings in order to learn about space magic (that Pidge is still not quite convinced is actually magical) a week after one of those most care-free (seemingly) people Pidge has ever met had a full-on mental and emotional breakdown and taken the rest of them half-way there with him.

Comparatively, Keith getting mad at Shiro for something is rather bland on the crazy scale, but still noteworthy enough that Pidge has to know what caused it.
Keith sighs, looking forward to seemingly make sure that Lance and Hunk aren’t going to overhear.

“He keeps talking about something that I’m super uncomfortable talking about,” the red paladin mutters, “and he always seems to do when he it doesn’t want to talk about something that he isn’t comfortable talking about. It’s getting old.”

Pidge raises an eyebrow.

It’s hard to imagine Shiro being inconsiderate enough of Keith’s feelings to not notice that he’s upsetting the red paladin with a particular topic, and even harder to imagine that he’s mean enough to press it when Keith doesn’t want him to.

“I’ve even said that I don’t want him to talk about it multiple times now,” Keith complains, crossing his arms and scowling.

Shiros has always been super aware of Keith’s feelings. The black paladin could probably stand to focus his attention elsewhere, Pidge feels, cutting a glance at Lance and Hunk holding some stone up next to the glow of the Phi. But she has to believe that their leader knows that Keith doesn’t want to touch whatever thing the red paladin is referencing right now. Which means that Shiro must have a reason for pushing it.

“Maybe he thinks it’s something that will help in the long run?” Pidge suggests with a shrug. She’s so not equipped to talks feels with anyone, but at least Keith is relatively straightforward with his.

(Not like the anomaly that is Lance. Pidge still can’t get that day out of her head. That comment about his sisters...It’s something she knows that she will simply have to explore eventually. But not now.)

And true to character, the annoyance is plain on Keith’s face.

“It won’t help,” he insists, “I know it won’t.”

Keith sounds so serious and so sure of himself that Pidge finds herself believing him even if she doesn’t really know what they’re talking about right now.
“Does Shiro know that it won’t help?” she tries. Maybe they’re miscommunicating, or something is getting lost between them. Enough of that has happened so far that Pidge wouldn’t be surprised.

“He deadset believes that it will,” Keith responds tiredly, “and I can’t seem to convince him otherwise.” The red paladin’s voice gets annoyed again, “what’s worse is that I was trying to figure out what was up with him! I couldn’t even get a clear answer!”

Why are these boys she’s around so damn complicated?

“Well have you told him why you don’t want to talk about?” that would be the logical next step. If Shiro is dead set on pressing the issue, then he has to think that it’s important. But Keith’s feelings are important to him too (like, super important. Pidge still feels bad about her loose lips.).

“What do you mean?” Keith asks, and he’s totally pouting.

Pidge bites back the inappropriate comment she wants to make.

Instead she explains, “Well you just told me that it makes you feel uncomfortable when you guys talk about it,” then goes on to say, “I think it would go a long way if you were to tell Shiro that too. He probably doesn’t want to make you feel that way, and he might listen to your reasoning more if he’s got that perspective in mind.”

Keith looks thoughtful at that, as though he might actually consider it. It lasts for about a second before he sighs.

“Shiro’s got a lot on his plate right now,” the red paladin murmurs, “I don’t want to put that on him too-”

“So?” Pidge cuts in, unable to help herself. This type of rationalization is probably how one of her best friends ended up so damaged by those around him (intentional or not) that he spiraled downwards in mood for a week before finally having a meltdown.

She mentally takes back what she said earlier about Lance and his reaction to the Allura comment. He did need to get huffy over it. Lance needs to never take any bullshit from them ever again, no
matter how much he tells himself that it’s no big deal in the long run, and Pidge is glad that he’s starting to speak out more on serious missteps like that.

And Keith needs to let Shiro know that whatever the black paladin is pushing on him is not cool before he starts to resent his best friend for it.

“What do you mean ‘so’ !?” Keith snaps, obviously offended on Shiro’s behalf. “Don’t try and downplay what’s he’s been through like that!”

“I’m not trying to downplay anything!” Pidge snips right back, keeping her voice low less Lance or Hunk decide to come back over.

“Well then what are you trying to do then!?”

“I’m trying to help you out,” she huffs, crossing her own arms and glaring at him. “I’m trying to be a good friend,” she goes on. Keith’s shoulders seem to deflate a little at that, and he casts a glance in the direction of the other two paladins.

Pidge follows the boy’s gaze to see that he is looking towards Lance, who is doing a spectacular job of acting like he hasn’t noticed that the conversation between her and Keith is getting heated. The blue paladin had developed an impressive sixth sense for that during Shiro’s absence, and Pidge knows that he’s paying a lot more attention than he seems.

The red paladin seems to go through a little debate in his own head about her words before he finally purses his lips.

“Go on,” Keith mutters. He pouts a lot for someone who’s generally such an edge lord. Or maybe he pouts just the right amount?

Pidge takes a deep breath. Gathers her thoughts. And then she lets out some of the things she’s been stewing over since last week.

“So Shiro has a lot on his plate,” she starts, “so what? That’s nothing new. He has PTSD Keith, he’s always going to have a lot on his plate. Just like you.”
Keith opens his mouth to interject but Pidge talks over him.

“You have a lot on your plate too. The Blade? Finding out that you’re part alien and not knowing about your origins? You were a foster kid before the Garrison on Earth. Your baggage may be different than his, but it’s not any less important than Shiro’s.”

Keith stares.

“Hunk has problems with anxiety,” Pidge goes on, “sometimes the smallest thing will have him throwing up or crying. He can only function out here because of Lance, they have a lot of talks that the rest of us don’t know about. He has a lot on his plate.”

The red paladin listens to her. She has his full attention, and Pidge would dare to say that she’s actually putting some things into perspective.

“Allura and Coran are the only survivors of an entire species,” she states sadly, “the only thing for them right now is defeating the Galra, they don’t have a home to go back to. They have a lot their plate.”

Pidge pauses, thinks it over. Continues.

“My family is missing,” she mutters, “I don’t know if they’re alive, or if they’ll even be the same people I remember when I find them,” if she finds them. “I left my mom back on Earth alone, and I don’t know if I’m ever going to see her again. I’m fifteen and going through hormonal changes and having body issues that I can’t talk to anyone up here about.”

It’s the first time she’s stated this aloud, and to Keith of all people. Where is the logic in the universe lately?

“And Lance,” she gulps, “Lance…has issues.”

Pidge is frighteningly sure that Lance has some form of Major Depression or similar mental disorder or maybe even worse. She hasn’t been privy to his worst breakdowns like Hunk has, but she knows for a fact that what they all saw on the training deck is nowhere near how bad it can get, and that’s scary. It’s terrifying, because while Hunk will be ok as long as Lance is around to be his rock, Pidge doesn’t know how ok Lance is even capable of being. She doesn’t know enough about
mental illness to say for sure, and that scares the shit out of her. Because what if Lance needs medication or something? What if Hunk talking him down stops working one day? What if last week was only a precursor to something bigger? They talked big game about doing their best to fix it, but Pidge doesn’t even know how well they’re doing that. Lance acts the most normal with her and Hunk, but how much of that is genuine?

“Pidge?” Keith calls softly.

The green paladin shakes her head. One problem at a time. Keith. Focus on Keith. Talk to Coran about Lance when she gets a chance.

“My point is,” she clears her throat, “we all have a lot on our plates. We’re Defenders of the universe, we’re never not going to have a lot on our plates. So if that’s your reason for not being honest with Shiro about whatever he’s saying that makes you uncomfortable, then it’s illogical. And stupid.”

“Hey!”

“Your feelings aren’t stupid,” Pidge corrects herself, “but the thing you’re letting stop you is. Don’t be your own worst enemy.”

Keith stares at her, as though he’s seeing her for the first time. Pidge feels her face flush. This is why she likes robots.

“What?” she demands, “You better have been listening to me!”

Keith gives a tiny chuckle.

“I was,” he nods, face much calmer than before. “You sounded a lot like Shiro just now, funny enough.”

“No,” Pidge shakes her head. She thinks of a night not far back. Remembers the feelings of hopelessness and rage as she sat in the dark, wondering why she kept losing people and not being able to find them. Remembers snapping at the boy with the ridiculous blue robe and lion slippers and bursting into frustrated tears not too long after. Remembers how he’d sat down next to her, and spoke calmly over her shouting.
“I sounded like him,” she tips her head. Keith doesn’t look, she knows that he knows that he doesn’t need to. They both know who inspires feelings similar to those that their leader inspires. Even if he keeps that ability to himself most of the time.

“I guess you did,” Keith shrugs. “Not now,” he goes, “but the next time that Shiro brings it up, I’ll tell him why I don’t like it.”

“Good,” Pidge grins, feeling triumphant. “Now,” she redirects, “let’s go catch up with them. I need to talk tech with Hunk to let my brain recover from all that sappy bullshit just now.”

Keith laughs freely, “Can I listen?” he asks, “My brain will melt and I’ll forget all about the sappy bullshit.”

“’Deal,” Pidge nods, moving in the direction that Hunk and Lance have gone. “Only if you promise to remember it when it’s necessary.”

“Deal.”

They find Hunk in an animated discussion with some alligator-looking alien, holding something very familiar-looking in his hand. Lance stands off to the side, cackling in delight, but Pidge can see his eyes do a quick scan of them both before he looks away again, seemingly satisfied.

“Guys!” the blue paladin says happily, “Hunk and this dude,” he proceeds to say a name that sounds like nothing Pidge has ever heard in her entire life, “are exchanging horror stories about the hopping pepper!”

Pidge’s eyes widen as she takes in what is indeed one of the most stressful food items that Hunk has ever brought onto the castle. The alligator alien has an entire cart of them.

“Apparently there are these pores that react to water vapor that causes a biological reaction that literally changes the inner composition of the pepper!” Hunk says excitedly, “it turns into meat! Apparently it tastes amazing, but you have to be able to catch it! It’s a shame that ours is still loose, but we can get more here!”
Keith grins at Hunk’s happiness, and Pidge grins at the fact that the red paladin feels better now.

She just wishes that she could say all that she said to him to the person that she really wants to talk to about it. The green paladin looks at Lance, taking in the calm stance and happy disposition. The Phi and the artificial sunset bring out his skin and his eyes. He looks content for the moment. Pidge hates that she can’t stop wondering about how genuine it is. Can’t stop imagining dark thoughts passing behind blue eyes.

It’s wonder how a ragtag group of damaged people like them got saddled with the fate of the Universe.

…

If Lance is occasionally frustrating to be around, then Faraj is an absolute nightmare to be in close quarters with.

“Faraj,” Allura says tightly, attempting to keep her composure. Katal and her personal council are present, it wouldn’t do for her to come off as unbecoming.

“Princess Allura,” the Kvarian smirks in response, red eyes glinting.

But Faraj is just so annoying.

“Would you please answer my question?” she asks quietly. Coran hums amusedly from her right. The Princess can’t see what’s quite so funny.

“You didn’t ask a question,” is the response, “you expressed interest in our progress so far in selecting Contacts for your Paladins.” Faraj shrugs, “But at no point did you actually ask me anything.”

How does a person like this exist? Allura certainly hopes that he doesn’t plan on becoming a Contact for any of her Paladins.

“How well then,” she states, wondering why Katal just allows Faraj to behave as he pleases. The lack of professionalism is astounding, and she does not understand at all why Faraj is here. “Would you kindly divulge your choices for Contacts for the Paladins of Voltron?”
At first she had assumed that the Kvarian was one of Katal’s trusted attendants. And for a while it seemed to be that. But from what she and Coran have observed of the man’s behavior towards others and their behavior towards him, this is not the case. Allura remembers briefly learning that Kvarians are very adept with Quintessence, so she supposes that Faraj’s species has something to do with it.

“Nope,” Faraj grins.

Allura really doesn’t like this person.

“What Faraj is neglecting to explain,” Lieen says reasonably, “is that he has in fact made a suggestion for each individual Paladin, but has yet to ask for the trainer’s agreements.”

“Once everyone is on the same page,” Mirjn continues, “the decision will be made and relayed.”

“I see,” Allura nods, “that makes sense, thank you.”

“I’m told the training here can be a bit…” Coran chimes in, “...intense?”

It’s certainly not easy, from what Allura remembers. She was able to observe a bit of it when they performed the ceremony to tie the Lions to her lifeforce so very long ago, and “intense” is light description. And this was when Voltron didn’t have an enemy like Haggar and the Galra to combat.

“It depends,” Faraj shrugs, “since your Paladins have no working knowledge of Quintessence, it stands to reason that it would be extremely difficult for them. But they’ve piloted the Lions for this long already, so their bodies are likely more accepting of Quintessence manipulation than I imagine most Paladins would be when training here.”

“There’s also the fact that everyone involved in their training will be coming into this with no actual prior experience with the true Lions of Voltron,” Lieen states plainly.

“Indeed,” Allura nods. This is something that she’s been a bit worried about. “You say that you all have experience running this type of training before?”
“This culture was built around the Lions of Voltron,” Katal explains, “all of our training for our Militia, all of our weaponry and technology has roots in the Voltron of old.”

“And the Round Table has done a pretty spectacular job of preserving the knowledge of old,” Faraj chimes in, “the Lions are exactly as we’ve studied.”

Allura nods, but does not respond. She will admit, if what they say is the truth, then it is a mildly worrisome one. It would mean that they more of Voltron than herself and Coran, which isn’t exactly unexpected, and that in and of itself is not very ideal.

Why would they not seek the Lions out then? In all of the time that Kislev has stood, it’s only progressed farther and farther than Altea ever could. Surely they could have put a worthy fight against the Galra?

And then there is the worry of how the process will go. These beings know things that she and Coran do not, and Allura would be lying if she said that she trusted them completely.

Well, she trusts Katal and her council well enough. The trainers are quite eccentric, but none of them strike her as untrustworthy. Tanterian in particular was quite charming.

“Your Paladins are in capable hands,” Faraj smirks again.

This one is the unknown factor. Allura had been willing to overlook how shrouded Faraj’s actual thoughts have been. And then she found out that he would be taking an active role in the training. His careless attitude does not really speak of a great concern for her Paladin’s wellbeing.

She will have to keep an eye on him.

“I believe it.” Coran nods, voice serious. “But do keep in mind that these are children that we bring to you.”

“Coran,” Allura says. She had hoped that he would have let this go by now. They’ve talked about this.
“Children of War,” Mirjn responds plainly, “we will push their limits.”

The Princess feels her advisor tense up a bit. He is not as comfortable with the idea of being hard on the Paladin’s she’s come to learn. This is something that they disagree on. Allura knows where Coran is coming from, she truly does. If keeping the Paladins safe in the castle until they worked out their issues was an option, she would have no hesitation.

But it is not an option. It will *never* be an option.

Not while Haggar lives and plots. Not while the Galra Empire remains active across a huge majority of the Universe. Not while Voltron is needed.

Voltron is always needed.

They can protect the Paladins. They can cherish the Paladins. They can guide the Paladins. But they cannot coddle the Paladins.

“But we will not break them,” Lieen assures. “Their species is fragile, yes?”

“Quite,” Coran responds before Allura can interject.

“But their hearts and wills are strong,” she says proudly. “Their biggest talent is overcoming adversity,” the Princess goes on, “they will persevere through this, and become all the better for it.”

“Well-spoken,” Katal nods in approval, “just as I would expect from the Princess of Altea.”

The title results in a tightening of her chest, but Allura smiles pleasantly through it.

“I am glad that you were the one to orchestrate this,” she says sincerely, bowing her head slightly at Katal.
“I am glad to help,” Katal bows back.

“Everyone is just a bundle of joy today,” Faraj drawls, and Allura has to catch herself before she glares at him. She still isn’t quite sure of his level of authority here. Katal and her council obviously have no direct control over him. “But as fun as discussing logistics are,” the man waves his hand, “it is almost time to end out the day.”

“Ah yes,” Lieen says pleasantly, standing from his chair. “The meditation is upon us,” he states, “we’re honored to have Alteans as guests, I rather think you will enjoy the atmosphere.”

“Oh!” Coran says excitedly, “I’ve read all about the Kislev meditation traditions! I would love to experience it!”

Allura smiles slightly at her advisor’s enthusiasm. But makes a note to speak to him about his reservations when she can.

It’s without much further ceremony that they vacate the small meeting room in one of the smaller corridors of the Hall. Allura finds herself taken by the sheer beauty of this marvelous world. The Phi did not exist when she was last here, and Allura can honestly say that their presence is humbling.

It’s as though the planet’s very breathe flows from the little glowing orbs, bathing the area in gentle light and warmth. Allura does not remember a time where a place afforded her such a level of calm.

Faraj leads, walking down the hallways next to Lieen, with Katal and Mirjn in close step behind them. Allura allows herself to slow just a bit until they are a good way from the others, and Coran obliges her unspoken request and falls into step beside her.

“Yes Princess?” he asks without preamble. They both know what she’s about to ask about.

“Might I ask where your sudden hesitation has come from?” Allura verbalizes it anyway. The orange-haired man does not respond immediately, gathering his thoughts most likely.

“They are not a new occurrence, Princess,” Coran states simply. “I am worried about the Paladins undertaking this training. We’ve spoken about this.”
And they have. Back when she first made the decision to come here. Coran had been concerned that this may not be the best choice in the wake of that unfortunate day. But Allura had maintained that the Paladins did their very best when they had a goal to focus and come together on. Kislev had seemed the perfect choice. One goal, individual training tracts. It would give them the mindset of unity, but would not force them into close quarters save for times of calm. Plus they would learn about Quintessence, and become stronger Paladins as a whole.

And Allura would be able to explore a theory she’s had for a while now.

But now they are here, and despite Coran’s assurances to the Paladin’s faces not even a full quintent ago, these reservations have risen once again.

“Why did you put on such a supportive facade earlier?” Allura decides to ask, “In front of the Paladin?”

“I do not want to cause needless stress,” Coran responds easily, “my reservations are my own, and they would only unsettle the children. They were going to do this with or without my honest opinion, so I decided to present an opinion that would give them feelings of ease as opposed to worry them, while not being deceptive. Nothing I said earlier was a lie Princess, I just decided to sound a bit more excited about it than I actually am.”

Allura stares.

She’s taken aback. Though somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows that she shouldn’t be. Coran has stood at the side of many a ruler and political figure. There is no reason for her to be surprised at how well he can guide a situation if he so chooses, and yet it somehow shocks her every time.

“I see,” she ends up saying, turning to look forward again. “I am sorry that you are wary about this Coran,” she says sincerely, “but I feel as though this is a necessary step.”

“And I agree,” Coran responds just as sincerely, “I’m just finding myself hesitant over the timing.”

Allura nods, but does not say anything. She knows. But it does not change anything. They’re here already.
They move to catch up with their allies.

(His mind is a storm of disjointed thoughts and unconnected events. No order. No calm. No control.

He’s not sure how much time has passed since he’s been in this state, but he instinctively knows that it’s been too long.

It feels familiar. This state of being. He’s been here before. Been like this before. But he can’t remember when. Why can’t he remember? Is there even anything to remember?

No order.

What’s going on? Where is he? These are questions that he feels like he should know the answer to. But he doesn’t. Does he care? He doesn’t really know.

No calm.

Why is he angry? Is he angry? Or is he hurt? It’s hard to tell the difference between the two sometimes. Something is wrong with him, but he doesn’t know what. It makes him angry. Or does it? Does he want to know what’s wrong with him? Maybe he’s relieved. Maybe he isn’t supposed to know what’s wrong with him. Maybe he’s supposed to just accept it. Accept that he wants kil-

No control.

This isn’t him. He doesn’t know what this is, or how it got here, but he knows that it’s not supposed to be here. Only he’s supposed to be here, in his mind. Because it’s his mind. Why doesn’t it feel like his mind?

“...o... ?”
A voice cuts through the madness. Who is that? Why are they here? They shouldn’t be here. It’s dangerous.

“H...ud....ke..up”

Still the voice persist. Sharp and chilly. It slices through the madness with a surprising level of ease. That won’t do. That’s too much power. Too much power over him. The voice cannot stay. It has to leave.

“Yo...Shi...hell’s wro...? G...up”

The voice does not leave. It stays. Powerful, sharp, and cool. Like a pillar of ice amidst the raging storm. How can it persist.

“Dude...rry me. I’m abo...eith...Hun...Are...sick?”

Like a pillar of ice. If it won’t melt, maybe it will crumble. He has to destroy it.

“Shiro!”

...

Shiro gasps as he shoots upwards, only vaguely registering the yelp of someone near him as a head moves back from colliding with his.

What?

Shiro activates his arm immediately.

“Whoa!” a familiar voice calls, “Dude, chill out! It’s me!”
Like a pillar of ice.

“Lance?” the black paladin calls softly, looking over slowly.

The room is darker than he remembers it being, and Shiro has the wherewithal to perceive that quite a bit of time has passed. The Phi of the room glow a soft blue, just barely giving a dimness that he uses to examine the blue paladin.

Lance looks worried, and Shiro feels his chest tighten just a little bit. It’s the exact look that his friend would give him before the entire debacle last week, and it would make him hopeful if he didn’t know that Lance worries over people naturally. It does not mean that things are better.

“Are you alright?” the blue paladin asks softly, “seems like you were having a hell of a nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” Shiro doesn’t remember anything that occurred after he made the decision to just lie down until it was time to go back to the Hall.

The Hall.

Shit.

“How long has it been?” he asks with wide eyes.

“Long enough that the weird meditation thing has passed and everyone is chowing down right about now,” Lance answers quietly.

Shiro groans. Some leader he is. Can’t even manage his time right.

“If it helps,” Lance offers, “Allura explained it away. No one was mad or offended or anything.”
It helps a little bit, but not nearly enough as he needs to not feel like a complete idiot.

“She kept saying that you must have been experiencing the ‘lagging’ super bad,” Lance says amusedly, apparently deciding to just ignore Shiro’s angst for the moment. “I think she was trying to describe jetlag, guess we never really explained the concept well enough.”

Lance had said that the others were currently eating probably.

“Did you leave dinner to come here?” he asks guiltily.

“Keith would have come,” Lance shrugs, “but Tanterian was super interested in hearing about the Blade of Mamora. Apparently he’s encountered a few of them or something.”

“I…” Shiro swallows. What has been going on with him since looking at that damn painting? “I’m sorry.”

His apology feels loaded. Of course he’s sorry for missing the meditation and forcing Lance to leave dinner to check up on him, but Shiro’s sorry for so much more than he can’t even pull the sentiments out of the word.

Lance notices, and regards Shiro with a carefully blank expression, blue eyes gleaming sharply in the glow of the Phi.

“I was beat anyway,” the blue paladin mutters, “I think we all were. Keith and Pidge looked about ready to fall out. The space jetlag is real.”

The joke is delivered flatly and without any real feeling behind it. Shiro wonders how they even managed to get along around the others, if there’s still this much awkwardness present?

He has no one to blame but himself though, and Shiro accepts this. He really does. He’s been too hesitant to make a move to follow through on his promise, and Lance had made it starkly clear that the ball was in Shiro’s court. It’s up to the leader to bridge the gap, but he hasn’t yet.

“I…” Shiro begins, but stops. He can’t focus. There’s too much on his mind.
He doesn’t remember what he dreamed about, but he knows that it was unpleasant, and it’s got him all screwed in the head. Well, more than he usually is anyway. Shiro needs to go see Black the next chance he gets. His Lion can always settle him when he gets cagey like this.

“I brought you some food,” Lance says with small smile, “I left down on the first level, but I think I’ll go get it.”

“Oh,” Shiro nods, “Ok.”

He’s such a mess.

Lance pivots and makes his way to the door, stopping just short of leaving.

“I wish I could help you more,” the blue paladin mutters with his back to Shiro, “but I don’t really know how to go about it right now.”

“It’s alright,” Shiro finds himself saying, “you don’t have to worry about me.”

“But I’m going to anyway,” Lance’s shoulders shrug. “So,” he says strongly, “you’re going to have to find a way to un-tie your tongue around me when we’re alone Shiro.”

Shiro just stares at Lance’s back, fingers flexing. He wants to reach out. Moves his arms to reach out. But he stops short and doesn’t say anything. Now isn’t the time, not when all Shiro can focus on is asking himself what’s happening with this place.

:Lance seems to know this as well, that now isn’t the time, because he turns halfway so that Shiro can see him give a tiny quirk of the lips.

“And when you do,” Lance says, “I’ll be waiting,” and then walks out.

Shiro stares after him, and then looks back down at his arm.
“Like a pillar of ice…” he mutters thoughtlessly.

Chapter End Notes

So I think the most noteworthy thing to talk about is Pidge and her worrying about Lance. So basically, him telling her that he was in a mental ward for a night really hit. I feel as though Pidge is the type of person who would approach the topic of mental illness in a very panicky faction, because she doesn't know enough about it to feel confident in confronting. This is something that will be touched on in the future, but not be a very big focus to the overall story arc. A lot of it is Pidge not knowing how she can help Lance and freaking over it.

We also get to have a bit of Pidge and Keith friendship bonding! I feel as though her logical approach to things is a good thing for Keith who is bad at feelings.

We also get to see a bit into Allura's thoughts so far. I won't say too much there, because there's more to come on it, except to explain that Coran can be amazing at controlling how he comes off. He has to be, right lol?

I won't say much about about the ending scenes with Shiro's dream sequence and the interaction with Lance at the end. Only that I hope that the dream sequence wasn't too hard to follow. I tried something kind of weird there.

The flashbacks are also amounting something eventually.

Ugh, so many sub-plots, I hope I'm managing them well hahaha. Anyways, there's no way that you'll have to wait that long again for the next chapter, because it is in fact half way done by the time of this posting. I won't commit to a time frame, but stay tuned for more soon!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!