"There is no escape for you, Paladin," Haggar whispered, voice echoing from from the very depths of his mind and filling Lance with a horror and dread he could not begin to describe. "Not from this ship. Not from death." She let out a soft laugh that rang with dark promise. "And especially not from me." / In which Zarkon desires the Black Lion and the Blue Paladin pays the price.

**Timeline notes:** Takes place during season two, prior to forming an alliance with the Blades of Marmora and the subsequent events that follow.
Warning notes: No pairings, all team-bonding, platonic relationships and family. This story will be dark and violent at times, so please consider that before reading. Violence warnings include: physical violence and at times graphic imagery, emotional and mental torture. The story is being kept at a T-rating, but some chapters/sections could border on M. Thank you for reading and enjoy!

Additional notes: At this point it's safe to say that all of the events in the *Burning Bright, Shining Strong, Stand Together Now, Carry On* series I have written detailing Keith and Shiro's meeting and history is canon in *Color* and many moments of them are referenced in this fic. You do not have to read the series to understand what happens in this fic, but if you are looking for some additional reading and backstory then please be my guest :)!

As Color Fades Away Supplementals
*Color* has an *amazing* bunch of fans. ♥ Truly, I am blown away by the love. Be sure to check out these beautiful tributes!
Please note, spoilers are involved so proceed with caution if you're new to the fic!
*Fanart master post*
*Soundtrack score: What Lies Within*
*Video trailer*
Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A sizzling bolt of purple energy cut through the deep abyss of space, arcing and bouncing around the platform where a towering figure stood, hands splayed wide and eyes glowing against the canvas as he searched and searched. He would find it. Nothing would stop him this time. Nothing would—

The power cut off with a blink as one of the Druids standing around the Emperor of the Galran Empire collapsed and the entire circle was interrupted.

Zarkon roared out his displeasure and smote the pathetic creature where he knelt.

"The Black Lion will be mine," Zarkon growled, fists clenching at his side and trembling not from exhaustion but a bone-deep anger and frustration that his search continued to be in apparent vain. He had not been able to make contact with the Black Lion for over two movements, no matter how much energy the Druids conjured for his search. Pathetic creatures.

"These parlor tricks," he snarled at the exhausted Druids, all collapsed around him, "are wasting my time."

"Perhaps we need a new plan," Haggar advised from above and Zarkon rounded on her, purple eyes flashing dangerously.

"I will not cease my search for the Black Lion!"

No matter that Haggar's Druids were incapable of assisting him further. His eyes narrowed. She was the one responsible for this failure. She would suffer in his pain.

She raised her hands placatingly as his own crackled with the power she had bestowed him. "I meant no such thing, my lord. Merely a suggestion on how to bring the Black Lion to us, rather than this ceaseless chase across the galaxy."

He growled low in his throat at the dig but had to acknowledge the chase had indeed been fruitless. He gave the slightest inclination of his head for her to continue. Haggar's Druids may have failed him thus far but his head Druid was a powerful, deadly force to be reckoned with. While no thought was above his own it was a foolish move of a leader to not use the resources at his disposal.

And Haggar was a valuable resource indeed.

"We set a trap to capture one of the Paladins," she said. "And then use them as bait to lure the Black Lion to us."

"They are no fools," Zarkon countered. "They will see it is a trap." This was her plan? Foolish.

"Yes," Haggar agreed to his surprise. "But we give them no choice. Either the Black Lion surrenders itself to us or we kill the Paladin in the most painful way possible. The Paladins of Voltron would not so easily abandon one of their own. And should the ploy fail..." she gave a shrug. "Then we have at the very least weakened them as they will no longer be able to form Voltron without their fifth member." Her lips twisted. "It is perhaps an idea my lord might entertain? A more productive use of time than the... elimination of my Druids."
Zarkon couldn't quite hide his own chuckle as her nose wrinkled in distaste as she looked at the smote of ash where one such creature had stood but minutes ago.

"And you believe you can accomplish such a feat?"

Haggar gave a cruel smile. "Absolutely, my lord. You will have a Paladin in your possession by the end of the movement and the Black Lion soon after."

Very well. He would indulge her for now. And should she fail...

Then it would not be a Paladin screaming in agony.

"Then do it," Zarkon commanded. "And do not fail me."

xxx

"Good morning my fellow Paladins!" Lance greeted cheerily as he strode into the kitchen. And what was there not to be cheerful about? The sun was shining (somewhere he was sure), he'd had a lovely hot shower and Coran had done the laundry yesterday so his favorite jacket was nice and clean.

Pidge looked blearily up at him from her tablet as he sauntered over. "Why are you such a morning person?" she groused. "Tone it down."

"Aww, did my little buddy have a long night?" Lance asked, sliding in right next to her and draping an arm around her shoulders. With the ease of practice he ignored the ticking above her eyebrow.

"You know what I say; rest before work!"

"Of course you do," muttered Keith, hunched over his food goo and eyes hooded too with sleep.

"It's why you never do anything."

Lance gasped in mock surprise. "Keith! What a cruel thing to say! Of course I do things. Why, yesterday I had a very relaxing nap and then a chat with Blue, and then the mice and I designed a new game for them with the pillows in the main room."

"So, nothing important."

"Hey!" Lance brushed aside the tiny tick of real hurt at Keith's statement. Just because he didn't dedicate all of his free time to training didn't make his own activities unimportant. Besides, it wasn't his fault entirely. He didn't have projects like Hunk and Pidge or responsibilities like Shiro and Coran hadn't needed anything cleaned or fixed and the idea of spending what relaxation time he had between training and missions and battles doing more training was insane.

Keith just didn't know how to have fun, he'd concluded. And any attempts to fix that had been met with a mixture of glares or confusion to the point where Lance had stopped trying, even though he was still trying to be friendly. Something Keith apparently didn't know much about either.

"Would you two cut it out?" Pidge snapped, shrugging Lance's arm off of her and it clunked on table. "I don't care what you have or haven't done. I have been tracking a Galra supply ship for the better part of the night and just want to eat my breakfast in peace!"

"Ooh, what for?" Lance asked, excitement kicking back into gear as tried to get a look at her tablet, but the resulting lines of text and code meant nothing to him. "Are we going on a mission?"

"Up to Allura and Shiro," she replied, back to typing while her food goo remained untouched. So much for eating breakfast, Lance thought. But when she was this focused on something Pidge found
It hard to concentrate on the normal things humans needed to function. Like eating and sleeping. He just sighed inwardly and hoped Shiro could break her out of her work and get her to eat. He'd tried himself, but it always resulted in being yelled at or food goo being chucked at him. And getting that stuff out of his hair was ridiculously hard.

"What's up to me?" Shiro asked, strolling into the room with a towel about his neck having clearly come from the training deck.

"Pidge found a Galra supply ship," Lance said.

He felt his smallest teammate glare at him, made all the more scary with the light reflecting off her glasses. "Lance…"

"Oh? You wanted to tell him. Lo siento, my bad."

Shiro gave a soft huff of laughter and turned his attention to Pidge. "I'm assuming you have some more information?"

She nodded, wrenching her gaze away from burning holes into Lance. "My tracking algorithm for Galra radio signals went off around 0200. I traced it back to a supply ship coming in from the sixth quadrant of our current location. It's moving slowly and its shields don't seem to be up." She paused, frowning at the tablet. "It almost seems like it may have been attacked."

"Attacked?" Lance and Keith both asked at the same time.

"Jinx!" Lance cried, pointing a finger at Keith. "You owe me a soda!"

"What are you on abo-?"

"No talking! That's two sodas!"

"The two of you, please," Shiro said, rubbing at his head. "Lance, no jinxing games. Pidge, what makes you think that?"

"I've never seen a Galra ship moving like this before," she said. "It's practically limping along. If it is as defenseless as it seems it could be a great opportunity to plug into their systems and find out more information."

"Or it could be a trap," Lance pointed out.

"Really?" Keith deadpanned. "Never would have thought of that."

"Does it appear to be manned?" Shiro asked, ignoring them.

"I don't see any telltale Galra heat signatures, but it likely still has sentries if it's still moving. Otherwise it'd be dead in the water."

"We'll see what the Princess says," Shiro said after a moment. "It could be a good lead if we approach cautiously, but I don't want to take any undue risks."

They hadn't had a Galra sighting though in several days nor any distress signals that the Castle of Lions had been able to pick up. It was a little disconcerting and as of now they were just traveling about without any real direction. The only planets they'd recently encountered were uninhabited and other than providing a training ground for the Lions they hadn't even been able to make any new alliances.
If there was someone else out there attacking Galran ships it could explain why they'd not experienced any attacks themselves. But who would have the ability to go toe-to-toe with Galra? They knew there were freedom fighters out there (if the bounty hunters could be believed) but enough to take on a Galra ship?

Allura though thought it was an excellent idea when Shiro told her about it after breakfast, so long as all necessary precautions were taken. It was decided they would go down in the Green Lion thanks to Pidge's cloaking technology (and Lance whined not for the first time when his Lion would get cloaking technology too and had his foot stamped on painfully by Pidge with a huff that it took time and she had more important projects right now) and they would infiltrate the building.

Shiro would stay with Pidge so she could use his arm to access the Galran tech and the rest would provide security in the case there were rogue drones or this was indeed a trap. Allura and Coran would be standing by with the castle ready to dive in should they need firepower until the Paladins could get back to their Lions in the hangars.

And the first part of the mission had gone without a hitch. They'd docked the Green Lion on a landing deck and had encountered no resistance as Shiro opened the bay door for them. There were signs of damage on the outside of the ship, but nothing severe enough that seemed to indicate why anyone would have abandoned the vessel. It set everyone on edge.

Lance's comment of calling it a "haunted ghost ship," had Hunk moaning in fear and Keith telling him to "grow up" and Shiro letting out a low sigh and asking them to please focus on the mission.

Pidge had practically dragged their leader down a hallway, eyes fixated on her screen, and found the server room within minutes with still no enemy activity.

"This shouldn't take too long," she said, directing Shiro to place his hand on the access panel while she activated the system, already completely focused on the primary goal.

"Stay on alert, Paladins," Shiro cautioned as was tethered to the machine. "This seems too easy."

The remaining three Paladins exited the server room (which had only one entry door) and set up a perimeter down the hallway. Keith was the picture of seriousness while Lance leaned against the wall, his bayard held loosely in one hand.

Hunk, who had been down in the engine room with Coran all morning working on a filtration system upgrade, placed himself between the two with an internal sigh.

He'd known Lance since they were kids and he could tell that despite the appearance of aloofness, his best friend was bothered by something and he'd bet it had something to do with Shiro's reprimand. Whereas the scolding had Keith straightening up and resolutely ignoring Lance, it had seemed to make the Blue Paladin droop.

"What's up?" he asked quietly, mimicking Lance's pose although he kept his own bayard firmly gripped and his eyes on the passageway.

"Shiro's mad at me," Lance muttered, idly kicking his leg back and forth, heel hitting the wall with a dull clanging.

"He's not mad," Hunk said carefully. "Just... Just a little frustrated, I think."

Lance's eyes widened behind his visor. "You're taking his side?"

"I'm just looking at things from his perspective," Hunk said soothingly, reaching his free arm out to
give Lance's arm a quick squeeze. "Shiro is our leader and we're a team and as a team we need to be able to count on each other." And Keith and Lance's bickering and jabs had been rising in the last few days. Hunk blamed it on the lack of Galra sightings; the lull of quiet was unnerving and reminded too much to Hunk of the calm before the storm. Something was brewing and Keith seemed to be more attuned to it than most.

"He starts it," Lance grumbled. "I'm just trying to be friendly." He just wanted everyone to get along and have fun every now and then and it wasn't his fault that Keith was so uptight about everything and seemed to take it as a personal offence that Lance didn't live and breathe fighting the Galra and being a Paladin like he did.

"I know," Hunk said, giving Lance's arm another comforting squeeze. "We all know. But you need to give Keith some space. Being a part of a group like this is new for him and he's still getting used to the dynamic." Hunk didn't really know Keith, not at all, but he did know that Keith was the type that seemed to prefer quiet and silence and even at the Garrison he had always been alone. Being thrown into this situation and forced to be around people so often, even with a building as gigantic as the Castle of Lions, had to be hard to adjust to.

Lance sighed, but did not look quite as glum as he had before. "You're right. I'll try. But," and his voice turned to a whine that had Hunk smiling, "he's just so… Keith-like. You know? It's like he doesn't know how to have fun and doesn't want anyone else to either."

"Hey," Keith said lowly as he peered into the dark hall beyond. "Stop talking. Something's coming."

Lance shut his mouth right away and both he and Hunk turned to look in Keith's direction.

First mistake, Lance realized as he heard the whine of a gun powering up from the opposite hall he was supposed to be watching.

He whirled around but was a second too late as a purple ray shot forward and struck his armor straight in the chest. It hurt, but the armor held and Lance fired a return strike and cheered when it collided dead-center with the sentry and it collapsed in a shower of sparks.

His relief was short-lived though as his own blast revealed there were quite a large number of sentries all hurrying straight for him. Hunk had left his side to give Keith long-distance support before they were overwhelmed and he had no other choice but to set up and pick them off one by one.

He had excellent aim, if he did say so himself. He proclaimed it on a daily basis to normally eye rolls from Keith and Pidge as they took it as him showing off (again), but he was glad that one of the talents he loudly claimed was actually legit. It may be his only real talent that paled in comparison to the rest of the amazing skills of Team Voltron but he could shoot.

So he did. He set up each shot, not wasting a single pull of the trigger as he fired into the oncoming ranks. But they were too fast, too many, and he couldn't take them all down.

"Uh, guys?" he called, activating his shield and thrusting out against the sentries, who had clambered over their fallen brethren and were trying to mob him with sheer numbers. "A little help?"

But both Hunk and Keith found themselves with their hands full as a ceiling vent in the middle of the hall burst open and sentries came pouring down in a metallic clatter. Keith was in the thick of it, his sword slashing with every turn and Hunk was firing into the horde of metal, careful to aim his bayard away from his teammates.
"Paladins, what is your status?" Shiro crackled in their comms.

"It was a trap!" Lance shouted, finally clearing out a small pocket of breathing space and ramming his shield under a sentry’s chin and dislocating its head before another one swiped at him and he was forced to block, stumbling backwards at the impact. "We're being overrun!"

"Just another minute," came Pidge's voice, higher than normal as she tended to sound when she was worried. "Can you hold them?"

"We will hold," Keith said, not sounding out of breath in the slightest and Lance felt jealous in the face of that calm while he was starting to feel a little overwhelmed and hysterical.

There were so many.

And they weren’t stopping.

"Speak for yourself," he snapped back instead, taking another blaster hit to his armor and trying hard not to panic as that one he felt a wash of heat.

His armor was starting to suffer under the steady barrage.

Close combat had never been his strength. Shiro and Allura had been pushing him to improve on hand-to-hand, but no matter how hard he tried he just didn't measure up to the others. Not Keith's natural talent in everything, Pidge's agility and cleverness, Hunk's strength and brains and he didn’t even dare try and compare himself to Shiro.

He hadn't even been able to conjure up a good bayard backup for close range fighting. He figured if he at least had a sword like Keith he'd be able to do something, but his bayard stubbornly refused to be anything but a large, powerful gun (although at least no one else had had any success with changing forms and that made him feel slightly better) and he did not have the strength like Hunk to clobber people with it. He wished he did though. Hunk looked so cool when he did it.

So he did what he could now that he was boxed in, blocking the blasts with his shield and using it as a battering ram when he found a window to do so. He was surrounded now, sentries on all sides, and it was taking all he had not to call out for help again because neither Keith or Hunk had and if they could do this then he should be able to too. A shot struck him sharply from behind in the leg, right where the armor bent behind the knee and was most vulnerable.

Lance screamed.

He couldn't help it, the pain so intense as he could literally feel his skin burning as it buckled below him. The sentries wasted no time, continuing their relentless onslaught and Lance felt more and more hits smashing into his armor, warning indicators flashing in his visor that its integrity was becoming compromised. He wasn't such much as even fighting back now as he was trying to keep the shield between his body and their blasters while tears of pain blurred his vision.

And then in a swoop of Galra purple and Altean teal, Shiro was there, arm glowing and forcibly slicing down all of the sentries that Lance had been unable to defeat and Hunk was crouching next to him and pulling him to his feet, forcing him to run even as each step sent agony racing up his injured leg that refused to hold any weight.

Lance made out that all of the sentries Hunk and Keith had been fighting were bits of mangled metal and he felt the all too familiar feeling of shame wash over him that he had not been able to do the same. Hadn't been able to defeat the enemy, had gotten injured...
He had messed up.

Again.

They were running faster now to the point where Lance felt like he was being dragged and Pidge yelled at them to go even quicker as the self-destruct sequence she’d initiated would be going off in thirty seconds.

Hunk hefted Lance over his shoulder with all the grace of a sack of potatoes, but Lance found he couldn't even care as such an action cut off the worst of the stabbing agony that was making up his leg. They made it to the Green Lion with seconds to spare, cramming in and Pidge throwing the thrusters into gear as explosions sounded from inside the ship.

The Green Lion blasted away from the Galran ship with all the speed her form carried, and even then they still felt the shockwave as the ship imploded behind them.

"Everyone all right?" Shiro asked as they made their way to the castle.

"We're fine," Keith answered for them. But then his eyes flicked to the Blue Paladin, who Hunk had gently settled on the floor behind the pilot's chair. "Except Lance."

"Yeah?" Lance retorted, voice high with pain even as he tried to swallow it down. "Well maybe if you'd come when I said I needed backup—"

"You shouldn't need backup for a mission like this," Keith said. "We were able to fend them off. Why couldn't you?"

"Enough, Keith," Shiro said, earning a huff and Keith turned away, gaze going out the front window as space rushed by them. Shiro crouched down next to Lance and more gently said, "Are you all right, buddy? Do you think you need a healing pod?"

"Dunno," Lance said, even though he knew he probably did. Shiro moved his hand down to examine it and even that light touch against his armored knee had him nearly crying again. "Dios mío, Shiro!" He tried to withdraw and hated the whimper that was pulled from him at the action.

"Sorry, sorry," the Black Paladin said, pulling his hand back. "If it's that bad though I think you do need a pod. Coran?"

"Already on it," came the chipper voice of the royal advisor. "We'll have you fixed up in a jiffy, Number Three!"

"And the mission?" Allura asked over the comm. "Was it successful?"

"Not sure yet, Princess," Pidge said. "We need to go over the data I downloaded. But it looks like this ship was supposed to be carrying some pretty valuable cargo and it was removed following the earlier attack. If I can track down the coordinates of the drone ships that took it, it could be valuable."

"It seems to be sound," Shiro said, having been present to Pidge's mumbling as the data downloaded. "The sentries remaining on the ship were likely not activated during the initial battle and came online when Pidge started hacking the system."

"That is most excellent news then," Allura said. "Great work, Paladins. I shall see you on the bridge."

They arrived a minute later and landed without incident in the Green Lion's hangar. Shiro instructed
everyone to disarm and report to the bridge, save for Lance and Hunk to report to the infirmary.

"I can walk," Lance protested as Hunk made to sling him over his shoulder again. Or, well, limp. But he could feel Keith's eyes on him and he flushed, ducking his head. No doubt his fellow Paladin was embarrassed by how easily Lance had been taken down. He needed to at least try and save a little face. Hunk sighed but allowed Lance to loop an arm over his shoulders and assisted him in his painful hobbling hop.

Once the other Paladins had branched off towards the living quarters though, Lance slumped bonelessly, leg burning, and reflexive tears trying to make themselves known. Hunk gave him a sympathetic smile and scooped him into his arms and Lance tucked his head beneath Hunk's chin.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you," Hunk said softly, guilt pooling in his stomach at the clear pain Lance was in and the way he had seen him fold up at Keith's words.

"It's my own fault," Lance mumbled. "Keith was right. I should have been able to fight them off."

"And I should have been there to assist you," Hunk said, tightening his arms around his best friend. "Your weapon isn't good for close combat and we know that. It won't happen again."

"No," Lance said nearly inaudible. "It won't."

And Hunk could only sigh and hold Lance a little closer.

Coran was waiting for them next to a cryo-pod and clucked his tongue sympathetically as they came into view. "That does indeed look painful," he said as Hunk settled Lance onto the nearby bench. "Let's just get his armor off you and into the pod you go."

That was easier said than done. Coran expertly knew where all of the latches were, but the blast to the leg had melted the connector on the side and they'd needed to physically pry him out of the leg guard with what appeared to be the Altean version of a crowbar.

Lance had been unable to hold back a cry as the armor was finally pulled free and blinked back the hot tears that had sprung up again.

Coran winced at the sight of burned flesh and patted Lance on the shoulder. "That was a pretty lucky shot by those sentries," he said. "I'll see what I can do about enforcing the armor there a bit."

"Thanks," Lance said breathlessly as Hunk picked him up once more and sent a lancing pain down his leg that seemed to hurt even worse than before. His chest and arms were littered with small bruises too from the sentries' guns and although they were nothing like the pain in his leg they were throbbing with a dull hurt now. It only got worse as Hunk manhandled him as gently as possible into a cryosuit over his underamour.

"I'd say about two hours," Coran advised as Lance was placed into the pod, having to balance uncomfortably on one leg as the other hurt too much to put down, which only added to his growing unease in the small space. "You'll be feeling right as ravioli once you're finished." He reached in and gave Lance's shoulder a squeeze, eyes softening in understanding.

Lance's throat was thick again and he tried his best to give Coran a smile of thanks.

"It's right as rain," Hunk corrected as Coran booted up the sequence and the front of the pod began to slide down.

"Such a strange saying," Coran said shaking his head. "On Altea rain is very painful
"On Earth it's actually very pleasant," Hunk said. "Although I could really go for some ravioli now. I wonder if we have any of that Kersphek cheese left from our last supply."

Lance's smile fell as a familiar sense of panic took root as he was sealed fully in. He hated being put into the pods while he was awake. He loved the results, sure, but ever since the castle had tried to kill him in one he was not all that fond of the cramped space. Or any cramped space, really. Or dark ones. And both of the above? He shuddered and it had nothing to do with the growing cold.

It would be just a few seconds now, he knew, before the cryo part of the pod took over. He just had to make it for a few more seconds.

Happier thoughts, he told himself, for those last ticks. Ravioli they'd been talking about? He would really like some ravioli now too. Maybe Hunk would have some ready when he came out of the pod.

And with that in mind, Lance succumbed to the healing powers of the chamber.

xxx

"They have taken the bait," Haggar informed Zarkon with a low bow. "We will commence the next phase shortly."

He scowled at her instead. "I grow impatient, Haggar. It has been four days since you proposed this plan and I have yet to see results." All he had seen were wasted opportunities to strike at the Paladins as instead he recalled units in their last known location and had purposefully had to cripple one of his ships. Haggar assured him it was well worth it.

"They are coming soon, my lord. By tomorrow's end we will have a Paladin in our custody and the Black Lion to shortly follow."

Zarkon inclined his head a fraction. It was at least a better timeline than the "soon" Haggar had been feeding him and if it did not work he knew whose screams he would hear for wasting his time like this. "Good. Then dismissed."

She bowed low and disappeared in a whirl of black lightning.

Zarkon allowed himself a smile in his empty audience hall, gaze drawn to the darkness of space across the room. If this did plot of Haggar's did work... then he would soon be in possession of the Black Lion and Voltron would fall completely and utterly.

And then none would stand in his way.

Chapter End Notes

This is my first Voltron fanfiction! I am primarily posting it on fanfiction.net under my penname of IcyPanther, but recently joined with this site and thought As Color Fades Away would be a good test run for it :)

Thanks and hope you enjoy the story! I appreciate your comments and encouragement!
By the time Lance emerged from the cryo-pod, he knew for sure he'd missed lunch and by the rumbling in his stomach it had to be approaching dinner.

Coran was waiting for him outside the pod with a fresh change of clothes, blanket and a cheery wave, helping him down from the high step and draping the blanket over his shoulders. Lance held it together, teeth clacking in his mouth as they tended to do as he exited the frozen air of the pod and into the still chilly infirmary.

"You are looking much refreshed," the Altean said as Lance took an experimental step forward and released a sigh of relief as not even a trickle of pain rode up his leg. "I do apologize though, Number Three. My analysis for your injuries was rather off."

"Yeah?" Lance asked, swallowing thickly as he took the proffered clothes. His throat always tasted like cotton after he got out of the pods. Coran was prepared though and offered him a neon-orange beverage that strangely tasted a little like kiwi. It was soothing though and Lance drained it in one gulp.

"It's miraculous that you were walking on it at all," the advisor said, settling himself on a bench as Lance retreated beyond a screen to change in private. "Your muscle was ripped completely through. Nothing these lovely pods can't fix though."

Lance tried not to shudder. Such an injury would have laid him out for weeks if not months back on Earth and he had no doubt the recovery would have been as successful either. He flexed his foot again as he balanced while pulling on his pants, relieved when it continued to respond as normal. It was just another stark reminder of how different it was out here and that he, at only seventeen years old, was fighting in a war.

His mamá would be terrified if she knew. If Lance thought too hard on all it was they were doing and expected to accomplish-a group of teenagers and two aliens -he would admit he was a little terrified too.

So he tried not to, turning his thoughts to another matter.

"Where is everyone?" Lance asked, now fully dressed his casual clothes. It's not like he'd expect Keith to be there when he came out of the pod and Shiro was too busy and of course Allura as princess was too, but he was a bit torn that Hunk and Pidge weren't considering his injury had been more serious than they'd thought. Maybe they didn't know that though? He allowed himself that comfort.

"They've been on the bridge for the past several varga," Coran said and Lance inclined his head. "Your mission was very successful indeed, although I will allow them to fill you in. And the Yellow Paladin has been cooking up a storm since the meeting finished. I daresay everyone should be heading to the kitchens for dinner about now."

Lance grinned, spirits brightening. He'd been fortunate enough to be a connoisseur of Hunk's delectable cooking from a young age and he knew that no matter what strange alien ingredients his best friend had to work with he would make something delicious. "You don't have to tell me twice!
Lead on to the food!"

He followed his nose to the kitchen where a most heavenly smell was wafting from the stove. "What's cooking, hermano?" he asked, stepping into the room and making his way to Hunk, decked out in an apron and huge oven mitts.

"Lance!" Hunk whirled around, bandana tails smacking Lance in the face, as he scooped him up in a giant hug that Lance eagerly returned it. "You're up!"

"When I heard you were cooking actual food I couldn't stay in there any longer," Lance joked, even as he squeezed Hunk a little longer than the situation probably warranted and Hunk returned it, understanding in those warm honey eyes. "What's on the menu anyways?"

"I'm hoping something that resembles lasagna when it's done," Hunk said, releasing Lance from the embrace to peer into the oven window. "Not sure how well that weird wheat-stalk we got from the market is going to cook up as a noodle, but it looked normal going in."

"If normal is lime green for pasta," Pidge noted from where she was already sitting at the kitchen table, the ever-present tablet propped up in front of her although her attention was for once not on it and instead on her Garrison teammates. She gave Lance what she hoped was a kind smile when he glanced over at her. Coran had reported several hours ago that the injury was much more extreme than they'd originally thought and her initial feelings of amusement that Lance had to end up in a cryo-pod again (could he not make it through one mission without one?) had been replaced with a mixture of guilt for even thinking such a thing was humorous and a sick worry that Lance was always getting hurt enough to need one. She didn't like seeing him like that or knowing he was in pain, and oftentimes because he took a hit aimed at someone else.

But she swallowed down her worry and turned her smile into something lighter, more teasing, more normal for her and Lance. "Good morning, sleeping beauty. Feeling better?"

Lance grinned at her in return. "You know it! Those pods are like magic!" He sniffed the air appreciatively. "But still not as magical as Hunk's ability to turn alien food into home cooked delicacies."

"It does smell rather delicious," Allura said, entering the kitchen with the mice riding on her shoulder. She turned her attention to Lance, who had slid into his customary seat next to Pidge. "And you are feeling better, Paladin?"

"The Princess is asking about little old me?" Lance smiled cheekily at her. "I'm so touched!"

And he really was. Allura was so busy and had so much riding on her shoulders (and he didn't mean the mice, who were disembarking to scurry towards their bowls of food goo) that her concern warmed him to his toes and he bit back any further comment that would earn him an ear twist or grimace from the princess.

"I shall take that as a yes," she said with a shake of her head, sliding into her own chair at the head of the table. Lance mentally patted himself on the back and based on the stare Pidge was giving him she too was surprised as his restraint when being given one-on-one attention from Allura. He offered her a shrug and reached for the silverware, going to stack it into a structure while he waited for dinner. He'd just gotten out of the pod and had no desire to go back in one.

Keith and Shiro entered a few moments later and Coran re-emerged from the pantry he'd headed for when he and Lance reached the kitchen with several odd looking bottles in hand. Allura's eyes lit up at the sight though. "Coran, I had no idea we had any bullarum left! Oh, what a treat!"
"Bullarum?" Lance sounded the word out on his tongue.

"It is delectable," Allura said, jewel eyes sparkling and Lance forced himself not to stare at how pretty they were. "It is very bubbly and warm and oh, you must try it!"

Lance absolutely wanted to do so. On the premise it didn't taste like nunvill. He eyed the bottle more distrustfully then as Coran came over to the table.

"I felt that on the eve of such an important mission we should have something to celebrate its soon-to-be success with," Coran said, popping open the bottle and pouring what appeared to be a clear liquid with tiny bubbles into glasses around the table.

"Okay, I'm lost," Lance said. "What mission? How long was I out?" He said it jokingly but his stomach twinged that he was the only one out, even though he knew it was impossible for him to have known anything since he'd been in a pod. He grimaced to himself. If he'd only avoided that shot he could have been on the bridge and a part of the mission discussion with the rest of them.

Shiro was quick to assure him it had only been for the afternoon and a promise to explain it all after dinner. "I'm just glad you're feeling better," he'd smiled gently and Lance had ducked his head at the show of concern.

The bullarum ended up tasting quite similar to sparkling grape juice and it tickled all the way down the throat in a very pleasant way. And Hunk had outdone himself with his alien lasagna although it was a bit crunchy and, as Pidge had noted, lime green.

Soon though plates were being scraped clean, the mice finishing up the last few noodles, and Shiro cleared his throat. Lance sat up straighter, determined to listen well since this rebrief was for his benefit. To his surprise there seemed to be an attentiveness from the others too and while he expected it from Keith (he never relaxed) to see Hunk and Pidge looking excited and Hunk nudging his foot under the table was a bit different.

Lance’s stomach gave a flop of nerves and excitement. Something was about to happen.

Shiro started by explaining that the data they had pulled from the ship showed that it had been transporting some sort of item that was apparently of such value it was listed only as "xxx" in the ship's logs but given the high security detail around it and the fact it was the only item on the cargo ship inventory it was indeed something special.

The ship had been attacked, by who Shiro said they could not determine, and a set of sentry-manned drones had removed the item and abandoned the ship.

Pidge jumped in and explained that she had managed to copy the drone signal and piggybacked onto it and sent the coordinates to herself, but to her surprise the drone was no longer pinging as moving nor located in space.

"So it crashed?" Lance clarified, but he got a head shake and Hunk's grin across the table widened.

"Not quite," Pidge flipped her tablet around although Lance couldn't make heads or tails of it. "It did, but not in the boom, explosion way. The planet it fell to... it's Xinsthes."

Lance looked at her blankly, not understanding the importance.

"It is a water planet," Coran chimed in. "No land mass to speak of."

Lance could feel a smile of his own starting to grow as the details started to sink in. Were they
"The Galra are attempting to retrieve this item as we speak, but their ships were not designed for such an environment," Allura explained, meeting Lance's eyes. "There is only one vessel that exists that would be able to pilot in such location without requiring any additional time to configure to the viscosity of Xinsthes."

Lance could feel his face splitting from the force of his grin. "Me? Right? Me and Blue?" He bounced out of his seat, unable to contain his excitement. He was getting a solo mission? Him? Hunk's foot nudging made a lot more sense now and Lance beamed at him as Hunk chuckled and nodded.

This was it. This would be his chance to show them all what he could do. He'd impress Allura and Shiro and maybe even Keith would acknowledge his success and skill and Lance could prove to his rival that he was was deserving of the title Paladin too.

"Correct," Allura said, although a smile tugged at her face at the Blue Paladin's antics and clear excitement. "It is of the utmost importance we retrieve this item before the Galra. It is clearly valuable to them and therefore even moreso to us."

As Lance looked about the table though he felt his smile dimming and the nerves from earlier flared back up. Because...

Could he do this?

The mission seemed easy on the surface, so if he screwed it up that'd be really bad. Was he even good enough to be trusted with such a mission? He'd messed up today, they'd all seen it. He hadn't been able to fight off the sentries when it mattered. And he wasn't the best pilot and this was a really important mission. Too important to mess up, to trust him and him alone. He bit his lip, excitement leaving him.

He wanted to do this so bad but he was afraid of the chance of failure too.

"Lance, buddy," Shiro called and Lance started. "Everything all right?"

"Y-yeah," Lance said rubbing the back of his head as he felt a flush blooming on his cheeks. "I was just thinking" – he vaguely heard Keith mutter "that's a first" under his breath – and pressed on trying to ignore his face now trying to catch literal fire, "that maybe I shouldn't do this mission."

"Why ever not?" Allura asked, narrowing her eyes. "Are you still injured?"

"Well, no."

"Then why?"

"I just, uh, don't think I'm the right person for this. I mean, I really messed up today," He heard Hunk try to interject but he plowed on. "Someone else should do this. Shiro, maybe. I'd probably completely mess it up too and it's really important and I don't want the whole mission to fail because I suck at being a Paladin."

"Paladin, no one thinks that," Allura said as he paused to draw breath, a frown playing over her features. "You are a true Paladin of Voltron and I have the utmost faith you are the best pilot for this task. Do you doubt me?"

Ooh, that was tricky right there. Lance didn't doubt Allura in the slightest, but he couldn't help but
doubt himself. But if he disagreed with her then he'd be saying he didn't believe her judgment and he really did, except for perhaps him being the best person for this mission. Behind Allura he could see concern settling on Shiro's features and Hunk looked worried too while Pidge more confused than anything. Keith was frowning too, eyes narrowed and Lance hurriedly averted his eyes before they accidentally met. He couldn't bear to see the judgment in them right now.

He swallowed thickly and then gave the barest shake of his head to Allura's question and a soft, "No, Princess." He knew he should feel bolstered by her show of support but his stomach was twisting again as nerves and what ifs settled heavily.

"Then it is settled," Allura gave a graceful nod. "We shall commence the mission at 0800 varga sharp tomorrow. Any questions?" A series of head shakes sounded about the room.

Shiro took charge then. "It's going to be a busy day so you're all to be in bed no later than 2000 hours. Pidge," - honey eyes widened innocently behind her glasses - "no electronics in bed again," and she pouted, caught. Lance would have chuckled if he didn't think doing so would make him throw up Hunk's lasagna. "We'll meet outside of the Black Lion's hangar at 0800 in our Lions. Dismissed."

Shiro turned then to Allura, requesting the princess speak privately with him, and Lance felt his stomach give another heave. He had the sick feeling they were going to be talking about him. He was already standing up from the table and as quick as he could without running away he left the room, hearing Hunk calling out for him but he didn't stop.

This wasn't something one of Hunk's hugs was going to fix. He couldn't face anyone right now, face a mixture of still embarrassed red and scared pale and sick green. He just wanted to go to his room, try not to puke, and convince himself that accepting this mission wasn't going to be a giant mistake.

But as soon as he stumbled into his room he realized this wasn't where he wanted to be. He didn't want to be alone with his thoughts right now.

Blue.

He wanted, needed, to talk to Blue. She never failed to reassure him and calm his racing heart. He could certainly use her gentle rumbling purrs right now and smiles and laughter and imagined scent of the ocean surf.

Yes. He would go talk to Blue.

He about-faced and headed for his hangar, going at a quick trot. But the sound of voices from up ahead had him ducking into one of the many open doorways, conference rooms of days long past that used to be filled with meetings and people according to Coran.

He still didn't want to face anyone.

Seconds later the voices became clearer and his heart stuttered.

Shiro and Allura.

"—worry as well," Allura said, voice as musical as always but heavy. "Their behavior threatens all of the team and its ability to form Voltron."

"I know, Princess," Shiro replied quietly. "I will speak to them once tomorrow's mission is over. Perhaps a team-bonding exercise for the two of them to work this out."
Allura hummed although she did not sound happy. Their voices were getting closer and Lance pressed himself further against the inner wall, heart pounding and stomach hurting even more.

They were talking about him and Keith. He knew it.

"I also worry for Lance," Allura continued softly and Lance started at hearing his own name even though he had already guessed he was the topic of conversation, but moreso hearing it from Allura's lips. She generally only called him Paladin, just as she did all of the other humans. "He seems happy, but I am beginning to think I do not understand him nor his motivations as I had previously thought. I had believed this mission was something he wished for but I fear I was mistaken. I am concerned."

"Me too," Shiro said quietly and Lance's breath hitched. Allura and Shiro were worried about him? Oh, he really had screwed up. They both had enough on their plates; they didn't need to be troubled with him. He needed to get his head on straight. More training, first thing after the mission. He'd get better so they wouldn't worry, so he wouldn't be a burden, the one always in need of rescuing instead of being the rescuer.

He had to fix this.

He missed whatever Shiro said next thanks to his own thoughts rattling around, but came back at the sound of Keith's name from Allura's mouth - and again, he was confused by the sound of their actual names - but it was overshadowed as Shiro let out a soft, tired sigh. Guilt tugged at him.

"He's a bit stubborn," Shiro murmured. "Keith... he... well," he trailed off and Lance tried not to breathe in the sudden silence. He'd always figured that somehow Keith and Shiro knew each other from before Voltron, but he had no idea how or what their relationship was. Was he about to find out? He didn't want to, not this way. Lance wasn't as nosy as Hunk and this sounded... this sounded private.

But he needn't have worried as when Shiro next spoke it was not about his rival, not in that way. "I'll speak with Keith tomorrow after the mission. He's a good kid, Princess. He just... needs a little time to adjust." Allura made a comment too soft for Lance to hear as they continued to step away and within a few ticks they had rounded the corner and silence reigned.

Lance counted out a full dobash before he exited the conference room. He didn't even feel like talking to Blue now, heart feeling even heavier than before. He was worrying the two people he really looked up to and making a fool of himself in the process. No wonder they were worried about the team's ability to form Voltron. He was holding them all back and despite how he wanted to blame Keith... he knew it wasn't his rival's fault. Lance just didn't measure up, it was as simple as that.

He was the weak link of Team Voltron.

He trudged back to his room and burrowed under the blanket and grabbed one of his many quilts he'd collected on their space travels, pressing the rough weave to his face and rubbing it back and forth on his cheek to try and ward off the hot tears cropping up. He knew he should probably get dressed in his pajamas, the zipper of his jacket already digging awkwardly into his side where he had curled up, but he left it. It was comforting, his jacket, that had somehow continued to survive all of their space adventures. If he concentrated hard enough he could almost pretend it smelled like the cinnamon candies Mamá liked to eat and the rain-scented detergent that she bought just for him. The familiar pang of homesickness struck him and he curled tightly into a ball, trying and failing this time to blink back the tears.

He wanted to go home.
But he couldn't. The universe was counting on Voltron to bring peace and defeat the Galra Empire and even as the weak link of the team he was still a part of it.

He was a part of Team Voltron, the most amazing thing in the entire universe. He wiped at his tears, nodding to himself. He could do this. He wouldn't let the universe down.

"I'll make you proud, Mamá, Papá," he whispered, the promise strong despite the quietness of it. "And... And I'll show all of them that I am a real Paladin of Voltron."

xxx

The next day dawned much too early in Lance's opinion, but he didn't allow himself to complain. He'd try and be just like Shiro: focused, calm and ready to complete the mission. He could do this. He repeated the phrase to himself as he changed into his underarmor and then pulled on the outer armor that Coran had apparently repaired sometime in the overnight hours and returned to his room.

He made a mental note to thank Coran later for the trouble.

He hurried then to the Blue Lion's hangar and greeted Blue with as cheerful as a good morning as he could manage as his stomach twisted with nerves as *this was it* and the earlier conviction and courage was fading and doubts were clamoring in. Her mind had brushed against his as soon as he was inside the hangar but as he entered the cockpit it turned into a stronger pulse of concern.

"I'm all right," he assured, but she nudged harder, insistent like a pesky wave, as she sensed his unease.

"Okay, I'm a little upset," he conceded as he flipped on her engine. "It's me though. I'm just… I'm worried about messing up today, Blue. I... I really want to do this right but I keep thinking that something is going to go wrong, you know?" He let out a weak laugh that was not at all the humorous ones Blue loved.

Her reassurance came through as strong as a a tidal wave, but comforting all the same. *My Paladin best* she purred. *My Paladin not fail.*

"It'd be hard to with a gorgeous Lion like you by my side," he said sincerely, and he felt her rumble with contentment at the compliment. She though could feel his heart lightening, the blue of his light shining brighter again from the darker swirls and choppy waves it had entered her hangar with.

"Thank you, Blue."


Lance could feel Blue settle down around him as she herself focused on the mission and Lance guided his Lion out of the hangar and into the open space around the castle towards the Black Lion's hanger on the far side of the castle. He was not the last one to arrive, he noted, as Hunk still had yet to show. In the far distance he could make out Galran drones hovering around a dark blue planet that Blue happily sensed felt like water. He chuckled and pattered her console. Soon.

A few seconds later Hunk arrived and Shiro had them all gather in a circle, his voice coming in loud and clear over the comms. "All right Paladins, this is going to be a quick get in, get out mission. Lance, you and the Blue Lion will go to the planet and locate the Galra tech marked by the heat signature its giving off."

"I see it," Lance said, a small pink dot blinking on the console. "Blue and I are ready."

A small smile pulled up Lance's lips at his words. Yes. He was ready. He and Blue could do this. Blue let out a soft roar in his mind of agreement.
"Good," and Lance didn't think he was imagining the note of pride in Shiro's voice. He ducked his head even though no one else could see his pinkend cheeks. "The rest of us will provide aerial support from above. Take out whatever ships you can, but focus primarily on clearing a path for Lance both upon entry and especially exit of the planet when the Blue Lion cannot engage while carrying the item. Are there any questions?"

No one spoke. "All right then," Shiro's voice sounded over the comms. "Commence mission."

The Lions launched themselves from their stationary floating forms. Lance curbed the habit of charging headlong in an attempt to keep up with Keith. He knew he couldn't match the Red Lion's speed and he was supposed to focus on reaching the planet without engaging the many Galra drone ships. And besides, he wanted to prove to them all he could take a mission seriously.

He could do this.

They were in Xinsthes' atmosphere within a few dobashes, the Yellow and Black Lions flanking his side and their large bulks a comfort, as the Galran fleets swarmed their way. Lance hoped there weren't any actually piloted ships out there, as those presented an entire different set of problems than the sentry-powered ones.

Shiro and Hunk flew with him almost all the way to the planet's surface keeping his path entirely clear, and with a burst of speed Lance broke away and finished his descent solo, adjusting the controls as they hit the surface and they slipped beneath the dark surface with barely a splash.

He could feel Blue's absolute glee as the water rushed over them and she swam in a happy circle under the water he whooped as she somersaulted in her excitement. He understood how she felt. He hadn't been in the water in forever and let out another shout as she flipped over into another series of happy tumbles.

"Focus on the mission," Keith snapped over the comm and Lance winced.

"Spoilsport," Lance muttered under his breath, an attempt to ease the sting of the words, and he felt Blue's silent apology for her actions. He patted her console; he didn't blame her in the slightest but it was time to get to work now and reigned Blue in and directed her towards the beeping dot on the console.

He listened idly as the team up above called out strikes to one another, no one ever rising above the level of calm and collected. That boded well, he thought. It was nice to have a mission without a huge complication, especially a mission in which he was playing such an important role

His palms felt sweaty beneath his gloves and he rubbed them against his thighs for all the good it did. Deep breaths, he told himself. It was fine. He could do this.

The beeping was growing louder on his dashboard as he and Blue swam deeper and deeper, a direct contrast to the almost painful silence and pressure outside of her cockpit. He was glad his Lion knew where she was going, as other than her headlights it was pitch black under the water and nothing to see in all directions. It was making him feel the slightest bit claustrophobic, if he was being honest, and he clutched a little harder than necessary at her controls.

No worry Blue comforted as she felt his unease. Lion protect Paladin.

"Gracias, beautiful," he whispered, licking suddenly dry lips. "I—"

"How is it going, Lance?" Shiro’s voice crackled over his headset and Lance jumped in his seat, smashing his knees on the underside of the dashboard at the sudden address and based on the
exclamations the thunk had been audible across the comms. Lance's face flamed.

"You okay, Lance?" Hunk asked.

"Fine, fine," Lance hurried to say, tongue nearly tripping on itself. "It's just..." Really dark down here, he silently added. And quiet. And more than a bit unnerving.

"Lance?" Shiro sounded again. "Buddy, everything okay?"

And he was making Shiro worry again. Dios.

"Are you sure you can handle your assignment?" Keith's voice cut in.

"You try diving to the bottom of a planet," Lance snapped, letting the quick burst of anger, of embarrassment, push away the steadily growing dread as they continued to dive deeper into the black abyss. He really, really really hoped Blue knew which direction was up because he did not want to be trapped down here, lost, in the never ending darkness until his oxygen ran out and then he suffocated and—

"You're doing great, Lance," Shiro's voice broke through his spiraling panic. "How's the sensor looking?"

Lance had been so distracted by the comms and the darkness that he had almost missed that the proximity sensor was no longer beeping but almost humming. And unless his eyes were deceiving him there was a spot of color not related to the faint beam of Blue's headlamps piercing the water.

"I think we're just about there," Lance said. And to his immense relief a moment later there was indeed an object being illuminated by Blue. "Ah, I see it! It's really, really big."

It really was. He circled around it, sizing up whatever this mysterious block shaped item was. It was he'd guess maybe twenty or so feet tall and was nearly pitch black, save for a faint purple glow emitting from its very bottom.

"Can the Blue Lion pick it up?" Shiro asked.

"Yeah, she's got it. Right, Blue?" He received a soft rumble in answer as they floated next to it and Lance silenced the sensor, letting out a breath in the same moment. He'd done it. He and Blue had reached the item and he hadn't messed up the mission in any way. He just had to get it back to the surface now and Blue sent him a reassurance that she did indeed know which direction was up, amusement coloring it and Lance let out a not quite hysterical laugh but one of just sheer relief that it was almost over.

"Easy does it now," Shiro cautioned.

"We've got it, Shiro," Lance said as he lowered Blue directly above it so she could grip it with her claws, a burst of confidence restored at the success. "Piece of cake."

But just as Blue's claws touched the surface of the item everything went wrong.

An explosion of light burst from the object, Blue roared in agony, Lance joining her as her pain traveled down their link, and the Paladins all shouted as harsh static raced across their communications and blasted their hearing.

The underwater landscape lit up with the sick purple glow....
And then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading the fic! As I said on the first chapter, I am completely new to this site, but I'm thinking a "kudos" is similar to a "like" on Facebook? Thank you for those!

I really, really appreciate those of you who took the time to comment! I live for comments/reviews and those are what inspire me to keep writing and updating. So if you've got a moment please do leave a comment below (doesn't matter how long or short!) to keep me motivated! Your favorite part, line, thoughts for the story, on a character, etc.

Special thanks to those who did take the few seconds to leave a comment. Thank you!! Those lovely reviewers are: GuardianofFun, Rachel and Aquadarkrose ♥

See you all next chapter!
"Blue!" Lance screamed, head pounding with pain that had nothing on the agony he could tell his Lion was in. "Blue!" The systems all around him flashed before going dark and he was left in pitch blackness save for the faint teal glow from his armor, the pain cutting off abruptly and Lance panicked as with it went the gentle presence he had become accustomed to feeling in the back of his mind when around his Lion. "Blue!" he shouted again, pushing on her thruster as though that could bring her back.

Nothing.

She had completely lost power from whatever that thing had done to her.

It had hurt her.

Something had hurt his Lion.

A few lights were starting to blink again on her console and Lance pressed them all to no avail. One in particular was shining a sort of purple he didn't recall seeing before and he frowned at it, the color reminiscent of the light that had burst from the item.

That sick Galra purple.

Had it infected Blue?

He placed a trembling hand on the console, whispering her name again.

He needed to get her help.

That meant he needed to calm down as panicking wasn't going to help anyone.

Anyone.

The rest of the team.

His hand went to his helmet, Shiro's name on his lips.

Only static greeted him.

"Shiro?" he repeated, voice small. "Shiro? Can you hear me?"

No one answered.

The darkness of the cockpit seemed to be growing and Lance shuddered, wrapping his arms about himself in a hug that did not comfort him.

It was so dark. And quiet.

"Okay, okay, don't panic," Lance told himself, his own voice too loud for the space but he kept it up as it was still better than the oppressive silence. "Blue will come back in a few ticks. You've got air. You're fine. Everything is fine. Está bien. Estás bien."
But ticks turned into dobashes and Blue's systems did not light up with a comforting glow and the comms continued to only broadcast static whenever Lance tried.

His voice had petered out as he focused on breathing in only the smallest amounts of air of the cockpit. He'd retracted the bottom panel of his visor as depending on what happened he was getting the sinking (oh Dios, he was already losing it) feeling he may have to swim for the surface and he would need all the air his suit had.

He didn't know if that would still be enough.

They had gone so so deep.

Could the team even find him down here?

"Blue? Lance whispered. "Blue, pl-please... I...I really need you."

She remained silent both in mind and body.

Lance whimpered and was glad there was no one here to hear him. But, he decided, he didn't care who heard him or if they teased him for being scared of the dark and deep. He just wanted to get out.

Just as he was trying to decide if Blue's cockpit was actually shrinking even though he he told himself logically that was impossible and all of this was in his head and he needed to get it together he heard the dull sound of metal on metal.

Someone was cutting into the Blue Lion.

"Oh gracias a Dios," Lance prayed. The team must have come for him, somehow. Maybe Yellow had sank with her bulk? Lance didn't know how and he didn't care right now. All he cared was that they were here.

Unfortunately none of Blue's controls were responding and he had no way of opening up the hold. The screeching sound of some type of saw echoed now through the Lion and Lance winced. "I'm so sorry, Blue," he said, patting the console. "I'll make it up to you after this. Promise. Hunk'll fix you up better than new."

He heard two sets of boots clatter into the hole that had been carved into the loading hold and Lance hurried towards it, only his familiarity with his Lion letting him get through without bumping into anything. He vaguely wondered how the space hadn't filled with water and chalked it up to some cool tech Pidge and Hunk had created. Maybe sort of water repellent shield? His friends were pretty awesome.

"Shiro is that you?" he called, making a mental note that they should get some type of flashlight made and installed in the Lions. For emergencies just like this. Not that he ever planned on this happening again though. "Hunk?"

Blinding purple light filled his vision and Lance realized in an instant that whoever had boarded was most definitely not any of his team. The two figures who boarded...

They were Galran.

This had been a trap. Somehow this had been a trap.

And he was caught right in the middle of it.
"Oh heck no!" he yelled, reaching for his bayard as instincts kicked in, training scenarios flashing like lighting. Fight. He needed to fight.

But the lead Galran brandished his own blaster first and shot several consecutive shots, forcing Lance to divert his attention to his shield although it only caught the last two shots and not the first barrage that smashed against his armored chest with bruising force even as the armor held.

The second one physically charged then, brandishing what appeared to a short sword and Lance yelped and backpedaled. A sword? The Galran had a quizznacking sword?

Oh *Dios*. He was in trouble.

Lance crashed into the pilot's chair and managed to just block with his shield as the knife descended for his chest, the blade skittering off the surface in a way that was *much much* too close for comfort. He didn't even have a second to breathe though as the other Galran let loose another round of gunfire from the side and Lance couldn't move the shield to intercept it as he strained to hold it against the knife.

The shots slammed against his side and he felt one break through the armor. A choked scream was yanked from his throat as laser met flesh.

The one with the knife lifted the blade and the sudden release of pressure nearly had Lance falling sideways before it was back and he desperately blocked with his shield again, bayard inoperable and back in its holster as both hands went to supporting the shield as his body screamed at him as the gunshot wound was stretched at the angle.

"Shiro!" he screamed, hoping, praying, that it would somehow cut through the static. "Shiro, please!"

He needed *help*.

Another round of gunfire sounded and Lance curled to the side, trying to intercept the shots against his back armor plates. Another got through and he cried out.

He was going to *die*.

He was actually going to die.

Lance swore he felt his heart stop.

He didn't want to die.

He...

What would Shiro do?

The thought came above his panic as an image of his leader, his hero, swam to mind.

What would Shiro do?

Shiro was strong. Shiro would fight.

*Fight!*

The knife wielder pulled back, no doubt to smash down the blade again, and Lance moved. He shoved upwards with the shield, digging it against the Galran's middle and while it wouldn't injure
the alien at all it did have enough force to send him stumbling back. Lance dissolved it within a tick and rolled forward as he’d seen Pidge do countless times and pop up with a clenched fist that he aimed for the Galran's chin. To his surprise it actually worked and the Galran's head snapped back with a shout, but the victory was short lived as the second assailant was quick once more with the gun and energy blasts tore across his side and back.

Gritting his teeth, Lance formed his bayard and swung it in a wide circle, mimicking Hunk now and hoping he had some inkling of luck with it. The weapon smashed into the Galran with a gun and sent him stumbling back several feet.

Lance wasted no time. He didn't know if he could make it all the way to the surface with his current air supply, but his chances were a heck of a lot better out there.

He'd made it just two steps to the doorway when there was movement to his side and he whirled to face it, bayard raising—

And then agony and he let out a strangled scream as the sword plunged through his ribcage and out his back just below where the armor covered. The Galran grabbed his shoulder with his other hand and yanked, dragging Lance flush to the hilt of the blade and he let out another terrible sounding noise as he felt blood gush and his insides seize around the thing that was impaling him.

"Do not kill him," he heard the other Galran say, barely audible over the pounding in his head and the breathless, choking sounds coming up his throat as pain pain pain thrummed through him. "Haggar needs him alive."

The sword was pulled free with a terrible sounding squelch and a new sort of scream found its way out as his blood flew through the air, splattering the Galran soldier in front of him and the cockpit around him. And although the blade was no longer in him the fire it left behind continued to burn and tear through him and Lance collapsed to his knees, metal ringing and sending his head spinning even more.

"What a weak human," the Galran muttered, disgust clear, flicking his sword to the side and sending more blood splatter across the floor.

Lance saw the foot before he felt it.

It smashed into his side, directly on the wound.

Lance faintly thought he may have screamed, he couldn't quite tell over the shrieking sounds echoing in his mind and making his skull near vibrate as he fell fully onto the ground, body no longer capable of supporting him.

But he heard the words of the Galran, said with even more distaste than the previous ones.

"This is a Paladin of Voltron? Pathetic."

His companion snorted a laugh.

Lance hated how even now he felt a burst of shame that only made the fire burn hotter in his chest. He groaned, curling up around it, and the Galran stepped away to join the other one at Blue's console.

What were they doing?

What was all of this? Why had they done this?
What did they want?

Lance took in a shuddering breath, forcing himself to think past the pain. He was fine. He was fine.

He...

He was not fine.

The Galrans had said... they'd said Haggar. She was the one who had...to Shiro...

And she wanted him alive?

That... That could not be good.

He had to stop them.

He had to stop them now.

But...

But Lance knew he could not run away (or swim in this case). His chances had been slim before, they were nonexistent now with the way he could feel his body growing heavier, his breaths harsher.

He didn't have much time.

There were two of them, one of him. They clearly had some craft capable of piloting in the water and if they got him aboard it then it was all over.

He had to stop them.

He had to stop both of them. And he had to do it in such a way that neither of them could regain consciousness and continue what they started because he knew that he was not getting out of this without help. Unless Blue powered back on and shot them to the surface right now then they would retrieve him and although he had no idea why they were targeting him he did know that somehow it would not end well for the universe.

And that meant...

That meant he had to... had to...

He squeezed his eyes shut, stomach heaving and not from the pain.

His bayard rematerliazed in his hand, the Galrans clearly not understanding how the weapons worked and had not removed it from his holster where it had returned.

It would be their last mistake.

Now he just...

Just had to do it.

He could regret it later.

Lance braced his shaking left hand beneath his body and pushed up, swallowing back the groan the movement caused and he swore he felt a gush of something wash over his stomach.
Blood, his mind supplied.

Don't think about it the other part of his mind added.

He listened to that part of it.

He managed to somehow rise onto his elbows, entire body shaking, and eyes glazed with pain looked in the direction of the front console where the Galrans were standing.

No.

Not just standing.

They both had bladed weapons now and were hacking away at Blue's dashboard.

They were hurting Blue.

He let anger and despair fuel him as he pushed himself to his knees, choking back the cry that tried to escape, but he was not entirely successful as both Galrans turned as one to face him.

Lance did not allow himself to hesitate as he shouldered his bayard.

Protect Blue. Protect the Universe.

He pulled on the trigger and as all his shots did, it flew straight and true....

Right through the sword-wielding Galran's head.

He tried not to look.

Not to think.

Next shot.

He wasn't fast enough.

The other Galran was upon him just as he pressed down on the trigger and while the blast connected it was through the raised armored arm.

It didn't stop him.

A dagger, clenched in the Galran's other hand, swung down and it cut against Lance's wrist. The arm brace saved him from losing the hand but the strength and shock of the hit was too much and Lance found his hand releasing its grip on his bayard.

He let out a scream — pain and fear and horror all rolled into one — as it clattered to the floor and there wasn't enough time to summon it back to him and—

The sword flashed again in his vision and Lance had only a second to catch a glimpse of his eyes, scared and pinpricked with terror, in the reflection of the metal before he saw no more.

xxx

"Lance, come in," Shiro called for what seemed like the hundredth time, floating above the planet below him and hating the unease taking up residence in his stomach. Just as Lance had been about to secure the item their comms had cut out and no matter how many times they tried to reboot the signal
there was only static.

"I cannot obtain a reading on the Blue Lion," Allura said, the sound of rapid-fire typing entering their headsets. "She seems to have gone offline, somehow."

"An electrical pulse, maybe?" Pidge suggested, voice more calm than she felt. Logic was her friend here and she took comfort in it rather than the bursts of painful static that belonged to Lance's headset. "It would explain why the comms cut out. The item though is still there, at least according to my scanner." And that was another comfort, she told herself. If the item was still there then Lance was still there. He was probably just stuck, waiting for the Blue Lion to reboot.

It had been nearly twenty minutes now since the transmission had cut out and Shiro had cautioned them all to remain topside while they tried to reestablish communication as none of their Lions were made for the thick water. They knew from the Yellow and Blue Lions foray following the bad wormhole jump about a month ago that the other Lions could traverse water but still not well and as Lance had relayed earlier, the location of item and therefore where he and the Blue Lion would be was very, very deep. If one of their Lions went down and got stuck they'd be in even a worse situation.

"Give them a few more minutes," Shiro said. "Otherwise we'll go back to the Castle and I'll go down in a supply pods tethered to one of the Lions."

"That's going to be a lot of cable," Hunk muttered, stomach clenching with worry. "Do we even have enough? I mean, the distance from—"

"I'll start looking into it, Number Two, don't you worry," Coran said, cheerful tone a comfort. "We'll have Number Three back up here in a jiffy."

They gave it about ten more minutes, nearly a half hour now since they had lost communication, when Shiro made the decision to return to the castle and attempt the supply pod, of which Coran was still gathering cable for and requested their assistance. Hunk was right. They needed a lot of it.

Just before Coran began the process of dismantling one of the large tapestries in the receiving hall for its support cords, Allura sounded out over the intercom system of the castle.

"The Blue Lion is back online!" she called. "She is headed for the castle." She paused and Shiro hated how the flicker of relief at her words went out. "However I am afraid I still cannot reach the Blue Paladin."

"Blue's got him though," Hunk said, feeling a huge weight drop from his chest. He'd had this fear that someone had gone wrong, but if Blue was back in action there was nothing to worry about.

"The Blue Lion is not going for her hangar," Allura said, confusion in her voice. "She is headed for the main hall. I am opening the door now."

"Guess that's our cue," Pidge said, jumping down from where Coran had boosted her to unhook part of the tapestry.

"Oh, I do hope he isn't hurt," Coran fretted, although he could think of no other reason as to why a Lion would not go to their hangar first. "He does so hate the cryo-pods."

"Really?" Pidge asked, raising an eyebrow as she hurried after her taller companions. "I mean, I know it can't be pleasant to keep going in them all the time but... hate?"

"Oh, Number Three is slightly, what's the human word, clusterphobic? He's not overly fond of small
That brought Shiro to a halt and sent Pidge smashing against his back with a low ow as he sent a surprised look at the adviser. "Lance is claustrophobic?"

"No he's not," Hunk frowned. "He used to get into tight spaces all the time as a kid and back in the Garrison. Figuratively and literally." Pidge let out a soft laugh of agreement.

But Coran shook his head although he appeared puzzled. "Perhaps I misspoke."

But as they hurried towards the Blue Lion, Shiro could not shake the niggling feeling that Coran had never been wrong before and he was a very astute observer. There must be some truth to that, but he himself had never observed it. For being such a loud, open individual, Lance certainly did carry some secrets. He glanced over to Hunk who was frowning too, hands wringing inside themselves, and clearly distraught by this piece of news.

They all beat Allura to the grand entrance, conveniently just down the hall from their former location, where they found the Blue Lion pacing anxiously with her tail swishing in obvious distress behind her and claw marks already gouged into the floor.

"Hey Blue," Hunk greeted, not sure if the Lion would understand him as he wasn't her Paladin, but he had to try. "We're here to help Lance now."

But the Lion did not stop moving, continuing her pacing and a low growl was torn from her throat.

She... she sounded like she was in pain.

Hunk's earlier nerves came back full force and he hated that he was not the only one who seemed to sense it as Shiro raised his voice and called for Lance to come out.

Pidge's sharp inhale had everyone turning to her and she shook her head, eyes wide. A small, shaking finger was raised and they followed it...

To spot a hole, perhaps about Lance's height, carved into the side of the Lion above her cargo hold, that at first glance had just appeared to be a darker patch of metal but now was obvious to anyone that something had punctured the near impenetrable surface of the Lion.

"That's not good," Keith muttered, beginning to feel the first stirrings of unease that had been plaguing his teammates. He knew Lance could buckle down (mostly) when it came to a mission, but when his fellow Paladin had gone off and clearly been playing in the water with his Lion upon diving into the planet Keith had silently growled and shaken his head at the fact Lance just couldn't ever be fully serious. The static was worrying, sure, but since the item was there then it meant Lance was too and Keith had chalked it up to Lance taking his sweet time in getting back to enjoy the planet. But Lance would never hurt his Lion and she most definitely had not gone to Xinsthes like that.

"Blue, calm down," Hunk pleaded. "We want to help Lance, okay?"

She let out a roar that shook the very ground around them. But it wasn't the joyful sound they'd come to associate with Lance's very friendly Lion. It was full of anguish and longing.

"Blue, por favor," Hunk tried and to his complete shock the Lion came to an immediate standstill.

"Spanish?" Pidge quirked an eyebrow. "The Lions understand Spanish?"
"Lance talks to her sometimes in it," Hunk said, although his gaze was not on Pidge but angled up towards the magical Lion. "I don't know if she understands but..." But Hunk knew how comforting Lance found his native tongue and no doubt that sense of peace behind the words would have come down the bond he shared with the Blue Lion. "Blue, por favor. Queremos ayudar a Lance."

"You speak Spanish?" Shiro asked. He was learning a lot about his teammates recently it seemed.

"A little," Hunk said, "enough to—"

He ceased speaking as the Blue Lion sank to the ground with a metallic creak, ground shuddering, and opened her mouth to allow them inside.

As soon as they stepped in, Shiro leading the way, they could all feel the sense of wrong emanating, and that was just as worrying as the feeling as this was not their Lion and they should not be able to connect like that.

"The Blue Lion is projecting," Coran said, voice low and filled with a mixture of awe and a tremble of fear as they moved towards the cockpit. "I... I have never seen this before."

He didn't say it but he didn't need to. That probably was not a good sign.

And they hated that they were proven right as they reached the cockpit and it took all Hunk had to swallow back the bile that raced up his throat.

Controls were slashed all about the space, some sparking and others dull, indicating why the Blue Lion may have not been able to fly for a while. But it was the dark blood splattered throughout, made even more eerie by the flashing blue backup lights that illuminated the compartment, that really made the feeling of wrong flare.

Hunk did lose his breakfast when they found the body of a clearly dead Galran, a giant hole blown through his head and collapsed by the pilot's chair. He somehow knew without a doubt that despite the kill shot — had Lance ever killed anyone before? Had he? — that Lance had done it.

What had happened?

He trembled on the spot, unable to take another step into this horror-filled cockpit. Pidge came to his side and he clung to her, blinking rapidly and waiting to wake up.

He didn't wake up.

"Guys," Keith said, his face pale even in the dim lighting. "Over here."

Hunk couldn't move but Shiro and Coran did, legs mechanically bringing them to the younger Paladin's side, who gestured at an incredibly large pool of blood behind the pilot's chair and a familiar helmet next to it.

A helmet that was shattered.

"Paladins, what has happened?" Allura sounded, her footsteps echoing up the ramp. "Is the Blue Paladin all ri—?" she cut off though as she entered the blood stained cockpit. What has happened?" she repeated, weakly.

"Wh-where is Lance?" Hunk managed, wiping at his chin. "Bl-Blue? Where is Lance?"

And just like with the feeling of wrong that even now continued to assault them, the Blue Lion
responded. Feelings of pain and fear and confusion and scarily for the genteel Lion anger swept through the cabin.

And then...

*Recording.* The word echoed not just in their minds but outside the Lion.

The Blue Lion was talking.

"I didn't know the Lions could talk," Keith gasped, feeling unsteady already from the feelings forced upon him and now this. Shiro put out a hand to steady him and Keith tried not to lean too much into it.

"I have not heard it before myself," Allura admitted quietly. "But I have heard told that some Paladins and Lions are so closely bonded that they can attain such a feat, although..." She shook her head. "For a Lion to adopt physical speech in the Paladin's tongue? Never."

The bond between the Blue Lion and her Paladin were much, much stronger than Allura could have ever imagined. A query for another day, she pushed aside. For now she would do as the Lion had asked for behind the word Allura could sense the exhaustion and pain. It was taking all the Blue Lion had to reach out to them and such a thing meant the situation was dire indeed.

She made her way to the control board of the ship, frowning as the recording light was glowing a purple. She sensed the magic as soon as her hand neared it and she withdrew it with a sharp gasp.

Druids.

This was more than a simple attack.

She forced herself to press forward as it was the only piece of information they had, wincing as her hand descended on the play switch. The purple light flared and then disappeared, dissolving back to the steady blue it should have always been. And as soon as had returned to normal...

Shouting filled the cabin.

Lance.

He was crying out for Blue to respond, the sound of controls being yanked and beaten upon, although he could never have done the damage they saw now.

He sounded scared.

Shiro was reminded of Coran's comment about claustrophobia and the way Lance had eerily quieted down (for him) as he and the Blue Lion had gone deeper and deeper.

Lance went quiet and about a minute later they heard him try and contact Shiro, voice barely audible on the recording over the buzz of familiar static.

"His comms were out too," Pidge muttered, confusion on her face. "The whole Lion sounds like she went down so... so why is this," she gestured at the recorder, "still working?"

"There is magic here," Allura said quietly. "Druid magic."

Shiro's stomach bottomed out.

Druid?
Haggar. He shook his head, forcing away the image of yellow eyes and slender purple hands. Not
now. Preferably not ever.

"Why did they want us to hear this?" Hunk whispered as Lance rattled off into commands to himself
not to panic, that there was air here and he was going to be fine.

The terror in his voice was palatable and around them Blue groaned in shared distress.

No one answered Hunk. No one wanted to know why because when they did...

All went quiet again for several minutes before Lance started talking again, pleading for Blue to
wake up, and a soft whimper echoed.

"Oh, Lance," Hunk whispered. "Hermano..."

Lance's breathy distress cut off abruptly as he must have heard something that was not yet present in
the cockpit.

When he spoke next his voice was calm, steady. "Oh gracias a Dios. I'm so sorry, Blue. I'll make it
up to you after this. Promise. Hunk'll fix you up better than new."

They heard Lance get up from the chair and Shiro frowned, growing larger as Lance called out first
for Shiro and then Hunk. "He thought it was us."

They all knew it absolutely wasn't.

There was a quick gasp of breath and a startled, "Oh heck no!" and then the terrible sound of rapid
fire gunfire. Hunk actually jumped aloud at the sound as it echoed about the room like it was
happening now. They heard Lance yelp with pain and then a crash, as if he'd fallen down.

There were just heavy breaths then before gunfire punctured the air once more and Lance gave a
short scream. "Shiro! Shiro, please!" A grunt and the sound of an object hitting solid flesh. "Shiro!"
he screamed again, voice panicked as more gunfire sounded in the small space.

"Oh my God," Hunk whimpered, legs giving way beneath him and he took both himself and Pidge
to the floor in a hard sit. Lance was... Lance was...

There were more sounds then – screams and shouts and thunks and oh God they were hurting
Lance – and then, just when Hunk didn't think it could get worse there was a choked, ragged scream.
And if Lance's cries had been hard to hear before this one was ear-shattering agony.

Following it was a series of heavy, pained breaths and gasps and noises Lance should not ever be
making.

Oh God.

An unknown, gravelly voice echoed then above Lance's distress. "Do not kill him. Haggar needs
him alive."

"Haggar?" Shiro repeated, blood running cold.

She was a part of this?

There was a terrible squelching noise that nearly had Hunk vomiting again.
"What a weak human," said a second voice and the sound of a body crashing into the floor. It was followed by another thunk and a short scream from Lance. Pidge was trembling in Hunk's arms at this point, eyes pinpricked at the torture they were hearing. There was a chuckle then. "This is a Paladin of Voltron?" and the other Galran laughed too.

"Monsters," Allura hissed, fists clenching at her sides and horror etched into her face. She knew the Galra were cruel and ruthless and she had seen the cruelties they had done to the universe in ten thousand years. But they were torturing her Paladin and they were laughing.

Worst yet, if Zarkon's head witch was somehow involved...

She feared for Lance.

The recording went quieter then, only the sounds of metal on metal – the ruined machinery no doubt that the Galrans were destroying – and Lance's pained wheezes and gasps.

"Get up," Pidge whispered, trembling, even though she knew all of this had already happened. "Get up, Lance."

Lance did just that.

They heard his breaths increase in pace and a low grunt as he no doubt pushed himself somehow up. He let out a soft cry then, clearly not intended, and the sound of the dashboard destruction stopped.

A whine sounded, Lance's blaster.

And while they all knew what was about to happen, the proof in the body lying still inert on the floor, it was still unexpected to hear the blaster go off and the sound of it connecting a tick later.

They barely heard the sound of the body thumping to the floor over the shout of the second Galran and while there was another blaster shot going off it was followed by a dull clang and then it was Lance screaming before he cut off with a sickening silence.

A thunk sounded then – Lance's body this time striking the floor – and the tinkling of glass. Lance's helmet.

All was quiet then, save for the ragged breaths the still conscious enemy. After a much too long, too tense pause, the figure spoke. "Paladins of Voltron, this is a message from Emperor Zarkon. Surrender the Black Lion if you ever wish to see the Blue Paladin alive again. Further instructions will follow."

And the transmission ended with a silence that seemed much too sudden.

Shiro was the first one to shake off his stupor and as he shifted on his feet it seemed to be the cue for the others, Hunk shakily rising and Pidge clinging to him. Keith had yet to let go of the back of the pilot's chair and Allura was leaning heavily on Coran.

"What do we do?" Pidge whispered.

"The only thing we can do," Shiro said, voice stronger than he felt.

There was only one solution to this after all. He placed his flesh hand against the Blue Lion's
console. "I promise you," he said quietly but with conviction, "that we will bring your Paladin back. We will bring Lance home."

And the Blue Lion let out a roar of pain-filled hope.

Chapter End Notes

I very much wanted to write this story only from limited third-person with Lance as my narrator, but given how this fic is evolving from where I pictured it, I'm having no choice but to branch out to other characters. I kind of like it though, as we're going to get a chance to dive into a few other heads and root around. And although this story is going to be a lot of physical whump, there'll be plenty of mental which is my personal favorite to write :)

And oh my gosh, you guys are so sweet! Thank you so much especially to: Callin, AngelofGrace96, WolfFire, EreAsha, Wyo, maychorian, killjoy2246, muttikarl and Pai813 for leaving a comment on the chapter. You guys all know I literally live and breathe for them xD

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! And as always, please do review below. Y'all keep me going! (and it's been a really rough week already (and it's only Tuesday >.<) so I could definitely use them!)
Consciousness came back slowly and rather painfully.

Lance whimpered at the dull throbbing that seemed to make up his entire body and wondered what kind of level Shiro had put the gladiator on and how to make sure it never happened again. He kept his eyes closed, anticipating the worry and concern and, he winced, no doubt a critique from either Keith or Allura about his failure this time, any second.

Nothing.

Lance frowned at that. Shouldn't someone be at least checking on him?

He cracked open an eye, already preparing to wince at the over-bright lighting of the training room. But instead it was nearly dark and the only light was a faint purple glow coming not from the ceiling but the wall.

Confused, he went to sit up and was immediately assaulted by stabbing pain that seemed to travel through his entire torso and he gasped, stopping his ascent immediately.

What the...?

What had happened?

He hadn't been in training. He'd been... in Blue on a mission and then...

Lance's stomach heaved.

Galra.

Galran soldiers had attacked him, forcing their way onboard Blue. And he'd...

He'd...

Lance pivoted his body to the side just in time to vomit, splattering the ground with what little contents he had in him. Each contraction sent his chest alight with a new agony and it only made him heave again.

He'd killed the Galran.

Blaster shot right through the head that the helmet hadn't even had a chance of stopping.

He'd killed the Galran.

Lance vomited again, all stomach bile this time.

He'd killed the Galran.

He knew he hadn't had much of a choice. He knew that.

But still...
And...

And it had all been for nothing because in the end...

He had still been captured.

Wiping his hand weakly across his mouth, Lance rolled away from his mess and half-pushed himself, grunting and trying not to start crying at the pain, so he was leaning against a smooth metal wall that he found to also be freezing cold. A glance down revealed that might be because he was only half-dressed.; his armor had been stripped off, which meant his bayard was gone too, and so had the upper part of his underarmor.

But he had gained bandages. They wrapped tightly around his chest and back and Lance recalled that yes, he had been stabbed. They hadn't done anything for the laser burns that covered him, including a rather serious one to the right of his ribcage that seemed to pulse with heat, but he didn't think he was in danger from dying from those. His head was pounding too – the Galran had hit him upside the head, he thought he remembered – and Lance tried to determine if he had a concussion, but couldn't quite remember the symptoms for one. Headache for sure though, check.

Lance shivered, the motion sending every nerve back alight, and he whimpered low in his throat, bringing his arms up to wrap about his stomach in as much a hug of comfort as trying to warm himself.

It didn't help much.

He swallowed thickly, trying to pull himself back together. So he'd been captured. Okay. Fine. He just... he just had to get out of here now.

In a few minutes, he decided, tilting his head back against the cold wall. Maybe when the room stopped its gentle spin that he was ninety-nine percent sure was just in his head. He just needed a few minutes. He'd be fine then.

His chest throbbed as though to say it begged to differ.

So not moving for a little bit. What else could he do instead?

An image of his Lion swam to mind and Lance tensed. Had she been captured too?

"Bl-Blue?" he rasped, voice feeling like he'd rubbed it raw with sandpaper and he swallowed thickly, trying to ease the ache. "Are you th-there?"

No comforting purr touched his mind. He stretched his senses as far as he could, seeking some sign of his Lion. Even in the castle he could always feel her, a tiny press against him, even if she was too far away to speak with in her hangar.

So that meant either this was a really big ship or Blue wasn't here. Lance warred between relief and despair. He was so so glad Blue wasn't caught too but... but he really needed her.

"Blue," he whispered again, just to break up he silence.

It didn't help.

What would help would be figuring a way out of this.

Think. He needed to think. It'd be easier to do if everything didn't hurt so much and his thoughts kept
drifting. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt not just hurt but so... fuzzy. He thought it might have been when Keith was directing him through the maze and he'd run headlong into one of the walls at full tilt because Pidge and Hunk were about to beat them and he had to have been close and Keith was making him mess up on purpose.

And he was getting off track. What had he been trying to think about? Right. Escape. Getting out of here. Think. Think. What would Shiro do in this situation?

Okay, Shiro would analyze the situation. Lance opened his eyes – when had he closed them? You weren't supposed to sleep with head injuries, right? Stay awake! - to take inventory. Clothing: underarmor shirt was gone, pants were still intact. Shoes were... gone? He scowled, wiggling his visible toes. Wasn't that something bad guys did? Take your shoes so you couldn't run away as easily?

Lance paused then. Right. The Galra were bad guys. Made sense. He decided he may indeed have that concussion. Wasn't disjointed thinking a symptom? Or was he making that up?

Okay, what else? Chest wound was bad, very bad, but nothing else seemed to be too terrible. His legs were still working, he determined, even though moving them sent tremors up the rest of his body and so he stopped. That was good. Location? Some type of cell, as he'd figured. Maybe eight feet by eight feet? Tall enough to stand in, it looked like, but he wasn't willing to stand up to try. Completely empty.

There was a door on whatever direction was across from him. He'd never been good with directions and how was he honestly supposed to know right now anyway? He bet Shiro and Keith had some type of internal compass built into them though as they always seemed to know exactly where they were. He was just going to call it north. Door on the north with ugly purple light (and he had once thought purple was a pretty color, ugh) mounted to the right of it.

The door did not have any handles on his side and no little window for him to peer out of. He could only tell it was actually a door because it was set further into the wall than the rest of the room. Walls were, as he'd already deduced, made of metal. He rapped a weak fist against the one he was leaning on, but it was just as solid as he'd anticipated.

He was well and truly captured. Lance tried not to panic at the thought and what it all entailed.

Because why had he been captured? He recalled them saying something about Haggar.

He...

He did not want to find out why Haggar wanted him.

He knew he wasn't the brains of the Voltron team but even he knew something weird was going on. This entire time it had been Black Lion, Black Lion, Black Lion and yet here they were luring the Blue Lion (and it could have been none other, not with their underwater trap) to them. Why?

He hoped he didn't have to find out.

He needed to escape.

But, as he glanced again about the cell, he knew such a thing was not happening right now.

When someone did come to open the door he wasn't going to be able to go all kick-butt Shiro on them or even martial artist Keith and take them out; he wasn't a very strong hand-to-hand fighter on a good day and today - his chest ached again - today was not a good day. Even if he was able to
miraculously overpower the guard he had no idea where he was and he doubted the Galra were
going to let him just wander about the ship looking for a hangar. If he had a way to hide himself -
scurry into an air duct like Pidge had done when Sendak had infiltrated the castle - that would be
ideal, but he also didn't think he would fit into one.

He hadn't been bound, he noted. He doubted it was out of concern for his injury either, which left...

That he wasn't a threat.

Lance hated the pressure building behind his eyes at that. Even without knowing him or his abilities,
despite the fact that he had ki-- hurt one of the Galrans sent to capture him, they were not taking him
seriously.

He should use it to his advantage, he knew. It could be his one chance.

But even still...

He knew it was useless. He was no match for a Galran like this and even had he been at full health
there wasn't much he could do against their sheer size and armor without a weapon.

So what did he do when ultimately someone came for him?

He couldn't fight, but he didn't want to go meekly. He wasn't that weak, he wasn't. And he couldn't
let them see how afraid he was. He was a Paladin of Voltron. Stuff like this happened all the time to
heroes in the stories; they got captured, they were interrogated - oh Dios, were they going to torture
him? – and ultimately they either escaped or were rescued. An escape was pretty much non-existent
but a rescue? He could wait for a rescue. He was sure the team was gathering now, just as they all
had for Allura when she had been caught.

Although...

She was Allura. The princess. He was just... Lance.

No. He shook the thought from his head. He may be the weakest member of the team but he was still
a part of it. Hunk, he knew, would never just leave him behind. They would come for him. He just
had to remain strong until then.

He could do that, right?

He still wasn't sure what his approach was going to be. If his head would just stop aching so he
could think then maybe--

He cut his own thoughts off as the door began to open.

Quiznak.

They were here.

He winced at the brighter light - purple still, of course - spilling into the room from the hall and
illuminating two Galran soldiers.

Two huge Galran soldiers, armed with blasters and... and was that an axe?

What did he do?

"Paladin--" the smaller (but not small at all, absolutely not at all) one began, but Lance interrupted,
"Your hospitality skills suck," he informed them, talking past the scratchiness of this throat. Just keep talking. "What kind of place is this? The accommodations are awful. Like, look, I get that you guys probably have barracks or something but your guests should be treated a little better, don't you think? Like, room with a view maybe? A bed would be a good start too."

The soldiers seemed dumbstruck and Lance kept going. If he was rambling there was no room left to be scared. And he wasn't scared. Not at all. Not one bit.

"The metal décor in here just isn't doing it for me and I know you guys really like purple, but it's just not my color. Blue is much better. But not a pastel blue, no no, but like, a nice deep blue is fine or even better an ocean blue—"

"Get up," ordered the the other soldier, a small burn scar above his right eye, both of which were narrowed in such hate that Lance felt a shiver run down his spine.

"I'm... I'm actually doing fine right here," Lance said, trying not to shrink as the Galran moved towards him. "You know, the metal isn't that bad when you get past the coldness and hardness of it—"

He cut off with a small yelp as the Galran reached down and sank claws into his hair, digging into his scalp, and then lifted him by it. Reflexive tears sprang to Lance's eyes at the pressure and he hated the noise pulled out of him as sleeping wounds were awoken and his chest screamed at the pressure and angle. There was little relief to be had either as he was made to stand on his tiptoes, most of his weight still hanging from the Galran's hand in his hair.

"Enough," the Galran growled, shaking Lance and he bit his tongue to keep the cry inside. When Lance did not respond the Galran shook him again, and while he wasn't smiling there was something gleeful crossing his face as Lance moaned again.

He was waiting for a response.

Lance couldn't nod, not the way his head was behind held, and as much as he told himself to not give into the fear that was seeping past his earlier bravado he couldn't help it either.

"'kay," he managed, hoping it didn't sound as pathetic as it came out, but his throat was tight and he wasn't sure he was capable of saying more at the moment. He was lowered back to the floor, feet falling flush, and his hair released. He stumbled slightly at being upright and his vision blurred for a moment before it came back with sudden clarity as a set of claws descended painfully on his shoulder.

"Walk."

Well, so long as stumbling counted as walking Lance followed the order, sharp claws digging in and forcing him to keep up a steady pace even as every footfall sent a pounding pain through him.

He debated for all of a tick of resisting, of digging his feet into the ground and refusing to budge, but he knew ultimately this was not the place to make his stand. It would do nothing and he'd likely only end up even more hurt from it. And... and if he was going to be interrogated (read: tortured) then he was going to need whatever little strength he had left to endure.

Just until the team arrived.

He tried to trace a path, but every hall looked the same and after six turns he couldn't remember if it
had been three lefts and a right and then two lefts or if the right turn had been one more hallway up. It didn't matter anyway, as he didn't want to return to his cell. He needed to find a hangar but despite the many offshoots and halls there were no signs indicating a direction and it wasn't like he could read Galran anyway.

Lance did have to admit though that this ship was much bigger than any ships he'd previously been on. In fact, the only thing he could think of that might have stood a chance at comparison was Zarkon's flag ship they had attacked in retrieving Allura. But, it wasn't like he was meeting Zarkon, right? That was ridiculous.

And yet as they entered another hallway that opened into a receiving hall with a throne perched at the very back Lance came to the horrible conclusion that actually yes, he was about to meet Zarkon. Oh Dios.

"I... I don't think I'm dressed appropriately for a visit with your dictator," Lance squeaked, trying to stall for all the good it would do. "Maybe we could reschedule? For like never in my lifetime?"

"Silence." The grip on his shoulder increased to the point where Lance felt warm trickles of blood flowing down his arm from the punctures and he barely swallowed up the gasp.

He was forced to kneel at the steps leading to the throne, where none other than the Galran emperor himself sat. This was Lance's first time seeing him up close and he had to admit the guy had a pretty commanding presence. His eyes were purple instead of the typical Galran yellow and his features weren't as furred as many of the other Galrans Lance had had the not-pleasure of encountering. The armor was huge, but then so too was the man behind it.

Standing next to the throne was a cloaked figure and Lance's stomach dropped.

That must be Haggar.

And somehow, despite her small stature next to Zarkon, he was infinitely more afraid of her. She was the one who had hurt Shiro. Had given — forced — that arm upon him. And as cool and useful as the robotic arm was, Lance would bet everything Shiro would rather have his flesh one back.

She was the one who had wanted him alive.

It was not a comforting fact.

"The Paladin, as requested, my Lord," the Galran not gripping Lance's shoulder spoke.


That...

That did not seem normal. Or good. Definitely not good.

Zarkon turned his head slightly to the cloaked figured. "Your plan seems to be succeeding so far, Haggar."

And it was Haggar.

Quiznak.
Lance let his mouth move on its own accord again in an effort to fight back his growing dread.

"Uh, what plan exactly?" Lance asked, figuring too there was no harm (although there probably actually was) in asking. "I'm not sure if you realized this, but I'm the Blue Paladin. You know, with the Blue Lion. Not that we'd let you have the Black Lion, I'm just saying I think you got your colors mixed up."

To his surprise, Zarkon let out a deep laugh. "I had heard rumor that the Blue Paladin liked to prattle, but I did not realize how much so."

"Haha, yeah, I'm a pretty funny guy," Lance said, shifting slightly and halting immediately as the claws dug in deeper and he felt a new trickle of blood descend over his chest. "So, how about I entertain you for a bit, tell some jokes, and then you send me off on my way home? It's got to be pretty late at this point and Sh— he cut himself off from saying Shiro's name; there was no need to provide or confirm any intel the Galrans had, "my leader is really strict about curfew."

"Haggar?" Zarkon sighed. The Druid took a step forward and pointed a hand at Lance.

Lance's stomach bottomed out.

"Okay, crazy witch lady don't go pointing at—"

And Lance found himself silenced as his jaw snapped shut.

What. The. Quiznak?

He futilely tried to open his mouth, to speak as words were his only weapon here, and all he got for his efforts was a pressure on his jaw and a new ache to add to his many. He could feel himself growing lightheaded and forced himself to take a deep inhale through his nose and then out.

Don't panic don't panic don't panic.

He was panicking.

Magic. Haggar was using magic on him and she hadn't even touched him and oh Dios what had he gotten himself into?

"You did not let me finish," Zarkon said, interrupting his spiraling thoughts, leaning back in his throne. "I dislike pointless words. Even so, I will answer your question." He paused then, for dramatic effect Lance was certain, and he hated that it was working.

"I desire the Black Lion," Zarkon said simply, although a dark smile pulled up his face. "You are here to ensure that it becomes mine. The... bait, if you will."

Oh.

Oh.

This all made so much more sense now.

It was why they had created such a scheme in the first place, separating one Lion from the pack. It wasn't that they were specifically after Lance or Blue, no, they just needed a way to get one of them alone and vulnerable.

Well, Lance had to hand it to them. Their plan had worked.
But...

He shook his head at Zarkon's words. He would not be the bait. He would never allow the Empire to have the Black Lion. If Zarkon obtained her then the universe had absolutely no hope of fighting back.

As if hearing his thoughts Zarkon chuckled again, although it held no humor. "You have no choice in the matter. Your life in exchange for the Black Lion. If your fellow Paladins value it, they will come. And if they do not then I suppose you meant little to them."

Lance was unsuccessful at completely hiding the wince at that statement.

But it didn't matter anyways. Even if they wanted to, they could not just hand the Black Lion over. Zarkon was unlikely to let Lance live when all was said and done (otherwise he was an oddly benevolent sort and that just didn't fit with the picture he painted) and if the exchange did go as planned then Lance and the other Paladins would be dead soon thereafter without the ability to form Voltron.

The only way this would possibly work for him was a rescue mission. They had rescued Allura once, there was no reason they couldn't do it again.

Except... they'd been able to form Voltron then. Without him they couldn't do that. And as skilled and determined as his friends were, there was no way they were a match for Zarkon's forces. Four lions and one castle against the entire Galra fleet? It was insanity. Lance would never want them to endanger themselves like that.

Not for him.

So if a rescue was out of the cards, what were the other options?

Lance had a sinking feeling he knew what it was.

He would die here. He would die after being tortured and interrogated and he only prayed that he didn't give up any information in that time that could hurt his team. He didn't know much about Voltron as a whole, but he did know (or liked to think he did) about its Paladins. About the people behind the robot and even now his mind was running through and simultaneously trying to block out any observations he'd made of his team that would detail strengths or weaknesses.

He couldn't give them anything. He would have to hold on until the very end.

He prayed he could do it.

And then after... His death would leave a hole in Voltron. But Paladins were replaceable; he was sure they could find someone, maybe even Allura, to pilot Blue.

What wasn't replaceable was the Black Lion. The team would realize that too. They would see how it was a suicide mission to attempt a rescue, know that they couldn't give into Zarkon's demands.

And so...

So he was probably going to die here. But he wouldn't go down without a fight. He could at least do that.

"I see your resolve, young Paladin," Haggar rasped from Zarkon's side, who had watched with interest as the blue eyes had gone from pained to resignation to determination. "But you are mistaken
if you believe that the Paladins will not come for you. Not when they see what you have been reduced to under my hand." Haggar smiled and it was not a kind look. "I look very much forward to our time together."

Lance swallowed thickly but it did nothing to combat the terror settling over him at her words.

So there was going to be torture.

And... and the others were going to see it?

Oh *Dios* no.

"And should the Paladins of Voltron refuse to accept the terms," Zarkon rumbled as Lance tried to will himself to calm down, "we will still gain a victory. You will be disposed of and cease the summoning of Voltron. Not only that," Zarkon's grin widened, "I may know the weaknesses of each Lion, but these Paladins are new to me. I too am looking forward to what secrets Haggar learns from you."

And he'd been right. Oh *Dios* he was right.

Lance's jaw clenched even around Haggar's magic. He wouldn't tell them *anything*. He would *never* betray his friends like that. He was a Paladin of Voltron. He would protect them and the universe until his very last breath.

But could he? His mind treacherously reminded him of what happened to Shiro. And if someone as strong as that could still suffer from his time at the hands of the Galrans what resistance could he possibly provide?

He'd do what he could. He would give every bit of himself if it meant protecting his friends and hopefully it would be enough.

It *had* to be enough.

"Remove him from my sight," Zarkon commanded. "Haggar, I expect results soon."

She bowed and Lance was pulled forcibly to his feet by the commander and had it not been for his grip Lance might have found himself on the floor again, legs shaking against his will.

Haggar vanished in a burst of black lightening and Lance would have screamed had his mouth not been magically sealed shut as she appeared directly in front of him, mere inches from his face. This close her eyes were practically glowing even under the darkness of her hood and her smile was sharp.

Sharp and dangerous.

Lance tried to pull away but she was reaching out a purple hand from her robe and roughly cupped his face, turning it side to side. Lance jerked to no avail, heart hammering as she brushed her thumb against his cheek.

*Wrong* his mind screamed at him, the gentle touch at odds with what violence he knew she was capable of.

"You have beautiful eyes," she crooned, her own pupil less yellow peering into his. "I have never seen such a shade of blue." A pointed finger traced lightly about his right eye before digging cruelly into the skin just below it.
Lance squeezed them shut so he didn't have to look at her anymore and she laughed, a cruel sound.

"Take him back to his cell, Commander," she instructed. "It is time to begin phase one."

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh, you guys! -insert Clawhauser's squeal from Zootopia here- I am so blown away with all of the support you have shown this fic! I am so glad you all are enjoying it! And I'm so, so grateful for those of you who continue to inspire me with your amazing reviews and words of encouragement. You make me just want to keep writing and writing (when I ought to be doing things that pay the bills xD).

Thank you all so much to those who reviewed! It means the world to me! ♥ I'm glad you're enjoying reading as much as I am writing!

As always, please do drop a comment below if you enjoyed it! Doesn't matter how long or short; every one makes me smile and encourages me to keep writing. Thank you so much and see you within 1-2 weeks (although if y'all keep being awesome I'm going to keep getting chapters out in a week!).
Lance was shoved unceremoniously back into the cell he'd first awoken in, unable to stop his stumble from the push and crashed into the far wall and had him uttering a short scream as pain erupted in his chest at the hit. The door closed behind him, plunging the room back into near darkness save the lone purple light next to the door. The only thing that seemed to have changed was that his pile of vomit had been removed. Strangely kind of them.

He took a shuddering breath and then another, stretching his jaw at the reminder that he could do so again and shuddering at the recollection, as brief as it had been.

He'd been completely powerless then. Physically restrained and then forced to be silent.

Lance hated it.

He hated more how much it was still affecting him.

He sank down to the ground, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms about them despite the pain it caused to radiate as his wound stretched. The previously cold cell seemed even colder now and he shivered, the action sending another jolt through him. He wrapped his arms tighter.

It didn't really help.

He coughed lightly, relieved still again to hear the sound. "A..." he swallowed, throat aching lightly from its previous screaming, "A blanket would be nice," he called, assuming that there were cameras hidden somewhere in this cell. If he were the Galra he'd most definitely have a camera. "Some water and food too. But no Paladin Lunch, if you can manage it." He tried to smile, it probably came out a grimace, but he kept it up.

He couldn't let them get to him. He had no idea what his plan was at this point but appearing weak was not on the agenda.

Silence greeted his request, but he wasn't surprised. He didn't expect to actually get any of those items but... well, they did have to keep him alive, right? And other than providing basic medical care, they hadn't done much. Even now he could feel that the bandages were slightly wet and sticky. He tried not to think about it.

Thinking about it made him think of blood which made him think of the Galrans which made him think of the one he'd ki–

Phase one, he interrupted himself. Not that it was really a better change of topic but it wasn't about–

Phase one. He wondered what it meant. Nothing good, surely. But so far... well, other than being cold and wracked by tremors from his previous wounds phase one wasn't so bad. He was all for not being tortured.

And most definitely not tortured for information about his team.

Just the thought of that made him feel sick.
Not only did Zarkon want the universe to crumble, which it would if he got his hands on the Black Lion, but in the interim while they "negotiated" his release he wanted to wring every bit of information that he could from Lance. He had to admit it was a great plan – sadistic and awful and cruel but smart and if he were an evil dictator he'd probably do the same.

Lance couldn't let it happen.

He'd already ruled out that the team could absolutely not give into Zarkon's demands. They couldn't. The universe couldn't afford that. He'd also determined that they could not launch a rescue mission as they were; it was too dangerous, too risky and he would never forgive himself if any of them were captured as well. Never.

He'd resigned himself to dying here - never getting to see his family again, never getting to return to Earth – with the conviction to not tell the Galra anything but... but where if there was one more option?

Escape.

It's not like he really had any grand ideas on how to go about it, but it was there. It was his only real option if he wanted to get out.

He had to escape himself. Maybe there'd even be a sympathetic Galran like Ulaz. He'd told them there were more, right? And Lance was certain it had to be common knowledge at this point there was a Paladin of Voltron aboard the ship.

But in case there wasn't...

He needed to engineer his own escape. It was time to start acting more like Shiro – brave and strong and smart – and less like himself.

And that started with finding a way out of this cell.

With a groan Lance unfolded from his sit and pulled himself to his feet, his head swimming at the change in vertigo and he had to lean against the wall to steady himself. He really hoped they did come with water soon; his throat was parched and his head was aching and he was pretty sure you were supposed to stay hydrated when you were losing blood. And he most definitely had lost and was losing blood.

Just the thought of water made everything seem to flare up at once and he groaned, pushing it away in the "pain to ignore" file folder that was quickly becoming a drawer. He doubted Pidge had an inkling of what a file drawer was and if she did she'd think it was the most ridiculous thing ever. And focus, he scolded himself. He needed to concentrate on examining his cell for an escape, not sit here thinking about office supplies.

Keeping one hand on the wall, he slowly made his way about the cell, seeking any hairline cracks, any loose piece of something he could tug free and fashion into a weapon. And of course where the cameras were located so he could disable them because it would be hard to stage an escape if they could see what he was doing.

The wall that he'd decided was south yielded nothing of interest even as he passed by it multiple times, each time looking at a different portion. Kicking it was a dumb move too, as now his toes really hurt, but it did take away some of the attention from his other more serious injuries for a bit.

The east wall did have a slightly different colored panel on the bottom and Lance had eagerly crouched next to it. Pressing against it resulted in him being beaned in the forehead as it retracted
from the wall and revealed a… He frowned at what apparently the universe considered a toilet. But at least it took care of one problem (which didn't seem like it was going to be a continued one if they didn't bring him water) even if the Galra had no sense of privacy.

He told them as such as he completed his business, sending the toilet back into the wall when he was finished. Unfortunately no other wall panels opened up to reveal an armory or something useful on any part of the room.

He'd tried prying at the door, but he was too short to reach the ceiling where the metal retracted and the seals were airtight on the edges. He couldn't even try to climb up the doorframe as it was nowhere near indented enough to allow him a good grip and he doubted honestly he'd have been able to do so given how much it hurt to just move his arms up let alone support any weight.

However, his pitiful attempts at jumping did reveal the location of the camera. It was a tiny thing, which at first glance looked like a screw in the ceiling, but the faint sheen of glass gave it away. It also meant he was not getting anywhere close to it which meant he was not disabling it.

Quiznack.

The only thing left was the light fixture, which was mounted at just about his shoulder height. It was about three feet tall and maybe six inches wide in a cylinder shape. He'd quickly found that it was also quite hot and he hurriedly removed his hand from it, blowing on the light burn that took over his palm. The warmth had been welcome though compared to the rest of his cell and he eagerly held up both hands to it like he would one of the bonfires Papá would make in the summer.

But no gentle heat flickered over them. Figured. He was cold, but not cold enough to keep burning himself. Hopefully he'd get a blanket or some type of prison uniform soon.

Although he was starting to fear that he wasn't getting anything of the sort.

He wasn't as chilled now thanks to the walk, but everything was hurting more and he was most definitely bleeding now from his main wound and the punctures dotting his shoulder from that one commander's claws. The guy could really do with a nice manicure. Did Galrans get manicures? They'd probably need like industrial strength nail files and he was having a hard time imagining them with painted claws. He snorted lightly at the image.

Lance retreated to his corner between the south and west walls now that his circuit was completed with nothing really of value gleaned. He'd have preferred to stay near the light, for as small as the cell was this section was more shadowed, but there was no way he was going to sit that close to the door.

He wondered how long it had been since he'd been captured. His stomach was growling at him so it was at least past lunch. He hadn't had the time to grab breakfast or it wouldn't be so bad. Then again, he had sort of puked out what contents were in it so...

The memory sent it rolling again and he choked down the acid tickling his throat.

He...

He might have to kill again.

His hands shook where he had them gathered in his lap.

He didn't want to do it again.
It didn't matter that it was a Galran, the enemy, and they would just as surely kill him if given the opportunity (and permission, as according to Haggar he was to be kept alive for now) he didn't like it.

He understood they had all likely killed before; it was inevitable that some had perished when they blew up ships and bases. But that hadn't been...

Hadn't been like this. So... so sudden. So violent.

He had to stop thinking about it, he decided, as his stomach clenched again.

He need a distraction. Anything.

He turned his attention to what he now knew was the camera. "Hel-lo," he drawled. "Me again. Think you could bring that water and food I asked for? You guys want me alive, right? It'll be your funeral if I die."

And Lance had no doubt that was not an idle threat. If the Galra had put this much effort into capturing him then it would not go over well to kill him via dehydration. He knew he wasn't anywhere close to such a condition being fatal, but, well, he definitely wasn't comfortable and while water was not the sole answer he knew it would help.

He swallowed again. He was so thirsty.

He allowed them nearly ten dobashes before he spoke again, adding in his own version of a threat. May as well put his ability to nearly annoy others to death to good use. "This is your last warning. Bring me my requested items or I will start singing the most annoying Earth song known to man. Believe me, you do not want this stuck in your head. It will cause an infectious earworm that will devour your brain."

He smirked to himself. He doubted Galran culture was knowledgeable about earworms and perhaps such a thing would finally spur them into action.

Another approximate ten dobashes passed to the point where he was actively shivering and debating going back to the light for warmth (and burns). His palm still slightly stung from its first encounter and he ultimately decided against it as the thought of moving made him dizzy even while he was sitting. That, and he'd sort of gotten the metal on his back warm-ish from his body heat and he had no desire to have to repeat the process.

"Oh-k-kay," he stuttered. "You guys asked for it. Prepare to hear the most obnoxiously beautiful version of ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall that you will ever encounter in your soon-to-be short lifetime."

Clearing his throat he began in the pitchiest voice he could manage, "Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-nine bottles of beer. Take one down and pass it around, ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall!"

He swallowed against his dry throat and continued. He could do this all day. All day. "Ninety-eight bottles of beer on the wall, ninety-eight bottles of beer. Take one down and pass it around, ninety-seven bottles of beer on the wall!"

He sang and sang, switching from a country twang to rap to Broadway musical and everything in between that he could think of, trying to imitate his teammates, Iverson, and even a version dedicated to the mice in a series of squeaks. His voice started to go around fifty-four bottles and he was all but rasping by forty.
It'd been at least two hours now by his count that he'd been thrown back in here. His shivering was getting even worse and he was curled up in a ball on the floor now as even sitting against the wall was starting to make him dizzy. The blood that had been leaking from his wounds had been grossly warm, but now he didn't even feel it.

Speaking was becoming painful and so he stopped, licking his dry lips and wishing for just a sip of water. He'd even take nunvil at this point.

Maybe he'd close his eyes for a little bit. Sleep didn't sound so bad right now and he had nothing else to do. Maybe he'd dream up an awesome escape plan while he was at it. Then when he woke up perhaps they'd have brought food and water.

He tucked his head further into his chest and prayed for sleep to come quickly.

xxx

Lance awoke sometime later to a horrible cramping sensation all through his torso. The pounding in his head seemed to have increased tenfold and his tongue felt like it had grown three sizes.

Letting out a low moan he curled back into a ball, trying to ease the pulsing pain. He was still so cold and while fingers tingled uncomfortably, pressed up against his stomach, he could barely feel his toes. He whimpered and pulled his feet towards him, awkwardly stretching one arm down to grip at the cold limb and try to rub it back into feeling.

That hurt too.

He kept at it.

How long had he been out? It must have been a few hours at least. He pried open his eyes, looking tiredly for the food and water they had to have brought him while he was unconscious.

But there was nothing in sight.

Nothing save for the little breath of air he made and his eyes widened.

It was definitely colder.

He uncurled just a little bit, straining his eyes to see if there was something he'd missed, but nothing. No food. No water. No blanket.

Just a barren, freezing cell.

He couldn't help the whine that emerged from his lips and ducked his head back down to hide his face. The Galra must think he was pathetic, he thought. A few hours without food and water in a cold room and he was already crying.

He was pathetic.

None of the other Paladins would be complaining. Okay, fine, he amended that. Hunk most definitely would and Pidge for sure, but Pidge would be swearing up a storm and probably legit frightening the guard into giving her the requested items while Hunk would be giving the camera silent judgement and making the Galra feel bad for not doing as he'd asked.

Lance couldn't do that though.

Everything just... hurt. And he was so cold. He shivered again and nuzzled his nose against his
inner arm where he'd pressed it.

The only thing he had left to do at this point was ask (beg) for some assistance, but he couldn't lower himself that much. Not when he didn't even know if it would work. And even then his small bit of pride wouldn't let him sink that low. Not yet at least.

Still, he could try neutrally asking once more. That wouldn't be so bad.

Except, he found out, it hurt to even attempt talking. His tongue was refusing to cooperate and licking chapped lips only made them hurt more. An unintelligible grunt was the only sound he seemed capable of making and he faintly scowled at himself. Hadn't he been saying that talking was one of his true talents? How could he fail at even that?

So he skipped trying to ask for water to a word he loved so dearly that it never failed to turn his lips up upon uttering it. "Bl-" he started, swallowing painfully and retrying. "Bl-Blue."

Of course she didn't respond, but saying it made him feel a little better. Like he wasn't so alone. He tried it out a few more times, becoming more articulate with each pass even though his throat protested. He told it to be quiet and that it didn't hurt a bit.

After chanting Blue's name a few times quietly into his chest, he finally felt ready to face the camera and at least not croak at it. He carefully turned his head in that direction, fighting back the wince as even the small movement seemed to make all of of his body ache, and addressed whichever lucky Galran got camera duty.

"Water would," he paused, swallowing, "would be really nice. It'd go a long way towards building some good will, you know? I'll just wait here for it. Knock before you come in."

There. A touch of snark, a bit of sincerity and hopefully nothing that screamed out how pathetic and pitiful and in pain he really was.

Please let it work.

He knew they wouldn't really let him die, but he had no doubt they could make him uncomfortable... well, more than he already was. What was it, three days without water was fatal? Probably less in his case due to the blood loss.

So they had to come... eventually. It had probably only been a few hours since he'd been captured.

Please let them come soon.

He tried to count ticks to keep his mind from wandering – as it settled on everything from torture to water to the team to water to pain to Haggar to water again and repeat and repeat and repeat – but after nearly twenty dobashes worth of ticks no one had showed and Lance stopped the count.

Maybe, he thought, they wanted him to be asleep when they dropped off supplies. Because he was so frightening and all. It was a ridiculous thought but it pulled a weak chuckle from him and he chose to believe it.

Closing his eyes Lance prayed when he opened them there would be water to greet him.

xxx

Still nothing? His stomach was growling like a black hole now, but it had nothing on the paralyzing pain that was emitting from chest and the sick dizziness whenever he tried to shift his head. It was
like all of Lions had decided to toss him around like a hacky sack while using blasters to boot.

Whatever phase one was Lance decided he loathed it, even as he asked himself what on earth phase one was.

Holy quiznak, he was starting to lose his mind.

Did he have to actually beg to get supplies? Is that what they wanted from him? To grovel?

No. He wouldn't do it. He was a Paladin of Voltron. He had some measure of pride. He wasn't that weak. It was just water. He didn't need it. Or food. Or blankets. Or medical attention.

None of it.

He wished he believed himself.

He squeezed his eyes shut. They'd have to give him something soon or he really could die. He just had to hold out until they realized their situation.

Sleep, he told himself. Just sleep.

Sleep would become his escape.

xxx

Where was he? Why was it so hot? Why did everything hurt so much?

Lance cracked open an eye, confusion settling in as he observed metal walls and a purple light. Was he in a cell? Had he been captured?

Ah, that's right. He was a Galran prisoner right now. Everything was trickling back and he moaned softly, hand pressing against the stab wound as it pulsed. How did he ever forget that?

At least being too hot was a nice change from freezing.

But no, it wasn't the room that had changed, he realize as he pulled his face free of his arm to take in a gulp of air and saw his breath mist in front of him.

That meant...

That meant it was he who was warm.

He had a fever.

Great. Exactly what he needed. The cherry on top of this scenario.

Mmm, he could really go for a sundae now. Dripping with hot fudge and caramel sauce and lots of sprinkles. Maybe Hunk could whip something up that resembled ice cream. He hadn't eaten it since the Garrison.

Focus, focus, he scolded himself. Stop thinking about food. It just made it worse.

He wondered how much worse it was going to get.

Probably a lot.

Lance whimpered quietly.
His eyes closed on their own accord again and forced himself to try and sleep again.

xxx

He drifted in and out of consciousness with no sense of time.

He'd awake to either stabbing pains from cramping muscles, his wounds or the pounding of his head. His sandpaper throat had moved from beyond an annoyance to nearly as painful as the rest of him and each dry swallow was agony.

He kept forgetting where he was but he always remembered once the wash of purple light seared into his vision.

He called for water a few times when he awoke, other times whispering for Blue and in his lowest moments praying for his parents and Shiro and Hunk.

Just a few minutes more, he promised himself every time. Someone would come in just a few minutes.

No one ever came.

xxx

Water water water water water water water.

His entire body screamed for it with such an intensity that he'd cry if he had any tears to shed.

Everything hurt. Breathing hurt. Thinking hurt. Every muscle and bone ached and stabbed and his flesh felt like it was burning even though he couldn't stop shivering.

He wanted it to stop.

"W-water," he rasped, voice barely audible even to him, a moan more than a word. "Pl-please."

And in another part of the ship Haggar grinned down at the screen showing the human boy, his plea tasting like the sweetest of victories.

He had lasted nearly two days, a feat she had honestly not expected from one as weak as a human and nothing like her Shiro. But it only added to the despair and fear she knew the Paladins had to be feeling.

It would serve their purposes well.

She turned to one of the soldiers assigned to monitor the cameras. "Find Commander Theodek and have him retrieve the boy," she ordered, eyes sparkling with delight. "It is time to begin phase two."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your amazing comments! Seriously. Blown away every week by you guys. If you lurkers have a comment to share too I'd love to hear it! ♥

Thanks everyone! Hope you enjoy this chapter. As always, please do leave comments below! ♥ I adore reading each and every one!
Chapter Six

Lance wasn't sure if he was hallucinating or not. He swore the door to his cell had just opened. It had not opened in...

In forever.

He blinked at it.

Yup.

It was open and a bright purple light that stung his eyes was filtering in. He moaned and closed them.

Heavy footsteps sounded and that prompted Lance to reopen his eyes.

Just in time to see a blurred purple hand descending for him.

He didn't have the strength to move and it latched onto his head and Lance definitely remembered that action. As he was dragged to sitting, his body screaming as it was pulled from where his limbs had become locked, he caught sight of the burn scar above this Galran's right eye.

The commander.

Which meant that yes, all of this was very real.

Someone was actually here, even if that someone was dragging him by his hair and sliding his body across the floor without any mind, faint red streaks smeared behind from where Lance's blood had congealed in his huddle.

Which meant…

"Water," he croaked, the word literally filling his mind. Somehow, someway, if he could just have water things would be okay.

The Galran ignored him.

Lance closed his eyes and offered no resistance as he was dragged through the halls. No stairs at least, he thought wryly, supposing he should be grateful for the small things. His head was aching as his entire weight was dragged by it, but he had no energy left to cry out. All he could manage were pathetic whimpers that the Galran paid no heed to, except to tighten his grip every now and then.

He must have blacked out at some point during their journey, as when he awoke he was being strapped into a high-backed chair and Haggar, he definitely recognized her, was placing small probes all over his arms and chest.

Even in his muddled state that got a reaction and he tried to pull away, going nowhere thanks to the restraints holding down his wrists and, an attempted kick later showed, his ankles, with a strap pulled tight across his chest for good measure.

He wasn't going anywhere.
"Awake, are you?" Haggar chuckled next to his ear.

He shut his eyes in reply.

"Now now, that won't do," she clucked. And then there was something cold and wet bumping against his nose and Lance's eyes flew open.

"There are your pretty blue eyes," she murmured but he was looking not at her but the glass of water she was holding in front of his face. Water. He almost started crying at the sheer relief that finally he was going to get a drink.

Haggar chuckled. "I have something for you, Paladin. But first you must do something for me."

And just like that all of Lance's dreams of having a sip – scratch that, chugging the glass – went up in smoke.

Lance knew a bribe when he saw one. Growing up with a bunch of siblings would do that. And no matter how much he wanted a drink he would not, absolutely not, do anything for the witch.

As exhausted as he was Lance narrowed his eyes into a glare and leveled it at Haggar. It probably wasn't intimidating in the slightest, evidenced by Haggar's amused smile at it, but it was all he had.

Well that and...

He swallowed thickly and forced out with all the conviction he could manage, "No."

Haggar hummed response nodded at something over his head. The next second his body was alight with literal fire as the probes all over him let up a sickly Galran purple.

And although Lance hadn't thought he had any voice left, somehow he found enough strength to scream, throat tearing at the abuse and he swore he tasted blood. Haggar let whatever it was continue for what seemed like eons before it ended and he was left panting and sagging in the chair, only the restraint holding him up.

"You will deliver a message," she continued as if nothing had just happened. "If you do this, you will be rewarded." She shook the glass of water. "If you fail, you will be punished."

Lance said nothing, concentrating on getting air back into his lungs as his heart beat out a staccato that was much too fast to be safe.

"You will repeat what you hear word for word," she instructed. "Do try and look at the recorder as you speak."

At that Lance jerked his head up, just noticing now that yes indeed there was a recording bot floating a few feet away from him, and paled.

_Dios._ His team was going to see him. Like _this._

Haggar seemed to sense his train of thought and gave him a dangerous smile. "Your fellow Paladins will see it, of course," she said. "I do hope you put on a good show for them."

Lance shuddered. This was _exactly_ what Haggar had wanted. She'd said as much in the throne room. She wanted the others to see him in pain, his _torture_, to make them agree to the trade. The trade that would destroy the universe's last hope for peace.

Well...
Lance couldn't do anything about the being tortured bit, but he could do something about his reaction. She wanted to see him in pain? He grit his teeth. He would hold out for as long as it took. He wouldn't let them see him scream.

He didn't want that to be their last memory of him.

Lance raised his chin at Haggar, a challenge as much as a promise to himself. He would not be a part of her game.

"Repeat after me and you will be rewarded," Haggar said instead, not reacting to his challenge, "and if you fail you will be punished." She paused and then continued. "Greetings, Paladins."

He kept his mouth in a firm line and narrowed his gaze at her, determined to not look directly at the recorder.

"Greetings, Paladins," she repeated.

He replied in silence.

And although he knew it was coming he still couldn't prepare for the burst of agony that flowed through him. He choked on his tongue, trying to tamp down the broken scream.

The pain increased.

And he realized how foolish he'd been to think he could fight back at all.

A cry was torn from him a few ticks later and he he threw his head back and smashed it into the seat, hoping it would be enough to knock him out and end this. It did not but the shocks did stop, leaving him shuddering and listing sideways in his restraints.

Haggar gave him about twenty ticks to recollect himself and then said, a cruel twist to her lips. "Greetings, Paladins."

"Qu-quiznack you," he snapped instead, his voice barely recognizable to his own ears.

More shocks and screams followed.

They continued that pattern for much much too long.

And, Lance learned, there was no end to it.

He had blacked out, whethr he'd finally knocked himself unconscious or the pain had overridden his senses to the point where his body had to shut down to save itself.

But somehow he kept waking up.

He'd finally realized they were drugging him with something, waking up once to a needle leaving his neck and a flare of ice cold fire left behind.

The entire time the recorder blinked.

His friends were watching this.

*Hunk* was watching this. The thought curdled his stomach. Hunk, who didn't like violence of any kind who didn't even like to watch first person shooter video games was seeing him tortured on screen.
If... if Hunk were in his place (and Dios, no, please no, never) then he would want Hunk to speak to save himself the pain.

"Greetings, Paladins," Haggar intoned, interrupting Lance's thoughts. He weakly shook his head, his eyes closed. He didn't even know what he was saying no to. The torture, the words or his own pride.

He could end this for all of them. His pain, the suffering of having to watch.

He supposed...

He supposed he could take his own advice. Just this once.

"Greetings, Paladins," Haggar said again, surprisingly not having shocked him in the interim.

Lance swallowed, tasting blood. "Gr-greetings," he rasped, eyes shut tightly closed and head slumped down. He didn't want to see Haggar's glee or his friends to see the shame painted on his cheeks at his decision.

"Paladins," Haggar prompted like a schoolteacher to a nervous student.

"Paladins," he whispered. His voice was hardly audible to himself, he had no idea how the recording was picking it up. But no shock followed so he supposed it was good enough.

"I bring a message from Emperor Zarkon."

"I bring a... a m-message," he stuttered, breath failing him mid-sentence as a cough overtook him. Haggar was kind enough to let him catch his breath instead of shocking him. He could feel her gaze on him though as he didn't continue. "From Emperor Zarkon," he rushed out, praying he wouldn't feel the pain to follow.

"He is willing to negotiate a trade."

"He's w-willing to..." Lance trailed off as his body pulsed with pain and he moaned instead. Shocks were quick to follow and he didn't even make a sound save a low groan as they wrapped up. Screaming took too much energy now.

He had nothing left.

"Negotiate a trade," Haggar prompted.

"Trade," Lance managed instead. Haggar seemed to realize that was as good as she was going to get and continued. His tongue didn't seem capable of forming such long words right now.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."

Lance shook his head. No. He wouldn't say that.

He would never say that.

"No," Lance whispered, the word tasting like blood.

Haggar repeated the sentence over the sound of the torture, this one seeming to carry on for longer than the others.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."
"No," he gasped, jerking his head up and looking straight at the camera. It was a plea, a wish.

A shattered hope.

"No, Shiro no-"

They  couldn't  come. They  couldn't.

He was rewarded with another bout of shocks.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."

"Please, no," he pleaded. He wasn't sure who he was addressing that to. "Por favor."

Pain was his answer.

Lance choked on his next breath as he came around.

His body begged for him to repeat the words. It was nothing they weren't going to learn anyways.

He couldn't keep doing this.

At this point there would be no life of the Blue Paladin because he would be  dead.

But Lance knew it wasn't going to be that simple. They wouldn't let him die unless it was on their terms.

This was going to keep going and going.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."

A dry sob was pulled from him. "The l-life of the… of the…” His head lolled as fatigue and pain pressed in on him. "Me," he whispered. "For the Black L-lion." He managed to pick his head up then, trying to look in the direction of the camera. "No. Sh-Shiro no, you c–"

He broke off with a barely there scream for going off script.

Only once he had stopped, head angled back down, and quiet did Haggar continue.

"You will locate instructions for surrender at the following set of coordinates."

Lance gave a slow blink as he stared down at his thighs, which kept going in and out of focus.

They wanted him to say that? All of that?

Of course they did.

He summoned up the last of himself. He had to end this.

He couldn't let them watch this any longer. "You will 1-loc-cate the instruct… ions… f-for surrender at…”

"The following set of coordinates," Haggar reminded as Lance coughed up blood.

"Following coor-coordinates," he panted, praying this was the end.

"Hodgkin quadrant sixth nebula."
"Hodgkin qu-quadrant… sixth… neb… nebula."

His head felt like it was going to break his neck as it hung heavily against the chair. He could feel himself slipping away all on his own.

"Seventeen point six degrees north and two hundred and five point four degrees west."

"Seventeen… Six… north…” his mouth struggled to move. "Two h-hundred… five… p-point…” What was the rest of it? He didn't know the rest of it.

He couldn't think anymore.

His body lit up with shocks for the disobedience. He wanted to cry. He was trying. She had to see that, right?

She just didn't care.

"Four degrees west," Haggar said, rough voice piercing through the fog.

"F-four. West." Dios, was it over now? Please, please, please let it be over.

She was talking again though and looking at him expectantly. He blinked back at her.

All he could hear was a dull ringing in his head.

She didn't shock him then, to his surprise, but instead the Galran commander came around and Lance couldn't even try to pull away as a syringe was injected into his neck and the icy fire prickled through him.

Haggar became audible again.

"We look forward to your arrival," Haggar finished, raising an expectant brow.

Last one.

He could do this.

Lance wasn't even sure what he was saying at this point, the drug doing little to help with clarity. He sounded out the syllables, each one taking all of his effort. "We l-look for..ward… your ariv-val,” he mumbled.

His eyes widened when he realized what he'd said.

No.

He jerked his head up then, a "no" on his lips, but the recorder had already been shut off.

He slumped back in the chair, his heartbeat pounding in his ears and chest heaving from what it had just been put through.

It was over now, right?

Even though...

Even though he knew this was only the start.

A taste of what he was sure he was going to be forced to endure as they interrogated him.
And unlike here... he couldn't give into their demands. It wasn't for his friends' benefit then (or so he was telling himself). He needed to hold out.

Just...

Just until they killed him.

Of which such a thing had to be coming soon as he could feel how dehydrated he was, that cotton-mouthed agony and heavy limbs reminding him of how much they too hurt now that the shocks had stopped.

Water.

Haggar had promised him water.

He lifted his lashes to find Haggar's face inches from his own.

She smiled at him and one of her hands moved to cup his cheek, tilting his chin up and he was too weak to even try and struggle.

"You put on an excellent show," she whispered, caressing his face. "And now you shall be rewarded."

Her other hand waved across his eyes and Lance knew no more.

xxx

"Lunch is ready," Hunk said, placing a large, steaming platter of mint green looking potatoes on the table. His voice lacked the usual excitement though at the prospect of food and he slumped down into his chair and made no move to serve himself. He couldn't. He'd made the food to distract him from thinking the hundreds of things Lance could be going through while they were all just sitting here, useless, but it hadn't worked.

He'd even forgotten the salt.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd done something like that.

It was why he had stopped trying to cook any more. A kitchen was no place for a distracted mind, especially one with alien ingredients.

"It looks very tasty, Number Two," Coran said in an upbeat manner, even as his moustache seemed to droop. He took up the serving spoon and ladled some onto his plate and then onto Pidge's, who had her head on the table next to him. "Eat up, everyone. We need to keep up our strength."

"I wonder if Lance is hungry," Pidge whispered, voice muffled by the tabletop. "I hope…" She didn't finish her thought, but Coran placed a gentle hand on her shoulder in understanding.

It had been two and a half days since the trap and Lance's capture. Following Shiro's proclamation that they would rescue Lance, they'd all been filled with hope that they would retrieve their friend soon from the Galran's clutches.

However, they had found themselves quite literally stuck as they had no idea where they were to go. The message had said instructions would follow but follow when?

The tricky part about having an enemy with no home planet was that they had no guaranteed location of where to go. Lance could be anywhere. Literally anywhere in the vast universe and they
They didn't even have an idea of where to start.

So they had to wait.

They'd busied themselves as they could, with Blue's repairs at the top of the list. They figured they could at least scout out down on Xinsthes, see if there was anything to be gleaned from the item that had been left behind.

Hunk, Pidge and Coran had taken to repairing the sliced open hole in her flank as best as they could while Shiro, Keith and surprisingly Allura, who had appeared with her sleeves rolled up and a grim resignation in her expression, had taken on the task of cleaning up the cockpit so the tech team could then move inside and begin to patch up the sliced controls.

Shiro was impressed by both Keith and Allura's fortitude as they cleaned up blood – Lance's blood he'd thought, stomach clenching, and the only comfort being that he knew that Lance was not dead as he'd been requested alive but the idea that it was by Haggar's order had negated most of that relief – and removed the body of the Galran soldier and ejected it into space. "Good riddance," Keith had muttered as it floated away, but Shiro hadn't missed the tremors that worked their way up his frame and had pulled the boy into a tight hug, one of the first since they'd been reunited and although Keith stiffened at first he had softened within a few seconds and just as tightly returned it. And if Shiro's shirt was slightly damp when Keith composed himself and pulled away, he said nothing, except to give him another squeeze of his arm.

And although he hated to see Keith upset he was relieved that Keith was displaying such a reaction. In light of everything that had happened he'd never had that talk with Keith about his attitude towards Lance but he didn't think at this point it was needed. He had the proof that Keith did care, even if his way of showing it was more prickly and affronted than Shiro would have hoped. Still, he would take what little sliver of silver lining that he could.

They had all hurried with the repairs as quick as they could, made easier as the Blue Lion had settled after Shiro's promise to her and she had pulled back on her emotions, making it so they weren't all constantly hit with loss, guilt, pain, fear, anger every time they stepped foot inside. Allura said she could still feel them at the back of her mind due to her bond with the castle, and had spent time sitting on the Blue Lion's paw and stroking the metal foot in a measure of comfort.

But despite that understanding from Allura, she had been blunt about the situation. They could not, under any circumstance, turn the Black Lion over to Zarkon. It would mean the utter destruction of the universe.

"So you're going to abandon Lance?" Hunk had roared, the closest to rage any had ever seen him, and it was terrifying. "You know what they'll do to him!"

"You think I do not know?" Allura had asked, voice cracking. "I will do everything in my power to get the Blue Paladin back! But we cannot sacrifice the Black Lion!"

It had ended with Shiro intervening and assuring Hunk they would get Lance back, no matter what. "We rescued Allura from their base once already," he'd said. "We will do the same for Lance."

No one commented on the fact that at that time they'd had the ability to form Voltron and Allura was worth more to the Empire alive than dead. Lance did not have that luxury.

It was a point that lingered, sick and dark, and no one yet had the courage to ask over it.

They had determined the best course was to wait for the Empire to contact them, to see if there was
anything they could use from the message for a different way to go about retrieving Lance.

It was the only hope they had.

But that was two and a half days ago and in this case it was unlikely that no news meant good news. That was a long time for Lance to be a prisoner to the Galra and none had any idea what he was being forced to endure in that time.

They tried not to think about it.

Blue had been patched up in that time and she had allowed Allura to pilot her while Shiro joined her in the cockpit to return to Xinsthes. Everyone had wanted to come, but Allura said it was important that most remained behind in case this was another trap. She had wanted to go alone, but Shiro was insistent on coming, refusing to allow anyone else alone out of his sight.

He would not lose anyone else.

"This is not your fault," she told him as they descended through the water towards the item that had started this entire nightmare, slender hand lying atop his own in a measure of comfort. "None of us could have anticipated such an outcome"

"It is," Shiro had insisted. "I'm the team leader and I made the call for this mission." His hand had clenched then, prosthetic creaking. "I know what they can do, Princess. What they are going to do to him."

"I know," she said, voice quiet. "I know. But Shiro," and his name had given him a pause, "We cannot give them the Black Lion. We cannot. No... no matter what they say or do."

She could not let every sacrifice made by her people be for naught. The universe could not afford to lose their last chance for hope.

No matter the cost.

"I know," Shiro had sighed, repeating her words, and voice as heavy as she had ever heard it. "I know."

"But I promise I will do whatever I can to see Lance safely returned," she continued, eyes straight ahead and hoping it was a promise she could keep. For Lance, Blue Paladin he may be, was a child still and involved in a war his kind could not even begin to imagine at her request. This was her responsibility too. "We will not abandon him. You and the other Paladins give me hope. We will find a way."

No helpful answers though were yielded in their underwater search. The item was still there, and Blue kept a safe distance away, but scans showed that it was as Pidge had suspected; a pulse designed to knock out all signals, controls and transmissions.

A piece of bait that they had swallowed hook, line and sinker.

The only interesting piece of note was a disturbance of the soft floor of the planet, indicating that something once rested there. It was quite large and Allura quietly guessed a ship of some design.

Zarkon had been busy.

The Galrans had likely lied in wait until Lance and the Blue Lion activated the pulse and had swarmed in then before taking off and exiting on the opposite side of the planet out of sight of the
Paladins' eyes. It would not have been difficult as they had learned from the transmission the entire exchange had taken place in minutes leaving the Galrans with a large chunk of time to make their escape.

A few minutes of horror had now gone on to almost two and a half days of torturous waiting.

And it was getting harder and harder to have hope.

Shiro had not been lying when he had expressed his fears to Allura over what the Galra could do. He didn't remember much of his time there, just snippets of thought and memories and whenever they attempt to come to the surface he did all he could to push them back. He didn't want to remember. All that existed there was pain and hurt and fear and glowing yellow eyes.

But even then he knew what horrors awaited Lance. His arm throbbed, a reminder of what Haggar had done. And he knew that it was not just what she could do to the body but to the mind.

It was why his had shut down, had locked away those memories. It was to protect him, or at least he thought that might be it. The idea that Haggar had messed with his memories, had been the one to do it was too awful to consider and so Shiro chose to go with the option that give him less nightmares.

He still had plenty, imagined or based on memory, to keep him company most nights.

Nightmares may not have been plaguing the team yet, but they certainly weren't sleeping well. Pidge had moved into Hunk's room, Shiro had noted, her mattress taking up a swath of his floor, and the two of them had been spending any downtime not repairing the Blue Lion either in the kitchen or the lounge and not sequestered away in their individual workshops.

Safety and comfort in numbers.

Shiro had been pleasantly surprise too to see Keith joining them; oftentimes lingering on the outside of the duo's circle but still in the same room. He hadn't trained once either, which was more than telling as despite Shiro's orders that none of them were to utilize the training deck – if someone got hurt it was an injury and time they could not afford in case the Galra contacted them – Keith normally didn't listen.

This time he did.

But despite the fact the team was spending more time physically together as a whole than ever before, Shiro could feel them splintering apart.

It was irony at its worst that you don't realize the worth of something until it's gone. And Lance...

Lance had been so much more to this team than just their sharpshooter.

He was their glue. He was the one who generally instigated what he called "family dinners," literally prowling about the ship to pull Pidge from a project or Coran from a repair and even a few times Keith from the training deck. He organized movie nights with the Paladins and games for them to play during downtime; everything from some of the Altean ones he'd found and adapted to 'would you rather' questions that could get a little crazy at times and Shiro was always surprised by how much he found himself laughing at the ridiculousness.

Lance was a bright spot in this dark universe; a reminder of laughter and smiles.

And yet...
Yet most of the time they had not seen in that way. Lance could come off as annoying, as shallow, of
too willing to pick a fight with Keith and rile the other boy up (of whose temper Shiro had noted had
grown shorter since he had been away and he hated to think of what had caused that and hated more
that he was sure he was a part of it). Shiro had heard it all from nearly all of the team save Hunk:
Lance was immature, Lance was annoying, Lance was bothering them, Lance had no concept of
personal space, Lance never took anything seriously.

But now that he was gone they were all realizing, Shiro too, just how much they had taken that slice
of normal for granted.

Lance was only seventeen years old, after all, and thrust into a situation and war that Shiro still
regretted exposing them all to. They were all so young.

And now Lance...

Lance was at the mercy of the Galra Empire.

It made Shiro want to both equally cry and blow things up.

Because this was all about him. He was the Black Paladin and it was the Black Lion Zarkon
wanted. He should be the one in Lance's place. He had gotten them involved in his crash to Earth,
he had pulled them all into this fight.

And yet here he was, safe, while an innocent boy, a child really, was in the hands of monsters. Shiro
had the utmost faith in Lance; for all his outward immaturity and lackadaisical approach, Shiro knew
beneath that there was a very strong, very compassionate individual. But beneath that there seemed
to be another layer, one that Lance had not willingly shared and Shiro had caught but glimpses of.
Shiro had seen too the way Lance would grow quiet after being snapped at a bit more pointedly than
normal, withdrawing with a quiet "sorry" and disappearing for a few hours before coming back with
either a tentative smile or a loud, boisterous one.

It was the way his voice would drop sometimes when talking about home, the clear longing and
homesickness darkening ocean eyes that would get a tad overbright before a smile would work its
way onto his face and the moment was gone. It was the way, Shiro was now realizing, that Lance
talked about himself as compared to the others; constantly praising them (even Keith, in a roundabout
fashion) while putting himself down.

It was also the way Lance was always too eager, too willing, to put himself in danger to protect the
team. It was a noble thing, to be sure, and point Allura stressed regularly that they had to protect each
other to protect themselves, but Lance took it to sometimes dangerous levels. There was a reason
why he was the only one of the Paladins to have ever gone into the pods and it was because he
would literally put himself into the line of fire.

He'd take a hit, a shot, a tongue lashing from Allura... anything to make sure no one else had to. He
didn't like to see them hurt.

Shiro was afraid what that would mean if the Galra discovered just how deep Lance's loyalties ran.
Lance would do anything to protect them and...

And Shiro didn't know what that meant for Lance's own safety.

He prayed it wouldn't come to that.

If they could just receive word from the Galra so they could go about formulating a rescue...
Shiro scowled to himself and shoved one of the bland tasting potatoes into his mouth (not Hunk's best but he had no right to complain as his attempt would have been inedible), mechanically chewing as Coran was right though and they needed to keep up their strength and he needed to lead by example.

His bite seemed to be the cue everyone was waiting for and gradually the soft clink of cutlery sounded about the table, but that was it. Shiro was just grateful they were eating, even if he'd been in libraries louder than this.

The sudden beeping coming from the datapad Coran had brought down and he gasped, almost knocking it off the table in his haste to reach for it, and Allura's eyes had widened as well.

"A transmission," the princess breathed.

"Indeed," Coran said, silencing the beeping and raising jeweled eyes up from the datapad. "It is from the Galra."

They were finally reaching out.

Lance.

"Let's go," Shiro said, pushing back his chair with a screech and the others hurriedly joining him as they made their way to the bridge to accept the transmission.

It was finally time to get some answers.

Chapter End Notes

So it begins. -insert evil laughter here- We are all terrible people, aren't we? xD I kid, we just love this sort of thing because we all love the "comfort" part at the end, right? Right?

We've also touched base with the rest of the Paladins, and I know quite a few of you have been asking after them. They'll get even more next chapter (but still plenty of Langst abound, never fear).

This has been one of my favorite chapters so far to write, so I hope you all enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you've got a second to drop a review (I love them all, long or short!) I would super appreciate it! Thank you so much to all of you who take the time to leave a comment. You are all amazing, beautiful people! ♥

Until next chapter!
One mad scramble later and everyone was on the bridge, clustered behind Allura as she activated the console to pull up the transmission.

She frowned though at the text that swam to the front of the screen.

"What is it?" Shiro asked, stomach dropping. It wasn't a false alarm, was it? A transmission from another planet, a distress beacon?

"It is a recording," she announced quietly, dark hand hovering over the play button. "It is not a live transmission."

Meaning they could not influence whatever the Galra had already done. It was just like with the Blue Lion; they could do nothing except listen. Allura's hands clenched white-knuckled on the console in frustration. She was sick already of these games; two and a half quintants had already passed with no word and now their response was to send a pre-recorded message?

Damn them.

"It is from the Galra though," Coran confirmed, voice heavy with something Allura could not quite identify. "Their signature is on the receiving log."

"Lance," Hunk whispered from behind.

And despite the urgency of the situation, the desperate desire to have some answers, Allura found her hand hovering over the control to play the message.

Her father had shielded her from the worst of what the Galra Empire had done, but she knew from her time post cryo-stasis that the atrocities and horrors he allowed under his rule had only grown since the fall of Altea. Prison camps and genocide and slavery and... Her gaze flicked to Shiro, more specifically to the metal arm she knew the witch Haggar had forced upon him.

It was not the only scar she knew the Galra Empire had left their Black Paladin with. He tried to hide it from them all and Allura did believe he was mostly successful, but given her need for less sleep than the humans she had been awake far too many times and observed him walking about the castle in the dead of night, sometimes with a determined stalk of patrol and other times with a sweat-soaked shirt plastered to him and a haunted look in his eyes.

She had never once confronted him as she had sensed Shiro was like her; he did not like to show weakness. Still, she had had the mice follow him at a discreet distance to make sure he made it back to bed, although far too often they reported he had gone to the training deck instead where he often ran laps until he near collapsed from the exhaustion.

Allura hated to admit she had no experience in how to handle the situation and so she left it as was. Until it got to the point where Shiro's sleepless nights were affecting the team she would prefer to let him handle things how he found best; she knew he was only twenty-five and such an age was still a near child in Altean but in his species it was about a quarter lifespan; he was fully grown and capable of making his own decisions.
The other Paladins though... they were so young. Had she known their ages and how they reflected on humans she wondered if she would have ever asked them to be Paladins of Voltron. She hated that she likely still would have. They were fighting a war, the future of the universe at stake, and if fate had called then there was no choice but to answer.

Still...

She had no idea what was about to be on this recorded transmission but she doubted it was something children should be privy to. But if she were to start viewing them as children now then she was doing a disservice to their title of Paladin. They were no longer children in that regard; they were warriors. They had seen many of the horrors the Galra Empire had done.

Was it so wrong that she wished to shield them from this one?

"Princess?" Shiro inquired and she realized her pause had been more than a few seconds.

They were all waiting for her.

She swallowed, her hand absolutely not shaking, and pressed to accept the transmission before she could regret it.

The screen in front of them lit up and even bracing for it, Allura was not prepared. Hunk whimpered and Keith and Pidge swore, the girl's voice a soft tremble, and it showed just how shaken Shiro was that he did not even attempt to correct them for their language.

They were finally able to see Lance.

And Lance...

Oh Alaaran. Allura clutched her hands together, eyes tracing over the form of her Blue Paladin.

He was restrained to a chair, straps cutting across his wrists and another one on his chest, which was rapidly raising up and down as though he had just finished an exhausting training run, save for the fact there was a definite tremor to him as well. She had a sickening feeling it may be related to the glowing probes that were littered across his torso and arms.

Shock conductors.

They were shock torturing her Paladin.

It was not only that. There was a blood-soaked bandage wrapped about the boy's torso and cruelly one of the probes was situated atop it. Allura's stomach clenched at the blatant cruelty atop what was already there. Lance was pale too, no doubt she was certain from the loss of the blood, as well as the other injuries that had to paining him; marks she recognized as laser burns and given the recording they had heard in the Blue Lion made sense with how he had been captured.

His eyes looked sunken, dark bags beneath them and she must have whispered that observation aloud as Coran responded with a murmur, "Dehydration symptoms. Fever too; his cheeks are flushed."

Pidge's inquiry as to whether they were feeding Lance came back with a sickening answer. No. No they were not. They did not appear to be giving him anything. Food, water or real medical attention.

Shiro's prosthetic clenched with a grinding force at the state Lance was in. He had known the Galra were not going to be kind but this? This was not how one treated a prisoner of war, which
given his status as Paladin of Voltron Lance was. And Lance had been in that state for over two days?

The Galra were beyond despicable.

The video had been silent to that point, but all of a sudden there was sound, although nothing discernible. Lance though thrust his chin up, eyes narrowing slightly at whoever was to the right of the chair and offscreen.

It made Shiro give the faintest sigh of relief. If Lance could still find some measure of defiance it meant they hadn't broken him.

Not yet, at least.

He hated that he even thought that.

"Repeat after me and you will be rewarded," a voice off camera said, a terrible familiar rasp that had Shiro letting out a gasp.

Haggar.

Haggar was there.

He had almost forgotten what her voice sounded like, those memories buried as deep as the rest of them, but now he couldn't believe he ever had.

There was no mistaking that low tone, dark humor coloring nearly every word.

She was saying something else then but he couldn't hear the words, just the tone.

It really was her.

His head was beginning to ache, a pressure building behind his eyes. It was a pain Shiro was intimately familiar with.

A memory was trying to lodge itself free.

He groaned, pressing his flesh hand against his forehead as though that could push it back. He felt someone else place a hand on his upper arm – Keith, he identified, touch light but grounding with its clear concern.

It allowed Shiro to open his eyes – when had he closed them? – and he became aware that everyone was looking at him, the video paused in the background.

"Shiro?" Pidge asked, voice small and he felt guilt pool hot and heavy.

He was scaring them. He normally was able to ward off the memories without an audience but this time...

His head pulsed again.

"M fine," he managed, not fine at all.

"Shiro—" Allura began.

"Later," he interrupted. Please. Not now.
Allura frowned, lips pursed, but she gave him a slow nod and turned back to the recording. Keith kept his hand on Shiro's arm and he flashed him a small, grateful smile.

On the screen Lance seemed pointedly trying to ignore the camera, eyes still narrowed in likely Haggar's direction.

"Greetings, Paladins," came Haggar's voice.

Lance's jaw clenched.

A moment later the probes covering his body lit up bright purple and Lance tensed, veins protruding from his neck as he clearly tried to keep from screaming out. It went out for a few ticks before the probes re-flared and Lance screamed, tossing his head back and slamming it against the chair with an audible thunk.

By the time the probes finally died down Lance was listing sideways in the chair, tremors racking his body and breath coming in harsh gasps.

Allura paused the video.

No.

She did not want them watching this any longer.

They did not need to see this.

Hunk was a mixture of ashen and green and seemed to only be remaining on his feet due to Pidge's hands fused in his vest, who was trembling just as badly. Shiro was pale, although Allura would bet it was as much from seeing the horror being done to Lance as the sound of the witch's voice, while Keith looked overall the least affected but was betrayed by the rigidity of his posture and the barely perceptible shaking of his fist at his side while his lips were a thin line.

And Coran.

Allura had never seen him look so heartbroken and yet so, so angry.

She would admit she was momentarily frightened by the expression. Coran had been a part of her life since the moment she was born and she viewed him as practically a second father. She had seen him at highs and lows and all matter in between but this?

She had never seen this.

It was too much for them all.

"No more," she said quietly, gaze drifting about the room. She would watch the video, learn whatever it was that Haggar hoped to share. They did not have to see anymore.

"No," Hunk was the one to first protest to Allura's surprise.

"Paladin, I do not--"

"I'm staying," Hunk said, voice fierce above the shaking and Allura was taken aback by the vehemence in the tone.

She supposed he was still angry with her from earlier.
"Me too," Pidge added, voice small.

"Paladins," Allura tried again, looking to Shiro for support. He shook his head at her and Keith was a steady presence at his side. She turned to Coran and he gave her the same.

They were all staying.

"Very well," she said quietly. "Let us... let us continue."

"Greetings, Paladins," Haggar sounded on the recording.

"Qu-quiznack you," Lance snapped, his voice not even sounding familiar; cracked and broken and in so much pain.

Hunk whimpered, the sound swallowed up by Lance's screams as the probes lit up.

It was a terrible pattern to watch, as Lance remained stubbornly silent, broken up only one other time by another reiteration of "quiznack you." It was after the fifth time that instead of gasping for breath, Lance was choking and spitting out blood.

He blacked out several times and the first time it happened they hoped that would be the end of it, Pidge sighing in relief.

But it was not to be.

A large Galran had stepped into view, a syringe in hand. And they had been helpless to watch as he depressed the liquid in it – an adrenaline shot, Coran had surmised – into Lance's neck that each time had him jerking back to consciousness with a gasp and moan of pain and confusion, that would clear somewhat as Haggar continued to repeat her words for Lance to copy.

"Greetings, Paladins," Haggar intoned after Lance had come to again.

This time though, rather than remaining as stationary as his trembling and jittery limbs from the shocks would allow, Lance weakly shook his head against the chair, eyes closed.

"That is enough," Allura paused the video once more her own hand shaking. It had been nearly twenty minutes of repeated torture upon torture and Lance screaming with what little remained of his voice. Hunk had already puked twice and Shiro had broken the bar running along the console.

Her voice softened. "The Blue Paladin – Lance," she corrected, feeling that the title was too formal at this point to describe the wounded, tortured boy on the screen, "would not want you to see this and neither do I."

"Princess," Hunk weakly protested.

"That is an order," she stated firmly. More gently, "Paladin, please. This is torture to you as well. Please. If there is a message here I will share everything. But you are no longer to watch this."

"How can they do that?" Pidge cried, shaking so much she looked ready to topple over. "There's no point! We can hear her just fine; Lance doesn't need to say it!"

Allura bowed her head. They all knew there was no point to what Haggar was doing other than to cause them all to suffer.

Pidge sniffled, rubbing at her eyes and trying not to look at the frozen image of Lance on screen, slumped and bleeding and looking defeated.
That was not Lance. No matter how many times he got knocked down the Lance she knew always got back up. He didn't look like *that*. He had no business looking that hurt and scared and in pain.

That wasn't her Lance.

That was not the Lance who would invade her personal space, hanging over her shoulders or draping himself across her lap and forcing her to pay attention to him like some pesky kitten when he was bored and despite her outward annoyance she appreciated the distraction, the reminder that life didn't have to be serious all the time. Not the one who would give her a hug when she was feeling down or drag her to dinner to make sure she ate (or sic Shiro on her when she wouldn't listen to him) or give her piggyback rides around the castle when she was feeling particularly playful and engaging in pillow forts and fights and pranking and confusing the Alteans with Earth customs.

She couldn't put that Lance with the one screaming and bleeding and being tortured by Galrans. He'd scared her half to death when he'd suffered the bomb blast (and although she hadn't said it that was one of the reasons that solidified her decision to stay) when he'd been so lifeless in Shiro's arms and even after in the healing pod. And this?

This was worse.

This was so much worse.

"Coran," Allura called and Pidge found a large hand descending on her shoulder a moment later. She tilted her head up, taking in Coran's profile as he managed a small, tight smile for her.

"Come along now," he murmured, steering her towards the bridge door, pausing on the way and lifting Hunk by the back of his vest where the larger boy had ended up on the floor following his last vomiting session as though he weighed nothing, settling him back on his feet. "Let's get some tea brewing for us all, hmm?"

"Go," Shiro said gently as Pidge looked over her shoulder at him. She nodded and allowed Coran to lead her and Hunk out.

She knew Lance wouldn't want her to see this either. It was the only reason she was leaving.

She would still never be able to forget. Lance's broken screams were going to be on replay in her mind for a long, long time.

"You two as well," Allura said, looking at the remaining Paladins.

"I'm staying," Shiro said firmly, having regained himself with the interlude. He was not going to leave and force Allura to watch this on her own. He was the reason Lance was in space in the first place, why Haggar was even a name known to them all. It was his duty, his responsibility, his penance to see this through.

"Me too," Keith said, his hand still on Shiro's arm, but gripping the fabric unconsciously between his fingers.

"Keith—" Shiro tried.

"I'm staying," Keith said stubbornly. He wouldn't lie and say he wished he could leave. Watching this made him feel sick, his stomach a mess of knots. He'd never liked seeing anyone in pain and never, never like this. He wouldn't have wished something like this on his worst enemy and despite Lance's insistence to be his rival and how much the other boy tended to annoy him he did consider Lance at least as a teammate and this was *wrong*. 
But he could see too how it was affecting Shiro; he could feel his pulse picking up tempo from where he'd grabbed onto Shiro's wrist and the sweat beading along Shiro's hairline. He might not be able to do anything about Lance's situation but he could make sure that Shiro did not suffer through this alone.

And if Lance could endure this... then he could too.

Allura let out a breath and gave a short nod. "Fine." She did not like this at all and she especially did not wish for one as young as Keith to be present, but he was indeed stubborn to a fault and if Shiro did not insist she could not either.

Her hands were trembling again but before she could lift one back to the control she was surprised to feel a heavy hand settle on her shoulder. "You don't have to do this alone," Shiro murmured. "We're a team."

Team.

Allura had never before included herself with the team of Paladins. She was the princess, the taskmaster, the one who resided on the outskirts but never got close, not really.

She...

She was grateful for the inclusion, the show of solidarity.

"Thank you," she murmured, placing one of her hands atop Shiro's on her shoulder and drawing strength from the metal, warming beneath her hand.

And with a newfound strength Allura pressed play for hopefully the last time.

Haggar repeated the greeting once more, and there was a different lilt to her tone, an excitement. She too had apparently seen the change.

And this time...

Lance spoke.

"Gr-greetings," he rasped out, head tucked down and shame dripping from the word.

"Oh, Lance," Shiro whispered, aching to reach out reassure him that it was all right. There was nothing to be ashamed of here. He for one was glad Lance was relaying whatever message this was as hopefully it would end this torture.

At least for now.

He hated that he already knew it wasn't over.

"Paladins," they heard Haggar prompt and Lance's answering whisper of the same.

The next piece went smoothly on Lance's end, as he relayed that Zarkon had a message, although in direct comparison to Lance's shudders slowing Keith's were picking up. Shiro glanced down at the dark head but Keith was staring unblinkingly at the screen while his free hand clenched and unclenched at his side and his lips were a thin, nearly invisible line.

Keith had always been a doer. He'd been that way since Shiro had first met him, after he had come out of his self-imposed shell of apathy that he'd had no choice but to place upon himself. Keith could be reckless, he didn't always think things through, but his decisions were his own.
And now he could do nothing except watch.

Shiro did the only thing he could and pulled him a little closer.

Lance seemed to be worsening, only managing half of the next sentence before giving into a moan and hunching forward on the chair. He was rewarded with more shocks and his body spasmed although no cry issued forth from his chapped and now bloodied lips.

"Come on," Shiro murmured, as Lance gagged out the word "trade."

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion," Haggar rasped from the side.

And Shiro's heart froze as Lance's eyes opened and widened and he shook his head. "No," he whispered, continuing to shake his head. The probes lit up, almost angrily, and Haggar repeated the line over the sound of Lance's screams as the pain was too great to do anything else.

"No!" Lance cried out. "No, Shiro no-

He screamed again.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."

"Please, no," Lance gasped. "Por favor."

Tears were now dripping down Allura's face and her fingers were crunching the metal on the console, further denting it from where Shiro's prosthetic had dug in earlier. Keith had stopped shaking, horror keeping him frozen.

Shiro felt like his heart had been ripped open and was being pulled further apart as Lance blacked out and the Galran with the syringe moved in again.

They weren't going to stop.

"Lance, please," he whispered himself. "Please just..." Say it, he pleaded silently. They knew what the Galrans wanted. Lance didn't have to keep suffering this anymore.

"The life of the Blue Paladin for the Black Lion."

And as if Lance had heard Shiro's silent prayer the boy let out a strangled sounding sob rather than a protest. "The l-life of the... of the..." Lance's head lolled, exhaustion dragging it down. "Me," he continued, barely audible. "For the Black L-lion." Lance picked his head up then, pain-filled blue eyes looking directly at them. "No. Sh-Shiro no, you c--"

The probes lit up again.

Shiro felt his own eyes watering, crying for Lance who had no tears of his own to shed.

He was going to kill Haggar.

Haggar then instructed Lance to give coordinates for the place of surrender and he mumbled them, pausing intermittently to cough and gasp. One time was too long of a pause and Haggar shocked him, although it did little to rouse him or elicit a reaction.

"His body... it is shutting down," Allura breathed, hand over her mouth in horror.

The Galran appeared once more and emptied another syringe into Lance's neck, a trickle of blood
flowing down now from the repeated jabs. Lance's eyes fluttered back into forced consciousness and Haggar repeated what sounded like the final phrase. Shiro prayed it was so.

Lance's eyes were glazed at this point, lips barely twitching as he spoke. "We l-look f-or your a riv-al." The recording continued for a moment, just enough time for them to see Lance's eyes widen in horror before it cut off to a black screen.

That had apparently been the message.

All of that to deliver a set of coordinates.

Next to Shiro Keith let out a low moan of distress and he felt his arm slide down Keith's form as the smaller boy went to the ground, hunched over his stomach.

Shiro found his own legs giving way too as his head pulsed with the full torrent of pain and memory he had desperately been trying to hold back.

He didn't let it form, he couldn't give into it now.

He wasn't entirely successful. Flashes of memory knifed their way into his head; Haggar's laugh, a metal table, pain of shock prods ushering him out into the arena, sand and blood squelching between bare toes and the laughter and jeers of the crowd echoed as surely as Lance's screams had done just moments before.

A hand descended on his shoulder and Shiro reacted instinctively, grabbing it with his prosthetic at the wrist, flesh hand on its forearm and going to heave, to throw the figure so he could... so he could...

He froze halfway through the action as the jeers of the crowd turned into murmured words and the figure he was grabbing was not struggling but had instead brought their other hand around to place on his other shoulder and squeezed it; not a painful grip but a secure one.

He blinked and the blood and stone and sand rushed away to be replaced with a head of white hair kneeling in front of him and the hands on his shoulders led to Allura, whose face was pinched slightly in pain at his grip but she did not move.

"Shiro," she murmured as his eyes moved to meet her jeweled gaze.

He felt his face flush with embarrassment. He'd just... to the princess...

"Peace," she said, giving his shoulder another squeeze and he hurriedly released her hand and arm, wincing at the reddened marks imprinted around her wrist from his prosthetic. "It is all right. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he mumbled. "I'm so sorry, Princess. I--"

"It is all right," she assured again and moved to offer him a hand up.

"Keith?" Shiro asked, accepting the lift and nearly stumbling as Allura pulled him up with no apparent effort on her part.

She inclined her head to the left, where Keith was sitting up against the console, knees drawn to his chest. Shiro felt his heart clench. He hadn't seen that pose in... in years.

Shiro crossed the floor and bent down on one knee. "Hey," he said gently, tapping the top of Keith's
gloved hand. "Keith, look at me buddy."

No reaction.

"Keith," Shiro repeated, moving closer and tipping his chin up.

Lost purple eyes glanced upward at the movement. "Shiro," he whispered and Shiro was both surprised and not to see tears gathering.

Keith was not as cold-hearted as most seemed to think he was. Shiro had known that from the moment he'd met him and despite the circumstances he was grateful that Keith might finally be willing to open himself up some to the rest of the team. To his friends. They would see too the caring person beneath the fiery demeanor.

"It's going to be okay," he promised, pulling Keith into a hug and the other boy returning it, burying his head underneath Shiro's chin.

Shiro cast his eyes up to Allura, who gazed at him with something he couldn't quite identify. She made a decisive nod with her head though.

“I shall set our course immediately. We will retrieve Lance." Their eyes met and he could feel the intensity and sorrow in them as she grappled with the weight of her decision. "No... no matter what it takes."

"No matter what it takes," he repeated softly, feeling the pain in his chest restrict the tiniest bit. He had her support for whatever the fate of the universe took as they embarked to save their teammate.

He would do both though. He would rescue Lance and protect the universe.

He would protect them all.

Chapter End Notes

Poor everyone this chapter. -hands out hugs- Everyone now, go give your favorite Paladin (or Altean) a hug. They need it.

As always, a huge thank you to my amazing reviewers. I do not know what I did to deserve such lovely comments from you guys. Absolutely blown away. Thank you so much for all of your support with this fic! ♥

I'd love to hear what y'all thought of this chapter! I hope you enjoyed everyone's reactions as much as I enjoyed writing them. I know this is primarily Langst, but everyone is going to get some. Because I am an evil person like that :D

On a happier note, I am currently drawing all of the Voltron cast to debut at ACen at my table in the Artist Alley. You can check out my chibis (dark writing, cutesy art, I know it's odd) on my facebook page, facebook.com/icypantherartshop.

Thank you all for reading and please do click that review button before you leave the page! Appreciate it!
Chapter Eight

Lance awoke to the quiet beeping sound of machinery and the faintest scent of metal. The constant, gnawing ache for water and the incessant jackhammering in his head had been reduced to a dull ache and he lay there peacefully for a few moments, reveling in the fact that nothing exclusively hurt, no more than the knowledge of just a vague hurt.

And why was he hurting again?

It all came back in a harrowing rush that left him dizzy and suddenly nauseated and his skin prickling, a low moan exiting his throat.

He'd been captured by the Galra, abandoned in a cell. At the reminder, fuzzy as it was, he could feel a tickle in his throat that morphed to a dry cough. It hurt, his chest aching with every pained exhale. His stomach was throbbing too, a reminder that it had not been fed in... in at least a couple days, he'd guess.

But all of that paled in comparison to the phantom pain he could feel at the memory of lightning in his veins and Haggar's cruel chuckle and words to repeat for a transmission to the Paladins.

He had...

They had...

They had seen him like that.

Tied up and screaming and giving into Haggar's demands. He felt color flood his cheeks and he made to bring his hands up to cover them, to hide his shame at being so weak.

But his hands did not move.

At that his eyes flew open and he let out another moan at the overly bright purple lights above him and he closed them just as quickly as they seared the ache in his head to something stronger. He waited a few seconds and then more carefully lifted his lashes, blinking at the spots from last time.

He wasn't in his cell.

Instead he was in some sort of laboratory room; evidenced by the steel tables and strange humming machines and far, far too many tools laid out on a tray next to him. The fact he was apparently strapped down to a narrow table completed his image of what a mad scientist's lab might look like.

Lance swallowed thickly. He'd take his cell back, please.

Swallowing made him aware of something on his throat and he attempted to sit up to take a look, but his wrists and ankles were firmly strapped down and he choked himself as his neck pressed against whatever it was. He more carefully tried to look then, tilting his chin, and was rewarded by the barest glimpse of some sort of metal bar that stretched across the table to keep his head mostly pinned down.

Rewarded was the wrong word, definitely, to use in this situation.
A better word was panic, maybe.

Because this?

This was making him think of Shiro's arm.

No one quite knew about Shiro's prosthetic and how he'd gotten it other than Haggar had been involved. Well, Haggar was here now. And he was strapped to a table. In a room full of very sharp, dangerous looking instruments. And she had said she was going to hurt him in her quest for information.

Losing a limb was a very, very real possibility.

He could already imagine the pain. They wouldn't use any medicine, he was sure. Would they hack it off in one go? Take it in pieces? How much blood would there be? A lot. Definitely a lot.

Lance gagged at the thought of seeing his arm separate away, fingers waving loosely. His stomach cramped although there was literally nothing in it to expel and he groaned instead.

He couldn't think about that. Anything else. Think about anything else.

Shiro.

And not his arm, Lance forced that image away.

What would Shiro do?

He'd analyze the situation and figure out what options he had. He could do that. Just like he had that time in the cell (even if it hadn't made any difference). Okay, good. Analyze away. Body first.

His mouth and voice still worked. Lance almost wished they hadn't; if he was going to be interrogated it would be better to have no way to actually speak in case he... No. He shook his head against the table. No. He wouldn't say a word. Not even if they removed every limb from his body.

Oh Dios he hoped they didn't do that. He hoped he could somehow hold onto that conviction.

He'd already failed miserably with the recording. He was afraid what was coming was going to be a series of distraeous repeats.

And moving on.

Head. It no longer hurt as badly and he was definitely thinking clearer. Given how his throat ached less too and his body didn't feel as heavy in general he bet Haggar had given him that water. He hated that he was grateful at all.

And pain. His entire body still hurt, his chest in particular, but it no longer felt damp and he thought they might have put new bandages on, maybe even healed the wound a little bit. Maybe. It wasn't anywhere as bad as it had been and the laser burns he knew were there itched more than they hurt. His neck hurt too with a dull sort of ache. They'd kept injecting him with something, he recalled.

He hoped it didn't have any long-lasting effects.

He flexed his hands against the restraints, trying to twist them to see if he might be able to pop one free. He'd read about people dislocating their thumb to get free of a cuff and while he didn't know if he could actually do that he–
There was something in his left hand. He could feel it twitching about as he moved and his breath caught.

He more carefully raised his head this time, trying not to choke himself, but to get a better look at the setup.

And yup, that was most definitely some sort of IV in his hand, feeding away to a canister set further back by his feet.

The question was, what were they drugging him with now? A poison? Something else to force him awake?

"Don't panic," he whispered aloud, the sound of his own voice bringing him a little bit of comfort. "You're fine. You're okay. Estás bien. Esto no es nada. Nothing... nothing the amazing Lancey-Lance can't h-handle." He stuttered on the last word, throat closing up.

He didn't know if he could handle this.

But after a few minutes of no change Lance gave way to the tentative hope that maybe he wasn't being poisoned. Maybe this was a typical IV drip full of fluids to hydrate patients. It would make sense and probably a lot easier to administer than forcing him while unconscious to drink water.

He let out a shuddering sigh, going with that option. At least he could close out one horror.

There were still so so many more to come.

And... and if he wanted to escape them...

He was going to have to do it himself.

There would be no cavalry (or pride, really, since they piloted lions) coming to save him. He knew they would want to. He hoped they wanted to. But they couldn't. They weren't so stupid to realize this wasn't a huge trap for them. He doubted Zarkon would even willingly let him go if the exchange did take place. He'd probably try to capture all of them because that's what evil emperors did. He had no reason to play fair.

But Allura did. And Allura knew the stakes in this war. She knew that the Black Lion was irreplaceable but the Blue Paladin?

Yes.

Losing the Blue Paladin would be a setback but losing the Black Lion would be the end. The former Paladins that had come before his team had known that too; it was why they had perished (Lance had pulled the story from Coran one quiet evening, wanting to know how Blue had wound up on earth and while Coran had not been able to answer that as he had already been in cryo-stasis, he said the former Paladins had sent the Lions away to protect them before joining Alfor in the final battle against Zarkon) and the Lions had survived.

Lance...

Lance could do it too.

He didn't want to, Dios he didn't want to die, but he would take that outcome before he ever hurt his friends. It would be a hero's sacrifice.
If they even gave him that option.

He didn't know what they would do when he refused to talk. Would it be like the video recording where they just kept going until forever? Did they have that sort of patience? Did he the stamina?

How long could he really hold out for?

He knew it wouldn't be for long enough. He just had to make sure they'd broken him by that point, ruined his mind so he had nothing to say. No weaknesses to give up, no skills or tactics or anything small that somehow the Galrans could exploit.

He wanted to cry at the thought of how much pain he was going to be in.

He wanted to cry more at the fact this as how it was going to end.

He wondered if this was how Shiro had felt when he'd been their prisoner.

The sound of a door retracting had him choking back the sob that his body was trying to given in to and schooling his features to as impassive as he could make them.

No weakness.

No fear.

He could do this. He could. He just needed to pull himself together like he'd managed in Zarkon's presence. And if that meant making sarcastic comments and jokes to hide his fears and maybe even hopefully distract them from other things, then he would give it his all.

He would do anything to keep them safe.

Haggar appeared right next to his head and Lance couldn't quite muffle the small gasp of surprise. She was so quiet. He tried to bring his features back to neutral, trying to find something to make Haggar not so scary.

A jingle bell. Yes. He imagined a little bell dangling off her hood like a weird little elf and jangling with every step she took. A tiny smirk pulled up his lips and it grew when Haggar tilted her head in perhaps confusion.

He could do this.

For now.

"You are awake," Haggar observed.

"Uh yeah, no kidding," Lance said, trying to keep up the smirk as he stared into her pupil-less yellow eyes. Be calm, be snarky and don't show fear. "But I'm fine with getting some more shut-eye. You want to reschedule this... thing?"

Haggar gave a hum but made no other comment.

She continued to stare. Lance resisted the urge to fidget or break eye contact first.

"Where I come from it's rude to stare at someone," he finally said as she made no move to turn her gaze away. "Well, that and plenty of other things. Like showing your middle finger or pointing at them. That's why character mascots don't have five fingers, you know. So there's no middle one to
make an obscene gesture."

Not even a blink.

Lance kept up his ramble, saying whatever came to mind.

"Do druids sleep with their eyes open? Is that what you're doing now? Elves can do that. Have you ever seen Lord of the Rings? Probably not, but you should. You'd hate it though since the good guys win."

At that she did cock her head. "You believe the Galra Empire is not good?"

Lance blinked. Was she serious?

"You are joking, right?" he clarified.

Haggar continued to stare.

"Dios mío, estás hablando en serio," Lance muttered. Haggar raised an eyebrow, a thin line barely visible below her hood. He wondered if she understood Spanish; the Alteans certainly didn’t but the Galra hadn’t been the ones stuck in cryo-stasis for ten thousand years. He cleared his throat, switching back to English, which somehow all aliens seemed to understand somehow. He’d given up thinking too hard on it.

"Uh yeah, you are the bad guys. The whole taking over the universe bit through enslavement and killing and torture sort of answers that, don't you think? Although," he jiggled his wrists, "I'm all for you wanting to turn over a new leaf and be the good guys. Want to give it a try?"

Haggar had the gall to chuckle. "You are mistaken, Paladin. The Galra Empire is merely trying to unite the universe and bring it to a new era of strength and prosperity."

"By killing people?" Lance asked, incredulously.

"Sacrifices must be made," Haggar shrugged. "The weak will die and the strong will live, that is the natural order of the universe. We are helping it to achieve such."

"That's insane. You're insane. Zarkon is insane."

At that Haggar’s eyes narrowed.

He'd struck a nerve, Lance realized.

He realized it very painfully as Haggar's hands lit up with a black colored lightning and she pressed them to his shoulder.

He screamed, the pain worse than any of the previous shocks had even come close to. Haggar pressed down and his body arced off the table as much as it could before he choked himself on the bar and his scream devolved into a painful gasping whimper.

"Do not insult Emperor Zarkon," she warned over Lance's breathing.

"Ju-just... stating the... the f-facts."

Sometimes he wished his mind would move a little quicker than his mouth as Haggar shocked him again.
"It is good that you are feeling rather talkative," Haggar said, stepping away out of his line of sight. Lance could hear her though, moving something around on one of the tables.

"Ac-actually," he swallowed, "I hit... hit my quota for the day."

Haggar actually looked amused as she stepped back next to his head a minute later, a small black vial in her hands.

"I think I shall greatly enjoy our time together," she told him.

"I'm pretty sure I won't," Lance responded, breathing back under control and trying not to focus on what the vial was. "And a one-sided relationship never works out for anyone in the end. You'd be much better off with another Druid, don't you think? So how about you let me up, point me in the direction of the hangar and I'll get out of your hair and end this star-crossed tragedy before it even begins."

Haggar laughed. And Lance decided then and there that it was the scariest thing he had ever heard.

"I will enjoy crushing that spirit," she murmured. One of her hands came down to rest in his hair and unlike the Galran who seemed to find delight in twisting and pulling it, Haggar did the opposite, lifting and carding strands through her fingers. Lance stiffened and tried to jerk away, that feeling of wrong that had surfaced when she had caressed his face came back full force. What was she doing? "Those that fall the farthest are always the most fun."

"Big talk, lady," he managed, quieting as if hearing his thoughts she brought one hand down to brush against his face, trailing the back of her hand first over his cheek and then cupping it in her hand, thumb making slow circles just below his eye. It took all Lance had this time not to close them.

No fear.

It was harder than it sounded.

"I will give you a choice," she said, continuing her distorted caress. "You can willingly answer my questions and you will be rewarded. Or you can refuse to answer and be punished."

"What kind of questions?" Lanced asked as he tried to brace himself for whatever she had incoming. "Like, my favorite ice cream flavor? It's pistachio almond, for the record. Or whether I prefer airplane or car trips? It's car, surprisingly. I doubt you know what those are though. Okay, um, what about—"

A shock of her magic overwhelmed him and Lance screamed again, body jerking against the restraints.

"I see you have made your decision," Haggar rasped. "Excellent."

She pulled away from the table as Lance trembled from the aftershocks, gritting his teeth and trying to get his seizing muscles back under control.

This was it now.

He could only watch as she lifted the black vial and added it to what he had determined was the fluid bag. The murky black substance settled at the very bottom before dispersing and turning the previous clear fluid black as well. It began a sluggish track down the line.
Lance yanked futilely at his left hand, knowing he did not want whatever that stuff was near him let alone in him.

It did no good.

He wanted to demand what it was, as though knowing would help him prepare, but he was afraid his demand would come out more of a plea as his tongue felt thick and his hands were trembling in a way that had nothing to do with Haggar's magic.

Haggar answered the question for him, seeming to delight in his confusion and fear. "That is saliidda," she paused and Lance wondered if that was the extent of the very helpful explanation. "It has the ability to enhance feeling."

Feeling? Lance felt something heavy settle in his stomach.

"Human bodies are weak," she continued. "They break much too easily and cannot sustain heavy damage." A smirk formed on her lips. "Why do you think my dear Champion received such a gift?" She drew a finger across Lance's right bicep, a thin scratch left in its wake. Lance shuddered. "His human arm was so mangled and destroyed that it was beyond repair. So I replaced it with something better."

"It is not better," Lance retorted, narrowing his eyes at her. Sure, it had saved them quite a number of times and was a huge boon to hacking Galra tech, but it was a replacement that had been forced upon him. If given the choice Lance was positive Shiro would not want it, that constant reminder of his suffering.

Was... was he going to get one too?

Haggar seemed to pick up his line of thought again and a cruel smile widened her face. "Perhaps we shall replace a piece of you as well. Maybe a leg?" She trailed her hand down his torso, fingers leaving a line of sick fire in their wake, to settle on his right kneecap. "It would be fitting, would it not, for the right leg of Voltron to longer be able to stand on his own?"

Lance felt his toes curl up at the threat but he scowled back at her. No fear. Somehow. "I don't care," he said, although he did care, he cared very much. "I'd just have Hunk make me a new one."

Haggar smiled at him then. "This Hunk is the Yellow Paladin, yes? He is your engineer?"

Lance's eyes widened in horror at the slip-up. It was probably nothing they didn't already know, but it was dangerous to confirm anything or add to it. He pressed his lips together firmly and turned his head away from her.

He had a new plan now.

He wasn't going to speak another word.

Ever.

"You did not let me finish my explanation," she said after a pause, amusement coloring her tone. "But you should be able to tell for yourself now what the effects of the saliidda are."

Lance did not reply – no more talking, no more talking – and instead turned his attention from her pointed face to himself. He didn't feel any different... maybe it had been a dud? Or wasn't compatible with huma–
He couldn't stop the gasp as it kicked in.

Feeling.

Got it.

The metal table beneath him was suddenly much harder and his back gave an ache at the stiff position. His arms and legs, pulled to the sides in the restraints, felt tighter and his throat throbbed with renewed pain of both from screaming and the bruises he had no doubt given himself by ramming his neck against the bar.

And his chest.

_Dios._ The dull ache had morphed to something sharper; still not as painful as when he had gotten it or the shocks, but no longer something he could so easily ignore, and the laser burns and small puncture wounds dotting his shoulder were throbbing as well.

"Human bodies are weak," Haggar reiterated. "Meaning they cannot stand up to the usual methods we would use on most prisoners. Why, nearly two days without sustenance and some crystal shocks and your body nearly collapsed." Lance faintly noted the two day timeline as Haggar continued to speak. "Saliidda allows us to conduct the appropriate methods of information gathering without breaking the body beyond its capacity to survive."

Lance did not like at all where this was going.

"It increases the response of the body's nerve endings," Haggar said. "So the body is much more aware of all sensations. For example…" She reached forward wrapped her fingers about Lance's right thumb lying flush on the table.

Lance didn't even have a chance to do anything before she bent his thumb backwards.

What would have normally been a twinge at most instead felt like he'd slammed it in the cabinet door (again), pressure and pain. It was not enough for him to cry out but he did inhale sharply at the unexpected hurt.

And that was from almost nothing.

If she chose to break his fingers...

"Of course," Haggar smiled, "it can be used for pleasure as well."

She brought her hand back to the top of his head, sinking her fingers into his hair. She did not twist it or pull but instead carded her fingers through it again, very lightly rubbing at his scalp.

It felt _good._

Lance had always been incredibly persistent in his affections with his teammates and relished every piece of contact with them. He loved hugs and would clamber about Hunk for piggyback rides whenever the opportunity presented itself. He'd wriggled himself between people on the couch and toss limbs over whoever was lucky enough to be in the same space.

Pidge had both fondly and exasperatedly told him he was like a cat clamoring for attention and he'd grinned at the assessment, but corrected her that he was more of a cuddly lion. She'd snorted and ruffled his hair like he did to hers all the time, but was surprised when instead of returning the favor in humor he'd pressed right up against her and demanded more.
He'd confided to her that his mamá always pet his hair when he was sick or in need of some comfort and it made him feel better, half expecting her to tease him and add it to what she called her 'rainy day blackmail folder.' But she had not. Instead Pidge had done the opposite and during quiet moments – movie nights, mostly, but sometimes too when she came to sit with him on the bridge and watch the stars go by – she would card her hands through his hair, not saying anything but the soft smile on her face said enough. Lance treasured those times.

So while what Haggar was doing felt so good it felt so wrong too. And more wrong than right.

She was not Pidge. Or his mamá. Or anyone he would actually want touching his hair.

Wrong wrong wrong.

And so he jerked his head as much as he could, rolling it to the side although there was no actually getting away from her hand."Don't touch me," he growled instead, eyes narrowing, hating that he'd broken his vow of silence and resolving to keep it again.

It was just...

Her hand had still not left and she was lightly still scratching at his scalp.

His toes curled at her smile as much as the ministrations. "But you enjoyed it. There is no use lying to me, Paladin."

Lance summoned up his best glare possible at her and left it at that. He'd already made the mistake of letting her see how much such an action affected him, he refused to do give her any more ammunition. Although, he feared, it was already too late.

"As you can see, you have a choice," Haggar said, finally removing her hand and holding them together in front of her. "Pain and punishment or pleasure and reward. Which shall you choose while the salidda courses through you?"

She did not seem to expect an answer and Lance did not give her one, his hands tightening into fists in preparation but halting immediately as his nails pressing into his palms felt like little knives rather than fingernails.

"Very well, let us begin. You are welcome to change your mind at any time."

Fat chance of that, Lance thought silently, even as he trembled and was unable to stop the movement.

This was it. He was about to be tortured.

He wasn't prepared at all.

Oh Dios there was no preparing for this.

"You may answer my inquiry with any information you so choose," Haggar explained, gently lifting Lance's right hand from where it was curled against the table. He jerked at it without success of moving her, only getting an aching twinge in his wrist for his attempt. "Answer with a proper response and you will be rewarded. Silence or insubordination will result in punishment."

Breathe, Lance told himself. Breathe. Inhale through the mouth, exhale through the house. In and out, in and out. She wasn't going to actually hurt him, right? It was all just going to be in his head.
Breathe.

Breathing was already presenting more of a challenge than he'd thought.

"Provide me information on the Paladins."

Just keep breathing, in and out. He wouldn't say anything. She could not make him say anything.

He didn't see it with his eyes squeezed closed, but he felt her hand shift on his and he braced for the oncoming pain.

And well, at least he wasn't disappointed. His pinky finger was bent backwards again, further than she had demonstrated before with his thumb, and it hurt but it wasn't unbearable. He grit his teeth against the moan building in his throat as she kept up the pressure.

She released it but immediately grabbed hold of his ring finger. "Provide me information on the Paladins."

Lance kept his lips a thin line.

Haggar bent his finger completely backwards right to the point before it would snap.

Lance couldn't keep the cry contained this time as what felt like lightning erupted in his hand at the pressure and bit down on his tongue, regretting it immediately as it felt like he'd just impaled it with a knife and he choked, expecting blood to be filling his mouth but there was nothing there.

Things took a terribly familiar turn then, as each moment of silence earned him agonizing pain for a few seconds and she would repeat her query with the same cadence as before, switching between his fingers each time.

Lance was afraid what would happen when she tired of merely bending his fingers backwards.

He knew that he was fine. His body was fine. All of the pain was fleeting, momentary, with no actual repercussion.

She was playing with him. This was her warm-up.

That thought was what made him shake as she twisted his thumb this time.

It was going to get worse.

It was going to get much, much worse.

The door to the room slid open with a hiss and Lance tensed as heavy footsteps made their way in.

Was this where the real pain began?

"Ah, Commander Theodek," Haggar near purred, "I have been expecting you."

The commander stepped closer to the table and Lance got his first glimpse, eyes widening. It was the Galran from before; the one with the burn scar who had taken him out of his cell both times and had been the one controlling the shocks during the recording.

He looked angry. Not the typical Galran expression of displeasure either, his eyes were narrowed with something darker than that and Lance instinctively swallowed as that gaze caught his.
This Galran did not like him.

He thought it might be pretty safe to say this Galran hated him.

"I have been watching," the Galran rumbled. "Your methods are not yielding results." He paused then, as though pained to say the next bit and ground out, "Lady Haggar."

If Lance hadn't been trying to convince his heart to stop thumping so loudly he may have been amused. No one here liked Haggar it seemed.

"You wish for a turn, Commander? Very well, please, allow me to see what you can do."

Haggar released his hand, dropping it to the table with a jolt that sent shudders up Lance's arm. And Lance couldn't believe he was about to think this but...

He did not want Haggar to leave.

"Do not disfigure him, Commander," Haggar warned. "We have only just gotten started."

The Galran smiled, fangs prominently displayed. "I understand."

Lance's stomach bottomed out as Haggar left the room, door hissing closed behind her. He got it now. Good cop bad cop. And the fact that Haggar was considered the good one?

The commander – Theodre? No, that wasn't right — picked up the same hand that Haggar had been toying with. Although where her hand was just about Lance's size, the Galran's dwarfed it. However...

Lance let out a small, uncontrolled laugh that had the Galran's face going from anger to confusion.

The fur. The fur tickled. It was enhanced by the saliidda, each brush of texture on his open palm sending his nerves tingling. He tried to smother his laugh because this was not funny but his body had other ideas. And tickle torture was a very real thing, he knew it. He was extremely ticklish on two parts of him and it only took his siblings ganging up and going for those spots for Lance to concede to almost anything to get it to stop because tickling could hurt.

He had no doubt the Galrans, if they knew, would make his siblings antics look exactly like the child's play they really were.

And this commander did not seem to like games.

Just as he had in the cell the first time it took only a few ticks for the Galran to compose himself and his face moved back to a dark countenance. "Do you know who I am?" he asked, grip tightening on Lance's hand in a painful manner and at the very least eliminating the tickling feeling.

Lance didn't answer.

He would say nothing unless this Galran was here to tell him he was one of the Blades of Marmora... his heart fluttered for all of a second with hope before he quashed it. No. This Galran was too angry, too violent, that even with orders to keep up an appearance he would not likely go to such lengths. Unless he really was that great of an actor?

"I am Theodek, oldest son of Theoden," he continued. "And now... Now I am the only son of Theoden." Lance was getting a foreboding feeling as the Galran's grip tightened more on his hand.
and he only barely swallowed the groan as it felt like his bones were being compressed together. "My brother, you see, was killed in the mission to retrieve the Blue Paladin."

Oh.

That...

That had been his brother?

The one he'd...?

He hadn't had a choice, he reminded himself. He'd had to... to do that. He hadn't wanted to. He hadn't. But...

But he had.

An apology danced on his tongue, surprising him, but also not. Because Lance could not begin to understand how much that loss had to hurt. If he lost any of his siblings or Hunk, who was just as much a brother as any of his blood ones, he could only fathom how much that would hurt, how much grief and anger he'd feel.

He felt bad for this Galran commander. He felt a twinge of guilt for taking away his family.

But...

But his brother had attacked first.

Although...

Although had Lance really had to kill him?

Had he?

Guilt flared again at his decision. Had there been another way? Could he have prevented someone, even someone as seemingly heartless as the Galra, from having to experience that pain?

"You think you have suffered, Paladin?" Theodek growled. "I will show you the true meaning of pain."

He didn't ask a question.

He just took Lance's index finger between his claws and bent it backwards as Haggar had been doing for the better part of the last half hour.

But unlike Haggar he did not stop as the knuckle contracted back.

No.

Lance stiffened with horror. No. Please n–

His bone was snapped in two.

And this time when Lance screamed he was not sure he would ever stop as pain pain pain encompassed his hand, swam up his arm and settled in deep over his heart.

He could barely even hear his thoughts telling himself it was just a broken finger.
They paled in the face of such pain.

Lance wasn't sure how long it lasted but when he eventually stopped shuddering it was to find that Theodek had not released his hand at all. His own eyes, tear-lined and he faintly noted he was capable of crying again, lifted up and he blanched at the sight of absolute hate that filled the Galran's face.

Without breaking eye contact Lance felt the commander's hand shift towards his thumb.

Oh no.

Oh Dios no.

He had only a low snarl to indicate what was about to happen again before blinding, choking agony washed over him and he couldn't believe he'd thought the previous break had been painful at all.

His body spasmed, trying to lift off the table but being held in check by the restraints and all he did was further choke himself, the bar now seeming like a steel vice wrapped about his throat.

He was going to die.

He was actually going to die as his lungs seized and he could not find the strength to draw a breath.

Black spots were dancing across his vision at the lack of air and his free hand clawed pathetically against the table, desperately trying to reach up to his throat as though that could help him breathe.

It did not.

But eventually the spots began to vanish and Lance's chest stopped throbbing and he took in one shaky inhale and then another, trying not to gag as air pushed down his abused throat.

Through it all he could feel the Galran's stare, disgust and hatred clear.

"I cannot believe this is what is considered a Paladin of Voltron."

The words washed over Lance and he hated that he could not stop the flinch at the judgement, the sheer vehemence painful on its own.

"You are weak," the commander snarled. "How could someone like you...?" His hand tightened on Lance's broken one and he whimpered quietly. "Someone like you best my brother?" the words were hissed, disbelief clear. "Clearly," his hand squeezed again, "you are a coward through and through, Paladin. Using trickery and deceit to—"

"No." Lance's mouth moved on his own, going against his self-imposed silence. "No," he repeated. Because Lance could take being called many things, being called the weak one, the dumb one, but he was not a coward. It was the Galrans who had used deception and tricks and traps; not him.

"No?" Theodek repeated, and somehow that single syllable dripping with danger. "No?"

"I'm not the coward," Lance said, heart thumping wildly and telling him that this was a bad idea and he really should shut up now because all he was going to do was make the commander angrier, but he couldn't. He refused to be labeled as that.

Theodek heard the implication in the words and if he had been angry before he was raging now. With a roar he yanked Lance's wrist towards him, jamming his arm against the restraint at the pull, and both hands moved to grasp at Lance's forearm.
Lance knew without a doubt what was about to happen.

He didn't even have a chance to scream.

With one sharp twist Theodek shattered his wrist.

Agony whited out his vision.

Welcome blackness soon followed.

But not fast enough, not quick enough to stop the terror that was filling him, the way his body struggled to breathe and fought to live and how he didn't want to die. He had made the promise earlier that he would welcome death before he betrayed his friends, that he would do anything to protect them.

But.

He wanted to live. His body and mind screamed at him to survive, to hold on.

And that terrified him.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: "Saliidda" means "oil" in Somali.

Welp, things took a turn for the worse with our boy. And Theodek is making his debut appearance as introducing himself as my other antagonist. I hope y'all like him! I try to avoid a lot of original characters, but in a story that's becoming rather epic-length we need someone other than Haggar floating about and Zarkon is a little busy to be tagged for such things. He prefers zapping Druids, honestly xD

Muchas Gracias to all of you who read, review and follow the fic. I am so touched. Special thanks to the following lovely individuals who dropped a review on the most recent chapter: flippingfairyprincess, Jadegem02, EreAsha, The Paladin, J (Shame you won't be at ACen this year! I've only ever met one fanfiction fan at a con actually, which is so sad. Maybe I'll catch you at Midwest!), tomoe00, Narniac4aslan, Copper, NewandOld, RiyaMorut, killjoy2246 (Mine were too writing it), cassius (walking_trigger_warning), Oh Dear God, Ridazzle and bubblebucky. Seriously you guys. ♥

Please do hit that review button on your way out the door. Would love to hear your thoughts on the chapter (and Lance's thoughts, who by the way is completely accurate in that pistachio almond and Cyborg are awesome :D). Every comment inspires me to keep going and updating for y'all!
"That is enough, Commander," Haggar called over the intercom system as she watched on camera as the human went unconscious. "Cease immediately."

The Galran shot the camera a glare but released the now broken limb and stepped away from the table, arms crossed over his broad chest. Haggar resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Galrans. They were all the same; so quick to violence without any sort of elegance to it.

But she supposed at least the commander was an intriguing subject on his own. It was the reason she had selected him to assist her rather than ordering any of her Druids about. He would be the sword to her shield and compared to him she would appear as a balm to the captured Paladin, urging him to offer up his secrets lest she sic the Galran back on him.

That, and she would not lie and say it was indeed useful to be able to step back and observe the situation. Knowledge was power after all and sometimes the best vantage point was from a distance. The commander had just given her an opportunity to test a theory and, she smirked, she had been correct. As always.

She stepped back into the laboratory room, making her way towards the table. The Paladin was out cold, but even then he was whimpering quietly and his body continued to shake.

She regretfully unhooked the saliidda infused fluid bag and replaced it with a clear one with the ingredients needed to keep a human body functioning. She had to admit his sounds of distress were delightful, but too much saliidda could prove fatal and she had no desire to kill him just yet. Not only was it a toxin in that regard, but the reaction it had on the mind could overload it. She had seen it happen before and she could not afford for the boy's mind to shatter before she gleaned information for her lord.

"What sort of pathetic creature is this?" Theodek growled lowly as Haggar finished affixing the newest fluid bag. "One broken bone and he gives into the pain?"

"Calm yourself," Haggar turned to him. "You fool, do you not understand the effects of the saliidda?"

"It enhances pain," the Galran snapped back.

Haggar's eyes narrowed. "No. It enhances feeling by tricking the mind. Humans are weak, fragile creatures, Commander. The stress placed upon their hearts can cause the muscle to seize, killing them, and the trauma and pain his body thought it was under very nearly did so. You are fortunate he passed out before it could rupture."

"Weak," Theodek muttered, but he did not offer up another complaint.

"Your actions did provide me valuable information though," she continued, "despite your... brutish methods." She tapped her fingers against the air and a datapad appeared out of the space whole she had made for it. She hid a smirk as she sensed the Galran step back at the magic.

"I had suspected given his display in front of Emperor Zarkon that he would be resistant to my questions for information regarding the Paladins of Voltron," Haggar said. "And that was further
compounded by his refusals during the recording. I will break him," she continued, "but I can see that his conviction is stronger than I anticipated and it is reflected in his mental walls, of which I have only been able to glean the barest of surface thoughts before they too are hidden from me." A small smile played over her lips. "I admit, he reminds me of my Shiro more than I had imagined so."

Theodek frowned at that. He like most of the Empire knew the one she spoke of as Champion, and that human had proved incredibly resilient and fearsome. This long-limbed, slender specimen looked nothing like the Champion and had already proven to Theodek that he was a coward and a liar and he would see him suffer for what he had done

"I have been monitoring all of his vitals since he was brought here," Haggar continued, reaching out and more gently than Theodek would have done and turning the human's head to the side and giving the briefest glimpse of a small, round disc embedded into the back of his neck. Theodek recognized it immediately; it was one of the probes the medical staff used on those injured in battle to keep track of changes before treatment could be administered.

It was actually a rather clever idea to use it as a way to keep tabs on the human.

"Humans are weak and thus I had to make certain he would not succumb to his elevated body temperature or dehydration before moving onwards to phase two," Haggar explained. "But as you know the probes can also scan for a variety of other things. Like a pulse." She grinned, showing teeth. "It has been quite entertaining to see what makes it spike and rest as it does. His rate indicates he has spent most of his time here in a state of unease and fear, but he does a remarkable job of trying to hide it.

"In fact," Haggar smiled, "I am not sure if I should be offended or delighted, Commander, as when I exited the room and you remained his heart rate spiked. You have quite the presence, hmm? I wonder what use I can make of you."

"I am only here to avenge my brother," Theodek growled, fists curling. He would not become one of her game pieces or pawns. He would put up with the Druid and show her the grudging respect that he knew his emperor expected of them all to show her and her kind, but he did not have to like her. If he was honest the Druids were terrifying in their own right and he would likely never have placed himself in such a position save for his revenge.

"Yes, yes," Haggar waved her hand almost flippantly at him and Theodek bit back his snarl at the disrespect, but he knew what those hands were capable of and he would not test his limits of her abilities on him. He had no desire to be the recipient of a magic attack. The witch seemed too distracted to take affront though at the moment anyway, scrolling through her tablet and clearly enjoying hearing herself talk.

"His heart rate jumped yet again after your first little display," she said. "Moreso than anything I had done to him, which includes the recording room. Do you know what this means, Commander?"

Theodek grunted. He really did not care.

"It means that he fears fear most of all," Haggar looked up at him. "He was resistant to my line of questioning here as he knew what to expect to a degree and during the recording he also knew what would happen and why. But with you, Commander... You did not ask him a question or make a demand. You caused him pain for no reason save to inflict it."

Theodek bristled. He had a reason, a very good one. The whelp had killed his brother and then had the gall to insult his memory. How dare she belittle—
"At ease, Commander, I know of your reasons and I do not say this to take away from your reasons. But your method did not give the Blue Paladin the opportunity to protect anyone or anything. He has been a shield, Commander, attempting to protect his team this entire time. Such a thing I imagine gives him a modicum of comfort, of purpose, in all of this." She smiled then, a truly dark thing. "Your methods, however, do not give him that opportunity. They strip him away to his very core and he make him vulnerable."

Theodek thought he might like where this was going.

"This entire time he has put up a very good fight, a mental strength I had not expected. But at the very end of your session with him... I felt that wall break, just a bit. For he projected something to me that all living creatures of the universe desire and that even he, with all his conviction, cannot help but give into." She met Theodek's eyes. "Survival, Commander. He may desire to protect his team but at the end of the quintant the need to survive will surpass rational thought. He will break and you will be a key part of it. I daresay such a thing should appease you."

Theodek smiled, all teeth. Yes. Yes such a thing did indeed.

"We will need to move carefully," Haggar said, putting away her tablet back into a pocket of space. "He is resilient and his mind is quick and sharp. If he senses a pattern I have no doubts he will adapt. We must strike hot and quick and batter down his shield to the point he has nowhere left to hide. And then," she grinned, "he will have nothing left to protect."

She moved to the table and pressed the control to release the straps, leaving the Paladin unrestrained. He did not so much as move.

"It is just as well," she said, flicking her hand at the human and sending him to float next to her. "We have just about two quintants before the Paladins reach us, assuming they travel at their fastest speed."

"Will that be enough time?" Theodek frowned. If this human was as strong as the witch seemed to think he was then two quintants was hardly a blink. Although... he had heard rumor and tales of the Druids reducing even the most battle-hardened soldiers to whimpering messes within the course of vargas sometimes.

"Yes." Her hand reached out and trailed down the side of the human's face, a strange look in her eyes that made Theodek shiver. "It is all the time I need."

xxx

Shiro, Keith and Allura made their way slowly to the kitchen following the transmission to meet up with the others, hearts heavy but filled with a newfound determination that finally they were going to be able to do something. Allura had put wormholing to the Hodgkin quadrant on hold for the moment so as to speak with the rest of Team Voltron first (and to eat something, she had admitted, as opening up such a portal was exhausting and she needed the boost).

Inside the kitchen Pidge was seated at the counter (the kitchen table still strewn with their lunch of bland space potatoes) while Hunk stirred a pot of something on the stove and Coran puttered around, pulling out cups and saucers for their tea. All three heads immediately turned though as the others entered, quiet, but not silent.

"Shiro—" Hunk began, voice cracking. Was Lance...?

"He's alive," Shiro interrupted, not allowing that train of thought to go on any longer and Hunk let
out a low sob, clutching the counter in front of him. "And we're going to rescue him."

Hunk's lip wobbled and Pidge gave a short nod, some of the tension bleeding from her shoulders.

"How?" Pidge asked quietly, after a moment. "Are we going to... to do the trade?"

"No," Shiro said firmly and Hunk's eyes widened with a wash of betrayal. "But we will get him back. I promise." He turned to Allura, who had steered Keith to sit at the table, the boy still pale, and had joined him and was dutifully shoveling potatoes into her mouth. "How soon can we wormhole?"

She swallowed thickly, coughing politely into her hand despite the fact her cheeks had been stuffed a moment before, and gratefully accepted the cup of tea that Hunk came and offered her before slumping at the table next to Keith.

"In but a few dobashes. I merely need to input the coordinates we were given."

She paused then, eyes widening. "Oh. Did..." she looked to Shiro, horror etched in her face. "Did... did anyone take note of the coordinates?"

Shiro paled too. He had been so distracted, so horrified, by the torture Lance had gone through that he hadn't even thought to write them down or give them much of a thought minus his silent pleas for Lance to finish reciting them. Allura appeared to be of the same thought.

They were going to have to watch it again.

"Hodgkin quadrant sixth nebula," Keith offered up quietly, his gaze trained on his hands wrapped about the cup of tea Coran had thrust upon him. "Seventeen point six degrees north and two hundred and five point four degrees west."

"Keith..." Shiro whispered.

"Had to focus on something... something else."

"Thank you, Paladin," Allura murmured, reaching out a hand and placing it atop Keith's forearm.

Keith gave an uncomfortable roll of his shoulders and a nod.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Princess, but we cannot wormhole to the Hodgkin quadrant."

Every single head jerked to where Coran was standing at the counter, his datapad in hand and a frown dragging his moustache down.

"Why ever not?" Allura demanded, anger not directed at her advisor but her voice still sharp.

"It is impassable at that speed," Coran said quietly. "The Hodgkin quadrant is made up of very unstable planets and asteroids. To wormhole into that could prove fatal." He tapped the tablet. "We may be able to jump to the quadrant's second nebula but we would have to proceed carefully and at normal flight speed for the remainder of the journey. There is no other way around either; the coordinates are directly in the middle of the quadrant and no matter what direction we approach from we will encounter the same problem."

"And how long will this delay take?"

Coran's moustache drooped even more. "Nearly two and a half quintants, Princess," he whispered.

"Two and a half days?" Hunk repeated, stomach clenching. "But... but why?"
Why would the Galrans pick a location so impassable, one that would require Voltron to slowly pick their way across the universe?

Didn't Zarkon want the the Black Lion as soon as possible?

"Information," Pidge murmured. "Oh God..."

"Information?" Hunk parroted, voice rising. "What information? What are you talking about?"

"About us," Keith said, looking up to meet the dark honey gaze. "On Voltron. They'll use the time to interrogate Lance."

"What?" Hunk breathed. "What, no, they wouldn't..."

"They would," Shiro said, pressing his flesh hand to the bridge of his nose, feeling another headache incoming.

And given what they had just seen...

"They'll torture him," Pidge said, voice small. "They'll... they'll..." Her arms wrapped about her stomach. It would make what little she had seen from the transmission recording look like nothing.

It was going to get worse.

She thought she might be sick.

Allura's soft inhale at least broke her from concentrating on her queasy stomach, although given the newest look on the princess' face Pidge wasn't sure it was any better an outcome.

"What is it, Princess?" Shiro asked as Allura raised a hand to her mouth, shaking her head.

"He is the Blue Paladin," she breathed. "Oh..."

And despite the seriousness of the situation eyebrows quirked in confusion from the humans in the room, although Coran paled as much as his fellow Altean, because obviously yes, Lance was the Blue Paladin.

"Do you recall when you first came to the castle and I told you about the Lions and how they chose their Paladins?" Allura asked, receiving slow nods from the gathered Paladins. "I never was able to fully explain how the Blue Lion made her choice," she continued and they all remembered how Lance had cut in that the Blue Lion went for the most handsome and best pilot of the bunch.

"The Blue Lion favors a pilot who finds joy in the world around them," Allura continued quietly, wringing her hands. "Like her element of water, she seeks someone who is adaptable, quick on their feet and offers support to buoy others up." Her voice grew quieter. "Loyalty and compassion are at the core of the Blue Lion's quintessence and character; she will only accept a pilot who will put others first and whose love and heart no know bounds."

"What are you saying, Princess?" Shiro asked, although the way his insides were freezing he had an idea of where this was going.

"I... I do not think the Blue Paladin will say anything," Allura said quietly. "No matter the tactics used or the pain he suffers. It is in his very quintessence to protect others and I..." she trailed off, shaking her head. "I fear that he would endure anything rather than endanger us. Even... even at the cost of his life."
"Don't say that," Hunk moaned in denial, even though he knew Allura spoke the truth. He'd seen Lance's self-sacrificial tendencies throughout his whole life and that had not changed even when the consequences became as deadly as they had up here in space.

Silence reigned in the room, a thick, tense ugly thing as each came to the same conclusion.

Lance would rather die than see them hurt.

"Then... then why?" Pidge asked, breaking it. "Why Lance? He's the worst choice for... for that," she struggled to say the last word.

For torture. For interrogation.

Oh God she really was going to be sick.

"They likely had little choice," Coran said, fingers steepled. "They needed to separate a Paladin from the pack, so to speak, a difficult feat when be it ground or air missions you all stay together in at least teams of two. Choosing an environment that would force a one-on-one situation I have to grudgingly admit was clever, and a water-based scenario would pose the least risk to their own soldiers as compared to something like a sun, for example, where only the Red Lion could traverse."

"It was all a trap," Shiro shook his head. "The abandoned ship, the data... all of it. And we walked right into it. I walked us right into it."

"This was a team decision, Paladin," Allura said, shooting him a look and Shiro thought back to their discussion aboard Blue. She sighed, sound heavy. "We were all played as fools."

"Maybe we can turn the tables though?" Pidge asked, straightening up, and a familiar, calculating gleam entering her eyes. "Make Zarkon and the Galra the fools?"

"I like that plan," Keith put in, a sharp look to his face.

"You've got an idea, Pidge?" Shiro asked, feeling the vice around his insides releasing ever so slightly. Pidge may be young but she was brilliant; moreso than even her brother and considering Matt was one of the smartest people Shiro knew that was saying something.

"They gave us those coordinates expecting us to take about two days," Pidge said. "So the logical solution is to go faster; launch a rescue mission when they're not expecting us and be gone before they even realize we were there."

"Assuming the castle could go any faster," Coran said, pulling at his moustache, "we would still be completely visible to the Galra. I have no doubt they will have scouts stationed in a perimeter around the coordinates to prevent anything of the sort."

"It can go faster," Pidge insisted. "Hunk, Coran, I'll need your help but if we were to divert power from shields to thrusters and reconfigure the propulsion system... it'll be like the supply pod. It can work. And I promise I've improved the design; this one won't have a chance to blow up." She hoped, she quietly added.

"And our visibility?" Shiro asked, hope growing as Pidge's eyes had yet to lose their gleam.

"I can't cloak the whole castle but Green is cloaked," Pidge said. "If I were to work with my design and use some of the spare Balmeran crystals I think – no, I know – I can increase the time. Maybe even to a whole half varga. We leave the castle on the outskirts, outside of the perimeter, and take Green in in stealth mode. They won't see us coming at all and with Shiro's arm I can hack us into the
"base like that," she snapped her fingers, "and then take control of the camera system. We'll find Lance and be out before Green's cloaking gives."

"You... you can do all of this?" Allura asked, trying not to show her skepticism but it was so much that even Altea's best engineers would be hard-pressed to design.

"Yes," Pidge said firmly. She looked to Hunk and then to Coran. "If you'll help me."

"Whatever you need, Number Five," Coran said while Hunk gave Pidge a firm nod and a whispered, "thank you."

"This plan is not without risk," Allura said slowly. "Much of it relies on being able to make it to the coordinates well within the given expectation. I think it would be wise to have a backup plan as well."

"What backup plan?" Keith asked, voice hot. "You honestly think Zarkon would actually let us leave after we turned over the Black Lion? There is no other plan, Princess. We either get Lance back this way or we're not getting him back at all."

"I concur," she said and Keith was drawn up short, clearly expecting her to disagree. "But it is unwise to not have contingencies in case matters do not go so smoothly. What if the Galra perimeter is wider than we thought and the castle is seen? What if the Green Lion's cloaking cannot hold out as long as we hope?" She sighed.

"They will be expecting something," Shiro said quietly. "They'd be foolish not to. They know that we know that this entire thing is just another trap."

Because despite Zarkon's apparent offer, the Black Lion for the Blue Paladin, they knew it was not likely he would hold up his end of the bargain. And even if he surprised them and did indeed honor it, the universe, as Allura had stated multiple times, could not afford for the Black Lion to fall into Zarkon's hands. It would all be over then and there would be no retrieving the Black Lion once she was in Galra control.

One slender human Paladin was a much easier rescue than a several thousand-ton mechanical Lion.

The easiest solution though would be to abandon the Paladin entirely. Paladins were indeed replaceable, Allura had seen several throughout the course of her life cycle through the Lions.

But...

But as she was slowly starting to see, these humans were not faceless soldiers. They were people and ones she found herself drawn to. The had been the ones to release her from cryo-stasis, to offer her a glimmer of hope from the horror she had just emerged from, to start to fill in the hole in hear heart left behind by the gaping loss of her father, her people and her home.

Her duty as princess may be to the universe, but her duty to this group of humans was more than that.

She would not abandon a single one. She would see the Blue Paladin rescued and would accept no other option.

"Yes," she nodded. "Which is why we shall do all we can to anticipate any obstacles. For now though our concentration should be on converting the castle to be able to traverse at the speed we need for this element of surprise."
She rose to her feet, brushing down the front of her dress. "Coran, you and the Yellow Paladin will assist the Green Paladin with her design for the thrusters and I expect an update within the next four varga. Red and Black Paladins, with me to the bridge." She sensed the confusion from the Red Paladin and met his gaze with a quirk of a smile. "We have a rescue mission to plan, do we not?"

He met her gaze and nodded.

"All right then, Paladins, you have your orders," Shiro said. He looked around the room, meeting each set of eyes that reflected the same determination and hope he could feel in himself. "Let's bring Lance home."

xxx

When Lance awoke it was to silence and he forced himself to not move despite the sudden pain that was hammering into him.

He didn't want them to know he was awake.

He didn't know who might be watching.

After a couple minutes though by his count he fluttered his eyes open, carefully, remembering how he'd blinded himself last time. But he needn't have worried; he wasn't strapped down to a operating table in the lab but was back in his cell, the only light the dim purple scone.

He felt both an immediate sense of relief and a gut-clenching panic because he did not want to go through that panicked, dull haze of fever and thirst and hunger. His stomach pulsed at that reminder and he groaned low in his throat at the reminder that he still hadn't eaten anything since he'd been captured. He supposed he could be grateful for the fluids.

Even if the fluids had come attached to that poison.

He stretched his hand out, testing to see if it was still in effect as he went to tap his fingers against the floor and then—

Dios! He nearly screamed as he put the slightest bit of weight on the limb and how the quiznak had he forgotten the Galran had broken it? He stopped moving completely, chest rising rapidly up and down, and trying to blink back the tears.

He didn't think he could afford to waste any fluids. He had no idea when they would give him more.

And if they came attached to the saliidda...

He wasn't sure he wanted them.

Heart back under control, Lance more carefully moved, using his left hand only to push himself to sitting and the room giving a dizzy spin at the change of vertigo.

He must have been out for a while.

He really, really didn't want to look at what had been done to his right hand but, he swallowed thickly, he couldn't not know.

Lance flicked his eyes down to where his hand was resting on the floor next to him.

Oh Dios.
It was worse than he'd imagined.

The entire limb from his wrist up towards his elbow was turning black and blue and the wrist was twisted, clearly broken. His thumb and index finger were both bent at the joint in a way that a human finger was not meant to go and a sick black and blue as well.

He felt his stomach somersault at the sight and closed his mouth, swallowing several times against the acid taste of bile that was tickling his throat. He didn't want to puke.

Whimpering, Lance lifted his right arm as best he could and pulled the broken part of his limb into his lap and tucked it up against his stomach, broken fingers pressing against his bare flesh and he shuddered. At least though he'd discovered moving it around hadn't hurt beyond what he imagined so the saliidda was indeed out of his system.

Small things.

Putting his limb in his lap did little to alleviate any pain, but at least it was secure now and somehow... somehow made him feel a little safer, even though he knew it was stupid. He wasn't safe here, not in the slightest.

Still, he found himself scooting himself backwards as gently as he could so his back was against the determined south wall and away from the door, giving him a clear line of sight to anyone that came in. Although what he thought he was going to do when that happened he had no idea. He'd opted not to resist before and that had been when he had been mostly healthy, minus the still very painful wound on his chest. Now he had two days worth of hunger, thirst, exhaustion and a broken wrist and fingers to round it all out.

He knew it was going to get worse.

This was only the beginning of the interrogation... or, well, maybe it was just a torture session now.

That's what the Galran had made it into at least. Commander... Theodore? Lance frowned. That wasn't right, but he couldn't recall the full name. Son of Theoden though. His only son now because Lance had killed the other.

His stomach curled again, guilt and remorse and sickness and fear all rolled together at the reminder of what he had done.

And because he had killed that Galran... his brother wanted revenge. Lance understood, in a roundabout way, that need.

And yet...

Yet he didn't. Not at all.

Because he hadn't killed the Galran out of malice or hate. It had been a necessity.

Right?

Right, he told himself.

Doubt still lingered that there could have been another way. A better way.

A way that would have still left him captured. But at least maybe then this commander wouldn't be so... so angry.
Lance still felt bad for him, felt for the Galran's family he had hurt.

And he would admit he was more than a little terrified that despite what they had done to him he still could not find it in him to hate them. That would be the normal reaction, right? To hate and depise right back?

But it would just continue this circle of violence and Lance didn't want that. They wanted to bring peace to the universe but peace didn't have to mean killing all of the Galra... at least he hoped so. Once Zarkon fell – and Zarkon, he had already long ago concluded, had to die and he just prayed he was not the one tasked with that final blow but he would do it, he would, if the universe asked it of him – he hoped the Galra would surrender and they could all move forward.

He could go home.

Well...

That had been the hope.

Now...

Now he was never going to go home.

He was never going to leave this ship.

He was going to die here, tortured to death for information he could not, would not, ever give them.

Unless...

Unless he escaped.

He glanced down at his wrist and let out a low snort.

Right.

Lance tilted his head back against the cell wall and closed his eyes.

What did he do?

He could not count on a rescue; as amazing as his team was he knew they would not be a match for Zarkon's forces, not without Voltron. And without him, for now, there was no Voltron. He would never want them to endanger themselves to rescue him; not when if he'd been stronger, faster, better he could have stopped his capture in its tracks and this situation would be moot. But there was no point in going over what ifs – he had been captured and that was all there was to it.

He could not expect a trade either and he knew, he prayed, Allura would make sure such a thing did not happen. Because even if Zarkon benovenetly held up his end of that bargain there was no future left for the universe without the Black Lion. He would condemn them all. He would kill them all and for as brief as his life would be after before the Galra Empire claimed it he would be wracked with guilt.

So it was up to him.

He, the weak link of Team Voltron. He didn't have the combat and fighting abilities that Keith and Shiro had, nor Pidge and Hunk's smarts. He wasn't a hacker like Pidge, didn't have Hunk's strength, none of Keith's instinctual talent or Shiro's tactical advantages and leadership.
What did he have?

Lance pursed his lips.

He was quick, he gave himself, although he wasn't sure how fast he'd be capable of moving with his injuries. His leg strength was above average – years of *fútbol* and swimming contributing to that – and he did consider himself a pretty out of the box thinker and adaptable to situations.

Okay, those were all positives. What else?

He had three working limbs on the physical side although his dominant hand was definitely out of commission. His chest still hurt but it was no longer the stabbing agony; he wondered if in addition to the clean bandages they had indeed healed it up further. He didn't dare unwind the bandages to check. He wasn't dizzy, not really, and he was thinking clearly.

This was going to be the best state he'd find himself in for the remainder of his time here, that Lance was certain of.

It was now or never.

It was time to stop playing the role of prisoner and start being a Paladin of Voltron.

His eyes narrowed, left fist clenching at his side.

It was time to escape.

Chapter End Notes

So glad so many of you liked Theodek! Phew! There's always that fear with original characters but looks like he's going to find a nice home here (I'm also glad I did change his name as Fordek just does not strike the same intense chord; it reminds me of yelling 'fore' on the golf course xD). On this chapter, we've checked in with all three of our "factions" so to speak and looks like things are going to get moving pretty quick. I wonder if Lance's escape will be successful :D What do y'all think?

As always the hugest of thank yous to the lovely reviewers. Shout out to: Immortalfey, Awkwardly_Social, EmotionalPlant, AngelofGrace96, Tomoe001, EreAsha, Ms.+J, killjoy2246, bubblebucky, Narniac4Aslan, Kamilla, NewandOld, Mimbillia, OH DEAR GOD, maychorian, ortthree, and J.

Thanks again everyone! If you enjoyed the chapter/story please do drop a quick (or long, whatever you would like) comment below!
All good escape plans depended on one thing. Surprise. And Lance had to admit that whatever he ended up doing was going to be a surprise to him too. He was a little afraid he was taking the whole thinking outside the box and adaptable to change idea a little too seriously, but in his defense he really didn't have much to work with.

The only real decision he'd made in his escape plan was that he needed a weapon. A blaster would be preferable as it was his dominant weapon, as well as the fact his right hand was out of commission and the idea of trying to swing any type of sword (and given that it'd be a Galran sword it would no doubt be large) with his left hand and bringing a very sharp, very dangerous weapon in reach of his body with his weaker side was something he'd prefer to avoid.

But.

If that was what weapon presented itself Lance would take it. He was only going to have one chance at this.

To get that weapon he needed to incapacitate the guard. How he planned to do that was another matter entirely.

The Galra had him beat easily in both height and width, and that didn't even take into the account the fact they were wearing suits of armor and weapons while he was sporting the half-naked look with bare feet and a broken wrist and a charming, witty personality.

The odds were not in his favor.

The odds got even worse if the guard sent to retrieve him for whatever this next phase or round or newest interrogation was Theodore. Because Theodore was not only huge even compared to his fellow Galra, he hated Lance and he would not be one to be thrown off balance again by a quip or an out of place smile.

His wrist ached at the reminder of the commander and he cuddled it closer to him.

What he really needed was a Pidge-sized Galran guard, for some reason wearing no armor and carrying a blaster in easy reach for Lance to commandeer.

He snorted.

Yeah. Right.

The other part of his grand master escape plan relied on obtaining some piece of Galra tech so he could access the doors and then ultimately a ship. He was thinking a sentry's hand would be the most viable option and he knew from previous missions that they always worked. But sentries traveled in organized packs and getting in close enough to somehow incapacitate one and remove its hand while avoiding blaster fire from the other ranks seemed more than a bit impossible.

It was why Lance had shoved that part of the plan into the "cross that bridge when it appeared" folder because his first priority was to get out of the cell.
Of which he still had no idea how exactly that was working.

All of this relied far too heavily on what circumstances brought and Lance had no way of knowing who would show up or even when. For all he knew they were dumping him in this cell for another few days. He cringed at the thought. Now that he wasn't feverish or suffering massive dehydration - he was still thirsty though and his stomach ached with hunger - he was becoming aware of how small this cell really was. It was really a glorified closet with the only good thing being the ceilings were so high.

Still, now that he was aware of it the walls did indeed seem to be moving in despite the fact he repeatedly told himself that no, they were not, and the light wasn't dimming either. It was all in his head and although the Galra might eventually be wanting to kill him the cell was not like the cryopod and being controlled by a hijacked crystal virus.

He was fine.

Or, well, as fine as one got in this sort of situation.

He had taken to humming as it did not hurt his throat nearly as much as singing or talking and it gave him something to concentrate on and force the non-moving walls backwards. It was comforting too, his chest vibrating with the song.

He had just finished the verse of his current song when the door slid open with a sharp hiss and Lance blinked rapidly against the brighter purple light now spilling into his cell.

Two Galrans.

He cursed inwardly as he had no idea how to incapacitate one Galran let alone two. But on the positive neither one was Theodore and that was a good thing, right?

Right.

He had to find something good about this situation.

Okay, so plan. The two Galrans had paused in the threshold to the cell, directly across from him. They were also very much so blocking his one exit.

He needed to get them to move.

Which meant he needed to get them inside the cell. Once there he could trap them in it and then make a break for it. He'd only have a few seconds thanks to the camera, but maybe if he was lucky the Galran assigned to watch it was on a coffee break?

He shook his head. Belay that. Focus.

How to get them to move into the cell?

Simple. Refuse to move himself.

He winced. That... that probably wouldn't end well for his wellbeing. But he needed them to come in, he needed them to come close so he could retrieve a weapon and then hightail it out of there.

Piece of cake.

Step one, try to get them off balance, to lower their guard from the rigidity they were holding themselves.
And so Lance mustered up the best smile he could and lifted his left hand into the air in a half-wave. "Hi guys," he greeted. "Is it time for another round of torture the Paladin already?"

They didn't so much as blink.

"Well, I was thinking," Lance said, trying to keep his voice steady as one of the Galrans stepped into the cell, "we could switch it up. Maybe pin the tail on the Galran? If you guys have tails, I can't really tell with your armor. Maybe stab the claw instead?"

"Cease your prattle, Paladin," the guard who had stepped inside scowled. He shifted his blaster - it was too large, Lance realized with a grimace - in his hands as though warning Lance what awaited. "Get up."

But...

Lance's eyes zoomed in on the smaller gun clipped in a holster on the guard's belt.

Bingo.

"I said to get up," the Galran snarled and Lance held out his left hand in a stop motion, hoping it was somewhat universal.

"Easy there big guy," Lance said. "No need for violence yet. I'm getting up. See?"

And Lance did have to give points to this Galran, as he was kind enough to let Lance awkwardly scramble to his feet using only one arm and the wall to pull himself to his feet. His chest twinged at the movement and he felt a rush of vertigo at his new position but forced it away. He was fine. Escape attempt time, remember? No time to be dizzy.

He eyed the gun holster again, about his chest height thanks to the Galran's size. It looked like the holster was pretty secure but the blaster handle was sticking over the edge for an easy grab and the safety strap holding it in was disconnected.

It was like the Galran was asking for Lance to steal it.

Now...

How to go about getting it.

The guard was beginning to become annoyed at the time Lance was taking to steady himself and reached forward to grab his upper arm.

And Lance decided now was as a good a time as any.

He shot out his left hand, angling for the blaster. The guard though pivoted and Lance's hand instead slammed with a dull smack against his armored stomach.

It hurt just as much as it sounded.

Lance offered up a weak grin even as he felt his stomach dropping because that had been his chance and he had very, very much just failed. "Uh, my hand slipped?"

Yellow eyes narrowed at him and within the span of a tick the guard's hands had shot out and encircled Lance's neck, bodily lifting him off the ground and slamming him against the cell wall. Lance gasped out a cry as his head took the brunt of the hit and compounded on top of it there was a sharp shock that made him yelp on the back of his neck.
He idly wondered if because of their fur Galrans conducted static electricity.

The grip around his throat tightened and Lance gagged, bringing his left hand up and futilely scratching and trying to pry the purple hand off.

He couldn't breathe.

He couldn't \textit{breathe}.

His right hand joined the left for all the good it did, merely jamming his broken fingers against the grip and sending a jolt of pain through him as dark spots danced in his eyes.

He could vaguely hear the Galran laughing and it only spurred him to struggle more although his limbs were growing heavy and his hands were slipping off to hang as dead weight by his side.

Dead weight.

Dead.

Like he was about to be.

And then there was \textit{air} as the Galran loosened his hold ever so, still keeping Lance pinned to the wall but no longer constricting his airflow as tightly. Lance choked on his inhale, greedily trying to fill his lungs.

The Galrans were talking now, laughter interspersed and Lance heard the word "pathetic" thrown in over his harsh pants.

"N-not," he gasped, feet scrabbling against the wall and hands returning back to grab at the Galran's hand as fight returned with his air.

"Not pathetic?" the guard asked, snorting. "Not from where I'm standing, Paladin."

Standing.

Lance paused his struggles.

The Galran was standing. He was holding Lance against the wall, his own height now on par with the Galran's.

To where if he bunched his feet up and kicked out...

They would collide dead center with the guard's chest and maybe, maybe, knock the Galran down, or at least make him stumble.

They wouldn't be expecting it, not at this point.

The question was, would it be enough?

There was only one way to find out.

Lance pulled his knees up, pressing his feet flush against the wall, and feeling muscles cord in his legs as he pushed down.

One shot.
Go.

He snapped his legs out in front of him, driving heel first into the Galran's chest.

It hurt, bare feet on armored plates were not a good combination, but it worked.

The guard let out a loud oof and stumbled backwards, hand releasing from around Lance's neck and he dropped to the ground, barely managing to get his feet under him and landing in a feral sort of crouch.

He had no time to waste.

Lance lunged forward towards the still stumbling guard, realizing his mistake within the moment as habit had sent his right hand reaching out and broken hands brushed against the blaster handle. He forced them to wrap about it, swallowing back the scream as bones ground upon one another, and yanked it free.

He had a gun.

He had a gun.

There was no time to celebrate though as the guard, even as he fell backwards, was lifting his larger blaster up for a shot.

Lance shot first.

His broken index finger curled around the trigger and blast of purple light seared through the cell, closing the mere foot gap between human and Galran and at that range the armor stood no chance. It pierced through the right shoulder and the guard let out a bellow of pain. He went down a moment later and his head hit the ground with a sickening crack.

He didn't move.

Lance had to though, barely throwing him to the side in time as a laser blast sailed just past him from the other guard. A second shot followed a tick later and it whistled just past Lance's head and he wondered if the blast was set to stun or if this guard was indeed trying to kill him.

He didn't want to find out.

Lance dropped into a roll, crying out as he landed on his broken wrist, but forced back the pain and shot out of the roll, already firing.

The first shot hit the Galran's shoulder just as he had done to the other and a second shot smashed into the guard's arm that was supporting the bulk of his own large blaster.

He too yelled out as the gun fell from his disabled hand and Lance wasted no time, darting around him and into the open hallway. A quick glance to the left showed a pad with a single button and praying it wasn't Galra-only activated, Lance pressed it.

The metal door slid down and trapped both Galrans inside, leaving Lance outside clutching his stolen gun and shaking in a mixture of shock and surprise.

He'd done it.

He'd actually done it.
A somewhat hysterical sounding laugh bubbled in his throat and he tamped it down.

Not now.

This was only step one.

And he couldn't wait around here. The place would be crawling with guards and sentries any moment and he needed to be long gone.

Lance painfully transferred the gun to his left hand, having to pry his fingers off the trigger, and then pulled his right forearm against his stomach and hoped he could keep it there and out of the way. Adrenaline was making the pain fade but he knew it wouldn't last forever.

Just long enough.

Glancing both ways down the hall, he shrugged and picked to go left, as he recalled going right out the door to meet with Zarkon and he'd really rather avoid any chance of finding the throne room. If he had that sort of luck his escape would be over before it really got started.

His bare feet made almost no sound, but he was sure his wheezing breaths were giving him away. He couldn't help it though; he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs between being nearly choked to death and the increasing trepidation of being found.

He prayed as he hurried through corridors, each corner that he rounded with no enemy in sight doing little to provide any relief. He could hear footsteps starting up now, the clank of metal harsh on the narrow corridors of the base and he shuddered.

Sentries.

A lot of sentries.

And while he needed to still obtain a hand from one of them he realized now was not that time. He needed to regroup, to breathe, and find a more opportune moment than trying to face down an entire squad.

Think think think.

He was passing doors, all of them the handle-less version of his cell and a keypad outside of them.

He resisted the urge to press on one as no doubt he would get an error message since he was not a Galran or sentry. He had been really lucky the one at his cell had closed as it had.

He didn't expect that luck to hold.

Lance paused at the entrance to the newest hallway he had run down, chest heaving and taking a moment to observe and try to regain his breath. Sharp eyes scanned the corridor, looking for some sort of inspiration.

Door, door, another door, a vent, a door... Lance dragged his gaze back to the large ventilation cover. He'd been joking in his mind about escaping via air ducts like Pidge had when giving Sendak the run around in the castle but...

But here one was.

Would he fit though was the million dollar question.
Lance's feet carried him over to the grate and he sized it up. Yes, he probably could fit assuming it didn't get any narrower. But it was so dark. And small.

He whimpered low in his throat at the thought of willingly going into such a thing. What if he got stuck? What if the vent kicked on and sucked out all the air or he was roasted alive or –

No.

He had to do this. This was his one chance.

And he was a Paladin of Voltron, right? Paladins weren't scared of small, dark, tight spaces.

Lance shivered.

The pep talk was not working.

But the footsteps sounding closer?

Those did the trick.

Lance jammed the nozzle of the blaster underneath the bottom corner of the grate and pulled on it like he would a crowbar.

The grate squeaked, the bottom screw straining under the pressure.

"Come on, come on," he muttered, barely audible over the blood pounding in his ears.

He managed to pry it fully off on the right corner, the open space as wide as the blaster.

Lance forced his right arm in and bracing it against the interior of the vent pushed, choking back the scream as his wrist protested the action but it worked as he widened the hole. Before he could waste the opportunity, both arms straining at the pressure, Lance ducked his head in and then his shoulders, scratching them on the grate and grimacing as he felt new scratches cut into his flesh.

A moment later though he had his torso through and his legs scrambled to keep up and after one awkward position later as his feet tried to get in past the rest of him he was inside the vent and the grate was snapping back down with a dull clang as the resistance let go.

Lance hoped they didn't hear that.

He backed away from the cover, noting that yes, the vent did indeed shrink almost immediately after its opening, and on top of that it was sloping upwards.

He was going to have to army crawl.

With a broken wrist.

Somehow holding onto the blaster.

In a pitch dark tunnel that was barely the width of his shoulders and no end in sight.

Lance swallowed back the low sob of terror.

He could have escaped only to get stuck and die in a vent. Like... like some rat lost in a maze.

He couldn't do it.
The footsteps sounded, in his hallway now and Lance propelled himself backwards away from the opening, trying to hold his breath and tears inside.

He saw the outline of sentry legs passing by, at least ten in the squadron. More would follow. Galrans would follow. There were only so many places he could be and they would find him.

And then...

Then they wouldn't kill him.

They would bring him back to Haggar and Theodore and then he would wish he was dead because they would interrogate him until he broke and betrayed his friends and he could not do that to them. He had to protect them.

And if that meant facing down the narrow, dark tunnel that made him feel physically ill...

Lance gulped.

He would do it.

He brought the blaster around to his front, doublechecking to make sure it was turned off so he didn't accidentally shoot himself, and held it to his chest with his right forearm, trying to protect his wrist as best he could.

He positioned himself on his stomach, feeling the top of the vent brush the top of his head and his shoulders press into the sides.

And stifling the sob of oncoming panic, Lance pushed forward.

xxx

"He escaped?" Haggar repeated the words back to the messenger, who cowered before her.

"Y-yes, Lady Haggar. He..." the mere foot soldier swallowed heavily, purple antennae quivering. "He overpowered the gu-guards."

Haggar resisted the urge to scowl. Of course. The one time she did not have the commander escorting the Paladin he had pulled something like this. She should have expected it, honestly. He was a Paladin of Voltron, not some mere prisoner.

But she had required the commander's assistance with phase three of her plan and as such he was not available to bring the Paladin to her for one more round of saliidda inspired interrogation, this time with the addition of a few more... sharper tools of persuasion. She could not wait to hear the sound of his screams as a knife pierced into his flesh again and again.

It would be delightful.

And now she couldn't hear it.

Because her Paladin had escaped.

But not for long.

Haggar waved her hand, smirked as the Galran flinched, clearly expecting to feel pain, but she merely pulled her datapad out of her space pocket.
It was simple. The Paladin's vital monitor also relayed his coordinates. It would be a simple matter of finding the location and then determining which floor he was on. She pulled up her diagnostic sheet...

And frowned at the screen.

For instead of the regular makeup of the Paladin's vitals – which when she had last checked nearly a varga ago had been steady as his body remained in an unconscious state from the commander's actions – there was instead a flashing error code of no signature.

Every single one of them was the same; his heart rate, body temperature, and of course the tracking.

She scowled. What had those imbecile Galrans done now?

Haggar flipped to the camera software of the Paladin's cell and moved to the previously recorded footage. Her eyes narrowed as she watched the proceedings of what had led to the human's escape and narrowed further as one of the guards and grabbed the human about the neck.

He had crushed her device.

The fool.

Calm, she told herself. There was nowhere for her wayward Paladin to go, not on this ship.

He would be found.

And he would regret ever thinking he could escape her.

"All soldiers are to commence in the search of the Blue Paladin," she said, fixing a dangerous yellow glare upon the still cowering Galran. "If he is not found within the varga..." Her smile turned dark. "I shall hold you personally accountable."

The soldier did not argue but merely gave a shuddering bow and practically fled from her sights.

Haggar could still not believe Zarkon had such pathetic creatures in his employ.

She sighed, looking longingly at her setup of knives she had lovingly selected.

Later, she told herself.

And perhaps...

Perhaps this futile escape would work in her favor.

She chuckled then, the sound echoing about the room.

Yes.

She would go join in the fun.

She had always loved a good hunt after all. And the screams the prey made when it was captured...

Music to her ears.

xxx

Lance stopped, almost not believing what he was seeing.
Light.

He blinked several times at it, expecting it to fade away.

It stayed.

Light.

A mangled sob worked its way up his throat and he desperately pushed himself forward, practically clawing at the metal vent beneath him.

An exit.

Lance had no idea how long he had been in the vent except it had been too long. The only change to it had been the elevation as it dipped and turned and rose in a dizzying black spiral. He'd had to stop a few times, unable to move any further as exhaustion and fear and hurt and panic that morphed into frozen terror had pressed in. The harsh scent of copper had been overwhelming in the already stale air and Lance had nearly vomited several times, unable to even curl up and try to quell his stomach as fear churned it wildly.

It was only the thought of his friends that spurred him to keep moving. He had to get out of this vent, had to escape, for them.

And now he finally was at the end of the tunnel. Or, well, he was making it the end.

He could not stay in here another minute.

He was at the newest vent cover within the minute, left hand hooking painfully into the grating and he almost started crying in sheer relief as the vent above the grate was tall enough that he could actually sit up and he did so, burying his head into his upturned knees and letting loose a muffled sob he had been holding in.

It was going to be okay. He was almost out.

Almost home.

The thought had him pausing.

He'd never quite thought of the castle as home, not in the way his room he shared with his two brothers was or even the Garrison dorm room he and Hunk had decorated with everything they could think of. But... but he supposed it was.

He had his room, piled high with knick-knacks from his travels in space, his plants, his collection of quilts spread out on the bed. And while the halls were empty and most of the castle echoed, the kitchen where Hunk could often be found was homey, the lounge comfortable and full of fond memories of movie nights and pillow forts. And Blue. A tearful smile tugged up his face.

He always felt at home with Blue, her presence like the softest blanket as it wrapped about his mind.

Yes.

The castle was home.

Which meant that...

That his friends were his family.
The thought brought another smile to his face and Lance rubbed tearlined eyes against his knees.

Family.

His space family.

That's what they were, after all. They had been through too much, meant too much to him, to be mere friends. Well, most of them, he winced. He wasn't sure if Keith even considered him a friend let alone a something as intimate as a brother. And Allura... he pressed his head harder against his knees. He didn't think she liked him very much. She didn't dislike him, per se, but she never called him by his name or wanted spend any time with him... well, she didn't do that for the others either. Shiro seemed to be the only one outside of Coran who she spoke with. But, he supposed, she was a princess and he hadn't done himself any favors constantly flirting with her... even though she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever met. He felt his cheeks flush and shook his head.

But even if they didn't think the same of him or hold him in the same regard...

Lance knew he loved them still.

And he would do anything and everything to make sure they stayed safe.

Which brought him back to this escape.

He eyed the grate in front of him, the pale purple light filtering in not overly bright and lending to his idea that he was not in a hallway. There were no sounds from down below either so maybe he had actually had a spot of luck and this exited into an empty room?

Maybe a hangar?

He felt a sudden giddiness at the prospect of a ship being so close before he remembered he still had yet to obtain a sentry's hand.

Still.

In any case he needed to get out, which meant he had to remove the grate. He didn't dare risk shooting it open in case the laser ricocheted, which meant he was left once more with his feet. If it was anything like the other grate the screws were on the outside so if he applied enough pressure he might be able to push it off.

Hopefully.

Lance angled himself as best he could so his feet were pressed up against the grate covering, the metal lines already digging into his bare soles and he tried not to think about what would happen when he pushed them against the sharp edges, and then tucked his knees back towards himself to put as much force behind the kick as he could.

And go.

He kicked his feet forward, choking on scream as metal *sliced* into his feet, but the grate did indeed go flying off, shooting like a champagne top off into the unknown room.

Lance stilled himself as much as he could as he heard the grate come to a clanging halt.

No footsteps sounded.

He counted out two full dobashes before he dared inch forward, sticking his legs out of the hole.
They hovered.

This grate apparently was not conveniently located on the ground like the previous one.

He ducked his head under the top, left arm gripping the edge of the inside vent, and surveyed below, stomach dropping as he realized how much he was going to have to drop to get out of the vent.

Fifteen feet, he'd guess, in a dead plummet. There was nothing below the vent to use to cushion his landing either, although the room itself was chock full of boxes and... spare uniforms? He'd apparently ended up in some type of storage closet by the looks of it.

He had the sudden image of trying to disguise himself in the uniforms and couldn't hold back the snort of laughter at what a picture he'd make. Hunk could maybe, and that was a big maybe, be able to fool someone if the helmets had full faceplates due to his size. But Lance? He'd look like a little kid playing dress up. And unlike the cartoons he doubted the Galrans would be so easily fooled.

None of that mattered though if he couldn't get down.

Think. There had to be something.

He absolutely was not crawling back into the vent again. Never again. His heart pounded just thinking of returning back into that narrow dark passage.

No ideas came to him though as he stared down at the drop. He had no rope and nothing he wore would be enough to act as one either, assuming he had the ability to tear through the super durable Altean undersuits. A glance at the blaster showed it did not magically turn into a grappling hook, as the only controls on it were a charge port and the safety switch he'd already engaged.

There was only one option left.

Jump.

He felt his heart leap into his throat at the thought of it.

If he'd had the use of his right hand he'd have shimmied out backwards from the vent and lowered himself as much as he could to decrease the fall. But his right arm was deadweight and after the incident with the guards and now carrying the blaster and dragging it along the bottom of the vent floor he couldn't even get the fingers to clench. He really hoped he hadn't messed it up anymore with that.

He had to jump.

And...

And just hope for the best.

Maybe he could channel a cat. They always landed on their feet, right? No, no, he shook his head, a small smile quirking up his lips.

He'd channel a Lion. He piloted one after all, maybe some of Blue's gracefulness had rubbed off on him.

And with a final prayer under his breath, Lance pushed himself out of the vent and plummeted towards the floor below.
Chapter End Notes

A whole chapter and Lance is still on the loose inside the ship. Perhaps this shall be a successful escape after all (contrary to all of you naysayers :p Or not, and then y'all are right xD). Still, he's gotten farther than I think even he thought he'd manage so brownie points for Lance :D

I'm not sure how many of y'all are still in school/classes/college, etc., but round here today is the last day! Hope y'all are finished too (or nearly finished) so you can have a nice summer break. I will admit to jealousy right now and sort of wish I could transport myself back to college xD

Thank you so much to the lovely reviewers who keep me inspired to keep on writing. Shout out this week goes to: flippingfairyprincess, EreAsha, AngeolfGrace96, Immortalfey, Puppetmaster55, killjoy2246, Awkwardly_social, Katnined, Maychorian, Hjorth, J, burple12345, and Proxy_17.

Would love to hear your thoughts on the chapter/story! Favorite line (or reference since Lance is an abundant fountain of them), scene, guesses as to what happens, what you want to see happen, overall feelings, etc. Love every single one and really appreciate them. Thanks everyone!
Chapter Eleven

Well, Lance thought, it could have been worse.

He was alive for starters. And he didn't think anything new was broken, although his left leg, which had taken the brunt of the landing, ached all the way up to his hip and his knee didn't want to bend very well. His head was pounding a new tempo too from where he smashed it on the wall and he could feel blood dampening his hair. But all in all, for jumping out of practically a ceiling vent in a freefall he hadn't done too bad.

He hobbled forward, each step on his newly cut feet sending lancing pain all the way up his body and a trail of bloody footprints behind him, and collapsed gratefully on top of a large box that seemed to hold a series of mismatched boots, setting the blaster right next to him and in easy reach, safety turned back off. He just needed a minute to catch his breath. That was more than fair.

He took the dobash to look more closely around the room to see if there was something he could use in his escape. The uniforms and shoes were too big but he was at least going to nab a tunic. And maybe, he winced, looking at his bleeding feet, he could try and tear one of them up into bandages.

A clothing rack was in reach of where he'd stationed himself, and Lance pulled it over by tugging on one of the tunics, wincing as the wheels squeaked in the otherwise quiet room. He yanked it off the hangar and took a moment to just hold it, reveling in how surprisingly soft and warm it was. It made him realize how cold he was again, as sweat cooled on his skin.

Without waiting another moment Lance maneuvered the oversized tunic over his head, wincing as he stretched both his chest and then had to feed his broken right arm through it, but a moment later it was on and he let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. And despite the fact the tunic was clearly Galran make, even if it was black and not purple, Lance felt comforted wearing it. He didn't feel so... exposed.

It hung long, nearly to his thighs, and the sleeves came down to almost his elbow while the neckline was trying to slip off his shoulder. He frowned. That could be a problem.

He decided to wear it around for now and if it continued to slide and provide a possible impairment to his movement... then it would have to go.

Lance hated how he already knew the answer to that. Stupid Galrans and their stupidly large heads.

He just wasn't sure how he was going to do that part as he had no knife and even had the fabric not been quite as thick he had no ability to pull it apart with his compromised right hand.

The grate seemed to wink at him as his gaze moved about the room again he grinned back at it. That thing was most definitely sharp as his feet could attest to. Maybe if he stretched the tunic over it he could pierce it and then pull it apart?

A few painful ticks later he'd stumbled to the grate with a tunic in hand and settled onto another storage box. Tilting it up he held the cover between his knees, gritting his teeth at the ache in his left one from the fall, and dragged the tunic across the corner. The faintest sound of ripping fabric
reached his ears and he allowed himself a grin.

It had actually worked.

He ended up having to hold one corner of the fabric in his mouth and the other with his working left hand and make a sawing motion across the grate corner, but before long he'd destroyed the tunic – and it was just as satisfying as he'd imagined – and had a pile of jagged fabric strips.

Tying with only one hand was going to be tricky, but he could do it. Well, he sort of could do it. It wouldn't be pretty but it would get the job done.

He chose to bandage his feet first, as they were stinging pretty badly and still dripping blood. He wedged a strip of cloth between his toes and then carefully wrapped it around and around his foot, tucking the end of it back into the foot wrappings near his ankle. He experimentally flexed his foot and the bandages stayed in place.

Cheered on by his success, the second foot received the same treatment. He skipped his chest for now since it was covered by the tunic, but he had a feeling he'd be attempting to rewrap what bandages were in place there as they were most definitely damp from rubbing against the vent tunnel although the pain was not as bad as he had been expecting.

That left...

His hand.

Lance grimaced at it. It looked worse than it had just an hour (two? three? He had no idea of how long he'd been in the vent for) ago; the skin around his broken fingers and wrists even more swollen and purple than before and as he'd already discovered it hurt beyond belief to even try and clench either of those two fingers and being that they were the ones he used to actually do things with... well, too late to wish Theodore had broken his pinky.

Now what to do about them?

His wrist was definitely beyond his limited knowledge as it had not just been broken but twisted and looking at it for too long made his stomach twinge. His fingers though... maybe he could fix those. And if he could then he would have his dominant hand back for shooting and at least capable of grabbing onto things although supporting any sort of weight was out of the question due to his wrist.

He just needed to do it. He swallowed thickly. It couldn't be that hard, right? Just bend the finger back at the knuckle where it very clearly was supposed to line up with the rest of his fingers.

He'd do the index finger first. It was a little more straightforward than the thumb.

It couldn't even hurt that much, really. After the pain from the saliidda and all the other injuries he'd already endured this was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Not painful at all.

He amended that statement as he reached out to pinch his index finger and let out a sharp hiss at the contact.

It was fine. All of this was fine.
He just needed to... to pull down at the knuckle. It'd be over in a blink. 

Lance took one deep inhale, closed his eyes and yanked on his finger.

He barely contained the scream from the self-inflicted injury as his hand felt like it was engulfed in fire.

He'd lied. He had so lied. This was much, much worse than he'd thought it would be.

The acid taste of bile swam up his throat and he swallowed heavily praying he would not be sick. "Dios mio," he whimpered, hunching over the limb. "Duele..."

Breathe, he ordered himself. In and out. In and out. Just breathe. Relax. And after a little when the pain had whittled down to a steady ache Lance risked a glance at his finger. And the barest of smiles tugged at his lips as the digit was once more straight and seemed to be as it should. "Gracias a Dios," he whispered. It hadn't all been for nothing. He'd fixed his finger.

He experimentally tried to flex it and stopped immediately. Yup, it was still most definitely broken. He could maybe try and use it in a pinch, but it was not going to be good enough to pull the trigger anytime soon.

He glanced at the thumb and then shook his head, regretting the movement as the room spun around him. Right. Head injury from the fall. Probably best not to engage in any extra movement.

But thumb was a no go. That was fine. As he'd learned just setting it did not actually heal it so it would be pretty useless anyways for what he wanted to do.

Moving on, Lance carefully wrapped his index to his middle finger so at least that hard work would not go to waste. He used another few strips to wrap about his wrist; it would do nothing for the break but it would at least hold it steady. He devised a sling with two more pieces but then paused.

To put over the tunic or to remove the tunic.

He knew what he wanted... he also knew what would give him his best chance.

And whimpering he forced himself to shrug out of the tunic, flesh immediately raising into goosebumps at the loss. Lance did what he could with the remaining strips, wrapping them awkwardly around his rib cage one-handed and using his right elbow to hold them down. They weren't as tight as he'd like when he was done, but it was at least another layer to the indeed bloodied bandages.

He pulled on his sling then and settled his right wrist into the loop, wincing at the new pressure but knowing this was much safer than letting it hang loose and be a deadweight at his side.

Injuries taken care of to the best of his ability Lance set his sights back on his original objective: escaping.

So, steps. Exit room. Locate way to open coded doors (aka disable a sentry). Find hangar. Steal ship and get away. Hope he could figure out the controls to radio the Castle of the Lions. Go home and hop in a cryo-pod and try and pretend all of this was a horrible nightmare.

Okay, so fine, maybe he should backtrack to the first few steps. Exit room and find either a sentry or the hangar. Don't fall over either, he added, as upon standing the room spun ever so slightly on the edges and he caught himself on one of the boxes.
After he had his balance back Lance picked up the blaster and edged to the solo door in the storeroom, this one fortunately having a handle on the inside for him to open. He did so, pushing it just a couple inches. When no action was forthcoming, he pushed it the rest of the way open and slid out.

The hallway was fortunately empty with blank walls stretching in either direction, lighting dim and purple-cast as the entire ship seemed to be. Lance figured he'd continue the trend and picked to go left. He crept silently down the hall and practically holding his breath as he strained to pick up any sound.

He made it to an adjoining hall and then another corridor, always moving left when he could, before he heard the sound of metal on metal and realized there was a sentry squad headed in his direction.

There wasn't anywhere for him to go though. There were no other doors down any of the halls and no air vents - although honestly he wasn't sure anything but last minute mortal terror could propel him into one of those again. So it was either retreat backwards and hope they didn't follow or meet them head on and try to rush past them. He needed a sentry hand, right? This could be his chance.

But such a plan was incredibly reckless. It was a Keith thing to charge out like that and Keith could afford to be as reckless as he was because somehow he always came out on top. Lance tamped down the sudden stirring of both envy and despair.

A better model would be Shiro, and, Lance figured he had already been asking himself what Shiro would do since he had woken up on the Galra base. So what would Shiro do?

Caution, he could almost hear Shiro say, along with that mantra of "patience yields focus" that Lance didn't entirely get but it seemed to mean something to Shiro, even if he had taken to uttering it almost like a prayer while pinching the bridge of his nose during some of the Paladins' wilder antics. In any case, caution and patience would be his friend here. As soon as he engaged the entire ship would have his location and he'd really like to avoid that outcome.

So Lance backtracked up the hall he had come from and angled around the corner to wait, hand ready on the trigger in case the sentries were to come down this offshoot. And after a few ticks though the clanking feet faded away and Lance let out the breath he'd been holding.

Obstacle avoided.

"Thanks, Shiro," he murmured, the sound of his own voice bringing him a sliver of comfort, despite the fact it was still a hoarser rasp than he was used to. He licked his lips and swallowed, aware again of how thirsty he still was. Top of the order after he got back to the castle was to stick his head under the kitchen sink and not stop until he burst.

He let out a low chuckle. Hunk hated when he did that – incredibly unsanitary, he would sniff – and then Lance would lick the faucet. It was worth it, even if he then had to spend the next twenty minutes disinfecting it under Hunk's watchful and anxious eyes.

Okay, focus, focus. He shoved aside the memory and the warm, safe feeling he got whenever Hunk he thought of Hunk and looked back at the hallway.

Go time.

Darting back out and even more cautious than before, he hurried down the hall where the sentries had just come from. He made it a few more halls without incident before his ears picked up another sound. This time it wasn't metal on metal though; it was softer.
Actual Galran officers.

Quiznak.

What did he do now?

He cocked his head, listening, and his eyes widened.

It sounded like there were only two.

He... he could take on two.

Two opponents, even if they were capable of original thought unlike the sentries, were much better odds for him.

And...

And maybe it would solve the problem of accessing the locked panels.

He had made the decision he needed a sentry's hand, but he'd snuck aboard enough Galran ships to know that not only did Shiro's Galran arm activate the panels, but so did any of the Galran's.

The panels were coded to their DNA.

He just needed some Galra DNA.

And blood, Lance gulped, would hopefully, maybe do the trick. He didn't want to remove a Galran's hand in any case.

He really didn't want to have to hurt them like that. Or kill them. He knew he was likely being foolish, but... His hand shook on the blaster.

He didn't want to kill again. He didn't want to cause any family, even one as cruel and twisted as Theodore's, to suffer more than they had to.

He was a good shot. He could take them down without killing them, without allowing them to sound the alarm. He could do this.

Lance took a quick breath to steady the shaking in his hand and focus his vision. He'd literally only get one shot at this, so he needed to make it count.

Ready?

No, not really.

Set?

Sort of.

Go!

Lance whirled around the corner where the footstems were coming from and in a single tick took in the scene.

There were two officers about thirty feet out. One was armed with a rifle; the other with a huge gun. A communication device was on the rifle-ones shoulder.
And best yet both of them had yet to fully react to seeing him.

This was his chance.

He fired his gun three times in rapid succession, adjusting the barrel just slightly with each pass. The first went straight through the radio with a sharp crackle. The second took out the right arm of the huge gun-wielding Galran and the third hit the chest of the other soldier (armor preventing it from being fatal but still shoving him backwards at the force) before they'd even had time to blink.

Both yelled out in a combination of surprise and pain and the large gun the soldier had been holding dropped to the floor as he involuntarily released his grip on it from the strike.

The rifle-wielding Galran's eyes widened though as though he realized what Lance had done, or rather had not done.

Lance had them dead to sight, neither wearing helmets and a headshot would have stopped them in their tracks, but he hadn't gone that route. The barest trickle of confusion crossed the Galran's face and he lowered his rifle slightly.

His comrade did not hesitate in the slightest. "You!" he snarled, lunging for him with bare hands instead.

Massive, massive clawed bare hands.

Hands that could so easily wrap around his still tender throat and suffocate him.

Lance swallowed and did not let himself fall into that what if trap.

He was escaping and he was escaping now.

He let off two more shots of his stolen blaster; a second strike to the chest for the confused one, who went down with a harsh gasp, and then two shots into the unarmored thighs of the charging Galran.

He didn't stop.

If anything he seemed even angrier and he was coming even faster, closing up the remaining yards between them like an enraged, charging bull.

Despite the fact that self-preservation was demanding he get out of the way, Lance lined up another pass, the familiar sense of calm that he'd sometimes get when he had to make a really tough shot overtaking everything else. The world around him faded to the point where he was only aware of the sound of the blood pounding in his head and the feel of the trigger under his hand as he raised the gun, sharp eyes accounting for every angle and movement.

The Galran lunged for him, leg extended, chest exposed...

And Lance pulled the trigger.

The beam went dead center through the Galran's torso, mere inches before his outstretched hand could strike him.

The Galran made a gargling shriek as the pressure from the blast shoved him backwards and he went down to the ground.

He didn't move this time.
Lance remained where he was, feet planted, gun raised and chest heaving as he waited for either to get back up. He knew they hadn't been fatal shots and they could very well get up and attack. He could end that option by sending a blast through their unprotected heads but... Lance shook his own. No. He'd made his decision and despite the increased danger it had made for him it felt... it felt right.

Both Galrans seemed to be down for the moment though, although the rifle wielding one was beginning to twitch. Lance frowned at that one, even as he told himself to stop wasting time. He'd *never* seen any Galran hesitate before and he definitely counted that soldier's actions in that category. Surprise, he decided. He must have just really surprised him when he popped up around the corner like that.

He didn't dare hope (or dread) that he'd just taken out one of those undercover Galrans Ulaz had mentioned he was a part of.

Lance carefully made his way towards them, legs shaking as the adrenaline high began to wear off and exhaustion kicked back in and his vision felt fuzzy around the edges.

He needed to hurry up.

Very, very carefully Lance shifted the blaster to his right hand, wincing as he forced his remaining three healthy fingers to curl around it and the trigger but even that action bending his wrist, and held out his left hand, palm open.

This was going to be the gross part. At least he wasn't Hunk, he comforted himself, as he lowered his hand to the rampaging Galran's leg where dark blood was already bubbling up and saturating the cloth. He'd have puked several times already.

Galran blood was like the rest of Galra: purple. It still smelled metallic though and had the faintest sheen of red even under the purple lighting. Lance resisted the urge to gag as he liberally coated his palm in it and several drips made it down his wrist and towards his elbow.

It was grape juice, he told himself. Really, really thick grape juice. Maybe grape jelly.

It most definitely was not blood.

Not at all.

His stomach twisted and Lance stopped trying to think about it completely.

He kept the gun held awkwardly in his right hand, knowing such a thing wasn't entirely safe but he didn't dare risk smudging the coating on his left hand in case the scanner needed a full read.

*Oh Dios* this was insane.

The moment of truth came a hallway later as it ended in a sealed door with the dreaded panel on it. Whatever was behind it was sure to lead somewhere he needed to go, but if this didn't work he'd be alerting them to his location with a cheery "access denied" warning of some sort.

Please.

Please let this work.

Lance pressed his bloodied palm to the console, holding his breath.

The panel glowed yellow and the door retreated into the ceiling.
It had actually worked.

Lance limped into the resulting corridor, which appeared the same as any other although it was nearly double the width.

Which was apparently the perfect size to fit an entire squadron of sentries.

*Dios mío.*

Lance froze like a deer in the headlights as he counted twelve all armed with blasters halt their patrol route and about-face to look at him.

There was a moment of silence by each party before the sentries all as one raised their blasters, the insides glowing a soft purple as they hummed to life.

Lance's only chance lied in the fact that they would not be trying to kill him... and that he had no qualms about headshots on robotic sentries.

He switched the blaster to his left hand once more, finger falling with already practice ease on the trigger, and raised it as he ran forward towards the pack. Sentries, he knew, stopped shooting once within a certain range.

He certainly wouldn't though.

Before they'd even discharged their guns he'd taken out four.

Eight to go.

They were firing now, shots sizzling through the air. Lance hissed as he felt one graze just above his hip and another one clipped his left shoulder. He couldn't control the yelp of pain that was dragged from him at the hit but he gritted his teeth and kept going.

Two more heads exploded and then Lance was in the mass of sentries, shimmying his way through their metal limbs and ducking low to avoid their arms as they turned, trying to track him with their blasters.

He squeezed out the other end not even a few ticks later, a few more bloody scratches to show for his time in the horde, but otherwise very, very much alive

He took out two more from behind – six left – and took off down another corridor while they sorted themselves out to commence the chase.

He tore down an offshoot hallway that led into another supposedly main one as it was secured by a coded door. Lance smeared his bloodied hand against the panel, no time for a full on print and he refused to let go of the gun, but the blood itself seemed to be enough and the door shot open again...

Where his current string of bad luck continued to show as he encountered not one, not two, but four Galra officers on the other side.

Lance fired his gun at the surprised group, two shots angled for the lead one's stomach – they struck dead center – and the next one for the sword-wielding one's legs.

The gun beeped instead.

Lance gave it a bare second glance.
Its indicator light blinked up at him.

Out of charge.

Out of quiznacking charge.

Of all the things–

He didn't have time to wait around though as the Galrans were shouting and charging at him now and he no longer had a viable weapon.

Running it was.

He pivoted on his heel and shot off down another hallway, feeling the heat of the Galrans' blasters around him, that had nothing on the hot tears threatening his vision.

So close. He was so close and then this had happened.

He couldn't let it end here.

It couldn't end here.

He refused to accept defeat.

He encountered another locked door and desperately swung his hand onto it, dead blaster thunking against the metal.

It didn't open.

Shots ricocheted around him and Lance grit his teeth as he felt sharp metal fragments pelt him as a blown out light fixture took one of the hits and heat and pain sear the very air.

He smeared his hand over it more, blood sinking into the pane and finally it opened. Lance dashed through and smashed the now useless gun down atop the matching panel on this side, a shower of sparks bursting from the console and the door slammed down behind him with a groan.

He'd heave a sigh of relief, except for the fact that he suddenly couldn't seem to catch his breath. He tried to take an inhale and a step forward and found himself instead tilting towards the ground as the world spun around him.

Both knees struck the ground and he painfully, barely, caught himself on his left hand, blaster skittering away.

Get up! he screamed at himself. Get up! Get up get up get up! The exit had to be just beyond. Get up!

But it was like watching someone else's body. He knew that the trembling blood-soaked hand splayed out in front of him was his, but he couldn't seem to move it to push himself back to standing. It was like every string holding him up had been cut and now he was a broken marionette without a puppeteer.

He managed a garbled, wet cough and felt something filling his throat.

Blood.

He spat weakly, chest seizing at the motion and felt more blood bubble up and coat his tongue.
Where was it coming from?

Another wracking gasp took over his body and he desperately tried to cough up more but it was filling his mouth and he couldn't find the strength to spit it out again.

He couldn't breathe.

He was drowning in his own blood.

His hand collapsed beneath him, sending his body crashing to the floor and blinding agony ripping through him, vision whitening out. He tried to cough as he felt blood going down his throat while at the same time trying to come up, but he couldn't manage.

Everything was starting to grow darker now, more muted.

He was dying.

His left hand twitched, fingers fading to blurred digits, but didn't move more than that.

He couldn't move any more.

He'd...

He'd failed.

He wasn't going to escape.

He was going to die.

But...

His eyes closed.

At least this way...

At least this way he knew his family was safe.

There could be no trade for the Black Lion now.

No way for him to betray them.

You couldn't interrogate a dead body after all.

But...

But he didn't want to die.

Not really.

There was the muted sound of footsteps now, approaching quickly, and Lance breathed in another lungful of blood.

He may want to live...

But he had to die.

There was no saving him anyhow. He could tell he didn't have much time left.
With the footsteps came voices, harsh and quick and *angry*.

He couldn't make out the words.

Even with his eyes closed he could sense everything going darker.

He tried to find his peace with it. It was all he could do.

It...

It was better this way.

His family was safe now.

He felt a hand alight on his shoulder, digging in, and a whisper breathed over him.

He couldn't really hear it though.

Everything was black now.

He sank into it, welcoming it.

And then there was a laugh.

It was cold and cruel and *loud* and it broke through the near comforting haze.

He could feel something there.

Someone was *in his head*.

*Haggar* was in his head.

"There is no escape for you, Paladin," Haggar whispered, voice echoing from from the very depths of his mind and filling Lance with a horror and dread he could not begin to describe. "Not from this ship. Not from death." She let out a soft laugh that rang with dark promise. "And especially not from me."

Chapter End Notes

And the attempted escape comes to a close. Darn those pesky blasters for running out of ammo when you need them most! Although even that may not have saved Lance since it sounds like he took quite a hit himself. Ruh roh. On a positive note, looks like Lance isn't going to die today! So, thanks Haggar. You're the best!

You guys are also all the best, with special best-ness awards going out to the readers who are also reviewers! Special thanks for the reviews go out to the lovely: Kamilla, ni_gou, WolfFire, Ms.+J, Bubblebucky, the_green_paladin, Katnined, EreAsha, Awkwardly_Social, AngelofGrace96, Immortalfey, SierraRhodes46, PuppetMaster55, killjoy2246, Maychorian, CreepyLittleLullaby, BubbleGummi, burple12345, and Narniac4aslan.
Also, I'm still new to the kudos thing, but Color has hit 500! :o That feels like a pretty significant amount, so thank you to all who gave it one!

As always, if you've enjoyed the chapter/story please do drop a comment below! Thanks a million everyone for the support and see y'all next week!
Where was he?

Lance turned around, taking in the landscape about him, frown pulling at his features.

Better yet...

How had he gotten here?

This place looked completely unfamiliar, but at the same time not. It felt... it felt safe.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt such a thing.

Water stretched out for miles and miles in front of him, practically glowing blue under the night sky speckled with stars. It lapped gently at his feet and he glanced down, his toes having burrowed themselves happily in the sand as the tide drew in and out.

He did not know this place, but it comforted him all the same.

It reminded him of the beaches back in Cuba before they'd moved to America; the air tasting of salt and if he listened closely he could almost hear the cries of birds over the soft lapping of the water against the sand and the singing of the stars.

Was... was this heaven?

He'd been shot, or so he thought. He'd been dying.

And then he'd heard Haggar.

He shuddered, wrapping his arms about himself and giving himself a start as there was no pain at the movement. A glance down revealed unblemished skin; no bandages, no bruises, no cuts or laser burns. His right hand too was whole once more and he twisted it without an inkling of pain.

He was still half-naked.

But this time he was clothed in swim trunks, a dark blue he could make out underneath the moonlight, and unlike with the Galra he was not cold. The faint breeze was warm and pleasant and the air was just the right touch of humid.

He turned again, wet sand squelching beneath his toes, and looked again for some clue as to where he was and how he got there.

All he continued to see was an empty beach.

"Hello?" he called out and started at the sound of his own voice. It wasn't that scratchy, weary one he was so accustomed to now, but whole and vibrant.

No one answered him.

Shrugging, Lance decided he may as well go look around. Keeping to the edge of the ocean, he
followed it as it gently curved along the shore, splashing his feet into the tide and laughing aloud as bubbles burst around his feet and the warm spray dashed against his chest. He'd just reached a small rocky cove when a sharp crack filled the air and he jumped nearly a foot in surprise as part of the rock structure gave way, sliding into the ocean with dull plops.

The water by his feet began to bubble and he hurriedly stepped backwards onto the beach, eyeing the ocean distrustfully as the bubbles grew larger and larger. There wasn't an active volcano underneath there… was there?

But as a hooded figure began to rise out of the ocean from the bubbles Lance changed his tune and decided an underwater volcano would be just fine. He backed up further now, fists raised although he knew such a thing couldn't stop her.

Haggar was fully emerged from the water now and she glanced at him, a smirk pulling up her pointed face and yellow eyes nearly glowing in the twilight. Lance moved to step back as she stepped toward the beach but found his feet frozen. Not frozen with fear though. Legit frozen. His mouth too, he discovered, was locked shut, just like in the throne room.

He felt panic shudder through him at the utter helplessness but pushed past it with the best glare he could manage.

Haggar took no notice.

Instead she was looking about the landscape and paying him absolutely no mind. Lance struggled to move, to do something, but his body was no longer responding to him and he could do nothing but watch.

After nearly one of the longest minutes of his life, Haggar finally turned to look at him. "This is quite the mindscape," she smiled, nothing kind about it. "I suppose it is fitting though for the Blue Paladin."

Mindscape? Lance rolled the word over. He'd never heard it.

"We are inside your mind," she explained, gesturing at the oceanic expanse behind her. Her smile turned into a smirk as Lance's eyes widened at the implication. His mind? They were inside his mind?

"She" was inside his mind?

He thought he'd heard her talking earlier in his head but this...?

This was insanity.

She chuckled. "Indeed I am. And there are no secrets here and no escaping from me here. This may be your mind, Paladin, but it is my playground."

Her playground?

No.

Absolutely not.

This was his mind, his ocean, his beach and he wanted her gone.

The waves about Haggar's ankles swelled and sent her stumbling.

Lance was just as surprised as her, moreso when he found himself taking a staggering step forward
as her spell released.

What...

What had he just done?

Haggar fixed him with a more calculated stare than her previous smirk and made to bring her hand in front of her.

He'd seen that move before. That was how she worked her magic.

"Get out," he bit out, throwing his own hand wide and the water responded in kind, a small wave hitting at Haggar from the side.

Lance stared at his hand.

Was he controlling the water?

_How?_

Haggar though had regained her balance and with it her smirk. "No," she said simply. She raised her hand again and before Lance could gesture for another wave there was a flash of purple and black lightning angling at him.

A wall of water erupted near his feet and intercepted it as Lance stumbled back, throwing his hands up in front of his face.

The wave fell away back into the foam of low tide, revealing Haggar still standing further out in the ocean and a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Are you not even curious as to why I am here?" she asked, sidestepping another wave he awkwardly gestured in her direction, not sure what he was doing or how but he was finally able to _fight_ and he was not going to waste it. "And do not lie, Paladin. I can feel your questions."

"Don't care," he said instead although yes, he did want to know. "I just want you gone."

She laughed again. "So hasty, Paladin. What if I were to tell you the only way to leave this place was with me, hm? Would you be in such a rush to push me away?"

Lance paused in trying to summon another wave.

He could leave?

Was... was he not dead?

"You are not dead," she replied, grin growing as he scowled at her.

She was reading his mind. He desperately tried to picture a shield, a giant towering wall of water, just like he did when the team mindmelded so they maintained their privacy. She wasn't going to get _anything_ from him.

"Impressive," she commented and he raised it even higher.

"You are not dead," she repeated, "although you gave it your best shot. You were indeed fatally wounded; a laser blast punctured your lung." She shook her head. "Humans are such fragile creatures. You are fortunate I arrived when I did or you would have succumbed to your injury."
Lance felt another shiver down his spine at her description.

A punctured lung?

That would explain why he had been choking on blood.

He... he had almost died.

He felt suddenly faint.

"That is how one ends up in a mindscape," Haggar continued. "When the physical body is failing the mind seeks refuge to escape that pain. It is not so simple as that though. The conditions, so to speak, must be right. It is actually quite the feat to wind up in one's mindscape; most would just fall into unconsciousness and then likely fade from this world. But not you." Her yellow gaze turned searching, tracking over his face. "You are much more than you seem on the surface, Paladin."

Lance didn't quite know how to respond to that. It... it almost sounded like a compliment.

He did not want such a thing from her.

Another shiver went down his spine.

"What do you want from me?" Lance demanded, voice stronger than he felt.

"I know you know the answer to that," she smiled.

Information.

On his team.

His family.

"I'll never betray them," he said.

Promised.

Never.

"I admire your conviction," she told him, waving her hand and summoning up a a ball of crackling black and purple energy. "Truly. But it is all in vain. None can resist me."

"Watch me," Lance snapped, clenching his hand into a fist.

A fist that was suddenly wrapped tight about his bayard.

His eyes widened. When had that gotten there?

Well. He grinned. No sense in letting it go to waste.

Lance lifted the bayard, the weight comforting, and braced it on his shoulder. "Now get out."

"I like that look," Haggar purred, not at all intimidated by the gun aimed at her. In fact, she looked excited and Lance tried not to recoil. "You look so much like my Shiro," she continued and Lance stilled.

What?
My Shiro?

There was no shoving back the shudder at how wrong that sounded.

"Come," Haggar called. "Let me see your inner strength so that I may crush it."

With more bravado than he felt, Lance forced his lips into a smirk. "Your funeral."

And Lance fired.

The shot flew true for Haggar's head — and her death would not be one he would regret, assuming he could even kill her here — but she blocked it with her glowing orb.

And the threw her own attack.

Lance somehow summoned a wall of water to absorb it and then fired again, the water parting to allow his shot through. Haggar dodged it but Lance wasn't done, sending the ocean wave after her.

She was bowled over and he let out a cheer.

It was a little too soon for victory though as she struggled back to her feet, robes dripping wet.

She did not attack.

Lance held his next shot, held back the wave from pummeling her again, even though he knew he should take it. Haggar would not offer him the same mercy.

And yet...

Yet he couldn't pull the trigger. Not when she was no longer fighting back.

The water swirled about her ankles still and he took comfort in that. If she tried anything he would stop her.

But...

But if she was telling the truth and the only way out of her was through her...

Although did he want to go back? Out there he didn't have a gun or this magical control over the ocean. His body was hurt there, weak, and she would do all she could to get him to spill secrets on his teammates.

But...

But he didn't want to die.

He did want to live.

He swallowed thickly. What to do?

Haggar answered for him, a low chuckle echoing across the open water despite the quiet volume. "I see I was correct in my assumption."

Lance tried to return the bravado and confidence he'd felt just a moment before, offering up a cheeky grin that if he tried hard enough almost reached his eyes "That I'm awesome?"

Haggar let out a laugh. "Come now. We both know that is not true."
What?

Lance shook his head, protest on his lips at her denial. "I—"

"I see you as you are, Paladin," she cut in. "You have strength, yes, but you have weakness too. More than you wish you had."

"You're wrong." His voice didn't waver. It didn't.

She was wrong.

Right?

"Am I?" Haggar waved a hand to the side. "Why are you here, Paladin?" She held up a hand as he opened his mouth. "In this mindscape? Because you nearly died. Why did you nearly die? Because of your failed escape attempt. Why were you even here to attempt such? Because you were captured. Why were you captured? Because you are weak."

"No," Lance shook his head. "I... I'm strong."

"No. You are not."

And Haggar's words hurt. There was a darkness to them that sent a choppiness to the waves, clouds racing across the sky. They dug in like shards of glass, piercing and pointed and he found himself frozen once more, unable to escape them.

"I am," he whispered, although he could barely hear it over the howl of the wind beginning to brew.

Images, memories, flooded his mind then and he was not sure if it was Haggar's doing or his own. They showed him pleading for water. Screaming as he was shocked and his bones were broken.

They hurt.

His bayard vanished.

Lance didn't even have a chance to miss it as new memories were swarming in front of his eyes.

Each one was a failure.

The simulator crashing again and again. Iverson telling him he was only there because Keith had washed out. The snickers behind his back as he received another dismal test score. The disappointment in Allura's eyes as he messed up another training simulation. The reprimand and exhaustion in Shiro's as he had to separate him and Keith yet again.

Failure.

Weak.

Getting stabbed aboard Blue, dropped and kicked and taunted.

Pathetic.

His breath caught as his wrist twisted on its own accord, bruises blossoming across the dark skin and the pain as fresh as if the commander had just broken it.
He screamed, the sound echoing about the open expanse, and Haggar laughed.

"You are weak, Paladin. You see it too."

Lance grit his teeth against the pain her words caused, his heart breaking and twisting.

She was...

She wasn't entirely wrong.

He was weak.

But.

He would protect his friends, his family.

Their faces flashed in his mind but this time not disappointed, angry versions, but smiles and laughter and happiness.

He would not let them come to harm.

"M-maybe I am," he stuttered out, feeling a sharp pain at his own admission, "but... but I'm strong enough to protect them."

And if the earlier words were darkness and pains his were light and healing. Immediately the vice wrapped about his heart lessened and the throbbing pain of his wrist vanished, replaced by a caress of warmth. The wind swept back to a gentle evening breeze and the clouds parted above to reveal only the star studded sky.

His bayard reappeared in his hands.

Yellow orbs widened and then narrowed at the declaration. Haggar was impressed, truly. His inner strength was unlike any she had ever seen; the cracks she had pressed into his very mind being filled in with warmth and love.

He would be more difficult to break than she had anticipated. But he would break. All things did before her.

She readied another attack in her hands, black lightning crackling.

The sound was swallowed up by the roar of the surf and Haggar's eyes widened as the ocean rose up before her.

It crashed down before she could so much as raise her hands.

On the beach Lance held one trembling hand outstretched as the tidal wave smoothed back to the rolling surf, Haggar nowhere to be seen.

Had he done it?

It seemed too easy.

The beach was quiet though save for the sounds of the water lapping at the shore and he released a heavy breath, legs giving way and sending him into the sand.

He'd done it.
He'd actually fought her off.

For now.

The thought sent a pang as real as the memories he'd seen through him.

Once he returned, somehow, to his body Haggar would be there. And she was no doubt going to be very, very very angry with what he'd done to her here. Somehow he was going to have to fight her off.

Again.

And again.

But he had done it once. He could do it again.

He was not weak like she said.

Well, not entirely.

She had been right. He did fail. A lot. Probably more than he succeeded.

He was the weakest link after all, the seventh wheel in Team Voltron.

He wondered how long he could last.

At what point would they tell him that the trade wasn't happening? A day? Two? A week? And then he what, held out for the rest of his life?

He knew how impossible that was. Torture without an end?

No one would make it through that.

There could be an end though. A definite out and one that protected his family.

He just... his hands clenched in the sand.

He...

He would do anything to protect them. Anything.

But...

Could he do that?

Could he take that final plunge all on his own?

If he was lucky he wouldn't have to. They'd go too far one time, cut just a little too deep.

Haggar couldn't always be there to save him, right?

He shuddered and shook his head as a cooler breeze picked up.

He shouldn't think about such things right now. Not until...

Not until that was the last option available. Although, he let out a low laugh that was anything but humorous, he didn't think they'd be so lax in their guard of him anymore. He'd bet it was cuffs or
some other restraint for him for the remainder of his time here.

His wrist already ached thinking about it.

He stood up abruptly, sand falling away.

Enough.

Enough of only thinking of the negatives, of the worst outcome. He couldn't say what the future held but right now?

Right now he was in his mindscape that apparently was the most beautiful beach he had ever seen and he should take advantage of it. He had no idea if he was ever going to make it back and if his end was soon coming, if torture and pain were going to become his new best friends, then he should enjoy this peace while it lasted.

Lance walked back to the ocean and let the tide tickle his feet. It was neither hot nor warm and was beckoning him to go for a swim.

So he did.

He crashed through the surf, a real smile pulling at his face at the ocean spray and the feeling of home. His feet squelched through sand until suddenly there was no more and he was off the bar and into open water.

Laughing with just the sheer joy of swimming again he dove in and out, gliding through the waves with all the grace of a dolphin, splashing water and dancing with the current.

When he'd had his fill he floated on his back with the water bobbing gently below him, staring up at the stars that contained Earth's constellations. He picked out the North Star and then the Big and Little Dippers and traced the made up constellations he and his siblings had created over the years. There was the giraffe on ice skates and over there the flying pig.

He wondered how they were all doing.

He forced himself to not think about them as he threatened to add his own salty tears into the ocean at the sharp pang of homesickness.

Good things, remember?

He'd just begun looking for his personal favorite made-up constellation – the diving mermaid – when a burst of pain shot through him and he gasped and flailed in the water. A cramp? In his chest? A second later it happened again and he groaned, treading with just his feet as both hands went to clutch his chest where the center of pain was emitting.

And although it was dark, he could not miss the telltale scent of blood and the way the water grew warm around him.

Another stab of agony had him slipping beneath the surface where the blood was even thicker and turning the crystalline blue into purple. A spasm shook him and his wrist screamed as it unnaturally twisted all on its own.

What was happening? Dios, what was happening?

Lance tried to breach the surface, but the blood was pushing him down, heavier than the water. He
clawed at it with his good hand, desperate now as despite his efforts he could not reach the surface.

He was going to drown.

The thought was beyond terrifying.

He flailed again, putting all of himself into one last push, reaching for the surface--

--and awoke with a sharp gasp, lungs burning and chest heaving and bright purple lights and hands digging into his shoulders and pain pain pain oh Dios duele duele duele, Dios, por favor hazlo parar, make it stop make it stop make it stop.

"Welcome back," came a low chuckle over his harsh breaths and moans.

Haggar.

A hand caressed the side of his face and that touch was more painful than any of the agony emanating from his chest and Lance tried to pull away.

The hand tightened painfully. "As I told you," came a murmur, "You will not escape me so easily."

Lance hated the whimper pulled from him and Haggar's subsequent laugh.

The hand patted his cheek and then withdrew.

"Commander, he is all yours," she said and Lance stiffened.

What?

His eyes flew open and he pushed past the searing light to make out the blurred forms of Haggar and...

And Theodore.

Oh no.

He moved to sit up, to do something, to go somewhere, but just like last time he'd awoken in the lab room his hands and feet were restrained although there was no bar across his throat. Pulling at his hands was a mistake as pain so intense his vision flared white as he jammed his broken wrist up against the manacle and he dropped his head back down with a weak groan and thump.

"I expect quite the show, Commander," Haggar said, amusement coloring her tone.

"The Kri Za Kri will give us both what we desire," came the returning rumble.

Kri Za Kri? Lance sounded out. He didn't like the sound of it; all harsh consonants that the Galrans seemed to love and anything they loved was most definitely something he knew he would not.

"Then I leave you to it."

A moment later a door hissed shut and Lance had a sickening feeling he was all alone in the room with the Galran commander. It was proven a moment later as sure enough Theodore was there, looming over him and fangs flashing in a smile that had Lance instinctively shrinking back and making the Galran's grin widen.

He said nothing though as he stepped up next to the table, a series of metal rings in his hands.
Manacles.

He grabbed Lance’s right wrist, squeezing it and drawing a sharp inhale as Lance tried not to scream, new dots dancing in vision, and before he knew it the manacle was tightly clasped there and a matching one on his left wrist, a length of chain connecting them.

The same was done to his ankles and Lance’s weak attempts to jerk his foot away did nothing except earn him a set of claws digging into the bottom of his foot right on top of the injuries made by the grate.

He whimpered again, unable to control it.

Haggar had apparently saved his life from the fatal lung puncture but everything else she had left as it was.

Figured.

His hands were then released from the table but before Lance could even think about trying to swing a punch (for all the good it would do) Theodore yanked on the chain lead extending from the wrist manacles and Lance screamed as he was pulled to sitting by his broken wrist, vision whiting out again.

The chain was affixed now to the end of the table between his splayed feet and he was forced to hunch over uncomfortably, chest aching. He twisted his head as Theodore moved to go behind him and there was sudden pain as claws descended into his hair, Theodore's apparent favorite pastime, and his head was dragged backwards, baring his neck and forcing Lance to look directly up into cruel yellow eyes.

A glint of metal in Theodore's other hand captured his attention and his eyes flicked to it; some sort of metal ring that instinctively he knew he did not want near him.

It lowered, brushing against his throat, and Lance jerked his head.

"Let go of me," it came out a rasp but at least belied any of the fear trying to claw its way free.

Theodore's answer was to backhand him with the object, Lance's head snapping to the side but going nowhere thanks to the grip in his hair.

Dazed and ears ringing Lance offered no further resistance as the the ring was opened and snapped about his neck, tightening so much that he gagged, hands unsuccessfully trying to pull free from where they were chained to claw at it.

Theodore laughed and released his head.

Lance attempted to take in a gulp of air around the device, and felt his throat constrict.

He couldn't breathe.

He listed sideways on the table, not even the pain as he dragged his full upper body weight against his broken wrist enough to break him from the closing in darkness.

A claw dug into the back of his neck then and the ring, collar he realized sickly, loosened the barest bit but it was enough for him to suck in a greedy breath and then another.

"Pathetic," he heard Theodore mutter over his gasps. "Humans are so weak."
Lance focused instead on breathing over trying to disagree.

A clawed hand tipped his chin up and Lance forced himself to narrow his eyes into the best glare he could muster even as his heart hammered in his chest and meet that predatory yellow gaze.

Don't show fear.

That was what the Galran wanted, Lance knew. This was a power trip, just like last time.

But unlike last time Lance wouldn't give into it.

He wasn't scared.

Absolutely not.

He was lying.

He was terrified.

But he couldn't show it. Couldn't let this Galran gain any more power.

And so he set his glare and clenched his jaw.

And Theodore...

Smiled.

It was not a nice smile.

The hand holding his chin up disappeared and Theodore moved to the side. Lance turned his head to follow him...

And found his vision blocked by a strip of cloth.

A blindfold.

Darkness.

Just like the vents.

Pitch black and small and tight and he couldn't breathe again, he couldn't do this again, not again not again not again.

No. No no no.

"N-no," and that weak voice was not his, couldn't be his. He wrenched his head to the side but Theodore grabbed him by his hair again and he was absolutely helpless to stop him as the blindfold was affixed, so tight and thick he could feel it cutting against his ears where it was tightened.

Everything went dark.

He swallowed thickly, pulse pounding, and trying not to give into the growing panic.

He wasn't in the vent. He wasn't in the pod. There was air. He could breathe. He was okay. He was okay. He was oka–

The chain jerked without warning between his hands and Lance choked out a gasp and then winced
at the cruel chuckle.

"I find your attempts at defiance irksome, Paladin." The chain jerked again, this time to the right and Lance's body moved without his permission in the twist. "Let me see that pathetic glare of yours now."

All went quiet then, the chain slack.

And Lance realized the silence and lack of touch was worse.

He had no idea where the Galran was.

*That* was scarier than anything.

*Where was he?*

There was the sudden harsh sound of metal on metal and a release of pressure on his ankles.

He was no longer restrained to the table.

There was another tug on his wrists and Lance barely had a moment to register the movement before he was being pulled the length of his table, his body dangling off into the unknown.

Theodore was going to drag him off the table.

He frantically tried to get his feet out in front of him and they slid over just as the rest of him did.

They hit the floor first.

Lance cried out at the pain as everything jolted at the hit and barely managed to get his feet under him, ankle cuffs and chains clinking, before Theodore was pulling forward on his bound hands again and Lance had no choice but to stumble in his direction as fire swam down his broken wrist.

He felt lost.

Disoriented.

It was *so* dark.

"Nothing to say now?" Theodore's voice came from up ahead. "Pathetic. And you call yourself a Paladin of Voltron."

Lance jerked to a stop without meaning to, wrist screaming at him for that mistake, but its pain muted by the words.

What?

What did he just say?

He could hear nearly the same words rumbled out in the same dark cadence wash over him then, followed by laughter.

Theodore's brother had said the same thing.

Pathetic.

The word echoed.
Lance swallowed thickly, feeling the collar digging into his flesh at the action.

He wasn't.

"I'm... I'm not," he whispered. His voice grew stronger. "I'm not."

Another laugh greeted him. "Tell yourself whatever brings you false comfort, Paladin. Your true colors will be revealed to even yourself at the Kri Za Kri."

Theodore started walking again and Lance was forced to follow, stomach churning.

They were wrong.

He was not pathetic.

But...

But what was this Kri Za Kri? What was it going to do?

Why did he feel so sick just repeating the phrase in his mind?

They came to another stop, but this one of the Galran's make.

"We are here," he said simply, although the dark glee lighting up his voice did not reassure Lance in any way.

"Welcome to your Kri Za Kri, Paladin," Theodore said. "Or, as you would say in your tongue, your blood for blood."

Blood for blood?

That...

That did not sound good.

In front of them a door must have opened as suddenly there were the sounds of hundreds of voices chanting "Kri Za Kri, Kri Za Kri" and the stamping of boots and staffs and Lance balked at the tidal wave of noise against his dark world.

He didn't want to go in there.

There was a churning in his gut, a sick feeling of premonition.

If he went in there...

Something bad was going to happen.

Something he could not even begin to imagine.

Why was he so scared?

Theodore chuckled lowly. "It is time for your judgment, Paladin." He pulled forward on the chains and despite Lance's best efforts he was dragged forward into the maelstrom, into whatever horrible future he knew awaited. "And I daresay I am going to enjoy it very much."
Fun Fact: Kri Za Kri is Croatian for 'blood for blood.' Try chanting it outside your sibling's door in the wee hours and increasing in volume. It's lots of fun.

So quite a bit of things happening this chapter. I created the idea of a "mindscape" as a way to allow Lance to regain some semblance of himself and mentally recover. I sort of based it off the idea of (reading too much Yugioh fanfiction xD) of the "soul rooms" of the spirits. The word "mindscape" was chosen from the words "landscape" being that it represents a location and "escape to the mind" as that is what it essentially is. And in here we got to see Lance conquer some personal demons (for the time being, at least) and fight of Haggar. Mwahaha. You are strong, sweetie.

Next chapters involving the Kri Za Kri return us to all of our whump. As Scar would say, be prepared! And for those asking, we will be checking in with our other Paladins soon. I haven't forgotten about them, never fear!

Thanks again to the amazing lovely reviewers. Seriously, I can't thank you all enough. Shout outs go to: Laurencat10, GummyWorm, Elianlovescats, nocturnalspork, spl, bubblebucky, margokuma, Puppetmaster55, WolfFire, ImmortalFey, AngelofGrace96, Katnined, Amiahat, the_green_paladin, killjoy2246, EreAsha, BubbleGumi, heyheroics, Maychorian, and burple12345!

And since I'm apparently on a Disney quote kick, let's go with Cruella. Just like her I worship fur (reviews), I live for fur (reviews) because is there any woman (author) in this world who doesn't? So if you've got a tick to spare and you've been enjoying the story/chapter, please do drop a comment below. Thanks everyone!
"I believe we are finished," Allura smiled, eyes tracing over the final plans they had drafted. "Paladins?"

"Looks good to me, Princess," Shiro said, Keith giving an exhausted nod at his side. "I don't think there's anything more we can cover."

They had been working nearly non-stop on the plans for Lance's rescue and trying to iron out every possible obstacle they may encounter and an appropriate solution.

There were so many though.

Shiro, who normally thrived under these type of tactical plans, felt even his own brain starting to liquefy. He supposed though eight hours of pouring over maps and scenarios and battle formations with only a forced few hours breaking it up for sleep they all needed could do that.

And, as much as he wanted to push through, he knew he had to lead by example. Pidge had not wanted to leave her project, bags so deep under her eyes she appeared to have black eyes, and if he refused to stop his own preparations he couldn't ask the same of her.

And she needed sleep. When he'd come down to check in with her, eyes and back both crying out for a reprieve, and found her attempting to weld a tea cup to the mount for something involving a Balmeran crystal he knew it was time. Hunk had already been passed out next to her and he had carefully had to go about prying the very sharp, very dangerous looking screwdriver item out of the boy's hand that had been angling for his throat as he dozed.

They were all exhausted. They had been tired before the transmission, sick with worry at the unknown, and unable to sleep.

But now with what they did know, what they'd seen?

Sleep was even harder to come by.

It was hard to justify sleeping and eating and taking the time for a quick shower when they knew what pain Lance was undergoing, how scared he must be, and those things were indulgences that if Lance wasn't having they didn't need either.

Well, not on Shiro's watch.

He understood the frustration but they were going to do Lance no favors if they went into this rescue sleep deprived and mentally exhausted. They were going to need their heads and wits about them and could not afford to falter because of a refusal to rest.

But still...

He understood.

It had been over a day since they had received the transmission and while they were making excellent timing it still wasn't enough, not to them, because that meant it had been over three days
since Lance was missing and would be over four by the time they reached him. It might not seem like a lot but Shiro knew anything could happen in a day, let alone an hour. He tried not to think of all the things that could be happening as his head ached every time and he could not afford to get lost in memories.

Pidge, Hunk and Coran had managed to successfully divert the power to the thrusters late last evening, far exceeding Pidge's plan of four varga and the girl had been near tears at the delay and why wouldn't it fucking work? and Shiro hadn't even had the heart to correct her language, merely pulling her into a tight hug and offering up his strength to move some of the conductors she had been struggling with.

The boost had helped, turning their at that point still forty-four varga journey into thirty-two and Allura had stayed awake most of the night to pilot the castle so they did not lose any time. She had been forced to rest that morning though when Shiro and Coran had come to the bridge and found her, eyes staring unblinkingly and a glassy sheen to them.

Alteans did not need as much sleep as humans, Coran told Shiro, a typical rest cycle being about three varga, but they did still need to rest. He had gently steered Allura away to her room and Coran had taken over for the next several hours, although his loss down in the engineering segment had delayed that progress.

They just couldn't win. Shiro did what he could in that interim, lifting things for Pidge and fetching items for Hunk, but he could feel their mounting frustration. He knew Keith felt the same and had been almost desperate to do whatever Hunk or Pidge needed for something to do. Shiro had tried to encourage him to sleep instead but the look he'd gotten at the suggestion had made him put his hands up in surrender.

Shiro wished he could sleep too.

He'd tried. He'd maybe gotten a couple hours between the tossing and turning before he'd given up and gone to the kitchen to make a pot of tea.

One blown up kettle later he'd had to admit defeat and that had been when he'd found Allura on the bridge from her overnight vigil.

And while the sight of Allura looking so exhausted and pained should not be a comfort, Shiro found it as such. He knew the princess cared about them all, but her focus had always primarily been on fighting the Galra and how the Paladins of Voltron could improve in that ability to bring peace to the universe. He understood; as the Altean princess she had the duty to see Zarkon dethroned and as such could not afford personal preferences or desires. He admired her commitment and inner strength she had found in this cause, but he would admit he admired this version of her even more.

This version of Allura was real. She was not someone asking after Lance and Keith's bickering with the overall motive that it affected the team's ability to form Voltron. No. This Allura would ask because she cared, because she wanted her team to be happy. She had fought previously for justice, for peace, and the deepest she had allowed herself to go was the flickering feelings of revenge for what the Galra had done to Altea.

But now?

She had found something more personal to bring to the fight.

Love.
Maybe not quite that deep, Shiro amended. But the feeling was there. The concern, the care.

The realization that they were not faceless soldiers.

They were still soldiers though and they were more than willing to fight.

Shiro hoped it didn't come to that. He hoped the infiltration rescue mission went off as easily as they imagined and Lance was back with them in... twenty-four hours now.

It was still over a day away.

It was too long.

And yet there was nothing more they could do.

Their plans were ready, looked at from every angle.

Shiro and Pidge would take the Green Lion, which once Pidge finished finagling with the schematics and crystals should have a full varga of cloaking, and be more than enough to get them in and out before the Galra were even aware. Keith had loudly protested the first part.

He was their second best fighter, he'd argued. He should be going on the main rescue mission too.

But Shiro had been adamant and Allura had backed him up. The more Paladins that went the greater their chances of being discovered. Shiro had the strength to carry Lance – they had quietly, grimly agreed that it was unlikely he was going to be able to walk and even so not quick enough – and his Galran prosthetic was required to get them access into the base.

Pidge was both Green's pilot and their hacker and she was intrinsic to their plan of accessing the cameras and floor plans. The goal was not to engage in any fighting but to get in, get out with none the wiser. Therefore, another Paladin was not needed in the rescue operation.

They did need his skills though for the contingency plan.

Shiro knew it was hardly what Keith wanted but the selfish part of him was glad Keith wasn't going to actively be a part of the rescue mission. It's not that he wasn't sick with worry for Pidge's safety in all of this and would rather keep her out of this entirely if he could, but Keith...

He couldn't bear to see Keith hurt.

Couldn't bear to hurt him again.

They hadn't talked, not really, about that missing year. Shiro didn't remember much of his but Keith had been purposefully mum about what had happened on Earth. The only thing Shiro had really gleaned was Keith had been kicked out of the Garrison and even thinking about it now made his blood boil. After everything Keith had gone through, after the administration knew what his situation had been, how the Garrison had been his home since he was barely fifteen they kicked him out after he'd already lost not just Shiro but Dr. Holt and Matt too?

Shiro would never forgive them.

Keith had been hurt. Maybe not physically, not in the way Shiro knew his foster families had done, but he had been hurt. He'd retreated back into that harsher countenance, the one that pushed people away before they could do it to him.

Shiro had done that. And he had no idea how he was ever going to fix it. Keith wouldn't talk to him,
not the way he used to. It had been why when Keith had accepted his hug in the cockpit, had returned it, hot tears dampening his shirt Shiro had been so relieved. Keith was still there, beneath the more rigid exterior, the front he put up to protect himself.

He may not have been able to protect Keith; be it from the Garrison or the other students or even fro himself, during that year he was a slave to the Galra but he could certainly do so now.

And with this plan Keith was as safe as one could be while trying to mount a rescue mission against the most deadly, evil force that existed in the universe.

Shiro admitted his perspective may be a bit skewed at this point.

The goal was for the others to not engage at all. Keith and Hunk would proactively be in their Lions and maintain a perimeter around the castle and were only there as backup should the Green Lion return with Galra fighters on her tail. The Black Lion was under no circumstance allowed out of her hangar and Blue would remain in hers as well.

All communications from the castle would be cloaked within a twenty-five pylon radius, which was to ensure that the Galra could not pick up any chatter. It did pose an increased risk to Shiro and Pidge as they were going to be cut off from any contact at that point, but it was the better alternative than the Galra listening in and potentially tracking the cloaked Lion.

The range was going to be close in regards to the Green Lion's cloaking, but Shiro was confident they could make it to the Galra base coordinates within twenty dobashes (in a space that would take the slower moving castle, even with the thrusters, almost a varga), retrieve Lance, and be out before the cloaking expired. If they weren't going to make it though that would be when the Red and Yellow Lions would most likely be utilized if there was indeed a large Galra perimeter that spotted the Green Lion as she became visible.

They would go radio silent in regards to the exchange and Allura had picked out a location next to a planet a whole two quadrants over that would be feasible to anchor themselves in the shadow of to further block their signal while they recouped. The closest call would be if Galran fighters did follow them as they would be forced to move slowly still through the Hodgkin quadrant's massive asteroid field until they got to the second nebula point where Allura could wormhole them again.

The castle's shields were currently compromised as much of the power was being diverted to the thrusters but Coran had assured it could still take a few hits and especially ones from Galra fighter ships. Their biggest worry would be one of the ion cannons but those would be moving just as slowly if not slower than the Castle of Lions and Allura said she felt confident in her piloting abilities of the castle to get them out of range.

All that was left to do now on their end was wait.

Another twenty-four hours.

Pidge and Hunk were still busy, working on cloaking technology for Pidge and Shiro to wear to aid them in their infiltration. Just because they would have access to the camera system didn't mean they still should not be cautious and stealth was a better alternative than fighting in Shiro's book. There was some complication though with the crystal reacting to the Altean armor and a whole bunch of technical jargon Shiro had no hope of following as Pidge went off on a tangent and he'd left her and Hunk to them.

Coran had been assisting on that front but had come up to the bridge bearing bowls of food goo and some sort of produce that vaguely tasted like carrots with an insistence they all eat and take a small
break and then joined them afterwards for a bit of planning and input.

"So what, we just wait now?" Keith asked as Allura shrunk down the diagrams on the screen until they were needed again and moved back to the console to check their course; which for the last hour had been flying on auto pilot for the most part until an alert signaled Allura she needed to veer off course to avoid debris. Shiro could hear the impatience in Keith's tone, but more than that he could hear the undertone of worry.

Keith, Shiro knew, too understood how even a single minute had the ability to alter someone's life forever, and they were all just slipping by.

"I know it's frustrating," Shiro placed a gentle hand on the smaller shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "We're doing all we can though."

Keith gave a short nod. He knew that. He did.

He just felt so useless.

And, he would admit, sick with guilt.

He hadn't been very nice to Lance since they been thrown into space. Lance was just so... so loud. And obnoxious. And when he goofed off instead of paying attention, instead of taking things seriously, it made him mad for reasons Keith still couldn't fully identify.

It was just...

The Galra had taken Shiro away and they had hurt him and they needed to be stopped at all costs so they could never hurt Shiro again and Keith was determined to see it happen, sharing Allura's hate for them. He took his mission as a Paladin of Voltron to heart and he would never, never, let Shiro come to harm again. He trained so he would be stronger, faster, better to make sure he could protect Shiro, and in doing that protect the universe because Shiro wanted to do that and therefore Keith wanted to as well.

And then there was Lance; playing hopscotch in meteor fields and holding races with the mice and flirting (badly) with Allura and always always always just talking. He never shut up and especially after having lived on his own in the desert for almost a year the constant yammering was even more trying on Keith. He knew he wasn't a very social creature; he'd never really gotten along with those his age and now he was thrust into a castle with three of them and while Pidge was a more solitary person by nature and Hunk understood personal space, Lance was... Lance was just everywhere all the time.

But Keith didn't dislike him. He did trust Lance (in most cases) to buckle down and be serious when it was needed. He didn't really call Lance a friend – although he called no one that except Shiro and Shiro was beyond that – but he did call him a teammate.

And Keith had been a real jerk of one lately. He'd just been tense, feeling that something was brewing in this strange wave of quiet activity from the Galra, and he'd been even more snappish and less willing to deal with Lance's over the top behavior.

He never imagined that it would all culminate in this. That Lance would be the one at the center of this storm.

And if things went... went...

Keith didn't even want to think it.
But if it did. If this was how it ended...

Would Lance die thinking Keith hated him? He certainly hadn't shown that he liked him very much. And all of his comments over the past couple days made him flush with shame. He had not been acting like the leader Shiro wanted him to be, let alone a teammate. He had been acting as a bully.

The fact sent his stomach curdling. After... after *everything* how was it that that was what he had turned in to? He had never meant to. He just... He didn't even know how it had gotten to that.

The guilt made him sick and he knew from Lance's end it was no doubt even worse. *He* had done that. He had hurt Lance.

He had to fix this.

But he couldn't do anything until they rescued Lance and the recue wasn't for another day and he *could not take the waiting any more*.

"Princess," Coran's voice was sharp and Keith jerked his head up from where he'd gotten caught up in his brooding, angling in on the advisor standing at the communications console. "We are being hailed."

"A distress signal?"

"Negative." Coran's throat bobbed. "It is a live transmission. The... the receiving log is coded Galra."

"Galra?" Shiro repeated in the sudden oppressive silence.

Nothing good could be coming from that transmission.

"Keith," Shiro's voice was sharper. "Wait outside."

Keith stiffened. "What? No, Shiro–"

"Outside, Keith." Shiro's voice softened as he met Keith's eyes. "Please. I don't... I don't want you to see this."

Keith's protest died on his lips at the quiet plea.

Instead he gave a jerking nod of his head. "Okay. But Shiro..."

"I'll be okay," Shiro reassured, although he was becoming pale and there was a tremble to his hands. "Please. I'll find you after."

Keith gave one more nod and then left the bridge, closing the door behind him. He kept his hands fisted in the handles and rested his forehead against the cool metal.

He could already hear Lance's scream. Shiro's sharp, terrified breaths as something too close to his own horror he refused to speak of was played out in front of him.

Keith thought he might be sick.

He pressed one hand to his mouth, praying he wasn't about to actually puke up the food goo he could taste in the back of his throat.

"Uh, Keith? Everything all right, man?"
Keith practically leaped away from the door, not even having heard them approach although Hunk was generally anything but quiet.

He wondered how long he had been standing there.

"I'm fine," he muttered.

"Because people who are fine are found clutching door handles like their life depends on it," Pidge deadpanned. Her eyes narrowed. "What gives?"

"Why are you here?" Keith asked instead, delaying the inevitable for just another moment. Another moment before they found themselves with that sick, unknowing worry that had taken up residence in his stomach.

"We came up to run a mapping plan by Coran since he wasn't back yet," Hunk answered and Pidge sent him a hot glare that had the larger boy finishing with, voice growing higher, "but apparently I wasn't supposed to answer that question..."

"What's going on, Keith?" Pidge demanded, hands white-knuckled on her laptop.

"Um..."

"Get out of my way," she all but snarled, marching forward towards the doors.

Keith plastered himself across them.

"Get the fuck out of my way, Keith."

"There's a transmission," he blurted out.

Pidge drew up short while Hunk parroted the word back, voice still high.

"The Galra," Keith clarified quietly, unable to meet their eyes. "Shiro... Shiro ordered me out. He didn't want me to see it."

Pidge pressed her lips together...

And then made an abrupt about-face, laptop clutched possessively to her chest.

Keith had a very bad feeling.

"Pidge, hey, where are you going?" Hunk called after her. He recognized that look in her eyes, that determination that had landed them all up in space to begin with.

She paused, shoulders curled in.

"I need to know," she said quietly. Her voice hardened. "Don't try to stop me."

Because she was not a scared child, she was the Green Paladin. And she was done with being afraid of the truth.

"Pidge," Hunk whispered. "Don't... don't do this."

She looked at him then, eyes sad. "I have to Hunk. I can't... I can't not know. I hear his screams and I just..." she shook her head.
"I'll come with you," Keith said, voice steadier than he felt, and Pidge looked at him, surprised. Beneath it though he could see her relief. "You... you shouldn't watch that alone."

"Guys," Hunk pleaded. "Please." He didn't want to see Lance like that. He'd seen enough of his best friend, his brother, being tortured to last him the rest of his life. And he knew, without a doubt, that this transmission could only be worse.

"I'm sorry, Hunk," Pidge said quietly. "But I have to."

Even as she said it though she looked so small, her eyes too bright.

She was scared.

And she was still going to do it. She was going to be there for Lance in whatever capacity she could.

Hunk... he could do the same.

Hunk swallowed thickly. "I'll come too."

Keith sent him a surprised glance. "You sure?"

"Y-yeah."

They turned then, heading for the lounge.

They all hoped they didn't live to regret this.

xxx

Back on the bridge, Allura met the eyes of both Shiro and Coran, lingering on the Black Paladin's pale countenance.

He did not need to see this either.

She had not even opened her mouth before he cut her off. "I'm staying, Princess."

"I as well," Coran said quietly, placing a hand on her shoulder. Allura nodded, took a deep breath and then moved a slender hand towards the console to accept the transmission.

Haggar filled the screen a moment later.

Next to her she could feel Shiro stiffen, the barest inhale of a sharp breath.

Haggar's yellow eyes crossed all three of them before she settled her gaze back on Shiro, a cruel smile tugging up her lips. "I would offer greetings to the Paladins of Voltron, but I see there is only one present. Where is the rest of your team, my Shiro?"

"Where is the Blue Paladin?" Allura interjected, her hand going out to latch about Shiro's flesh one beneath the console screen and she barely hid the wince as the human grasped it with more strength than she had been expecting. "Speak, witch."

Haggar chuckled, her attention shifting. "Greetings to you, Princess."

"Where is he?"

"For a supposed diplomatic race you do not possess much patience, Princess," Haggar sneered.
"We are making haste to the coordinates provided," Allura said, fighting to keep her voice as even as possible. "What is the purpose of this transmission?"

Haggar smiled. "I see you received my message then. Entertaining, was it not? Did you enjoy his screams as much as I?"

Allura raised her chin, the same as Lance had done, and did not respond to the taunt.

Shiro's admiration of Allura grew at the gesture. He felt like he was going to be violently sick if he opened his mouth, as even across the screen Haggar was too close. His insides coiled tightly as her greeting replayed in his head.

*My Shiro my Shiro my Shiro.*

His head ached.

Haggar let out a put upon sigh. "I see we do not have the same tastes. Pity. It is truly delightful."

Allura said nothing.

"I am here out of a simple kindness to keep you updated as to the health of your Blue Paladin," Haggar continued. "I thought you might wish to know he attempted to escape today."

Breaths caught around the room.

Lance had tried to escape?

On his own?

Pride burned fierce in Allura but it was quashed immediately by the other detail.

Attempt.

It meant he had not been successful.

"It was a rather good attempt," Haggar said, "but there is no easy escape from the Galra Empire. And he will now learn firsthand that there are consequences to such actions."

"What is it you are saying, witch?" Allura bit out, fingers gouging into the console that already had a series of dents from the previous transmission.

"The Galrans have decided to invoke Kri Za Kri," Haggar continued and Allura raised an eyebrow at the strange term. "I'm sure your advisor can explain it to you, Princess, since you seem unfamiliar with it." Allura risked a quick glance at Coran, who had gone as pale as Shiro.

Allura had a very, very bad feeling.

"Why?" Coran asked quietly, meeting the cruel yellow gaze head on. "Why tell us this?"

"I am not merely telling you, Altean," Haggar smiled. "I shall allow you to watch."

Coran sucked in a harsh breath.

"It is not every day an outsider has access to a sacred Galran judgment," Haggar continued. "Watch closely and perhaps you will learn something too."
"You are a monster," Coran snarled and Shiro started at the sheer hate in Coran's voice.

Haggar chuckled. "Perhaps. But it is the Galra who are the real monsters here."

"Why?" Coran asked again. "Why show us this?"

Haggar shrugged although the gesture was not casual. "An incentive, I suppose. A reminder to you all that should you fail to turn over the Black Lion this is only a taste of the suffering your Paladin will endure before he dies. But," she smiled cruelly, "I have ways of making sure he never dies. He will live out the rest of his existence in terrible agony as I tear apart his mind and revel in his suffering and then do it again and again. I told you, his screams are delightful. I must admit, my Shiro, I think I even prefer them to your own."

Shiro could not help his recoil then and Allura slammed her free hand down on the console with a bellow of, "Enough! Cease your prattle, witch."

"Careful, Princess," Haggar warned. "And here I was about to offer you a chance to speak with the Blue Paladin."

"...what?" Shiro whispered, mouth moving before he could take back the pathetic sounding noise.

"Ah, you do still speak, I was growing concerned," Haggar smiled. "I had thought it was your arm I had taken, not your tongue."

"Explain, witch," Allura bit out.

"Ask nicely."

Allura gritted her teeth, jaw clenching.

Beg?

Never.

"Please," Coran spat out the word like it was poison and Haggar tutted.

"That is not nicely, Altean. I will give you one more chance." She turned her gaze to Shiro's. "I wish to hear you say it, my Shiro. Ask me nicely now."

Shiro's tongue felt thick, his throat dry.

"Shiro..." Allura whispered, and it was his name from her lips, dripping with concern and unmasked horror, that gave him the push he needed.

For Lance.

"Please," he swallowed around the word, "what do you mean? Can we speak to Lance?"

"Was that so hard?" Haggar practically preened. "And to your question, yes. Should you watch the transmission through and if your Paladin remains conscious I shall arrange for him to speak with you." She held up a single finger. "One dobash. No interference from me. I am sure he would love to hear from you."

"Deal," Shiro snapped, not giving himself a chance to regret it.

If they could talk to Lance... let him know they were coming, that they would be their soon...
It could be the push Lance needed to continue to hold on.

Haggar smiled before her attention was turned to the side. She looked back at the camera. "The Kri Za Kri is about to begin. I do hope you enjoy the show." Her hand reached out, tracing the edge of frame. "I shall see you soon then, my Shiro."

The view changed then to a different camera, overlooking hordes of Galrans, all chanting the phrase "Kri Za Kri" at the top of their lungs and staring at a door. Coran reached over and muted the audio, silence plunging over the bridge.

His hand was shaking.

"Coran?" Allura placed her hand now on the older Altean's shoulder. "What is a Kri Za Kri?"

Coran looked up to them. He looked like he'd aged several decades in the span of a few minutes.

"Kri Za Kri," he said quietly, "is the Galran tradition of judgment. It translates to 'blood for blood' and is used as a way of meteting justice to the determined guilty party."


"Shiro, lad," Coran shook his head and Shiro started again at the sound of his name rather than his height moniker. "It is literal for the Galrans. Whatever injuries the Galrans sustained during Lance's attempted escape, of which I imagine must have been a number if Kri Za Kri has been called... they will subject him to the same."

"No," Allura breathed, hand going to her mouth. "No. That is... That is... barbaric."

Behind them on the video the door swung open into the audience hall, still playing silently.

"We can watch it silently," Coran said quietly as a Galran, large even by their standards, appeared in the doorway. The camera zoomed in, capturing the full sharp glint of fangs and hate-filled yellow eyes beneath a burn scar.

"No," Allura shook her head. "No. We will... We will bear this the same as Lance."

It was all she could offer up; her own suffering at the sight of his pain.

"Shiro?" Coran asked and Shiro gave a tight nod. He agreed.

Overwhelming chanting filled the bridge once more and Shiro clutched Allura's hand, finding reassurance as she squeezed back just as tight.

The Galran was entering the room now, a swagger to his step, and a length of chain clutched in his large hands, parading himself down the aisle lined with the screaming soldiers.

Shiro's stomach clenched. He knew what that chain must connect to.

His fears were proven as a violent yank on it dragged Lance into view, stumbling through the doorway.

Blindfolded.

Shiro's breath caught.
Like a lamb being led to the slaughter.

The screaming grew somehow louder and Lance visibly flinched, trying to pull back, but was dragged forward with a cry that was swallowed up by the shouting.

He looked so scared.

So young.

He was clearly still injured, moreso than the last time they had seen him. There were no bandages across his bare chest but there were plenty of wounds; cuts and bruises and drips of dried blood on his shoulders. His feet were freely bleeding, leaving sick, red smears in Lance's wake as he was pulled along the path, manacles wrapped tight about his wrists and... Shiro's stomach dropped. Lance's right wrist was mangled, a mass of black and blue flesh that was only being abused further with every forced step and every bit of resistance only seemed to excite the Galrans further. None looked to be touching him but Lance was recoiling regardless, shying away from one side to the other, no doubt confused by the sound and the lack of sight.

Shiro saw red.

How dare they.

Lance was at the end of the path now and approaching a short staircase that led to a platform above the crowd. The Galran that had been yanking on Lance's chains got behind the boy and shoved him up the small flight, Lance nearly falling over but somehow keeping his balance.

It was all for naught as once he was off the last step the Galran reached out a leg and kicked Lance at the back of his knee.

He went down, a strangled scream echoing above even the chanting as his weight was caught on his hands.

His very, very broken right hand.

The Galran reached down, claws digging into Lance's head, and bodily dragged him back to his knees, holding him there and looking across the platform where a robed Galran was stepping forward and the yelling was starting to grow quieter.

The Kri Za Kri had begun.

xxx

Lance couldn't breathe.

His chest was seizing painfully and his throat was constricting, made worse by the metal ring that even upon being loosened was so tight and he could feel it digging into his neck with every panicked inhale.

There was no denying it at this point.

He was terrified.

He'd been dragged through what he was guessing was a giant crowd of Galrans, all chanting and yelling and so loud and he couldn't even raise his hands to try and cover his ears, to try and hide away from the bloodthirsty horde that could see him but he could not see them.
It was letting his imagination run absolutely rampant and he hated how he had flinched as the shouting rose in pitch, how he felt a ghost of movement and tried to get away but went nowhere thanks to the lead dragging him forward and his wrist crying out all the while as broken bones were ground against one another and his feet aching and stinging and he swore they were bleeding.

Stopping had been a relief, up until he'd been shoved forward and landed his full weight on his broken wrist. He had been unable to do anything as Theodore's claws had descended into his hair and yanked him up, what little air he'd managed to hold onto stolen by that last scream and even with the darkness of the blindfold everything seemed to be going hazy.

Another set of claws dug into the back of his head and then there was light and Lance moaned at the sudden brightness, searing purple as always, but the relief outweighed the pain and he forced his eyes to remain open, blinking away the dark spots wavering on the edges of his vision.

He was in some type of audience hall, not the throne room though, and atop some sort of platform. There was a Galran just as large as Theodore standing a few feet in front of him, holding a rather wicked looking sword and dressed in some type of robed tunic. Theodore had said this was a judgment, right? That must be the judge.

Lance already had a sick feeling he'd been found guilty of whatever crime they were bestowing on him. There wasn't going to be a trial.

It was just a sentencing.

"Quiet!" bellowed the robed figure and immediately all sound ceased.

Lance's ears were left ringing in the silence and only the very dull rattle of his chains as his arms trembled in front of him and clanked sounded in the room.

"Our esteemed Emperor Zarkon sends his regrets that he is unable to attend today's Kri Za Kri, but has sent his hope that today justice bleeds red," the robed Galran continued.

Loud cheering greeted the announcement, thundering so loud Lance felt the very air shaking. It had nothing on the new shudder making its way down his spine.

"Emperor Zarkon has made myself, Modar, Commander of the First Battalion, judge in his place," the Galran finished. "I now officially invoke the Kri Za Kri. Are there any who oppose the sentencing of the Blue Paladin of Voltron who harmed many of our soldiers in his failed escape attempt?"

Silence.

"Anyone?" Modar asked, fangs glinting, clearly not expecting anyone to speak.

Well.

Lance did like to prove people wrong.

He tentatively brought up his left hand, chains noticeably clinking now. "Um," his voice came out a low rasp and he coughed, trying to clear it. "I'd like to oppose." He tried to muster up his best smile, tilting his head ever so in a way that normally got him out of trouble with his parents, the action yanking his hair more as he dragged it against Theodore's claws. He continued to smile. "If that's all right."
Lance didn't really expect it to work.

But he really didn't expect the sudden, blinding pain as his neck lit up with white fire.

He screamed, hands flinging themselves instinctively up to his throat and singing and shocking them on the metal collar.

It didn't stop.

He was only vaguely aware of the hand releasing from his hair as he crashed to the floor, shaking and shuddering and crying and he couldn't breathe he couldn't breathe he couldn't breathe.

Just when he was sure he was about to pass out, vision going in and out, it stopped.

He lay there, panting and gasping and hearing the Galrans laugh.

He hung his head and tried to focus on breathing again even as every harsh inhale sent pain shuddering down his throat.

It was a shock collar.

Theodore had put a quizznacking shock collar on him. Like... like some pet.

Hot tears burned his eyes as the Galrans continued to laugh and jeer.

"The charged is not permitted to speak," Modar's voice sounded above the others and they quieted down. "Commander Theodek?"

Theodore, or apparently Theodek, Lance should have known it had something with with a "k", reached down and hauled Lance up once more by his hair. Lance had no strength to support his own body and hung there, limbs still tingling.

"With no opposition I move onto the charges," Modar spoke. "The Blue Paladin is hereby charged with the following crimes: One count of battery, six counts of deadly assault with a weapon, five counts of assault with a weapon, and one count of theft of a weapon."

Lance blinked. That... that seemed like a lot of charges.

Had he really done all that?

"The Blue Paladin has been found guilty of all charges," Modar concluded. His grin sharpened. "Let the Kri Za Kri officially commence."

As if waiting for that cue, all of the Galrans began to once more chant "Kri Za Kri! Kri Za Kri!" and Lance found himself being pulled back to his feet. He swayed, only Theodek's solid grip on his hair keeping him upright.

His vision was darkening around the edges again and Lance closed his eyes, welcoming it.

A sharp jab into the side of his neck, just above where the ring felt like it had burned into him, had him letting out a sharp gasp, which turned into a plummeting stomach as he felt a burst of familiar ice cold fire seeping into his veins.

It was the drug they'd used before. The one that returned him to some modicum of consciousness.

Lance swallowed back his sob.
He still had no idea what the punishment for his guilty charges was but he knew it would involve blood.

A lot of blood.

And pain.

And there would be no escaping it. Not until they were finished.

And Haggar...

She would be watching, he could feel it.

He...

He had to stay strong.

Somehow.

He could not break here.

And so as Theodek pulled on the chain between his hands again, he resisted, digging bloodied feet into the ground, toes curling, for all the good it would do.

It did no good.

Theodek uprooted him and he was dragged to the very center of the dais where two more Galrans were standing. They latched onto his shoulders, spinning him around to face the audience hall.

Lance's eyes widened.

There were hundreds of Galrans staring back at him, glee and hate and excitement filling every purple face.

Oh Dios.

"The charge of theft of a weapon will be carried out by Commander Theodek of the eighty-first battalion," Modar instructed. "And the other charges to follow in the given order. Commander?"

Theodek nodded his head to the side and a third Galran soldier stepped forward, holding a tray that contained what looked like black dinner plates.

"The penalty for theft is the loss of limb that did the thieving," Theodek rumbled.

Lance paled.

What?

"In the Blue Paladin's case... that would be both of his hands."

Lance felt his heart stop beating as the crowd roared out its pleasure.

"However," and Lance had never heard such regret in the word even as his heart gave a tentative thump as it restarted, "due to the nature of the Blue Paladin's... visit with us," and despite the rumbling of displeasure Theodek’s words brought some laughter, "he is to keep his limbs... for now."

Lance felt his heart pick up a steady tempo once more even as he knew there was more to come.
"In exchange," Theodek grinned, "I shall double the penalty to four limbs that will be maimed but not removed. What say you?"

There were no words that Lance could pick out from the resulting screams but he could guess the sentiment.

He gave a jerk of his shoulders, going nowhere, as Theodek turned to face him.

"I will enjoy this, Paladin," he smiled, breath hot on Lance's face. He made a gesture and one of the black discs was put into his hand. He reached down and grabbed Lance's right wrist just above the manacle and dragged it upwards.

Lance barely swallowed back the scream.

The manacle was removed but Lance couldn't even attempt to fight back as pain pain pain took over and the back of his hand was pressed against the disc without issue, an energy cord snaking out and wrapping snugly about his wrist and pinning it there.

Theodek let go...

And his wrist hung suspended in the air against the disc that apparently had some type of hover technology.

The action was repeated with his left wrist despite Lance's best attempt to keep it out of Theodek's grip.

Theodek said something then, a command, and Lance's eyes widened as the discs lifted into the air, dragging him up with them.

He'd have screamed if he could as his full weight dangled from his arms as his toes barely skinned against the floor.

His right hand felt like it was on literal fire.

He looked through tear-blurred eyes as Theodek moved towards another Galran bearing a tray.

This one contained daggers.

Oh no.

No.

Dios no.

Theodek took one of the blades into his large hand and held it above his head.

The crowd went wild.

Theodek turned and placed the very tip of it against the center of Lance's open right palm. He desperately tried to curl his fingers down, to kick his legs up, but his body hung heavy and he couldn't.

He couldn't do anything.

Ocean eyes widened and met cruel yellow as the blade pressed down, a trickle of blood dripping down mocha skin.
There was not a glimmer of mercy to be found.

"I told you I would enjoy this, Paladin," Theodek whispered.

And Lance screamed.

Chapter End Notes

Kri Za Kri! Kri Za Kri! Kri Za... you guys aren't cheering? Well, this is awkward nn;

It has begun. Poor Lance. This might get a little violent... Least we all signed up for this, right? And we got to check in with the other Paladins so... yay?

Special thanks to the lovely reviewers. Seriously, you guys. I feel so loved ♥ Shout outs to: WolfFire, bubblebucky, Laurencat10, BubbleGummi, PuppetMaster55, heyheroics, ImmortalFey, the_green_paladin, AngelofGrace96, killjoy2246, GummyWorm, BrieCheese, fruitrollupaddict, maychorian, Narniac4aslan, RiyaMorut and saababa!

I'd love to hear what you thought of the chapter! Drop a comment below with your favorite part, line, question, character moment, etc. Thanks everyone for being so awesome! Can't wait to hear from you and see you next week!
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

**Warning notes:** Graphic violence this chapter, please proceed with caution if you are triggered by blood, torture and descriptive imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Holy fucking shit!"

Pidge kicked the laptop away from her as Lance's hand was impaled and the crowd *roared* above the sound of his strangled scream, trembling. Hunk was being violently sick off the back of the couch and Keith kept glancing between the two of them, unsure of what to do but feeling he should do *something* as the sounds of torture and cheering continue to emit from the laptop speakers.

They’d sequestered themselves in a corner of the main lounge and within seconds Pidge had hacked onto the transmission the castle was receiving. It had picked up with a very large Galran introducing himself and the start of the Kri Za Kri. None of them had known what that meant, but it likely wasn't good for Lance.

When they’d first seen Lance, kneeling on the floor and restrained and clearly hurting and scared, his entire body trembling, Hunk had almost turned the laptop off then and there.

They should not be watching this.

*He* didn't want to see this.

Pidge had practically bit his hand though, hunching possessively over the laptop to protect it from his interference and Hunk had tried some of the deep breathing exercises Coran had been showing him and telling himself it wasn't going to be bad and that whatever he felt was nothing compared to what Lance was feeling and this was to stand in solidarity with Lance.

When Lance had spoken out there had been a collective wince on all of their parts, which had turned into absolute horror as he went down screaming, what seemed to be a shock collar activating around his neck.

Hunk had been too overwhelmed to even try and close the laptop, sitting there and shaking himself and repeating over and over that it was going to be okay, that Lance was going to be okay.

A series of charges were read – Lance had done all that? Lance had tried to *escape*? – and then..

Then it had gotten bad.

Again.

The Galrans had pulled out the syringe they had all seen from the recording and Lance had been forced to the center of the dais, a measure of strength and alertness restored although nothing close enough to truly fight back.

And now they'd just seen *that* and...
And...

"Holy fucking shit," Pidge repeated breathlessly, shaking her head. "Holy..."

The laptop continued to play. Based on the sounds and renewed screams from Lance they could assume his left hand had just received the same.

"That's enough," Keith made the decision for them all. He reached out a hand towards the fallen computer, intending to snap it shut.

"No," Pidge gasped, catching his hand. "No."

"Pidge," Hunk pleaded, face pale and red and green all at the same time. "We can't."

"I'm not a child," she protested.

"We all are," Keith snapped at her, regretting the tone as Pidge shrunk back, the laptop once more in her hand, but not his words.

Shiro had been right. He should have listened to him. He had enough nightmare fodder from both recordings. This...

This he knew would haunt him.

Lance had no business looking that scared, that hurt.

When he'd fallen to the ground, breathless, gasping screams torn from his throat as he writhed and the Galra cheered...

He felt sick.

Keith raked a hand through his hair, trying to ignore the Galrans' cheering on the speaker. "Look, I'm sorry. But we should not be watching this. Shiro was right."

"No," Pidge protested again, although tears were sparkling in her eyes behind her steaming up glasses. She pulled them off, rubbing at her face. "I have to know. I can't... I can't stop thinking about what they're doing to him. I can't sleep. I can't focus. I just..." she let out a soft sob. "I have to know. I imagine it otherwise and... and... and that's worse, Keith."

Her brain filled in the blanks around the information she did have. Pidge didn't know if it was actually worse, because reality was terrifying, but she knew she would be haunted more by the unknown.

At least this way... At least this way she knew. And then she could fix it.

Knowledge was power, ignoring it was folly. It was simple math; the more facts, the more data, the better chances of a successive outcome.

And all of this?

It was one, huge, complicated, horrible equation.

And if she had the data she could solve it.

She winced at her own train of thought then. Lance was no math problem, no impersonal string of numbers and codes. But it stood. She needed to know so she could help him.
When they rescued him.

She would not accept any other outcome.

Keith let out a low, resigned sigh and Pidge felt her heart clench at the sounds.

Keith didn't sound like himself either.

"Okay," Keith agreed quietly. "Okay." He met her tear-lined gaze, his own eyes dry but shadowed. "But... but you're not watching it alone."

"Guys," Hunk whispered, "please. No more."

This was not what Lance would want, he knew that. Lance wouldn't want them to see him like this. He wouldn't want them to suffer as he was.

Pidge extended a small hand and dug it into Hunk's vest, keeping him rooted to the couch. "Please stay," she whispered. "You don't have to watch. Or listen. Just..." She reached her other hand into her pants pocket, removing her music player and set of headphones.

"Oh Pidge." Hunk patted the couch between his legs. "Come here."

She needed no second urging, scrambling over his leg and settling herself down within his embrace, tucking her head up against his chest where his heart was racing and she could feel him shaking.

Even then she felt comforted. Hunk always made her feel safe even when he was scared. Because for all his fears he always came through when they needed him and she had come to rely on his steady presence during her time at the Garrison.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He gave her a squeeze.

As Pidge got comfortable Hunk cast a glance over to the other member of their group.

Keith was sitting perched on the edge of the couch, set away from them. There was a rigidity there, a reluctance to get close, but Hunk could see past that. Keith needed a hug just as much, maybe more, than Pidge.

"Keith," he said gently and large purple eyes, no longer narrowed but wide, and Hunk felt his gut clench as Keith's words from just a moment came back. They were all still children, even someone as strong and independent and fierce as Keith.

Hunk didn't delay any longer.

He reached out, wrapped an arm about Keith's shoulder, and bodily dragged the smaller boy against his side.

Keith stiffened like a rod.

A moment later though all of the tension seemed to go out of him and he tentatively lifted one of his gloved hands and hooked it in Hunk's vest.

"Thank you," came the barest whisper.

Hunk squeezed his shoulder and wrapped his other arm about Pidge. She leaned back and adjusted
her headphones over his ears, flipping on the music player and moving towards some of the pre-
loaded sounds; this one of an industrial fan that Hunk found both comforting and familiar as it
reminded him of his dad's garage. It was loud and Hunk gave her a small nod.

He would not be able to hear the video over this. He closed his eyes then and focused on offering
what little support he could to the people, the friends, in his arms right now.

And soon, he prayed, Lance would be safe and sound and wrapped up in his embrace too.

Pidge and Keith exchanged a look as Hunk bowed his head over Pidge's, seemingly oblivious to the
goings on around him now.

"You sure?" Keith asked quietly, almost hesitatingly for him.

Pidge gave the barest nod.

And with a deep breath she opened the laptop screen back to full and they were plunged right back
into the Kri Za Kri.

xxx

Lance wasn't sure he'd ever felt pain like this, this stabbing, pulsing sharp ache that only worsened
with every exhale.

He swore the blades were digging in deeper with every second although he knew that was
impossible as their hilts were flush with his blood-covered palms.

He could still feel them moving around, sending fresh rivulets over his hands, down his wrists and
dripping along his arms.

His blood was warm.

There was so much of it.

Blood for blood.

It had just started.

And already his hands...

His hands were ruined.

And his feet were next.

He tried weakly to kick out at Theodek again as the Galran bent down to roughly grasp his left leg,
but between the ankle chain and the way he felt his hands tear against the embedded dagger it did no
good.

The collar around his neck lit up for his attempt.

Lance had almost no air left to scream but his body gave it its best effort as he jerked and writhed and
felt more blood drip down his arms.

When it finally stopped he found that both of his ankles had been attached to similar black discs, his
heel against the restraint and not allowing him any way to try and shift to put some weight onto his
feet.
His hands wept.
The knife brought out this time on another tray was wider than the daggers.
It looked like a butcher cleaver.
Lance faintly wondered if they were going to chop off his toes.
He tried to curl them back but Theodek grabbed hold of his foot, claws digging in, and raised the knife above his head once more.
The crowd roared.
And Lance screamed again.
The cleaver bit through the whole length of the bottom of his foot.
Lance swore he felt it hit bone.
He couldn't see it but he could imagine the torrent of blood, of jagged flesh, as Theodek ripped the knife free.
He...
He wouldn't be walking again.
No more escape attempts.
Lance let out a sound between a sob and a laugh.
As though they'd have given him the chance again.
He was crying, he realized, tasting salt on his tongue as they dripped down his face.
He hadn't meant to.
But he wasn't surprised.
He welcomed them as they blurred his vision, turning the crowd of screaming Galrans into indistinct purple blobs.
He was at the beach.
This was just spray from the waves. The pain from his feet from stepping on a buried seashell. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine the salty breeze, turn the roar into that of the ocean.
His left foot was butchered too and Lance was thrown from his thoughts.
"We now move onto the other charges," he heard the Galran judge intone to renewed cheering.
Lance shuddered.
He couldn't do this.
They hadn't even started the assault charges and already he...
He could feel himself fading.
He was breaking.

He couldn't break though. He couldn't give in.

Haggar was waiting for it. A broken body, a broken spirit and then a broken mind. She'd said so; she wanted to crush him.

She wanted information.

And if he broke now...

She would get it.

She would get it and his team would pay the price. She would hurt them.

He had to stay strong.

For them.


A Galran had disentangled himself from the crowd during that time and he was striding towards Lance with a smug grin while the judge made note to the audience that they were starting with battery charges.

Lance recognized this Galran; he was the guard who had nearly strangulated him and whose gun he had stolen.

He gave himself a mental nod. He hadn't given into the fear then, he wouldn't give into it now.

They would not get one more scream from him.

The soldier was in front of him now and despite the fact Lance hovered a couple inches off the floor he was still much shorter than the Galran, his sightline coming to the base of the Galran's neck. He didn't tilt his head up to meet the yellow gaze he could feel smoldering down, instead keeping his eyes firmly fixed forward and staring at where the Galran's armor connected to the shoulder plate.

The Galran apparently did not like that. A clawed hand gripped his chin and yanked his head up, neck aching at the position. Lance slid his eyes past the Galran's face though and focused on a point of the ceiling behind him.

No fear.

No fear.

"Look at me," the Galran growled.

Lance absolutely did not.

No fear.

Be strong.

He could get through this.
His chin was abruptly released and a tick later an open hand smacked against his cheek, jerking his entire head to the right and unfortunately pulling his matching hand against the dagger.

He felt it tear.

Somehow he swallowed back the cry and managed to keep his eyes open after the initial flinch, once more back on the Galran's armor.

"Enough," the judge ordered, a note of impatience in his voice. "Carry out the charge or forfeit your turn."

"My apologies," came the reply that sounded completely unapologetic.

And a closed fist rammed into Lance's stomach.

It was like getting hit with a sledgehammer. His torso responded to the force and swung back, although his hands and feet held fast.

Blood gushed.

He choked out a groan.

The crowd screamed for more.

To Lance's relief more did not come and he took in several shaky inhales, trying to replenish his air from where it had been literally knocked out. Over the sound of his breathing there were heavier footsteps.

Somehow he knew they belonged to Theodek.

His head had dropped to his chest as he breathed, but he found it being forced up as a clawed hand descended into his hair once more.

He pointedly kept his gaze straight and focused this time on the far wall of the audience chamber.

A claw dug itself into his chest and he pressed his lips together as he felt it being dragged in a circle, a thin line of fire behind.

"This," Theodek rumbled, "is a fatal spot for humans."

His heart.

"Do not," and there was a sharp warning bite on Theodek's voice, "enact Kri Za Kri within that mark. The penalty will be your own death."

And Theodek would be the executioner. No one, no one, had the right to kill this Paladin save for him. He knew he could not actually do so; Emperor Zarkon was using the boy for his own means and Theodek would never dare go against his wishes. He accepted that, knew his brother's justice would have to be found through screams and pleas.

But.

If any dared to get such a notion to try and take even that away from him he would make them regret it.

Theodek released the Paladin and stepped back, gesturing for the foot soldier who had allowed the
escape to happen to continue. Normally such a failure would be punished severely, but to his surprise the soldier had been pardoned for the lapse. Theodek had no doubt the witch was behind it for reasons unknown to him. Perhaps she just wished to see the human suffer even more penalties? He would admit, he could agree with that.

A gun – the one that had been stolen and then recovered with the Blue Paladin – was presented to the soldier and he took it with a low chuckle... and then strode right for the Paladin.

Theodek raised an eyebrow. Most Galrans used opportunities like this to demonstrate their marksmanship, to work the crowd into a frenzy. But, a cruel smile turned up his face as the Galran pressed the muzzle of the gun flat against they human's chest just beneath his collarbone, he would not admit this had a certain style too and settled back to watch the show.

Lance meanwhile had to force himself to keep his eyes angled back across the audience hall as he felt cold metal grind against warm flesh.

He was going to be shot point blank.

*Dios.*

He couldn't stop his heart from racing though, beating so fast he swore his chest was vibrating.

The Galran must have felt it too because Lance could see his face morph into a sick grin out of the corner of his eye. "Scared, Paladin?"

Breathe, Lance told himself. In and out. He could do this. It would be fine, over in an instant.

No fear no fear no fear no fear.

"Act the part all you want," the soldier hissed, breath hot on Lance's ear. "But we both know the truth. All humans are the same. Scared, pathetic little fools." Lance heard the gun whine to full charge. "Now scream."

The gun went off in a sizzle of light and sound and fire and agony.

And Lance...

He screamed. He tried not to. He did. Really. But it felt like his entire chest had just been filled with liquid fire and it was burning right through him. He was literally going to go up in flames.

Over the sounds of his own cries he could hear the Galrans shrieking in an excited frenzy and the soldier's quiet, smug chuckle.

His eyes rolled up in his head and the bitter taste of blood filled his mouth and he realized he'd bitten through his tongue.

The fire burned hotter and hotter and he wondered if it was possible to combust from the inside. It felt like it.

Was he going to die?

Was... was he okay with that?

The fire burned hotter and he shook, feeling new tracks of tears coating his cheeks that did nothing to soothe the burning.
It was getting worse.

And then it stopped.

Like a bucket of cold water had been doused over him but with none of the relief it cut off and Lance wrenched open eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed.

In his blurred vision there was the shape of a hooded figure, bird-like mask hiding the face.

A Druid.

The Druid had healed him.

He knew now why the sensation had felt so familiar; he had felt it just a bit ago when he came to on the table with Haggar standing over him.

Druid healing was nothing like the Altean cryo-pods; it felt like he had been stitched from the inside and the thread was made of molten lava. But it had worked.

Whether for better or worse Lance did not know.

Exhausted eyes lifted as the Druid stepped away, landing on the horde of Galrans who were all clamoring for more blood even as he faintly heard the judge ordering them all that any more shots like that would be punished and to rein it in so they didn't kill him.

The warning was of no comfort.

There were so many.

And that had been the first of the assault charges. There were... ten more? Something like that.

He didn't know if he was going to make it through ten more.

He had to though. He had to.

His team, his family, needed him to.

He couldn't fall here. If he fell here he knew it was over.

He wouldn't be able to pick himself back up, not when it mattered when Haggar returned with her questions, with her magic and pressure on his mind as she sought a way in.

It was just...

It was hard.

They weren't actually asking him questions. This wasn't an interrogation.

It was torture for the sake of torture no matter what label of justice they threw on it.

He had already shown his fear. The Galrans knew he was scared.

They would use it.

He couldn't let them.

He had to be brave, to be strong.
Strong like Shiro.

He let out a shuddering breath as another Galran ascended the dais, the gun now in his hands.

He reminded himself that he had held Haggar off. In his mindscape where she said she was in control. He had beat her. He did that. Him, Lance. The weakest Paladin on the team. He had stopped her. That had to mean something. That had to mean he wasn't as weak as he thought.

Maybe he was strong.

Just a little bit.

Maybe he could get through this.

He clung to that thought as the new Galran approached, the second guard from the cell.

He could do this.

Just ten more.

Ten more and then it was back into Haggar's hands.

Lance's eyes widened at the thought.

As horrible, as painful, as this was...

At least his friends were safe. He was the target here.

Once he left the Kri Za Kri... they were.

It wasn't just getting through ten more hits.

It was surviving through infinity.

There was no end.

And fire exploded against his inner right arm.

The Kri Za Kri had continued on.

He barely choked down the scream – born of both surprise and pain – before another shot took out his right shoulder and this time he bit down on his tongue, feeling blood well inside his mouth and drip down his chin as he opened it to gasp for air.

He didn't scream.

He took the barest measure of pride in that although the Galran who had shot him looked extremely displeased by the lack of reaction.

Lance managed a bloody smile at that and lifted his chin high.

It was what allowed him to see the next Galran step onto the dais, this one strangely not screaming for blood or wearing a cruel smile. He... he looked impassive.

Lance recognized him after a moment. It was the soldier he had shot in the hallway; the one who had lowered his gun.
"Lieutenant Yanden of the Third Batallion," the judge addressed and Lance realized he'd been missing all of the introductions.

Yanden. Lance ran the name over in his head, committing it to memory. There was something... different about this Galran.

"Do you invoke your right to Kri Za Kri?" came the judge's voice and Yanden inclined his head.

"I invoke my right," Yanden said, his voice a quiet rasp compared to the others. He strode towards Lance then, steps silent on the platform, and reached out a clawed hand.

Lance didn't even flinch as it descended on his chest, curious and confused more than scared.

He welcomed the change.

The claw dipped into the bloodied circle Theodek had made and used it to draw a red dot just above it where his own injuries in the escape attempt had been made. Lance tried not to gape in the fact when given an opportunity to inflict a new wound this Galran had not hurt him.

Who was he?

Yanden then retreated down the steps, heading towards the back of the room to murmurs of excitement from the crowd rather than the former roars of just bloodlust. Lance caught the word sniper.

Sniper.

This Galran was going to snipe at the mark he'd made with Lance's blood.

With a short range pistol.

Lance's head spun. He knew firsthand how difficult – how insane – it was to try to shoot without the proper gun. It's why there were so many models because every one had a different purpose. His own bayard was good at cover fire but streamlined enough to allow him to make finer shots.

That pistol?

Short range only, probably twenty feet maximum to hit within the target.

This Yanden was at least one hundred feet back.

Was he trying to kill Lance?

Lance's breath caught.

Maybe he was.

Maybe this was an act of mercy.

But...

Lance trembled.

Why did this question keep coming back?

Did he want to die?
He had no control over it, his opinion didn't matter. But if it came down to it did he want the lieutenant to kill him?

He didn't know.

He hated that he didn't know.

He had to protect his family. His death would ensure that.

But...

But he...

Yanden fired.

Lance watched with a sort of apathetic horror as the bright beam closed the space.

Live or die?

Live or die?

It struck dead center on the bloodied circle.

It...

It barely hurt.

It was like knicking himself on a kitchen knife or a very large bee sting; there was pain but nothing like what he'd been experiencing.

He wasn't even sure the strike, had it hit him in the head, would kill him.

So was this... was this mercy of a different sort? A break from the overwhelming pain?

Why?

The second shot went off and it struck the same spot. That one hurt slightly more, smarting on top of the previous hit, but still, nothing.

Lance tried not to stare.

Why?

The Galrans seemed to be taking it as a display of marksmanship, clapping the still impassive Galran on the back and cheering and expressing their desires to one day shoot as well as he.

Lance figured that had to be it as well. No Galran would ever risk the wrath of Zarkon to spare a few moments of pain for their prisoner, and if he were a Blade he would not have made so obvious a statement to single himself out.

But still...

It had been a small act of kindness, no matter the reason. Lance appreciated it, feeling a gentle warmth filling his stomach.

It might be the very last one he'd ever see.
And with next Galran ascending the stage he knew the kindness was over.

It was Yanden's companion, the one Lance had likened to an angry bull and even now that analogy seemed appropriate. How many times had he shot this one? How many had he gone through?

Lance tried to count. There had been the first guard with one and then the second guard with two for a total of three strikes. Yanden had two which made five and had it been ten or eleven total? Um, this one, of whose name he had missed again, had been three, he thought. Eight, then?

The raging Galran entered Lance's line of sight and he cast his eyes upward again, chin raised ever so.

Even though he didn't feel very brave right now the action gave him the tiniest boost.

"I'm going to enjoy this, boy," the Galran snarled.

Lance ignored him.

"I'm talking to you," came an angry growl.

Well Lance was not talking to him. He pressed his lips into a thin line, tongue tasting the blood that coated them still from where he'd earlier bit his tongue.

"Fine." He felt the gun press directly against his upper right thigh through his underarmour that would do little to protect him in this circumstance. "This'll loosen your lips."

He wouldn't, Lance thought, heartbeat quickening. The judge had told them off for such a close shot last time. He wouldn't—

He did.

The shot went through Lance's leg and he could feel the burn as it went out the back.

He shrieked.

It was torn out of him as he could do nothing else against such brutal agony. He tried to curl his legs up, as though to make himself a smaller target, but all that did was jog his feet against the manacles and new pain blinded him.

It was getting worse.

The fire was spreading from his thigh, pulsing up and down and he swore his skin was being melted right off.

How?

What?

Why?

How did this hurt more than the previous point-blank hit in his chest? It shouldn't. Not like this.

The gun was ground against the wound it had created and Lance let out another howl, vision flaring.

Something was wrong.
The Galran lifted it off then to re-position it in the same matter on his other thigh.

And even with his vision blurred by tears and pain, Lance saw something different.

The muzzle of the gun was black.

It was supposed to be silver.

That meant something.

What did that mean?

The second shot went off.

Lance blacked out.

He came to with that icy hot fire racing in his veins that still had nothing on the pain emitting from both of his legs now.

Cold metal pressed against the side of his face and exhausted eyes drifted towards it.

The muzzle was still black, but closer up Lance could tell there was something smeared on it, and it wasn't blood. It smelled... oily.

It was saliidda.

*Dios,* the gun was coated in saliidda. The stuff that amplified pain.

The Galran brought the gun down from Lances face and ran the muzzle across his chest, grinding it into the earlier wounds.

Lance bucked, hands dragging against the daggers again.

"Having fun yet, boy?" The Galran chuckled. "I am." He tapped the gun against Lance's shoulder, smearing more saliidda into his earlier wounds.

Lance didn't have the breath left to scream and only let out a pathetic whimper, body trembling.

"Two shots left," he grinned. "You gonna stay awake or pass out like a weakling again?"

Lance closed his eyes.

He didn't want to see anymore.

He couldn't see anymore.

The gun sizzled its final shots of the set, cutting into his chest and then into his arm. Neither one was made point-blank again, no saliidda behind the pain, but it didn't matter at this point as the saliidda had worked its way into his bloodstream and they hurt just as much.

Lance discovered he did pass out as he woke up to find the final Galran he'd attacked standing in front of him. This one wasted no time, firing two shots rapid-fire into his stomach.

Lance passed out again.

They didn't let him remain that way.
His head hung when they brought him back, no strength left to lift it, and dulled eyes catching sight of the pool of blood that had formed on the ground below him.

It was a lot of blood.

He wondered how much more he could lose.

He wondered if it mattered.

"The Kri Za Kri has been fulfilled," came the bellowing voice of the judge. "Now it is time to release the charged."

Lance didn't know if he should feel relieved or terrified.

All he could feel was pain.

He let out a whimper as he felt more than saw Theodek approach. His right ankle and then his left were released from the bonds, toes dangling limply down.

He couldn't have kicked out if he'd wanted to.

His hands were next.

But before the manacles could be released...

The daggers came first.

Theodek pulled on the one embedded in his left hand, a dull, wet squelch sounding.

Lance gagged, tasting blood and acid. The second one was pulled out the same way and he let out a low moan, unable to do anything more.

And then he was falling.

It wasn't far, just a foot, but it felt like forever.

And the landing...

Lance wanted to die.

Every single piece of him seemed to light up; his hands his feet his chest his legs his throat and he let out a weak sounding keening noise that despite everything had him flushing with shame as he heard Theodek laugh and the other Galrans join in.

So much for remaining strong.

Tears burned his eyes and they somehow hurt more than any other wound.

He tried to curl up then, to hide his face, his tears, his pain, but the Galrans would not him have even that.

A clawed hand grabbed onto his ankles and another onto his hands and they were pulled away from his chest. He heard the clank of chains and felt the manacles being reattached.

And then his arms were being dragged upwards.

Lance had no strength to fight back, to assist even in lessening the agony as his wrists and arms cried
out, and he was dragged back to his knees with his arms pulled high above him. The chain gave an impatient tug and Lance realized after a tick that they wanted him to stand.

On his feet.

That had been butchered.

The chain gave another tug, slightly lifting his knees from the floor and more of his weight on his mangled right wrist.

Lance tried to stand.

He placed his right foot out in front of him, trying to balance solely on his toes, and push himself to standing.

He didn't make it.

His legs gave out below him, he felt the gush of blood from the shots that had gone through his thighs, and his stomach heaved.

"Up," Theodek ordered harshly, yanking at the chain again.

Lance weakly shook his head. He couldn't.

It was the wrong answer. The collar activated around his neck and he collapsed back to the ground, shaking and gasping and crying.

Theodek dragged at his wrists again, attempting to pull him back to kneeling and then to standing, but Lance couldn't do it.

"Up."

He shook his head again, although at this point it was more of just a loll in a horizontal direction.

He couldn't. He had no strength left.

He couldn't do it.

More shocks.

His body refused to pass out.

And even if it did it wouldn't matter.

"Pathetic," Theodek snarled, voice sounding as though from far, far away.

Lance hated that he flinched.

"If you will not walk than you will be dragged."

It was all the warning Lance had as the chain slackened for the barest of moments, allowing him to draw his ruined hands back towards his chest, before they were pulled away from his body and he hit the ground with a thump, vision flaring as every wound on his chest took the impact and his chin clipped the floor.

He did not have the energy left to cry out as he was dragged forward, open wounds being torn
further against the floor and his wrists and arms at this point just one mass of fire.

Lance closed his eyes, trying to find solace in the darkness, praying he could find real escape soon.

He couldn't be strong anymore.

He'd failed.

He'd broken.

He was weak.

And now...

Now his family would pay the price.

xxx

Off to the side, Haggar smiled, a dark, dangerous thing.

She had felt it. She had felt it so so clearly.

She had felt the Blue Paladin's spirit, his quintessence, unfiltered and raw and so beautiful and strong.

She had never felt anything like it.

It was intoxicating.

She had to have it.

Druids thrived on the quintessence, the life force, of others. It was the power behind their magic. And this blue quintessence, this stunning, beautiful blue quintessence that had surrounded the human, that had kept his head high, was the most powerful she had ever felt.

She would be invincible if she could harness it. She would turn that light into the deepest darkness and it would be hers.

There was going to be a change in plans, she decided, lip curling. She would still attempt to get her lord his coveted Black Lion, but she was no longer willing to so easily hand over the Blue Paladin.

No.

Her Blue Paladin. Yes. She liked the sound of that.

Hers.

She desired his quintessence. And she would have it.

Every.

Last.

Drop.
Fun Fact: In the original draft I actually had a Druid escorting Lance out by floating him after he was released from the restraints. I realized that was far too benevolent so rewrote it to this instead. Sorry I'm not sorry.

So, that Kri Za Kri (pronounced Kree zah kree for those wishing to chant it themselves) is over and for now our blue boy still has all limbs and body parts attached (there is a wide divide of y'all from those chanting for limb removal and others crying to leave him alone) so I can say that he literally did come out of this in one piece. :p For those wondering about the Paladin's reactions; you got most of them! We'll check in with the others next chapter because Haggar still has to deliver a message after all. I wonder what it could be...

And good golly gosh, you guys blew me out of the water with the response to the last chapter. Thank you! I feel so loved right now ♥

Big thanks to the amazing reviewers who I cannot say enough nice things about. They are: BubbleGumi, hazael, WolfFire, tymedfire, PuppetMaster55, gdesertsand, Katnined, bubblebucky, RiyaMorut, cipheredsong, NewandOld, Ms.+J, Brohaikyyu, AngelofGrace96, Immortalfey, the_green_paladin, star_set, GingaNinja (Ginga_ninja418), GummyW0rm, killjoy2246, bravechicken, Proxy_17, BrieCheese, maychorian, Hjorth, ridazzle, Mariz777, Narniac4aslan, burple12345, spl, Spice noodle, and alexries.

As always I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter. Hope y'all make it through; I know it was a little intense ^^;

Thanks so much for your support and look forward to seeing what you thought of the chapter/story so far!
Chapter Fifteen

The bridge of the Castle of Lions was absolutely silent as the video feed went dark, the last glimpse of Lance showing him being dragged by his wrists across the ground while a parade of Galrans followed screaming and hollering.

What did one say to that?

They had watched the transmission in silence, broken only by short inhales and gasps.

None had looked away.

It was not that they hadn't wanted to.

But horror had kept them frozen and duty, guilt, even moreso.

"I need to sit," Allura's words cut through the quiet. She didn't so much as sit as she collapsed, dragging Shiro down with her by their still clasped hands. He took a hard knee next to her and made no move to get back up. Coran more gracefully crouched down, pressing one hand on Allura's shoulder and then placing one against Shiro's back.

Shiro leaned back into it, allowing it and Allura's still painful grip on his hand to ground him.

He felt like he was going to be sick.

He'd known the Galra were cruel. He knew they had a lust of bloodshed even amongst their own kind as he distantly recalled fighting a disgraced soldier in the arena.

He had still not expected that.

That level of violence against an unarmed, defenseless person...

Against Lance.

He tasted bile and swallowed thickly.

This wasn't about an escape attempt. This had been revenge, pure and simple, against Voltron, against what they stood for.

And the Galra had just tortured a child and enjoyed it.

And Lance...

Lance had been so brave. Shiro had felt such fierce pride when Lance had lifted his chin, refusing to be cowed by the cruelty and violence.

Shiro didn't know if he could have done that after such a time.

Lance was stronger than he had ever given him credit for. Allura had seemed to share the same idea as when Lance had smiled — bloody and defiant — she had inhaled sharply but it had not been of the previous horror of the torture.
She saw it too.

But that meant they both saw the moment where that determination had been erased in favor of pain and fear.

Lance had tried. He'd struggled to come back, but that one Galra who had shot him in the legs... Anger, dark and hot, filled Shiro. They hadn't been able to hear the audio on the dais, not over the screaming crowds the camera was angled behind, but that Galran had said something, done something, more than just a cruel taunt or taking the shot. Lance had recoiled from his attacks, had flinched and cried and screamed in a way Shiro had not thought was humanly possible.

After that Lance had been unable to pick up his head, to bite back his sobs.

And the Galrans had thrived on it. If their calls for blood and violence had been loud before they were deafening now. When Lance had been cut down they had practically pulsed with excitement, growing more and more as Lance was dragged to his knees and ordered to stand and had not been able to.

There was no way he could, Shiro had thought. Not when his feet had been sliced open. Not when he had gunshot wounds on not just his legs but all over his chest, his right arm, and then of course the state of his hands.

Shiro's stump where the prosthetic connected gave a twinge.

He tried to ignore it, ignore what it meant.

That would not be Lance's fate.

He would not let it be.

They were going to rescue him.

Shiro just hoped they weren't too late.

What they'd just witnessed... that level of brutality was something that could make grown men break.

Lance was a child in this war.

He had been a Garrison cadet, yes, but Garrison pilots rarely saw actual combat. They were used mostly for space exploration, as a worldwide peacekeeping force. And it would have been several years more before Lance was engaging in those sorts of topics as early years were more focused on piloting and communications.

The thought had crossed Shiro's mind when Allura had ended up captured, that maybe they should talk about what to do if captured. But he'd never acted on it, head aching at the repressed memories of his own capture, and he had always believed they would have each other's backs; in a worst case scenario they would have each other if caught.

He never imagined this.

And he had no idea if there was any preparing for this level of torture, not really.

But he should have addressed it. It could have helped.

Maybe.
He didn't know.

What he did know was that Lance should not be the one being hurt.

It should be him.

He was the Paladin of the Black Lion. He had been the one to escape and bring Voltron back to the fight.

Punish him.

And yet that wasn't the way things had happened.

And now Lance was paying the price.

There was nothing Shiro could do.

Well.

Actually, they had been promised to talk to Lance. And after what had just happened... Shiro was going to make the best of that minute.

He straightened. He had to pull himself together.

He nodded to himself. He could do this. He planted one foot down and pulled himself to standing, relieved when the shakiness that had plagued his legs had vanished. His hand was still connected to Allura's and he turned, offering her what smile he could muster, and she returned it, allowing him to pull her to her feet as well with a murmured thank you.

Coran was already standing, eyes fixed on the dark screen, a bar at the bottom showing it was still broadcasting, and lips a thin line under his moustache.

He looked ready.

Shiro had to be too.

Haggar no doubt wanted a reaction. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction. When she showed herself on the screen he was going to be ready for her. He wasn't going to let her words, her looks, affect him as he had.

He was the leader of Voltron, the Black Paladin, and it was time he started acting like it.

So when the screen flickered from nothingness to fill itself with Haggar's smirking countenance Shiro clenched his fists, opened his mouth, and prepared to tell her what a despicable person she was.

He never got the chance.

Coran beat him to it.

"You and the Galrans are a sick, vile depraved excuse for a sentient species," he spat, moustache quivering. "You... you praxia!"

Haggar laughed. "Tell me how you really feel, Altean. Go ahead, your words are sweet nectar to my ears."
A vein pulsed on the side of Coran's neck and he looked about ready to lob off into another set of Altean curses when Shiro cut in.

"Where's Lance?" His voice didn't waver in the slightest and he forced himself to meet that yellow gaze. "Let us talk to him. Now."

"Hmm. No."

"No?" Shiro repeated, voice low.

"No," Haggar smirked.

"We had a deal, witch," Allura seethed, narrowing her gaze.

"We did. Should you watch the Kri Za Kri in full and if the Blue Paladin remained conscious you would be able to speak to him. It seems you conveniently forgot the second part of our agreement."

"You will let us speak with the Blue Paladin now," Allura demanded.

"Such a thing is impossible, Princess. As you saw," Haggar inclined her head behind her where the barest glimpse of the dais could be seen, "he is no longer awake."

Allura bristled.

"However, on the topic of deals... there has been a change of plans."

"You cannot renegotiate an agreement without both parties," Allura snapped, drawing herself up to full height.

"As I recall your 'party' has not had any say-so in this trade from the beginning," Haggar sneered.
"Forgetting again, Princess? We hold the cards and you have no choice but to respond if you wish to keep up the facade that you care for this Paladin's life."

"Whatever you are imply-"

"Don't make me laugh, Princess. You are the same as every other Altean royal before you. Voltron is a weapon and its Paladins are mere pawns to be played. You have no personal attachment to them and would throw them away without a second glance if it didn't reveal to the rest of the universe how heartless your kind truly is."

"That is not true," Allura hissed, leaning forward on the console. "That has never been true. My father was a Paladin of Voltron, witch, and he put his life on the line the same as all before him. It is an honor to be chosen—"

"An honor or a death sentence?" Haggar cut in. "Tell me, Princess, do those chosen by the Lions of Voltron even have a say in the matter? We both know how rare a true connection must be, to find a quintessence that aligns just so. You honestly believe your ancestors would have let someone with such a match just walk away? No. They were chosen; call it fate, call it destiny, we both know what it truly is."

"You are wrong," Allura protested, but the fire was missing from her words, the barest of tremor to
her hands.

"Am I?"

Allura took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full height, jewel eyes flashing. "Yes." Her voice was stronger now. "I cannot speak for my ancestors but the Lions would never have forced such a connection. Quintessence connections cannot be forced, the bond with a Paladin team cannot be forced. The Paladins of Voltron served with honor and I will not let you make a mockery of their sacrifices."

"Then I ask you, what is the Blue Paladin to you, Princess?"

"He is a friend," Allura said quietly. Or, well, she hoped him to be one. Haggar's words had indeed struck close; she had viewed the humans first and foremost as Paladins, as a way to help her take down the Galra Empire. But she had never, never, considered them as pawns. Had they wanted to leave, had they turned down their role, she... she would not have stopped them. She had been willing to let Pidge go, she understood the call of family.

And although it had taken losing one of the Paladins, of having him ripped out from under her nose and subjected to tortures she would not have previously wished upon anyone (Haggar now the exception), she was well aware now that these humans had never been just pilots to her. And once Lance returned... she was going to make certain that he knew how much she had come to appreciate him. Not for what he brought to the team as the Blue Paladin, but what he brought as Lance. With his bright smiles and joy and light and the constant reminder that out there was still good and innocence in this dark universe.

"Oh dear," Haggar let out a low laugh. "I seem to have miscalculated. And here I thought you would be delighted."

"What do you want?" Shiro cut in. He'd had enough of listening to Haggar spew her poison.

"I want the Blue Paladin."

Anything Shiro was planning to fire back with died in his throat as her words registered and Allura and Coran seemed to be in similar states of disbelief.

What?

What?

"I have become rather attached to him, you see," Haggar smiled. "I simply cannot bear to give him up. He is to be my Blue Paladin now. My... Lance," she sounded out the word, smile growing.

Shiro felt his stomach bottom out.

My Lance.

My Shiro.

"Your words are treason to your emperor, witch," Coran snarled, more articulate than Shiro felt capable of right now.

"In a matter of perspective," Haggar shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "My lord wishes to possess the Black Lion and he shall indeed get it... just at a later time. Perhaps the Blue Paladin shall even assist me in doing so."
"No," Allura bit out, tossing her head. "That is not our deal and you shall not change it. We are trading the Black Lion for the Blue Paladin and that is final."

"Oh, Princess," Haggar shook her head. "How naive you are. You truly think we believe you would so willingly hand over the Black Lion for a mere human boy? Do not be foolish. His value is nothing compared to the great beast. No, if you were to come you would be seeking to take him by force and use the trade as a front to get close. We both knew there was never going to be a trade to begin with."

"So then why make the offer at all?" Coran asked, frowning, not denying Haggar's suspicions. As they had assumed, the Galra knew the Paladins would not so easily comply with the terms.

Haggar smirked. "It is entertaining, is it not? I must admit, I had not been expecting such cooperation from the princess. He does indeed mean more to you than you wish, doesn't he, Princess?"

"You are wrong to judge value based on what someone can offer," Allura said quietly. "And you have misjudged here. We are coming, witch, and we will take back our Paladin."

"Is that a threat?"

"Is it?" Allura parroted Haggar's way of asking back at her.

"You think you can get through the Empire's forces unscathed without the use of Voltron?" Haggar asked in return. "You think you stand a chance against our might? You would risk the universe for one human?"

"Yes," Allura said simply.

Shiro felt something warm bloom in his chest against the ice Haggar's words had been creating.

Hope.

Admiration.

Love.

Allura too was much more than she had first seemed.

It seemed her response had unsettled Haggar a bit as well as the amusement was fading from her face.

"Very well," Haggar said. "The deal as was offered stands. The Black Lion for the Blue Paladin. However... you have twenty varga in which to arrive at the coordinates. A dobash more and the deal is off and all Galran ships will open fire on your craft."

Twenty varga.

They still had twenty-four to go and that was already with the enhancements. For all Haggar knew they were still thirty-six hours minimum out.

"That is impossible," Allura growled, coming to the same conclusion.

"It is the new offer, Princess. Take it or leave it."

"We'll be there," Shiro growled.
"Delightful."

"I'm only going to say this once," Shiro continued, fixing Haggar with the darkest glare he could muster, "If you do not hold up this trade you will not live long enough to regret it."

"That is rather dark for you," Haggar remarked. "Spoken like a true champion though, hmm?"

Shiro did not let himself react to the moniker.

"Very well. In twenty varga we shall be reunited once more, my Shiro," Haggar smiled. Shiro gripped the console and scowled at her.

Haggar turned her gaze then to Allura. "We shall see then, Princess, if you speak the truth. How much do you truly value this boy over the fate of the universe?" She chuckled. "I shall send trade instructions along shortly. We," she laughed again, amusement dancing in her eyes once more, "look forward to your arrival."

The screen went dark before anyone could respond.

Silence reigned as all three occupants on the bridge looked to one another.

Fear, desperation and confusion looked back at them all.


His mind could go nowhere but his memories now and his head ached from it. Did Haggar want Lance to use as another experiment for her weapons? As as source of information?

As... as something else?

My Shiro. My Lance.

He shuddered.

"She said it herself," Coran said quietly, one hand pressed against his chest "although not in so many words."

"Information?" Allura asked, arms wrapped about herself and voice small.

"In part, I believe so," Coran answered. "And that is likely the reason she will supply to Zarkon if he discovers her dealings. For while Lance," his voice gave the barest waver on his name, "does not know much of Voltron he does know much of its Paladins and such information I am certain would be very valuable to the Empire."

"But?" Shiro prompted even though he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

His head pulsed.

"But the main reason I fear is something potentially more devastating," Coran continued. "I believe she is after his quintessence."

"Quintessence?" Shiro repeated the word as Allura let out a small, soft cry. He had heard it a number of times now, knew it was an energy of sort that the Druids had a hand in, but otherwise he had no idea of its importance. But both Haggar and Allura had mentioned it just now in terms of a connection.
"Quintessence is life force," Coran explained. "All of us carry it within but certain individuals are blessed with color infused quintessences and even rarer still are those who are colored quintessences." He met Shiro's eyes. "All Paladins of Voltron share one common trait: they must possess a full colored quintessence that is compatible with their chosen Lion. It is why when a Lion picks a Paladin it is not a mere random selection; it is the extreme matching of like spirits and why Paladins so very often reflect the qualities of their Lions. The level of connection varies, of course, even amongst such a group, but they are strong, Shiro. Very strong."

"Lance possesses blue quintessence," Allura murmured. "As we discussed previously, it is a connection that is buoyed by loyalty and compassion and the desire to protect others. It is the least offensive of the colored quintessences, but even so, water is a deadly element in the right circumstances. And... Oh... Oh Alaraaan..."

"By nature of blue quintessence it will grow stronger when being used in the protection of others over itself," Coran said. "And the connection Lance has with the Blue Lion? I have seen nothing like it, ever, in all my years and all of the Blue Paladins. His compassion, his ability to love, his empathy, it is strong. Very strong. And it will likely only continue to grow under Haggar's hands if he feels that we are being threatened."

Which they all knew was the case.

"What does this all mean?" Shiro asked. "For Lance? What can Haggar do with it?"

"Druids thrive on the quintessence of others," Coran said softly. "And if Haggar is willing to go against Zarkon's wishes to obtain it then Lance's quintessence must be strong indeed. If she were able to harness it for her own she would be able to power her own attacks, her weapons, to a formidable degree. That," Coran's voice lowered, "due to the fact it is quintessence linked to a Paladin of Voltron and thereby a Lion... I fear she may be able to dismantle Voltron in some way."

"What?" Allura gasped. "Dismantle Voltron?"

Coran inclined his head. "I fear so."

"Why has this never been done before then?" Shiro asked hesitantly. "Why did Haggar not... when I...?"

"You were not yet bonded with the Black Lion," Coran said gently, placing a hand on Shiro's shoulder. "You would have possessed black quintessence still, but a human body does not conduct quintessence like many other species and Haggar would not have ever thought to look under the circumstances. You were lucky, lad. That is unfortunately what it boils down to."

"If she had," Shiro pressed, "how would she have... have gotten it?" Because Coran had called it life force and if it was such then... then he would have had to die?

Coran sighed. "There are two ways of obtaining quintessence. The most common one is through the physical body and will ultimately result in death." Shiro shivered. "You may recall seeing dead planets in our travels, yes? Those were no doubt victims of the Druids. In Lance's case though I do believe Haggar would seek to keep him alive, so as to continue to draw quintessence. It replenishes itself naturally, you see, in living hosts. That way would be through the mind, breaking in through mental walls and protections. It is beyond difficult but for a Druid of Haggar's power... not impossible. And while Lance has shown his inner strength to be beyond what I think most of us expected... all things will break, eventually, and under a barrage like Lance is suffering... I fear it may be sooner than later."
"So we rescue him," Shiro bit out. "Now."

"Haggar was wise to our rescue plans," Allura frowned. "This timeframe... it does not bode well. And given what you have said Coran," she glanced up to her advisor, "it is imperative we rescue Lance before Haggar finds a way into his mind. Before," she bowed her head, "before they can hurt him any more. Logic would dictate we wait until they are not expecting us, but I fear... I fear we would then be too late."

"I fear the same," Coran murmured. "We must utilize the cease-fire window the Galrans have opened for us and rescue Lance in that space."

"We have to reach them first though," Allura pointed out. "And given the new deadline... I do not believe we are capable of doing so. Not even the Red Lion can move at that speed let alone the Black Lion."

"So we go faster," Shiro said grimly, prosthetic creaking. He turned to exit the bridge, feeling the Alteans exchange glances behind him.

It was time to consult their engineer and tech experts and find a way.

He would accept nothing else.

xxx

Lance was back in his mindscape.

Unlike last time though...

He was in pain. Gut-wrenching, blinding pain.

He whimpered, curling up tight on the beach, sand pricking uncomfortably against bare skin and raw flesh. He could feel it growing damp around him, not with the tide but with something warmer, stickier.

Blood.

He cast glazed eyes towards the ocean, more violent than his previous trip, the waves breaking the surf with a crash that swallowed up his harsh gasps.

Still, it called to him. It promised safety.

Somehow, Lance knew, if he could make it into the water everything would be okay.

He just had to get up.

Uncurling his limbs hurt, each press of mangled flesh against coarse sand a new kind of agony. Lance forced himself somehow into sitting, hunching forward and panting from even that.

He tasted blood.

And it was everywhere. He could see it leaking out from beneath his swim trunks, dripping down his legs. The shorts themselves were peppered with what he had thought were small red flowers but were actually just more droplets as the trickled down his chest, off his arms, and sank into the waistband.

He risk a glance at his hands, sitting on either side of him palm down, and hurriedly averted his eyes.
He still caught a flash of white bone amidst the gore. The fact he knew it had to look worse from the front did nothing to comfort him.

Water, a voice seemed to whisper. Get to the water.

He couldn't, Lance argued back. He couldn't. The choppy waves that brushed the sand seemed to be miles away instead of just a couple feet.

He wanted it all to stop.

He wanted to go home.

"Mamá," he whispered, the word doing nothing to alleviate his wounds, but rather bringing hot tears to his eyes.

He could picture her in that moment, hands covered in flour and favorite hibiscus covered apron stained with tomatoes, laughing and smiling as she rolled dough out for cookies.

He wondered when the last time he'd spoken to her was. Maybe a day or two before he ended up in space? She'd called to say she was up to baking that weekend and wanted to know what kind of cookies he and Hunk would like and she'd send them by with his sister Rosie.

Shortbread, he'd told her. Dipped in chocolate. And maybe some peanut butter ones too because he knew Pidge like them if the way he – she – squirreled them away when the cafeteria put out their faux version of one was any indication and he wanted to surprise him – her – because their smallest team member had seemed sad lately and his mamá's cookies could only be rivaled by Hunk's.

He wondered what Rosie had thought when she'd arrived and been told that he was missing. Did they think he was dead? Did they hold a funeral for him? It'd been months now, after all. How long would they have searched? Were they still looking?

Did they even know? Had the Garrison covered up his disappearance the same why he knew now Shiro's had been called pilot error? What story had they spun? Had his family believed it? Did they think he was still out there, somewhere, just trying to get home?

He hoped not.

Because if it had been an uncertainty before, it was a fact now: he was never going home.

He choked on a sob, hunching further over, and felt blood spill down his back.

The ocean continued to beat relentlessly against the sand and he felt the pull to go to it. But he couldn't. He couldn't move anymore. His feet were in tatters, his legs burst with pain as he tried to shift, and his hands...

Dios, his hands.

He just couldn't summon up the energy to move.

But…

He had summoned things in this mindscape before. His bayard. And then he'd healed his wrist after it had broken again.

If... if he concentrated hard enough could he heal his injuries? Well, here, at least. In the mindscape. He had no doubt when he woke from this it would be into the mangled body the Kri Za Kri had left him in.
He shuddered. Haggar had said the mind escaped here when the body was failing.

Had... had he almost died again?

He glanced at the sand, turning a dark russet around him.

He had lost a lot of blood, he supposed.

He needed to fix his feet first, he decided. If he could do that then he could stand and then go to the ocean. Everything would be all right then.

"Come on," he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut tight and imagining his feet whole once more. "Venga, venga. Por favor sana. Por favor."

There was a tingling then; somewhat painful but the good kind that signified healing. And when it stopped he found that the muted agony that had been pulsing from his foot had vanished. He very tentatively shifted his left one in the sand.

It was healed.

It had worked.

"Gracias," he murmured, throat choked with relief. "Gracias a Dios."

Water, his mind echoed again. Go to the ocean.

Lance intended to.

It took more than one try, his hands unable to help lift him and trying to use his core muscles to pop up had him crying and hunching back over as wounds gushed out new streams of crimson. He ended up painfully on his knees and then carefully standing, the world spinning once he was upright.

He staggered over to the ocean, feet splashing into the surf and had collapsed with a splash as the sand sank beneath unsteady feet. The water was colder than last time, but he was grateful for it as it washed over his legs and stomach, numbing the worst of the hurts, and he plunged his hands into it too.

He channeled the thoughts of healing once more, picturing flesh unblemished and blood lost to the waves.

A few minutes later the pain had vanished.

He raised a hand up to his face, not even a mark to be seen now.

He'd done it.

Lance let out a soft, relieved sigh and sank back onto his hands, letting the surf continue to splash against his chest and brush against his chin. It felt warmer now, a little calmer.

He closed his eyes, bathing in the soft starlight from above.

It was so peaceful.

He knew it wouldn't last.

He was going to have to go back.
Back to...

To that.

He drew his knees up, feeling a shiver down his spine.

He didn't know if he could make it.

He felt...

He felt...

Weak.

The word seemed to reverberate and he winced, pressing his face against his upturned knees. He had tried so hard to remain strong, to show them that he was not scared, he was not terrified and he would not break.

But at the end...

He just couldn't do it anymore.

Theodek had called him pathetic.

He... he was right.

The waves picked up again.

He'd closed his eyes, trying to hide away from what was happening. Like some child. As though that would ever work.

All of the Galra Empire had seen.

They'd seen him fall, they'd seen him unable to get back up.

And the thought of going back, of having to suffer through it all again, for ever and ever until maybe, eventually, they killed him by mistake.

His chest ached and he could feel Theodek's claws digging a circle around his heart.

The wind let out a mournful wail and Lance jerked to sitting, eyes wide.

There was something else there. He could feel it.

He felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle and he very, very slowly turned his head around, half-expecting to see Haggar standing right behind him. But only the darkening beach stretched out and he exhaled softly.

That exhale turned into a choked gasp as he turned back to the ocean and came face to face with the witch in question, his entire body locking into place once more with her magic.

"There there," she crooned, reaching forward from her crouch and placing a hand against his cheek, caressing it. "No need to be scared."

Lance futilely tried to shake his head, to push her unwelcome hand away, but he remained stuck fast.
A wave battered at his side and he frantically tried to redirect it just like last time, to unlock himself from Haggar's spell.

The water swirled harmlessly about them both.

What?

Haggar let out a low chuckle, bringing her hand up to card back his wet bangs. "Oh, precious boy," she murmured. "Can you not see that you are losing control of your own mind?"

What?

What was she talking about?

She gestured with her other hand at the choppy ocean that was becoming even more erratic and now accompanied with the distant flashes of lightning in the growing storm clouds.. "You are breaking, Paladin," she said. Her smile grew. "Just as I knew you would. All weak things do."

No.

No, he wasn't weak.

Her words still sent a physical stab through him, an icy cold that burned.

"You tried very hard," she comforted, stroking his hair now and Lance inwardly shuddered, unable to break away.

The ocean continued to uselessly swirl around them.

Why wouldn't it work? Why couldn't he make it move again?

"But you are no match for me. It is all right though," her hand smoothed back his hair and came back to rest on his cheek. "I will take care of you. My..." she smiled, "Lance."

My Lance.

Oh no.

He was not hers.

The force of the thought finally finally unlocked both frozen limbs and the might of the ocean and a wave slammed into the barely there space between the two of them. Lance scrambled backwards, stumbling to his feet and chest heaving.

He twitched his hand at his side, imagining his bayard back in hand.

It did not come.

He stared at his trembling hand, trying to will it into existence.

Nothing.

"You do not understand why it does not come," Haggar called out, remaining in the ocean but the waves at her ankles and not posing any threat. "I shall tell you. It is because you are no longer strong enough to summon it."
Lance growled even as he shook. "I'm not weak."

"Did I say that? No," Haggar chuckled. "But clearly it is a word on your mind, my Lance."

"Don't call me that."

"But that is the truth. Your mind sees it as well. Look around, tell me you do not see the ruin of your own mind beginning."

Lance swallowed thickly as another peal of lightning split the sky and thunder was quick to rumble. These were no comforting rainstorms though, no light show to enjoy or thunder to shriek childishly at and cuddle under blankets knowing it couldn't actually hurt.

Another clap separated the sky and Lance hated how he startled at it.

Haggar chuckled. "You are losing your will, my Lance. You are breaking. And thus... you are now mine."

"I'm--"

"Mine," she repeated.

The word hurt.

He felt it, a stabbing pain above his heart and with it came a surge of cruel laughter and even crueler hands.

No.

No.

He couldn't let it.

This was his mind. She had no power here. He'd proven it once and he would show her again.

He would keep showing her until he drew his last breath.

"I'm not," he all but snarled. "I'm not yours. I'm not weak. And I will protect my friends."

The ocean swirled.

"You will try," Haggar told him, "but you will fail. It is your nature after all."

Darkness swirled at her words, memories pushed in once more, full of screams and cries and pathetic and clanking chains and--

No.

No more.

"I won't," Lance retorted. "I won't fail them. I will protect them."

And with each word he spoke he could feel a warmth building in him, a light. The memories of before were replaced with smiles and laughter and light and the landscape about him grew brighter, he stars peeking out from behind cloud cover and the lightning vanishing.

But even better, his bayard was back in his hand and he could feel the pull of the ocean in his mind
and he lifted a wave, sending it pummeling against Haggar's lower half in warning.

But she did not seem scared at all by the display.

Instead...

She smiled.

"Oh, my Lance," she murmured. "I look very much forward to it."

He blinked.

That... that was not what he'd expected.

He readied his bayard and she chuckled, holding up her hands placatingly.

"Now, now, no need for violence. I shall let you have this victory."

She disappeared from sight...

...and reappeared right next to him, one hand forcing the muzzle of his bayard down and the other reaching out to brush his cheek. "It shall be your last."

And with a crackle of black lightning, so hot, so close, her fingertips searing against his cheek, she vanished.

The beach was silent.

Lance discovered his legs no longer wished to hold him up and he followed them to the ground, landing with a muffled thump on the sand, bayard fading out.

What was that?

What had just happened?

He brought a shaking hand to his cheek, wincing as he felt the light burn she had left behind.

What did she want with him?

This... this was no longer about just information. She hadn't asked him once about them, hadn't tried to press in on his thoughts, which even now he kept locked tightly behind the mental tidal wave.

Instead she had... had what? Threatened him? He wasn't even sure if that was accurate.

She had... wanted him.

He shuddered.

Why?

Why was she so interested in him? He was nothing special. He thought he'd shown that already. All he really had going for him was the ability to fire a gun and she couldn't possibly find that all that intriguing.

So why?

Was this all just some roundabout way to get the information? Something he wasn't seeing? He may
have sharp eyes but he knew he didn't see everything. Far, far from it.

What did she want from him?

He wrapped his arms about his knees and pressed his cheek against them, trying to draw comfort from his own touch.

It didn't help.

What he'd give for one of Hunk's hugs right now. To be wrapped up and just ensconced in all that warmth and safety that never failed to make him feel better.

He missed Hunk.

He missed all of them. Even Keith.

He missed them so much it hurt. His hands went to his chest as though to hold his heart in, feeling it beating and pulsing.

The wind picked up around him again and a rumble of thunder sounded on the horizon.

Lance whimpered and ducked his head against his knees.

Haggar had called the changes in his mindscape the beginnings of ruin, of him losing his will.

Was she right?

He had a sick feeling she was.

He'd failed in his escape attempt and he knew without a doubt there would not be another one. He had already known there would be no trade; his life was insignificant compared to the Black Lion and what she represented to the universe. There would be no rescue.

He was going to die here.

His hope was going to die too.

It already was.

When was the last time he'd smiled?

The question came to him and with it a sense of loss that ached in his chest.

When was the last time he'd smiled?

It had been here, in the mindscape. When he'd been swimming in the ocean.

Before...

Before he'd been dragged under bloody waves.

Lance shuddered at the reminder of that pain.

He... he should smile again. Laugh. That was who he was, right? He would feel better.

He twitched his lips up into a smile and then a grin. It felt fake. A mask. He let it fall, stomach churning.
He tried to think of a happy memory; something to make him laugh. But the normal repertoire: flying with Blue, beating the Gladiator with his team, playing with his siblings, teasing his friends about anything and everything, only brought tears to his eyes.

Because those would forever only be memories.

They couldn't happen again because he was going to die here.

He would never see them again.

The only hope he had now...

Was that his death would be quick. And soon. Before he could hurt them, hurt the universe, any more than he already had.

There was no real hope here, not anymore.

He knew how this was going to end.

He cast his eyes to the sky, but the stars were gone behind thick clouds. He shivered as a sharp breeze blew off the ocean and squeezed his arms tighter about himself in his self-made hug.

It didn't help.

The wind howled and the ocean roared.

He tried desperately to think of something, anything, to lift his spirits, to turn his mindscape back into calm waves and a peaceful beach.

He didn't want this.

But every memory only brought a sense of loss.

Another sob.

More pain.

Blood began to trickle from his hands.

Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed overhead.

And Lance cried. Tears ran down his cheeks in a never ending flow, dripping silently to the sand to mingle with the growing pool of blood that even the ocean could never wash away.

He sobbed even though he knew he shouldn't.

He was breaking.

This was what Haggar wanted. He had to stop.

But he couldn't.

He tried.

He failed. Just like Haggar said he would.

He always failed.
His shoulders shook harder now. Blood poured more freely as wounds began to pepper across his body.

The sky opened up above with a clap of thunder, torrents of cold rain pelting the beach.

Lance turned his face up into the storm, the droplets blurring his vision through the tears. He tried one last time to muster up a smile. It was rain. He loved the rain.

Nothing.

He turned his head down and buried it against upturned knees so he didn't have to face the pathetic, weak failure he had become.

And both the boy and the sky cried.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Wednesday y'all! Isn't this just the thing to brighten up your day? -nervous laughter- I do hope you enjoyed it though! We've got more of Haggar being deliciously creepy and our blue boy who just wants to go home.

Special thanks to the lovely reviewers for taking a tick to leave a comment. I really appreciate it! You seriously all amaze me every week and I am so thankful to have such lovely people as yourselves encouraging me. ♥

This weekend I will be at Anime Midwest (Rosemont, Ill.) selling my work in the artist alley under the name of IcyPanther's Art Shop (Spot N3). If you'll be there do come say hello! ♥ If you mention the title of this fic and your penname get a free Voltron button! You can find more details about my art over at my facebook, facebook.com/icypantherartshop.

As always, please do drop a comment below. Reviews feed the author's soul, ya know. Thanks everyone!
"I'm going to be sick," Hunk announced as the video feed went dark.

Pidge scrambled from her spot in Hunk's lap and joined Keith on the other side of the couch while Hunk made a mad dash for the adjoined restroom of the lounge. Both winced as the sound of retching began and Keith felt his own stomach twist. He pressed a hand to it, swallowing thickly.

Watching that had been a mistake.

He should have listened to Shiro.

And yet if he had then Pidge would have watched it by herself and...

He glanced down at the auburn head, bowed over the laptop screen with the barest tremble to her form. He lifted a hand up and then lowered it back to his side.

He didn't know how to comfort her.

He wasn't sure anything could.

What they had seen... He shuddered himself. The Galrans had been... ruthless. What they called justice was just an excuse to torture and the fact they had all been so... so eager to see someone in pain.

Not just someone.

Lance.

Keith couldn't ever believe he'd doubted Lance's strength, his commitment. Guilt anew added to his churning stomach.

Lance had... had endured Keith settled on. He'd held his head high, refused to give into the no doubt taunts that had been hissed out to him, and kept most of his suffering locked inside. And even when he had screamed... Keith winced, the sound even now echoing in his mind and he wasn't sure it would ever leave, so badly was it imprinted. Even when he had screamed and cried he had been strong in that moment.

Keith felt even more sick that this was what it took for him to admire that inner strength of his teammate that had been there all along.

Keith had been the one too weak, too stupid, to see it.

He needed to apologize, to take back all of the biting, cruel words that he couldn't believe he'd ever thought were the words of a leader, let alone a teammate. He'd been trying to fix Lance when the only one who really needed fixed was himself.

And if the last part of the transmission was correct... he'd be getting the opportunity to apologize sooner than he thought.

Assuming, that was, that they made it in time.
After the video feed had ended, screen going dark, Pidge had nudged Hunk and removed the headphones when that hadn't gotten the reaction she'd wanted. It was no surprise; the two of them had spent a good chunk of the transmission cringing backwards and digging hands into Hunk's vest and shirt. Keith had honestly had only gotten through it by having Hunk's steady support around his shoulder and the grounding his tangled hand in Hunk's vest had offered.

Once Hunk had realized that yes, it was over, he'd found his arms full of Pidge and Keith had delicately shifted aside, rubbing at his own arms instead. Pidge needed Hunk more, even though it had been she who had insisted on watching. That, and Keith felt that he didn't deserve any more than he had been offered. Not when he had caused Lance such pain. It was fitting that he suffered too, even if it couldn't even compare to what Lance was going through.

So when Haggar had suddenly popped up on the screen, still open on Pidge's lap, they had all given starts and Hunk had yelped. The Druid was clearly holding a conversation with the others, but Pidge wasn't able to access a microphone on the bridge (it displayed an error message and Hunk quietly suggested that Allura may have wrecked the console again) so they were forced to hear only one-side.

What they heard was not good.

Apparently Haggar had offered a chance for them to speak with Lance, but that was no longer possible. Keith's blood boiled. He knew they had ways of forcibly waking Lance up; he'd seen it. And although it seemed as though it hurt he had no doubt Lance wouldn't have minded the forced consciousness if he'd known it could lead to being able to speak with the team.

The next part of the conversation had been choppy, clearly between Allura and Haggar, although the part they had heard had made them all exchange uncomfortable glances. Pawns? Death sentence? A facade of caring?

"That's not true," Hunk had whispered, shaking his head. "She's not like that." Allura he would admit was not the friendliest, but he didn't think she was unkind. She had a lot of expectations placed upon her, both from her royal upbringing and what the Galra had done to the universe in her ten thousand year stasis. That didn't mean she didn't care.

Hunk had believed so, but he was still relieved when Haggar had seemed to confirm the same, seeming surprised and amused at whatever Allura's answer had been to what the Blue Paladin was to her. Hunk wondered what her answer had been.

And then all of the relief had vanished at Haggar's next words.

"I want the Blue Paladin."

What?

Haggar had gone on then, a possessive quality to her voice, as she described how she no longer wished to continue the trade, referenced how she had known they would be attempting some sort of rescue, had never planned to uphold their own end of the trade of the Black Lion.

"She can't," Pidge had gasped. "She can't do that."

That seemed to be the sentiment on the bridge as Haggar's amusement had fallen away and she had reoutlined the terms of the original trade. Only now it had a deadline of twenty hours.

Twenty hours was impossible.
Haggar had ended the transmission with the same calling she had forced Lance to speak on the recording, and that was when Hunk had lost the battle with his twisting stomach and now here they were.

"I don't understand," Pidge murmured, twisting her hands in her lap. She looked to Keith. "What does she want with Lance?"

Keith shook his head. He had no idea.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

The way Haggar had spoken about Lance was more than a little disturbing.

"What do we do?" she asked, voice small.

Keith realized she was looking to him for an answer, for a reassurance.

He shook his head, unsure.

He didn't have any to give.

He didn't know what to do.

Pidge's eyes filled with the onset of tears.

Hunk arrived back then and Keith let out a shuddering breath, relieved.

Hunk settled onto the couch and Pidge moved immediately back to his side, leaving Keith alone again in the corner. He pushed down the pang of loss he didn't quite understand. It was his own fault. She had reached out and he hadn't been able to do anything.

He always just made things worse.

"Hey, hey," Hunk murmured, draping an arm over Pidge's shoulders and rubbing gently.

"What do we do?" she asked him and Keith tensed, waiting for the answer he couldn't find.

"I don't know," Hunk said quietly. "But we'll figure something out. We're..." he swallowed thickly. "We're going to rescue Lance."

And although Keith knew that Hunk could not promise that, could not guarantee anything, he found his own shoulders loosening from the tension and Pidge too gave a small nod, uncurling slightly. No matter how unsure, how scared, Hunk had sounded when he said it, he had said it and believed it.

Keith felt guilt flare again. All he'd done was scare Pidge.

He really did always just make things worse.

"Keith?" Hunk called gently and Keith startled, catching dark honey eyes looking at him over Pidge's head and an inclination of his own, an invitation to come sit with them again. Keith gave the barest shake of his head. He couldn't. Not again.

He didn't deserve it.

He hated the hurt that flashed in Hunk's eyes, but the larger boy mustered a small smile and nod.
The lounge fell into quiet, broken only by Pidge's soft sniffles.

She didn't regret her decision though, she told herself. As horrific as that had been, she knew not knowing would have been worse.

Maybe.

She sniffled again. Maybe Keith had been right.

Even with her eyes closed she could still see the torture playing out. Still hear Lance's shrieks and the cheering of the crowd. She wasn't sure honestly if her imagination would have been the worst case scenario in this incident.

But there was no use in dwelling on if it had been right or wrong. It had happened and it was over now.

She peeked her head out from where she'd tucked it against Hunk's chest, turning to catch sight of Keith.

He looked pale. And for Keith...

He looked scared, his eyes a little too wide, his arms clutching onto his opposite shoulders and grip whitening what was visible of his fingers.

She'd done that.

"Sorry," she whispered, the word barely audible.

"Hm? You say something?" Hunk asked.

Pidge straightened up although she didn't disentangle herself from Hunk's hold.

"Keith," she whispered and bright purple eyes turned to her. "I'm sorry."

His eyes widened further. "...what?"

"You didn't want to watch it," she said, forcing herself to hold his gaze. "And... and you did. For me. So... I'm sorry. And... thank you."

He gave a slow inclination of his head, something unreadable on his face.

Hurried footsteps sounded then and all looked up as Shiro burst into the lounge. A look of surprise washed over his face as he spotted Pidge and Hunk too and then... then his eyes narrowed in on the laptop.

Keith's shoulders curled.

"You saw?" Shiro's voice was almost flat and Keith ducked his head down.

He couldn't bear to see the disappointment there.

"They saw?" came a breathless echo as Allura entered, followed by Coran.

"It was me," Pidge said, speaking as she saw Shiro's expression zero in on Keith, who looked... looked so small. Guilt roiled in her again. "I wanted to watch it. I had to watch it, Shiro. Keith... he tried to talk me out of it."
She met Shiro's eyes straight on, trying to generate both an apology and truth.

"You saw it then?" he asked, frown giving way to concern. "Pidge..."

"Me and Keith," she said. "He... he wouldn't let me watch it alone. Hunk tried, but... but after," she
shook her head. She was relieved though when Shiro's softened gaze turned to Keith and he crossed
the room in a few strides, placing a hand on the curved shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

Allura was not so quick to forgive, her expression still hard. "Shiro issued that order to protect you,"
she said, jeweled eyes boring into Pidge so hard that the young girl had to look away. "Someone
your age should not bear witness to such atrocities."

"That's... that's not fair," Keith said, raising his head. He had not forgotten Haggar's words about the
use of Paladins by the Alteans. "Someone our age? When you put us into this war?" His gaze
narrowed. "What are we to you, Princess?"

"Keith!" Shiro admonished but Keith didn't take back his words.

Allura met his eyes, expression solemn rather than the ire Keith had honestly expected from the tone.
"As I told Haggar," she said softly, "I would like to consider you as friends. I know I have not been
the most... approachable, in your time here, but..." She wrung her hands together. "I do care about
you all. I do not know what all you heard but you are not just soldiers to me." Not anymore, she
added silently. "Please, I implore you to believe me."

"Tell us what else was said," Keith said instead. "We only heard Haggar's half of the conversation.
Why is she altering the trade?" Depending on what he heard he would make his decision.

Allura inclined her head. "Very well. That is fair."

Allura and Coran took turns with Shiro remaining quiet, hand resting on Keith's shoulder although
whether it was to comfort Keith, ground himself or a bit of both Keith wasn't entirely certain,
explaining what had been discussed and what their suspicions were.

"She's a parasite," Pidge said faintly as Coran came to a close. "To just use his quintessence over and
over and... It won't ever run out?"

"It may indeed get weaker over time," Coran said quietly, "as eventually his spirit will no doubt
break under such conditions. But disappear? No. It will remain as long as he lives and the Druids
have ways of making sure death is not obtainable."

"So what are we doing?" Keith asked, looking to Allura.

"We will rescue Lance," she said, his name rolling off her tongue with a strange accent that sounded
both foreign and yet familiar.

It sounded right.

Keith inclined his head back to her and he could hear Hunk's breath of relief at the action and Allura
gave him a small, sincere smile.

A soft beep echoed in the lounge from both Pidge's laptop and Coran's always present tablet. Both
reacted immediately and were followed by matching frowns.

"Trade instructions," Coran said, the message having been sent on the same transmission channel.
He looked up from the datapad. "Princess, we may have another complication."
"All of the Lions have to be present," Pidge read. "Except Blue." She scowled. "They know we have cloaking abilities. It's their way of making sure we're all there. Assholes."

Shiro didn't even call her on the language as he read the laptop from over Keith's shoulder.

"The Black Lion is to be piloted by Number One," Coran continued, "and carry the shuttle. He is then to disembark, retrieve Lance, leave the Black Lion, and return via the shuttle to space. We will be escorted by Galra ships both to the trade platform and from it."

"No mention of a perimeter," Pidge scowled. "Just 'when we arrive,' which could be anywhere, anytime." At that her face fell. "About that. The time. How are we going to make it?"

"I do not know," Allura said softly. "I had hoped that you or the Yell– Hunk," she corrected herself and Hunk's eyes widened at the actual use of his name, "would have some ideas."

Pidge looked to Hunk and saw the same troubled expression staring back at her.

"I can't think of anything," Hunk admitted quietly. "The thrusters physically can't be increased anymore without literally blowing up. They're straining already as is."

"What if we just too the Lions?" Pidge asked. "They're smaller, they could travel faster through the quadrant."

"The Red Lion may be able to do so, and that is a strong may," Coran said, "but the rest of the Lions? No chance. That would also leave all of you Paladins flying at breakneck speeds for the next twenty varga with no rest whatsoever."

"So that's their plan," Keith said quietly. "We all rush in, exhausted, with no time for a rescue plan and fall right into their hands." He looked up at Allura. "They'll take all of our Lions and we'll be too weak to do anything about it."

"It would be too much of an opportunity for Zarkon to pass up," Pidge murmured. "All of the Lions except Blue and their Paladins too?"

"I fear that Zarkon no longer has honor to speak of," Allura admitted softly. "This may indeed be their plan and... and I will not lose anyone else."

Hunk swallowed. "What are you saying?"

"We need a new plan of our own."

Her words brought hope but also despair. Because while they were not giving up... they had no idea how to beat the deadline imposed and sitting around in the lounge thinking was only sending more precious minutes ticking by.

"We're positive we can't wormhole?" Shiro asked.

"That would be correct," Coran sighed. "We have no way of knowing what debris has entered our path and should it be anything larger than say the Green Lion, clipping it at that speed would result in instant death for us all. But," Coran straightened from where he'd seated himself on the opposite couch. "You may be on to something, lad."

Pidge frowned. "But you just said..."

"A half jump," Coran put in. "It's risky and I admit I've only seen it done successfully one time"
many, many, many, many deca-phoebs ago. But," he looked to Keith and Shiro. "We have in our 
presence the two most remarkable pilots I have ever witnessed in my many years. It could be 
possible."

"What does that mean?" Keith asked, willing the color trying to come to his cheeks at Coran's words 
away. "Half-jump?"

"Short version, we can put the castle into half of the jump speed it uses when navigating a 
wormhole," Coran explained. "To pilot at such a speed... it would be catastrophic if we were to clip 
even the smallest asteroid, let alone run headlong into one. You'd have a nano, no, half of a nano-
tick, to comprehend."

"But it can be done," Shiro said slowly, hope rising.

"Yes... In theory."

"Coran, what would our time look like if we pursued this half jump? Allura asked.

Coran counted on his fingers. "If we were to engage in a half jump right now we would be within 
the coordinates in... the next twelve varga."

Eyes lit up around the room. Twelve hours? That left a nearly eight hour window in which the Galra 
would not be expecting them, more than enough time to stage a rescue mission and get out before 
they even know what was happening.

"But," Coran held up a hand. "We cannot do that."

"Why not?" Allura demanded.

"We cannot do that because such a feat would mean asking Numbers One and Four to pilot the 
castle non-stop at that speed for the next twelve varga straight," Coran said. His voice became more 
solemn. "They would die, Princess. The strain placed upon their bodies from such a venture would 
kill them."

That...

That put a damper on the idea.

"However," Coran continued, "if they were to pilot the castle at half jump for say... five varga, that 
would decrease our timeline by another five varga, placing us at around nineteen varga until 
destination and within the deadline."

"Five?" Keith repeated, shaking his head. "Coran, I can do more. We can--"

"No," Coran's voice was sharp. "I admire your determination, lad, but your body physically cannot 
handle more than that. It is not just the piloting. You are connecting to the castle; it will drain you in 
ways you cannot imagine."

"We'll do it," Shiro said, squeezing Keith's shoulder. "We'll do whatever we can."

"That doesn't leave us much time for the rescue," Hunk put in, worrying his hands. "And we don't 
know where the Galra are going to be or when they'll spot us or how we can get the Green Lion 
away to rescue Lance if all of the Lions have to be present and--"

"Hunk, buddy, breathe," Shiro reached over the back of the couch and put a heavy metal arm on
"Hunk's shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

"What if we could trick the Galra?" Pidge asked, tapping her chin, a familiar look in her eyes she got whenever one of her mad (genius) ideas came to her. "I can create holographic projections with my bayard, right? What if I could hook it up to Green and project the image of... Oh, wait." Pidge flushed. "I can't project the Green Lion from the Green Lion. That would be stupid."

"But could you project a different Lion?" Hunk asked, sitting forward excitedly. His stomach was turning with nerves but this time that energy had an outlet and it was taking all he had to not word vomit his idea.

"Yeah, but if we need Green for the rescue mission then she can't be in two places at once."

"What if Green didn't go?" Hunk turned to look at Keith. "Red is the fastest Lion, right? And we'll barely be making it in time. What if Green projects an image of Red and then the Red Lion goes to retrieve Lance instead? You could wait until we've been spotted and then take off and you'd still beat us there. Pidge!" He turned to her without waiting for a response. "You can make cloaking for the Red Lion, right? If we don't have to waste any of it on scouting out a perimeter that'll give the Red Lion like a whole hour to get in and out. And then Keith," he flipped back around, "you and Shiro can rescue Lance while the rest of us pretend to do the trade and then bam!" he smashed his hands into a clap, "we all hightail it out of there!"

Everyone stared.

Hunk felt his cheeks darken. "Or, um, I mean--"

"I think it is an excellent idea," Allura inputted.

"It has merit," Pidge agreed. "But one big hold up. I'm the hacker. If Keith goes instead then we can't access the cameras and you'll be walking around the base blind. I've been working on the suit camouflage and I have it up to about half a varga, but that's nowhere near enough time to search an entire ship for Lance."

"Is there some other way to track him?" Shiro asked.

"I... could probably rig up a DNA scanner," Hunk said with a nod. "It'll take me a couple varga and it won't be very specific, but... but maybe?"

"Sounds great to me, buddy," Shiro smiled. "Everyone?"

"One more thing," Pidge held up a finger. "We're all assuming Lance is going to be in lockup of some sort. What... what if he isn't? What if he really is out there for the trade?"

"Then we'll need a way to retrieve him that the Galrans won't be expecting," Shiro mused.

"What about the Blue Lion?" Allura asked quietly.

All eyes turned to her.

"She allowed me to pilot her once before," Allura continued. "Perhaps she will allow me to do so again. If the Blue Lion could also have a cloaking feature applied then she and I could remain on standby and intervene if it is determined that Lance is indeed being traded."

"And the Black Lion?" Hunk asked. "Who's going to pilot her?"
"I'll talk to her," Shiro said. "I think she may be able to fly this one solo."

"Is that wise?" Allura frowned. "Zarkon will be there and he still has a connection to the Black Lion, like it or not."

"Do you have a better idea?" Keith challenged. Shiro let out a soft sigh but Allura lowered her eyes.

"No. I do not."

"Pidge," Shiro looked to the small girl still wrapped up in Hunk's arms. "Can you do all of that? We'll need cloaking on the Red and Blue Lions, your holographic projector, the cloaking on the suits."

"I... Y-yes. I can. I will."

But even with the determined look in her eye Shiro could see the exhaustion at the Herculean task already setting in.

He was asking so much of her. Of all of them.

But they would do it.

For Lance.

They were all tired, Allura realized as she took in the humans all gathered together on the one couch. Physical exhaustion, yes, but their spirits were tired too. They had been operating non-stop trying to reach Lance and it was starting to show. They were expecting too much out of too little. There was no possible way for just the six of them to carry out the magnitude of work that needed to be done in the short timeframe.

A soothing presence touched her mind then and her eyes widened at the projections that were filling her. "The mice," she whispered, drawing everyone's attention. "They wish to help us."

"Uh, no offense to the little guys, but how?" Hunk asked.

Pidge however brightened. "If you gave them instructions, Allura, could they assemble the wiring for Red's cloaking? It's all of the interior paneling that takes the most time and they'd be able to go right in there while I updated the specs. And then I could concentrate on the holographic projector. It would cut it down to eight, no, seven hours!"

"Yes," Allura said, receiving the affirmative from the mice.

"I can take care of the cloaking for Blue if you give me a base model," Hunk volunteered. "If I can get your schematics I'm sure I can figure it out within the varga. Oh, wait, the scanner..."

"I will do the cloaking for the Blue Lion," Coran said. "Number Two, you focus on that scanner."

"What can we do?" Keith asked.

"Rest," Coran answered immediately.

Keith frowned. That wasn't helping.

"You need rest, my boy," he said gently. "You as well, Number One. Rest and nutrients to allow your bodies to operate at their fullest potential for the half jump. If you flag even for a moment it will spell all of our deaths."
Both shot him incredulous looks.

"No pressure, right?" Pidge said in the sudden silence.

"There is no way I can sleep right now," Keith said, crossing his arms and Shiro echoed his sentiment. His mind was racing with all of the plans, the torture, the screams. He wasn't sure he'd be sleeping for the next week let alone in the next hour.

"It is not a request," Allura said. "Piloting the castle is no easy task and it takes a toll on the body. I have spent deca-phoebs practicing and training and even this idea is daunting to me. I will do what I can to sustain your bodies while you fly, but you must help me to do so. Please, rest. At least eight varga."

"Eight varga?" Keith repeated, shaking his head in protest.

"I will pilot the castle in the interim at our current speed," Allura continued. "That shall bring us down to about sixteen varga and then once you are able to pilot another ten. That will leave us with approximately six varga in which for you to rest and recuperate from the half jump and I will pilot the castle the rest of the way."

"Are you going to make it?" Pidge asked, raising an eyebrow at the princess. "Because correct me if I'm wrong, but that sounds like a hell of a lot on you."

"I will assist in piloting as well for the latter half," Coran said, "so the Princess may rest and convene with the Blue Lion." He held up his arm, flexing a bicep beneath his jacket. "Us Alteans are hardy folk. We're up for this undertaking."

"All right," Shiro said slowly. His mind was thrumming but he could feel the exhaustion lingering behind it. He was about to be responsible for the lives of everyone on board attempting to pilot in a way that was practically impossible. If this was what it took to get Lance back he would do it, and if that meant forcing his body to try and sleep he would do that too. He placed a warm hand on Keith's shoulder. "Let's go."

"I don't think I can sleep," Keith murmured as the two left the room and headed for their personal quarters. "I am tired," he said, raising his hand to ward off any protest, "but..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

Shiro looked down at the dark head next to him, shoulders hunched in again and a lips pressed thin. Keith was scared, he realized.

"Keith," he murmured, placing a hand on the stiff back. It did not release in the slightest. "Keith," he said a bit louder but no less gently. Keith finally looked up at him then and Shiro's stomach clenched at how young Keith looked then. It was reminding him of when the two had first met all over again.

It was also reminding him that Keith had barely spoken to him, not really, since they'd been reunited. The hug, the tears, as they cleaned out the Blue Lion's cockpit had been the closest he'd come to seeing the emotions Keith seemed dead-set on hiding.

"Hey," he stopped them from walking, pivoting himself to stand in front of Keith, arms heavy on his shoulders. "Buddy, talk to me. Please."

Keith's throat bobbed and purple eyes, with a sheen to them Shiro was not expecting, lifted to meet
"Is... Is Lance going to be okay?" Keith whispered. "After this?"

Because Keith had seen a lot growing up, bouncing around from foster home to foster home. He had seen abuse in all its forms; the physical pain, the biting words, the parents who thought they had known best and had insisted "it's for your own good." He'd seen the ways kids had shut down, curled in on themselves. He'd watched them fade as their happiness and dreams were stripped away as cold-reality and sometimes the hiss of a leather belt sunk in.

He knew of a couple kids who hadn't made it out. They'd crashed and burned and had either disappeared into the night or left bloody scars behind. If it hadn't been for Shiro's appearance in his life and his subsequent enrollment in the Garrison he might not have made it either. He'd have become another statistic, another case swept into a pile of discarded kids who had never meant a thing to anyone.

And although being a prisoner of Galra was so much different than being an unwanted kid in the foster system, they were alike in a way. And Keith didn't want Lance — the beacon of innocence and optimism and life — to burn out like he'd seen happen to so many. And what he had seen from the recordings... he knew now why he had felt so disturbed by Haggar's words. She was the worst of all of his foster families rolled into one – abusive and cruel and greedy and only in it for herself.

And Lance was with her. Alone. And in such pain that Keith didn't even want to think about it anymore.

Shiro's eyes widened and then softened. "You're really worried about him," he observed.

Keith nodded, not trusting himself to speak as he swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat.

"I'm worried too," Shiro admitted quietly, hands tightening on Keith's shoulders. "But Lance is strong. Stronger than most give him credit for."

"Like me," Keith muttered, alarmed to feel tears starting to sting his eyes. "I was so... so mean to him, Shiro. I never meant to be. I just," Keith tried to swallow back his sob. "He must hate me and thinks I hate him and I don't but—"

He was cut off as Shiro pulled him into one of the tightest hugs of his life and after a few seconds he brought his own arms up and clung to Shiro, burying his face into the broad chest.

"Lance doesn't hate you," Shiro reassured quietly, relieved beyond measure that it was all finally coming out. That Keith was talking and feeling again and allowing himself to do so.

"But—"

"He doesn't," Shiro interrupted gently, thumb rubbing a soothing circle out against Keith's shoulder. "I know you two have had your differences, but it sounds like you're trying to put them behind you and be a better friend. Lance is really going to need that when we get him back."

Keith nodded his head against Shiro's chest.

"He will be okay," Shiro continued. "It might take some time, but he's got all of us behind him and we won't let him forget it. Okay? Everything is going to turn out all right."

Shiro believed that too. He had seen time and again now Lance's resilience, his courage. If any of them could get through this with their heart and soul still intact he knew without a doubt it was
Lance.

That didn't make him any less frightened though for what he could only imagine Haggar was putting him through now that he had drawn her personal interest.

"Thanks, Shiro," Keith said quietly, breaking him from his spiraling thoughts and he gave the smaller boy another squeeze, grateful for the interruption. "But I—"

"Still can't sleep," Shiro finished with a sigh. "I know. Come with me, I have an idea."

He led Keith past the Red Paladin's room and to his own. It was furnished the same as Keith's, but in a black and white color scheme. Shiro bustled over to the small closet and pulled down some extra blankets and pillows.

"What are you doing?" Keith asked as Shiro laid them out on the floor next to his bed.

"We're going to have a sleepover. A throwback to old times, right?"

The barest smile turned up Keith's face. "I don't see a cot."

"It was the comfiest bed I've ever slept on indeed," Shiro smirked, recalling the small, creaky cot he'd set up on when Keith had first moved into the Garrison. He'd forced Keith to take his bed despite the boy's protests as the doctor had ordered him to sleep sitting upright due to his bruised ribs, one of the many injuries he'd sustained in the foster situation Shiro had helped to remove him from. "Two whole nights of pure bliss."

Keith rolled his eyes. Shiro felt his heart lift at the familiar, exasperated gesture.

"Besides, this way we can both hold each other accountable to actually attempting to sleep," Shiro continued. And, although he didn't say it, to wake each other up if they had a nightmare. "We've got eight varga to go, princess' orders. Go ahead and take the bed, I'll be good here."

"I can't take your bed!" Keith exclaimed.

"And now why does that argument sound familiar?"

"Shiro, I can't," Keith protested. Shiro fixed him with a look that brokered no argument. Keith let out a put upon sigh and kicked off his boots with a low curse.

Shiro smirked. "I should say, this is my own selfish comfort. That bed? Not half as comfy as the cot and definitely not as comfortable as the floor."

"You're such a liar," came the laugh.

"I take offense to that," Shiro said, already settling down in his blanket nest. "This definitely beats the gravel and rocks that we had at the…" he trailed off, eyes widening and a flush darkening his cheeks.

What had he just said?

He was more tired than he'd thought.

Keith's eyes were wide too and he whispered out Shiro's name.

"Bed," Shiro ordered, voice not at all thick. "Now."
Keith obeyed, if only because Shiro looked shaken by the slip.

Shaken and ashamed.

That wasn't okay.

"Shiro?" Keith whispered as the lights turned off above them, leaving only faint outlines around the door.

"Not now, Keith."

Shiro's voice was flat with the faintest border of something else below it.

"Yes, now," Keith insisted, sitting up. "Shiro, please. You... you've always looked out for me. Maybe... maybe I can finally look out for you."

Shiro let out a heavy sigh. "I... thanks, buddy. But..."

"I'm not a kid anymore, Shiro," Keith protested. "Tell me! Talk to me! You..." he swallowed thickly. "You used to. Before. R-remember?" Keith rubbed a hand across his eyes, hating the tears cropping up but unable to stop them or the words spilling from his mouth. "You haven't talked to me at all, Shiro, about anything up here. You just... just keep it all inside and I know you're hurting. And I... did I do something wr-wrong? Is that why? I'm sorry if I did. I know you're mad I got kicked out. I'm sorry. But I just... and they said..."

There was the rustling of blankets and Shiro's silhouette showed he was sitting up now too. "Keith, buddy, no, no." He was getting up then, struggling out of his nest and pulling himself onto the bed next to Keith, wrapping up the shuddering form in a hug.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, "I'm sorry. It's not you buddy, it's not. I promise. I just..." It was his turn to swallow thickly. "I don't remember most of it," he said quietly, breathing in the harsh scent of the Altean soap that Keith insisted worked just fine as shampoo. "And what I do remember I wish I didn't. They're... they're not good memories, Keith. At all. I don't want to burden anyone else with them."

Keith gently shifted, his hand coming up to clutch in Shiro's shirt. "I'll listen. If... if you want to talk about it. If it'll help."

Shiro let out a sigh. He knew, ultimately, it wouldn't be such a bad idea to do so. The memories he had regained — mostly from nightmares — haunted him even more now; snippets and flashes of a bigger picture of horror that he couldn't follow. They scared him just as much as not knowing and they festered, coming out at the worst times and sending him from his bed at night. Even more recently he'd felt them trying to break free from where he'd locked them away, Haggar's very presence and voice summoning many, but he forced himself to keep them away.

He couldn't afford to fall into them now. He couldn't afford to be anything but strong. Not when the team was looking to him for guidance.

But maybe...

Maybe Keith was right.

This could help.

"I remember sleeping in the arena," Shiro said quietly, voice barely audible even to him. Keith
stiffened in his arms and his grip tightened on Shiro's shirt. "Not... not most nights, I don't think. But... tournaments, maybe. I remember a lot of fighting. Exhaustion. The ground wasn't comfortable; a lot of rocks and... and other things.

"I got hurt," Shiro continued. "My arm. It was... it was bad." The prosthetic twinged. "I... I think I slept on it. Or, well, lied on it. I don't remember sleeping much. I remember feeling it just... bleeding. All night." He shook his head. "I... don't remember anything I think past that with it. So I think," he swallowed, "I think that was my last night of... of having it. Before Haggar..."

"Shiro..." Keith's hand tightened and he pressed his forehead against Shiro's chest.

"It's fine—"

"No it's not!" Keith jerked his head up, nearly clipping Shiro's chin. "It's not fine, Shiro. I'm... I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, buddy," Shiro murmured after a moment. "For listening. I... thank you." Shiro's chest felt tighter from giving voice to the memory, but at the same time his head felt a little clearer.

It had been a good idea.

He still wasn't sure he wanted to do it again. Keith didn't need to hear those sorts of horrors, not when they were over and done with and there was nothing to gain from dwelling on them.

"Anytime," Keith whispered. "Just... please don't shut me out, Shiro. I... I missed you. I can't lose you again."

"I missed you too," Shiro murmured. He couldn't remember but he had no doubt he'd thought of Keith every day when he was with the Galra. "And I'm not going anywhere."

Keith gave a nod against his chest, knowing better than to ask for a promise that could all too easily be broken, and the pulled out of the embrace. Shiro let him go.

"We do need to get some sleep," Shiro said gently as Keith laid back down, one hand sliding beneath the pillow and the other pressed against his stomach, cuddling the blanket to him in a way that was so familiar Shiro found himself smiling despite the still heavy feeling in his chest.

"I know," came the soft response. "I'll try."

Shiro laid a hand atop Keith's head, gently ruffling the dark locks. "Good." Keith didn't even try to swat him away, leaning instead into the touch.

Shiro felt like he could finally draw a breath.

He retreated back to his own blanket nest, snuggling down into it and comforted by Keith's steady breaths, which after a few dobashes deepened further into sleep.

Shiro lay awake for a while longer, trying to empty his mind from the screams and cries of Lance that were merging with his own. He concentrated instead on Keith's slumbering form, peaceful and safe and so, so relieved that at least if all of this had to happen he would have his brother by his side.

And for the first time that Shiro could remember, he slept without nightmares.
This chapter I eased off on the Langst a bit and instead we got some... fluffy-angst with Shiro and Keith. Is fluffy-angst a thing? I'm making it a thing. I'm also apparently going more into Keith's backstory than originally planned, but I can't help myself. I have a headcanon with the foster system and it might make a few more appearances throughout. In addition to all that hug-inducing goodness I also got to (hopefully not too much) bore you with planning. But it's good planning that rescues Lance so that makes it awesome :D

Big thanks to the amazing reviewers who kept me motivated. Y'all are awesome. Thanks to: killjoy2246, koalaoshiz, nmirah, NewandOld, WolfFire, hazael, BubbleGumi, Fey_79, Proxy_17, nocturnalspork, AnaStick, heyheroics, the_green_paladin, ImmortalFey, mememachine, a simple cactus, AngelofGrace96, GummyW0rm, Ms. J, Katnined, simplynel, Louder_than_anything, star_set, burple12345, PuppetMaster55, maychorian, mynameisquiche, and BrieCheese. Seriously, I love you all so much!

Also, thanks to BubbleGumi, we will now be wearing blue tears and black veils on Wednesdays in honor of Lance. I still don't have the veil, but I am dressed all in black as of this posting as a show of solidarity.♥

And, and AND! Color has fanart! ♥ I am over the moon! The awesomely talented heyheroics drew some gorgeous pieces of Lance in his mindscape. I am a failure at AO3 apparently as I uploaded the link on my profile, but don't seem to be able to view my profile...? In any case, you can see it here: photobucket.com/user/IcyPanther/library/As%20Color%20Fades%20Away -- and if anyone knows how to actually view profiles please tell me xD I'm not normally this technologically inept.

Almost last note; I'll be at Kitsune Kon this weekend up in Green Bay, Wisconsin. If you're in the area do drop by and say hi! I'll be at IcyPanther's Art Shop!

I'd love, love to hear your thoughts on the chapter: the rescue plan, the "baby" Paladins' reactions, the Shiro or Keith moments... What was your favorite? What are you looking forward to? What would you like to see? Can't wait to see what y'all thought!
This time Lance awoke to darkness.

It wasn't the dull purple glow of his cell or the comforting hues of the night sky. It was solid, deep black without a pinprick of light to be had and Lance hoped that this was still some part of his dream.

But he was in too much pain, every part of him feeling like it was on fire and and he couldn't help the whimper that escaped him, for it to be his imagination and he didn't think this was his mindscape.

That meant though, if this wasn't a dream and he wasn't in his mind, then this was reality and he could not see. He blinked furiously and definitely felt his eyelids opening and closing, but the blackness remained.

Had he gone blind?

His heart began to pick up tempo, a heavy thud echoing as blood pulsed in his ears and he strained his eyes into the darkness.

Lance took a shuddering breath to try and steady himself, which turned into more of a gasp as his body protested the inhale and he felt something constrict around his throat, at the same time igniting a new flare of pain.

Shock collar, his brain helpfully reminded him, and the aggravated flesh below it. One of the many new things bestowed upon him during the Kri Za Kri.

He brought a hand up towards his face, but it held fast and he figured he was once more restrained, likely on the same table he'd already been tortured on.

He moaned softly at that, the throbbing of his broken wrist making itself incredibly apparent now that he'd just jammed it against the cuff. His fingers clenched and he winced as he remembered that he had a new set of holes in him. But to his surprise his fingertips met the soft linen of a bandage and the pain wasn't anything like it had been. Still awful and terrible, but no longer excruciating.

He tentatively wiggled his toes and although he felt the skin pulling, eliciting another moan, they didn't feel like they were gaping open wounds any longer. He felt the tiniest bit of relief that maybe, just maybe, he could still walk. Although what good it would do him now he wasn't sure. It wasn't like they were going to give him any chances to escape again.

The rest of him still hurt and ached and stabbed, but as he continued to lie there it was fading to a duller ache now. Except his wrist. That still most definitely felt very, very badly broken and they clearly weren't putting any resources towards it. Made sense on their end; he was a heck of a lot less dangerous without a working hand.
But even more than that he was absolutely useless without his sight. And the small measure of calm he’d forced himself into disappeared as he thrashed his head to try and dislodge the blindfold that must be on him. To his growing horror he could not feel any such obstruction.

Breathe. He just had to breathe. In and out.

The heavy inhale had his chest aching again — how many times had he been shot there again? Two? Three? Five? — but it had the desired effect and halted the blind (haha, blind, Dios, oh no) panic that was trying to take over.

He couldn't actually be blind, he reassured himself. He couldn't. It was some trick of the light. Maybe he was in a pitch dark room. That made sense. It made a lot of sense.

It was okay.

He released another breath, this one stronger. He was fine. Well, his sight was fine. He most definitely was not.

He was strapped down to a table likely about to be interrogated again and he had no idea how long he could keep resisting. Haggar had been right, his mindscape proving it.

He was breaking.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Not until...

Not until he could draw his last breath and guarantee that he couldn't hurt his family with his words, with his memories locked inside his mind behind a mental shield that even now he could feel was smaller.

He shoved back at it, trying to force the tidal wave back to a roaring height. He had to keep Haggar out of his mind. He had to protect his friends. He could do it.

He had to do it.

If he stopped believing that he could protect his friends, then he had nothing left to believe in and they would win.

And no matter how far he fell he could not let them win.

He wouldn't let them be hurt.

Not because of him.

He took another breath. He had to remain strong. Like Shiro.

Thinking of Shiro though made him think of his other friends and felt his chest tighten. He wondered what the others were up to. Haggar hadn't mentioned them at all recently and he didn't know if he should take comfort in that or not.

He knew they weren't coming. He knew that. They couldn't.

He still wished they could.

Was Hunk trying to go around Allura and Shiro's orders and rescue him? He could almost see that; Hunk teaming up with Pidge and the two launching their own rescue mission. But they'd be caught by the Galra. And then they'd be tortured and hurt and it would be all his fault.
It was better this way. For them. They were safe right now. He had to remember that. He was doing his best to keep them safe.

And to continue doing that...

He had to let them go.

Picturing their faces was both a comfort and a loss and he couldn't fall back into that sobbing, pathetic boy he had in his mindscape. Not out here. Not where Haggar, where the Galra could see.

Although they had all already seen him fail.

He could almost feel the gun pressed point-blank against him again and hear the sizzle of burning flesh, feel the blood dripping and dripping and dripping. The Galran's dark amusement and the cheers of the crowd washed over him and he whimpered at the memory that was suddenly all too real.

The urge to curl up into a comforting ball was suddenly overwhelming, but he was held fast by the restraints. A soft keen made its way past his lips and he turned his head down as far as he could, squeezing his eyes shut and fighting back the sudden influx of hot tears.

He couldn't cry. He couldn't. Not again.

He tried to think of something, anything, to focus on.

The majestic image of his Lion was pulled to his mind, standing tall and proud as the ocean burst behind her and despite the power of the image there being only a comfort in his mind.

"Bl-Blue," he rasped, chapped lips stinging but the painful ache in his throat at least reduced. He would give anything to hear her purr in his mind whispering assurances and comfort. He just wanted someone to tell him that it was going to be all right. That he could get through this.

That it would be over soon.

"Blue," he whispered again, fingers curling into his palm.

Tears were making trails down his cheeks now and he bit his lip to keep from making any noise, ashamed enough of the tears he couldn't seem to stop. He was sure they knew he was awake already. They were probably watching him on some night-vision camera and laughing.

It made him let out another sob, this one echoing.

What was the point? They already knew how pathetic, how weak he was.

They were the ones that finally made him see how true it was.

Even when he tried to be strong he failed.

He failed at everything.

He closed his eyes. He was so tired. He wanted it all to stop.

He wanted his mom.

"Mamá," he whispered, voice cracking. "Quiero... quiero ir a casa." He let out another sob. "I want
to go home."

A chuckle sounded right next to him and Lance jerked against the restraints in surprise.

Someone was there.

Someone was watching him.

The surprise morphed to horror as a hand descended out of the infinite blackness and pressed against the top of his head.

"Oh, my sweet Lance," Haggar's voice crooned. "You are never going home."

Haggar.

Haggar was here.

Her hand was moving then, sliding through his bangs in a sick caress.

"St-stop," he finally managed to get out, breath locked back in in his throat. He swallowed thickly, trying again and pitching his voice lower. "Don't touch me."

Haggar hummed.

She continued to stroke his hair.

"Don't touch me," he repeated, voice cracking that time.

Haggar's hand lifted away but before he could even blink it was back and cupping the side of his face.

He struggled uselessly as she forcefully turned his head from the side to look straight back up, gripping it painfully.

"Tears, hmm?" she murmured, thumb brushing underneath his eye. "How delicious. They make your eyes even a prettier blue."

What?

How was she seeing him?

"It is no use trying to see me," she said, both hands now pressed to the sides of his face and thumbs brushing back and forth against his cheekbones. "I placed a darkness spell on your eyes. Much better than those archaic blindfolds the Galra use."

Lance felt his stomach turn to ice at her words. "What?" he breathed.

"You fear the dark," Haggar observed, her hands continuing their stroking. "Or, more accurately, you fear not being able to see."

What? When had she...?

"The commander may be rather brutish but I do find his methods rather... thrilling. Your reaction upon entering the hall filled me with great joy, my Lance, and I knew I had to see it firsthand myself. I am not disappointed."
She patted his cheek then in a gesture that had Lance flinching. "You also fear gentle touches more than painful ones." She laughed. "I find you fascinating."

Lance didn't know how to respond to that. She was right. As terrifying as Theodek was he would take his brand of pain any day over whatever this was.

Her touch made him feel sick.

"But I am not as cruel as the commander," Haggar continued.

Lance didn't bother to try and refute that statement.

"You can remove the darkness spell right here and now and return your sight," Haggar said. "All you must do is say, 'please.'"

That... That seemed too simple.

"I promise, that is all it is," Haggar said, her hand back and petting his hair. "I can set any number of words or phrases to activate my spells and this one is straightforward... perfect for someone like you."

Lance hated that he couldn't help but wince at the dig to his intelligence.

"Well?" Haggar prompted, hand tightening painfully in his hair.

"No," Lance said instead.

He would not beg.

He'd done so once, or so he recalled, pleading for water after days without it or medical attention, nearly delirious from it and the sickness that had descended upon him.

He would not do it again.

He still had his pride. He clung to it, the one thing he was determined to take with him to the very end.

Not once during the Kri Za Kri had he begged or asked for mercy.

He would not start now.

He would not play Haggar's game.

"You willingly chose to remain blind, interesting," Haggar mused. "Such a decision means you cannot prepare for something like... this."

Something plunged into his calf.

A knife, he realized, choking back the reflexive cry as he felt it tear into his flesh and hot blood gush down his leg.

It was fine. It was okay. It didn't hurt, it didn't hurt, it didn't--

Haggar twisted it.

And Lance could not contain the scream any longer.
His head smashed into the back of the table as his body jerked.

Haggar pushed the blade in deeper.

"We shall carry on as we were then," Haggar said, almost conversationally. "I will ask you a question and you will answer my query to my satisfaction. If you do, you shall be rewarded and if you fail..." she twisted the blade again and Lance let out another hoarse scream. "You will be punished."

She pulled the knife free, a wet squelching following it, and Lance gasped, trying without success to draw the limb up to himself.

All he felt was blood smear beneath him.

"Oh. And my Lance?" Haggar's hand was back on his face and the scent of copper assaulted his nose.

Blood.

His blood.

She ran her fingers over his cheek, across his nose, a line of metallic, cloying warmth left in its wake.

"You may still choose to return your sight at any time." He felt her bend over then, breath hot on his face. "All you need to do is," she pressed a bloodied finger against his lips and Lance tried not to inhale, "say 'please.'"

He shuddered.

"Now," she straightened. "Provide me information on the Paladins."

He concentrated on his breathing instead of answering her, inhaling only through his nose lest he taste the blood now on his lips.

His stomach heaved anyway.

The blade stabbed into his right shoulder directly where he'd been shot.

He screamed again as warm blood flowed down his chest.

"Provide me information on the Paladins."

No.

Never.

Haggar twisted the knife.

He shrieked and tried to shift away, which only buried the blade deeper. He swore he heard over his cries the sound of metal on metal.

The blade had gone through him into the table.

_Dios._
"Provide me information on the Paladins."

He remained silent.

He wasn't going to say anything.

Stab.

Cut.

Shock.

Dios, por favor.

Stab.

Twist.

Stab.

Burn.

Quiet. Not a word.

Shock.

Shock.

Pet.

It would end soon. It had to end soon.

Cut.

Stab.

"Provide me information on the Paladins."

Burn.

Stab.

Caress.

Twist.

Lance screamed.

Darkness darkness darkness.

Push.

Lance startled.

Push the sensation came again, not one of the torments he his world had centered into but something different.
Something more dangerous.

It was a pressure building on his mind, digging into the wave that had been sinking lower and lower.

Haggar was trying to get into his head.

He pushed back, putting all he had into summoning another wave. It rose high–

_Stab_ and _twist._

Lance screamed

The wave crashed back down.

The pressure increased.

No no no no–

Shock.

He threw his head back, smashing it on the table, writhing with no place to go.

Something _dark_ touched against the wave.

No! _Stop!_

He slammed all he had left back into the wave and it grew.

And grew and grew.

He felt his limbs growing weak, flopping on the table, and he pushed further.

The ocean _roared_ and crashed down, drowning out the pressure.

It was gone.

Lance lie there panting and gasping, chest heaving, and darkness staring back at him

"Well." It was the first word Haggar had spoken other than her demands and something Lance couldn't describe was in her tone.

"You continue to surprise me, my Lance." A hand carded through his hair, smoothing down sweat-soaked bangs. Lance was too hurt, too exhausted, to even try and shake them away.

He hated that they almost felt nice.

His stomach curled.

"I see such rudimentary methods are no longer enough to loosen your tongue," she continued. "It is time we move onto phase three."

Phase... three?

No.

There was _more?_
There was something worse?

His chest hitched and he heard Haggar chuckle. "Oh, my sweet Lance," her hand continued its caress. "There is so much more still to try. We have only just begun."

Just...

Begun?

Dios no. Por favor no.

He couldn't do this.

He couldn't do this anymore.

Was there no end?

He choked on a sob.

He knew there wasn't. Not until he broke or he died.

There was no escape.

Haggar's hand shifted from his head to rest against his shoulder, tightening against one of the many wounds she had created.

And then agony.

Molten fire filled him and a shriek was torn from his throat.

Even around the pain he knew what this was.

Haggar was healing him.

She was healing him for this next phase.

He didn't want to think on what that meant.

The fire continued its journey, searing through his body and leaving him trembling and shaking in its wake.

He still hurt.

She was healing him to the point where he would not die, where the wounds were sealed, but...

But nothing more.

And he knew without a doubt she could keep doing it. She could keep him alive for as long as she wanted no matter what she put him through.

There was no escape.

The hiss of a door sliding open sounded and he tensed, as though bracing himself for whatever this new phase was could help.

Heavy footsteps sounded.
Somehow he recognized those footsteps.

*Dios no.* Not him too.

"Hello, boy," growled a familiar voice right next to his ear and then a furred hand – and how had he ever found that amusing? – landed on his shoulder, squeezing tightly. "My turn."

"I want him back alive, Commander," came Haggar's warning.

There was the clink of a chain and Lance felt his broken wrist being lifted from the table and snapped into a manacle, sounding over the Galran's grunt of acknowledgement and his own low moan of both fear and pain.

Oh no.

He knew what happened next.

His left wrist was snapped into a tight ring as well and the chain clinked louder.

And then he was being *pulled* as the restraints released, his weight a counter to the grab and he struggled as best he could to sit up to lessen the fire shooting up his right arm.

Haggar chuckled. "Look how eager you are, my Lance."

Lance didn't bother trying to respond, feeling his body listing sideways at the change and only a clawed hand catching him around his shoulder kept him upright.

It pushed down on him, as though trying to indicate *stay,* and Lance let out a wheezing breath, hunching over and cradling his hands to his stomach.

They didn't stop him.

He could feel Theodek down by his feet, swapping out the restraints pinning him to the table with another set of chains.

Then silence.

It was the worst kind as he knew they were in the room, knew they were right there.

And just...

Nothing.

His eyes blinked against the never-ending blackness and he hunched over further.

He felt exposed like this, legs splayed out in front and two sets of invisible yellow eyes staring at him.

He could fix it. Just one word and he could at least then see again.

No.

He would not beg.

Instead he carefully pulled his right leg inwards, chain clinking softly, to fold it up against him.

Silence.
No one stopped him.

What were they waiting for?

He pulled his left leg up as well, frigid toes tucking themselves underneath his knees and he started at that.

What had....?

He lowered his left hand down.

He encountered cold, bare flesh.

He felt his cheeks heat.

They'd taken his pants.

There was the barest whisper of cloth as he moved his hand further up his thigh and there was a gut-wrenching relief inside him that he was still wearing his boxer shorts.

He heard Haggar let out another low laugh and his face flamed again.

It paled a second later.

He'd just given her another weapon, another thing to take away.

*Dios,* he was so *stupid.*

Stupid and weak and pathetic.

The shame burned hot again as surely as the heat he felt beneath his fingers as they ghosted on his thigh where knew he'd been shot. It pulsed again, a sicker heat than his face.

Infection, maybe.

He didn't dare check the other one although he was certain it was the same.

"Enough," came a low growl and he felt the chain tug on his wrists. "I grow tired of this." The chain tugged again and Lance was forcibly pulled on the table, towards where he could only assume there was an edge.

He hurriedly uncrossed his legs as he continued to slide and they went over the lip of the table, dangling off into space.

"Stand," Theodek ordered, giving another yank and Lance had no choice but to comply as the agony of his wrist was too much to resist and he had no doubts Theodek otherwise would merely drag him off the table.

He...

He couldn't be dragged again. Even that hazy memory had him cringing.

Lance lowered his feet tentatively, unable to fully stop the hiss as *pain* flowed up his legs as butchered feet tried to take on all of his body weight. Theodek gave another jerk of the chain though and Lance found himself stumbling forward, each step like walking on knives, but he remained standing, somehow, feet splayed as far as the ankle chain would allow.
He was standing.

Hope flared for a single tick before it was smothered.

He was barely standing and he didn't think he was capable of much more.

"Walk."

The command was followed by another yank and he took a staggering step in that direction and then another.

Theodek started to walk and Lance hated that he followed.

What choice did he really have though?

It was walk or be dragged. No matter what option he would be taken to this new destination.

But still...

How pathetic.

He wasn't even resisting like he had going to the Kri Za Kri, jerking back on the lead and bracing his feet.

He just plodded along as best he could, feeling blood already dampening the bandages he was still surprised to find. It was all he could do to keep putting one foot in front of the other, dizzy with hunger and moreso from the darkness.

Weak.

He was no Paladin of Voltron.

He hung his head, trying to blink back hot sting of his eyes.

A Paladin would still be fighting. Still resisting.

He couldn't find the strength to do so.

Weak.

"This is where we part ways, Commander," Haggar's voice sounded from behind and Lance took an extra half-step forward, sightless eyes widening.

He hadn't realized she was still there.

A hand descended on his chin and Lance stiffened as she tilted it up. Her other hand came up and caressed his cheek again. "I will see you soon, my Lance," she murmured. "And perhaps," a low laugh, "you will even be able to see me."

She released her grasp and Lance found himself being pulled forward a tick later, the sound of a door hissing open his only indication they had left the main hall.

Well, that and the cold.

He shivered as the temperature dropped all around him and his shuffling footsteps and the dull clinking of the chain began to echo.
What was this?

Were they going to leave him alone again? To freeze to death?

No.

They wouldn't be so kind.

This was something far worse than the isolation of before, which Lance was realizing had been some distorted mercy torture now.

They halted abruptly, sending Lance tottering forward and he crashed to his knees with a jarring thud. Instinctively he brought his hands out to catch him, and regretted it immediately as white-hot fire lanced up his arm and he let out a short wail, dropping completely to the ground on top of his mangled limb.

Theodek did not allow him to remain there.

A clawed hand dug into the top of his hair and dragged him forward, Lance's body scraping on the ground.

He was dropped a moment later and his head struck the ground, a dull ringing sounding in his ears. Over it he heard his ankles being uncuffed and then his hands were pulled out from beneath him and released as well.

Lance didn't even try to resist.

Pathetic.

Heavy footsteps stomped away.

He was alone.

Unshackled.

He didn't move.

He couldn't move.

What was the point?

Instead Lance tucked his nose against his shoulder and pulled his legs up to his chest as though if he tried hard enough he could make himself disappear.

Where else was he going to go?

A screech echoed in the room and Lance winced and then again as it sounded even louder.

What was happening?

A clanking sound, much louder than his chains, began to sound and there was a strange vibration coming up from the floor.

"Welcome to phase three, boy," Theodek's voice sounded as though from a distance. "It's going to be a lot of fun."
The vibrations were becoming stronger now and there was the sensation of something moving beneath him.

No.

Not moving.

The floor was retracting.

Lance scrambled to sit up, to try and push himself away from the dissolving floor.

His foot hit air.

Too late.

Always too late.

And with a choked scream Lance plunged into the unknown.

Chapter End Notes

Bet y'all thought we were done with phases, right? A proper phase set has to have at least three (two just doesn't cut it) so here we are. I wonder what on earth I have dreamed up? Any guesses? As many of you thought, last chapter was indeed the calm before the storm. Get ready for a bit of a rough ride coming up!

Huge thanks to the lovely reviewers who always keep me going: EreAsha, koalaoshiz, NewandOld, Immortalfey, bubblebucky, BubbleGumi, WolfFire, alexries, heyheroics, cipheredsong, jack, burple12345, AnaStick, ridazzle, Ms. J, GummyW0rm, AngelofGrace96, Grace, maychorian, Proxy_17, SketchyPeanut (FSPwrites), Fey_79, spl, and BrieCheese.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter. What do you think is in store for Lance (I'm honestly really excited to hear your guesses as to what new torture I've come up with that'll really mess him up :D), favorite scene/line, questions, hopes, dreams, number one way you'd kill Theodek and Haggar? Please do drop a comment if you've got a tick! Thank you!
Lance's scream cut off with a suddenness as he smashed into the surface below.

And then went under it.

Water, his brain stuttered.

Actual water.

There was water here.

And, Lance realized as he felt it flood his throat, he was about to drown in it.

He should probably do something about that.

He forced exhausted feet to kick up against the sensation of sinking, left hand reaching out and pushing the water away as black spots unrelated to the darkness burst in front of his eyes and more water choked down this throat.

He wasn't going to make it. He wasn't going to–

Lance broke the surface with a gasp, chest heaving and his pants echoing around him, growing in magnitude.

Air.

He sucked it in greedily, feet moving into a familiar tread, and focused on not slipping back under the cold water.

His breaths continued to echo harshly around him.

Slowly, ever so slowly though, his heart stopped its rapid thudding and the pain that had plagued him began to give way to a welcome numbness as the cold water lapped against wounds and the burns soaked up the moisture.

It felt...
It felt *nice*.

Lance didn't quite smile but he felt his body ease, tipping his head back to let the water soak into the strands and wash away the sweat and Haggar's touch.

He realized how thirsty he was.

He licked chapped lips, now free of blood, and debated.

Was the water poisoned? There had to be *something* to this as Haggar nor Theodek were so benevolent as to give him a reprieve. He was honestly surprised and grateful it wasn't salt water, which would be dangerous to drink and the salt in all of the open wounds would be...

It would make what Haggar had done to put them there a mercy.

He shuddered.

So to drink or not to drink?

He'd already inhaled some on his fall, right? And he was submerged in it. Drinking it could hardly be a death sentence.

Dipping his head, Lance lapped up the tiniest sip.

It felt like heaven; cold and cool and soothing on his hoarse throat.

He allowed himself a few more small sips but refrained from any more, the water settling heavily in his empty stomach.

He just realized now he had hardly noticed the fact he wasn't hungry.

That was probably a bad sign.

Nothing he could do about it.

Just like everything else.

He hung his head, nose brushing the water.

The brief joy he'd felt from being in the water was fading now, being replaced with the reality of his situation.

This was phase three.

Something bad was going to happen.

Something that Haggar felt would make him break above everything else she'd already tried.

And he was worried she might succeed.

He had felt her, there, on the table, pushing on his mind. He'd fought back that time but it had left him exhausted, mentally and physically.

If she kept coming like that he didn't know how many more times he could push her away.

And the fact his mental wall was water... and now he was floating in a whole lot of it...
His stomach twisted again.

He tilted his head back, sightless eyes seeking the top from where he'd fallen down and ears straining for any sort of noise, an indication of what was going to happen.

Nothing.

And although Lance knew knowing wouldn't change anything, it gave him something to focus on instead of the slowly creeping dread.

Diving for depth was out of the question as he was in no condition for any kind of strenuous swimming, but he could at least figure out how large this chamber was.

Propelling himself with his one arm and feet, he swam for a few ticks until his left hand hit a cold metal wall. He winced as his damaged flesh, healed somewhat and wrapped in a bandage but nowhere close to okay, struck palm first.

He tentatively splayed his fingers out. It was a solid flat sheet of metal although there were some odd circular indentations spaced over it as his hand trailed along it, but nothing so deep he could find a handhold. Inside of the indentations was a small bump but nothing he could yet figure out.

He followed the length of the wall until he found its corner and then began to track the perimeter.

A few minutes later he had come to the conclusion he was in some sort of metal square box, about twelve feet give or take on each side. Not very big.

Not big at all.

Very small.

And dark.

He sucked in a harsh inhale.

He had air. There was air here.

Plus water.

There was definitely more water than air.

Lance carefully, painfully, brought his left arm out of the water and stretched it as high above his head as he could go.

More air.

At least he wasn't swimming around in a small metal enclosed box with like only a foot between him and the top.

But he was swimming around in a small metal enclosed box with no exit.

He sucked in another harsh breath.

He was fine.

Just fine.
He swore the walls were closing in.
He could find out. He just had to say 'please.'
The word danced on his tongue but he swallowed it down.
No.
Haggar was no doubt watching, waiting, for him to play her game.
To beg for something that wasn't hers to take in the first place.
He wouldn't.
He refused to play.
To plead.
He'd fallen far enough, at least let him keep whatever little bit of pride he had left.
He knew it would be gone soon enough.
Haggar would make sure of it.
He wondered what she was doing up there. She didn't seem to mind waiting, watching, but
Theodek? He had shown his impatience and Lance doubted watching him almost hyperventilate in a
tub of water was all that exciting to him. Not that he was complaining. If he could get past his
growing paranoia that the walls were closing in and the air was disappearing he supposed this could
be called almost pleasant.
It made him realize how tired he was.
Exhaustion pulled on his limbs and Lance moved to float on his back as his legs began to slow.
When was the last time he'd slept?
What day was it?
How long had he been here?
He could close his eyes for a few minutes, right? He was sure he'd wake up if he slipped under.
He was just so tired.
And sleep offered an escape, even if only temporary.
He was just beginning to get comfortable, harder now that the water's temperature was starting to
grow just a little too cold, when there was the harsh screeching of metal from up above.
Lance flailed back to treading, body tense.
It was about to start.
He sucked in a shaky inhale and then exhale, trying to prepare for whatever new torture Haggar had
in store.
The water began to move.
And Lance realized he was in trouble.

Small waves began to bat at his sides, splashing up to hit his face and he unintentionally inhaled a mouthful. He coughed, but more rushed in and the cough turned into a gag.

Another wave, stronger than the others, struck at his shoulder and Lance let out a hoarse cry as he was batted into the wall, which morphed into a yelp as every injury was set alight.

The pulsing water continued to smash him against the unyielding wall and Lance madly scrambled to keep his head above water.

Another wave broke over his head and he emerged from it, gasping.

He was going to drown.

The thought froze him.

He was going to drown.

Another crash shoved him back against the wall, keeping him pinned there as more water dumped on top of him.

He needed to get away from the wall, back to the center of the room.

If he could just shove off...

He angled his feet as best he could, trying to find some sort of purchase against the wall even as his feet cried as he pushed them down. He made to propel himself away...

And the wall moved.

And with it so did the water.

A tidal wave as the room – not a room, he realized, a box, a container – rotated.

He was forced under with a gasp.

The water was just as chaotic under the surface as above, waves coming from all angles and tossing him to and fro, slamming him against the wall, pulling him away, and then doing it again.

Lance choked as his body was dashed mercilessly against the metal and he inhaled a stream of water.

Air.

He needed air.

He...

He had no idea which way to go.

The torrents were coming from every direction and in the pitch blackness he couldn't even guess which way went up as he was batted about head over heels.

His lungs were starting to burn and he desperately kept his lips shut. It had to stop soon. Any tick now.

One tick.
Two tick.
Three tick...

It wasn't stopping.

Don't panic, don't panic, he chanted to himself.

He was panicking.

It would stop.

He just needed to keep air in his lungs as once the water stopped churning the laws of buoyancy would take effect and he would float up.

Eighteen tick.

Nineteen tick.

He'd nearly drowned a few times in his life. It was all part of growing up around the water and having a not-so-healthy disregard for the rules. He could not count how many times he'd been scolded as a kid for not paying attention to his surroundings and ending up in trouble because of it.

Thirty-six tick.

Thirty-seven tick.

The number one rule he'd learned about the water was to never panic. It wasted valuable air and energy.

He was breaking it.

He couldn't help it. His lungs were burning and he had no idea if it was going to stop so he could find the surface or if he...

If he...

Fifty-eight tick...

Fifty-nine tick...

He was going to die. He was actually going to—

The water stilled.

Lance floated in the quiet, trying to feel past the growing haziness descending, on the movement of his body.

He let out a stream of bubbles, feeling them pop against his chin.

Upside down!

He kicked leaden legs in a circle around and pushed up with all he had left, right hand joining in the desperate strike for the surface.

And with a splash he burst from the water into glorious air, wheezing and gasping. His throat burned as he expelled what he'd swallowed and his eyes watered from the coughs.
Over the sound of his attempts at breathing he heard the sound of low laughter echoing from up above.

Theodek.

"It looked like you were having fun," the Galran called down. "How about we go again?"

Unseeing eyes widened.

What?

Again?

Dios no, he'd just gotten back up.

He was so tired.

The creaking of apparent gears and the slosh of waves was his answer.

He fought. So, so hard to stay above the waves.

It wasn't enough.

The chamber tilted again and Lance was sent along with it, hurtling towards one of the walls.

And this time he landed on his broken wrist.

He screamed, absolute agony winning out against his battle to keep his mouth closed. He inhaled a stream of water and choked as his air supply was replaced with water.

Up! Where was up?

He couldn't find it and he had no air left to spare.

He clawed for the surface, disobeying every rule he knew of swimming.

The rules didn't apply here. There was no real surface, no calm seabed, no sandbar to collapse upon or shallows to stand in.

Lance had always known the ocean was merciless.

This?

This was beyond that.

Whether it was luck or Theodek guided him, he breached the surface without warning and the waves slowed as he struggled to remain there, hands weeping blood and bandages long lost to the water.

He didn't know how long he could keep doing it.

He shifted to float onto his back, even that position hard to maintain.

He was so tired.

Theodek's chuckle rumbled from above. "Now that you have had a taste of phase three, we can move on. I will follow the outline Lady Haggar previously offered. Provide information on your fellow Paladins to me and I will reward you by not actively trying to drown you. Refuse, and you
know what will happen. And should I need to retrieve you myself for any reason... let's just say I will enjoy the consequences very much."

Lance didn't even have the energy to respond to how unfair the entire thing was.

He almost found himself wishing for the table and its restraints.

He blinked.

What?

*That* was what his brain thought of as mercy now?

*Dios.*

"Speak, boy," Theodek rumbled down. "Are you going to provide me information or not?"

Lance didn't even know why he bothered to ask. He already knew the answer.

He hated how the question though was almost a comfort. It wasn't the torture without end like Theodek had started with. It had a pattern, a routine.

He...

He was really starting to lose it.

The chamber gave another creak and the water began to flow again. Lance took in the largest inhale he could, chest aching as it expanded, and a moment later found him back beneath the surface.

The best solution he determined was to wait out the sequence rather than wasting energy trying to propel back to the surface to be shoved under again. If he could protect the worst of his injuries, curled into as tight a ball as he could with his mangled right wrist pressed to his chest, and prevent opening his mouth and inhaling when he hit the wall then he could manage for... for maybe about a dobash.

He normally could hold his breath for an easy three, but not now. Not with these conditions. Not with this body.

A minute should be more than enough.

At forty ticks he was still waiting.

It had to stop, right?

Theodek wouldn't actually kill him.

It wasn't stopping.

The waves kept pummeling and pummeling and Lance had no idea at this point what direction to even try and strike for the surface.

He squeezed his eyes shut, as if that could keep air inside.

Why wasn't it stopping?

Everything was starting to go hazy again even in the darkness.
Any tick now.
It had to stop.
Please let it stop.
It...
It wasn't going to stop.
Theodek was going to drown him.

His lungs decided they'd had enough and forced his mouth open to suck in air that was not there. Lance choked as water filled his mouth instead.

He couldn't wait any more.

He had to go.

He uncurled from his ball, stretching out hands and legs.

Just water.
He struck out, desperate, but only felt more water.

Air.

Please, he needed air.

Another wave forced its way down his throat.

His legs stopped kicking.

No.

No no no no no!
He reached out his left hand, fingertips trailing now through calm waters.

It didn't matter.

He had no strength left to find the surface.

His body convulsed and his arm fell back to his side.

He was going to drown.

He was actually going to drown.

The panic was swallowed up by a different kind of darkness.

Lance went still.

xxx

Lance came to with a start, realizing only as his head slipped beneath water that he had found the surface.
Somehow.

He pushed himself back up, spitting out what he'd just inhaled.

Exhausted legs managed to slowly tread on autopilot as he tried to figure out how he'd gotten free. He thought he'd… he'd…

There was a new ache emanating from his chest that he couldn't credit to any of the walls. It felt almost like someone had pounded on his chest with a boulder.

Tired eyes blinked in comprehension.

Ah. He'd experience the Galran version of CPR apparently. Of course they wouldn't actually let him drown. And Theodek had retrieved him, as promised.

And that promise had consequences.

A chuckle he dreaded only less than Haggar's laugh confirmed his theory. "You need not fear death today, Paladin," Theodek rumbled from above. "You need only to fear me."

That was not comforting in the slightest.

And...

And it was wrong.

A harsh shudder tore through him at the thought. Lance didn't only fear the Galran. He wished that was the case, but no.

Water.

He was becoming afraid of the water.

This coming from the boy who grew up alongside the ocean. From the Blue Paladin whose element was water.

He'd always known water was dangerous.

But this water wasn't just dangerous.

It was malicious.

And it scared him.

Drowning scared him. It didn't matter if the Galra had ways to rescue him from it. Knowing Haggar could save him from a punctured lung didn't give him a sense of comfort either.

It made it scarier.

They could keep doing it.

Keep forcing his head under, forcing him to inhale water instead of air, keep laughing as his struggles slowed.

He couldn't let it become that. He had to fight against the growing fear.

If only it were so simple. Waves created by his treading bumped against his chin and he flinched
violently at the contact, which only created more ripples.

"Do you wish to provide information on the Paladins, or shall you amuse me once more?" Theodek called down.

Lance pulled his lips into a thin line.

No matter what happened he could not do that.

It was the only thing he had left to cling to.

Protect his friends.

He'd do so until his dying breath.

"If you so insist."

The gears cranked again but this time there was no rush of water, no churning waves.

Was it too much to hope that this their torture device had broken? Lance doubted it.

When he felt something touch his foot he realized he'd been right.

And then he was being dragged down.

Whatever it was had coiled firmly about his left ankle, wrapped so tight he could feel it biting into his flesh.

He wondered if his ankle was going to be pulled right off.

Maybe Haggar would get to fashion him a prosthetic after all.

A few ticks later his foot slammed into the bottom of the chamber and his body followed with a terrible thud.

Lance couldn't help the reflexive scream.

Gagging against the sudden rush of water, Lance desperately tried to free his ankle from what felt like one of the energy coils, fruitlessly tugging at it.

But it was stuck fast.

His fingers felt clumsy against the restraint and his head was already foggy. He wrapped wounded hands around the cord and pulled.

He felt the coil burn against his raw flesh.

He released it with another cry.

His body begged for air.

He couldn't give it.

He gave another futile jerk of his leg instead but the cord held fast.

Trapped.
He was trapped.
He was going to drown again.
He wondered what Theodek would do this time.

xxx

He came back to with an even worse pain radiating in his chest and his throat feeling like he'd choked down and then back up lava.

His hands were crying at the newest abuse and his left ankle felt like it had been flayed raw.

"I see I had to rescue you again, boy," Theodek called from up above, as though there had been any way for Lance to avoid the energy noose. "This time, let me properly punish you."

Lance's neck became alight with fire.

He wailed with the little voice he had left, hands reaching to grab at the collar and only being shocked themselves for their efforts.

He sank beneath the water, body convulsing.

It didn't stop.

He inhaled another mouthful of water.

It still didn't stop.

He drowned again.

xxx

"Anything to say now?" Theodek's voice rang down as Lance came to, floating on his back.

He wondered how Theodek was getting down there to save him.

He didn't answer the question.

He didn't even have the energy to move from his position, even as he felt his legs trying to drag him down as they sank below the surface.

When he could no longer swim...

What would they do then?

What would he do when he couldn't fight them anymore?

Lance felt like crying.

"Then again."

And just like last time a coil shot out of the floor and wrapped around the same ankle.

He didn't even have the strength to scream.

This time Lance did not fight it. He clumsily moved as best he could to brace for the impact, taking it...
along his left shoulder and side and his body hovering now in the water at the length of the tether. 
He was going to drown again.
And again.
And again.
And again.
And they would keep doing it until he told them something.
He was so tired.
He wanted it to stop.
It was never going to stop.
He would never say anything. Not for a moment of respite, not even for his freedom.
He had been caught.
He had been too weak to escape.
And if he gave them up he could never face them again, no matter if he never did see them again.
He'd die a thousand times over before he let them get hurt because of him.
This was his fault.
H'd been too weak, too pathetic, to save himself.
The least he could do was make sure he saved them.
But when he couldn't fight anymore...
When he broke...
When Haggar got into his head...
Then what?
xxx
Lance came back to consciousness with the shock collar activating around his neck.
He was under the water before he even realized he'd been above it. Blood from his raw through was mixing with the water now, a bitter concoction his body tried to inhale.
He somehow surfaced still conscious, coughing and hacking and praying it would end.
He couldn't.

No more.

"Do you have information for me?" Theodek asked.
Lance whimpered, squeezing his eyes shut tight.
No.
He had nothing.
The water churned around him this time and Lance didn't have the strength to even try to remain at
the surface.
It's not like it mattered.
At this point Theodek seemed to be trying to drown him each time.
The world tilted and Lance smashed into the wall.
*Pain* exploded as what felt like spikes dug into his shoulder and thigh.
He was tossed away to hit another wall, this time being speared all over his back.
He shrieked.
Blood tainted water filled his mouth.
He blacked out on the fourth strike.

xxx

The shock collar brought him back to reality and he could barely muster up even the energy to make
a noise as result of the torture. He slipped back under the water, eyes fluttering.

Water filled his mouth – he hadn't even *tried* to close it – and Lance kicked leaden legs up to the
surface as the collar halted its attack, the sensation of the liquid sliding down the back of his throat
giving him the barest line of motivation.

He didn't make it.
Lance drowned again.

xxx

"*Pathetic,*" Theodek snarled from above as Lance came to, not even sure how he was afloat at this
point. "*So weak.* You are no Paladin of Voltron, boy."

Lance felt his body stiffen.
No.
That...

That wasn't true.
His neck lit up with fire and his response was a keening wail.

The shock only lasted for a few seconds though, leaving Lance floundering at the surface.

"*Admit it,*" Theodek taunted. "*You are too weak* to be a Paladin of Voltron. You are just a boy
pretending to be a hero."

Lance gave the barest shake of his head as his heart constricted.
No.
He was.
His heart stuttered.
He was what?
A Paladin?
Or weak?

"Admit it," Theodek repeated, "and I'll stop. Now say it!"
Lance pressed his lips together.
He was shoved back underwater a moment later.

It became an even more hellish nightmare then.
He'd surface to be shocked. Shocked to be pushed under.
Spikes buried themselves in his skin. Blood flowed.
Theodek laughed. Taunted. Demanded an answer.

Something pressed in on his mind.

Haggar.

He tried to throw up a wall of water.

It scared him.

His own mental wall scared him.

Pathetic.

He could feel her then, digging into his mind.

She was going to break it.

He was going to break.

No.

No.

He conjured a mental wall of ice.

It was brittle.

It would only hold her for so long.

He was out of time.

His family was out of time.

He'd failed them.
But...

His shoulder jammed into a spike.

But...

Another scratched his foot.

But...

He could still save them. He could stop this.

He could end it.

He just...

Had to...

To do it.

\textit{Dios}, he just had to do it.

He'd said he would do anything to protect them.

This... this was him doing anything and everything.

When he surfaced again, breath rasping in his throat, Lance closed his eyes.

He knew what he had to do.

"Please," he whispered, the word barely audible.

It was loud enough.

Dark color filled his vision – gray metal walls illuminated by a faint purple light down below in the water – and with it he could almost feel Haggar's excitement and the extra push on his mental wall.

He shot back a flurry at it.

Just a little more.

It just had to hold for a minute more.

He... he could do it in a minute.

It would all be over in a minute.

He willingly dove beneath the waves after his next re-surfacing, pulse pounding in his ears as water moved past him and with his sight restored he could see the violent waves and eddies.

He pushed past them, doggedly headed for the nearest wall with the rest of his strength.

He prayed it was enough.

He'd only have one chance.

The spikes were as short as he imagined, stretching maybe half the length of his index finger. He
placed ravaged hands around the base of one and gave it a futile tug, not surprised when it didn't move. Another wave buffeted him and he clung to the spike despite the pain, knowing he wasn't going to make it back a second time.

One chance to save them. To protect them.

If he failed in this...

Then he failed his family.

Failed the universe.

He glanced down then at his wrists; one peppered with bruises from the manacles and the other distorted in a mixture of inflammation and bruising and so horribly, horribly broken.

They would have to do.

He bowed his head.

This was for the best. He had to save them even if it meant he couldn't save himself.

He had promised himself he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. Well, it was here.

And he'd made his choice.

He would *always* choose them.

Even if... even if it meant...

Tears welled up in his eyes then and he let them. He was so, so sorry for taking this way out. He hoped they could all forgive him. Someday. He did it for them. He was selfishly doing it to end his own anguish too, if he was honest and why bother lying to himself at the end? They'd understand. He was sure they would. He hoped they would.

And then...

Then they could find a new Blue Paladin. A better one. Someone who was deserving of the title.

Not someone like him. Not someone so weak, so pathetic, this was the only option left he could think of to save them.

He just wan't strong enough to fight anymore.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, apology swallowed up by the water and he felt it flood his lungs.

Even that flare of panic, his own body's panic alarm, couldn't stop him from doing this.

He had to do this.

He closed his eyes then, as despite having finally regained his sight he did not want to see. Instead he pictured his families – his new space one and the one on Earth waiting and waiting and never knowing he wasn't coming home – and he choked on more water as a sob tore through him.

He was never going home.

Lance placed his wrists against two of the spikes, angling them so they could slice cleanly through
his flesh and into arteries. He'd only have once chance at this. He had to make it quick, make it so there was no chance for Haggar to save him.

It was now or never.

He prayed it was enough.

*Please* let his sacrifice be enough.

He took one last inhale, felt water fill his lungs...

And he violently slit open his wrists.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: This entire story actually came about because I had the scene in my head of Lance being tortured for information about his friends via repeated drowning. I thought that there was something incredibly poetic about his own element being turned against him like that and as we all well know, I am a huge sucker for angst. And then somehow this entire fic formed around the idea of this. You're welcome.

So, Color took an even darker turn. You have to realize though that Lance has zilch idea a rescue is coming and honestly believes he's all alone there. He knows Haggar is about to get inside his head and then his friends are as good as dead, not to mention all of the other havoc the Galrans could wreak with what he knows. In case it is not clear via Lance's thoughts above, I want to spell out that this a sacrifice play over anything else (in Lance's view it'd be the same as jumping on a grenade or taking a bullet for someone as this is to protect them; no one is just physically present for him to do the aforementioned but you can bet he would if it would save someone else). He has given this idea thought since he was first captured (chapter four) and it's cropped quite a number of times since that he will do anything to protect his friends even at the cost of his own life, as well as quite a number of notations of morality and death and needing to die to protect another. Given the action though, please know that suicide is never the answer. If you need help please talk to someone, anyone. Talk to me if you need to. Just know that there are so many people out there who love and care for you.

Huge thanks as always to the amazing reviewers! ♥ I never get tired of reading your lovely comments. Thank you!

I do think this might be one of my most terrible cliffhangers to leave off on to date xD Sorry bout that xD I would love to hear your thoughts on the chapter so hit that comment button down below! Thanks so much! ♥ Depending on the response I may even try to get you guys a bonus chapter sometime this weekend. It was a rather cruel place to leave off after all. So please do drop a comment!
Chapter Nineteen

He was in the water. Again.

But unlike last time it was of no comfort. It was only the cause of fear and Lance choked on it, the tang of salt and blood filling his mouth, causing him to inhale even more.

The ocean.

He was in the ocean.

How?

Mindscape, he realized faintly. He was in his mindscape.

But that meant that he hadn't…

He hadn't...

The acid taste of bile added itself to the mix and he swallowed it all down, despair and relief warring in equal measure.

He hadn't died after all.

He'd failed in his attempt.

Which meant...

He had failed to protect his family.

His vision was beginning to grow blurry and he realized he needed to free himself from the water before he drowned.

Again.

Drown drown drown drown.

The thought was paralyzing and he couldn't move.

He couldn't move.

Instead he inhaled another breath of tainted water and the feeling as it slid down his throat spurred him into movement, if only a few wild strokes.

But there was a faint light shimmering above and he forced himself towards it, each pass sending ripples of sheer agony through him as his abused body struggled.

He breached the ocean's surface, immediately being pummeled with waves and the sharp sting of rain.

But there was air. There was air and he wasn't drowning. He took a deep breath, the action stabbing his chest. Yet it wasn't fresh, clean air he was breathing scented with the smell of rain.
After a few seconds he registered that it wasn't rain falling down upon him at all as he struggled to stay above the rough surface. It was too heavy and slick, almost warm.

It was blood.

His intake of breath was lost as the ocean pulled back on him, trying to stake its own claim. And before all of this he would have happily dove back into its embrace. But now the thought of being in the water, any water, only gave him the desperate desire to get away.

He was going to drown.

Blood was pelting his exposed skin, blinding him from seeing where the shore was. The ocean yanked furiously in its game of tug-of-war. And Lance could make no sound except for terrified gasping as he fought all of it.

He had to go back under the water where it was calmer, rational thought told him. This wasn't Theodek's water chamber prison; it was the ocean. The rules applied once more.

Terror froze him though where he was, and he inhaled another oncoming wave. He couldn't go under. He couldn't. Not again. Not ever again.

He would drown. He didn't want to drown.

Dios please, he didn't want to drown again.

The ocean made its decision for him though and with a crash dragged him back under, his body spinning in a dizzying loop at the impact and every part of him crying out. More water scalded down his abused throat and he gagged it out, trying to hold onto some of the air he'd taken in.

Like oceans were supposed to be, the environment was rather still down below and through sheer force of will he made himself tamp back the panic for just a few ticks and look around so he could get out of there. He could see a rising bar of sand about thirty yards away and struck off in that direction, moving much more slowly than he'd like to but unable to go any faster.

Damaged hands struck sand a dobash later, sending new lancing shots up his arms, but he could not care, scrabbling at it and tugging himself along.

Almost there. Almost out.

It began to rise and a few seconds later he emerged from the ocean, feet sinking into the sand and the waves striking at mid-chest. The ocean was propelling him forward, almost as if it wanted to help him to land, and he gratefully accepted its pushes now that his head was above and free. Anything to get him to the safety of land faster.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to it, voice a rasp. "'s not your fault." It was all his. He was the one who was scared of a little water now. He could almost feel the ocean's sadness as it guided him towards the beach instead of back into its own waves.

Copper rain bombarded him from all sides now, the wind howling like a demon and causing every open wound to sting even more than the ocean's salt had.

Lance wondered if it was possible to just tear off into pieces, flayed open by the strength of the gusts.

He was nearly out now, waves just lapping at his ankles. He collapsed, his body longer able to
support his weight on such mangled feet. He let himself lie there for a few moments, ocean still washing up to his calves, to catch his breath.

It was hard to do so when every breath was a sob.

He'd failed. He'd failed everyone. There was no way he could even possibly try to hold Haggar back now. She would win. She'd break into his mind and uncover what he knew.

She would hurt them.

His shoulders shook, sending more spasms through him. Tears mixed with blood and made a macabre painting on his face and still he could not stop crying.

He couldn't go back.

He knew he didn't have a choice.

And when he left his mindscape...

The Galra would win.

Red was starting to fill his vision and Lance knew he had to get up before he choked and drowned on bloody rain.

He couldn't just lie here forever.

Could he?

Could he die in his mindscape?

He debated it for half of a second before hot shame washed over him.

He was contemplating killing himself again?

*Dios.*

What would his parents think if they knew? They would be so disappointed in him.

But he did it to protect them. To save them and everyone else from the Galrans. If the Paladins of Voltron fell then the universe fell. He couldn't let himself continue to live if he could protect those secrets with his own life.

It all sounded like a hollow excuse now.

He should have been able to find a different way.

He was a failure.

He shivered, burrowing his face against his shoulder as more hot tears leaked out. He was an absolutely pathetic human being, let alone Paladin. Would they even want him back now, after what he'd tried?

No.

And he didn't deserve it either.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled into his arm, more tears escaping, not even sure what he was apologizing
for.

Sorry for living.

Sorry for trying to die.

Sorry for not.

Sorry for failing at everything he tried.

Sorry for the failure he knew was coming.

He sniffled, rubbing his nose against his bare shoulder as he tried to catch some semblance of a
breath amidst his tears and the still falling bloody rain.

What would Shiro do? The thought had him letting out a half-snort, half-sob. Those words had
gotten him this far, hadn't they? He had nothing better to fall back on

So... what would he do? Well, Shiro would have never fallen this far to start, he thought miserably.
He'd But if Shiro had ended up in this situation, what would he do? He'd get himself out of the rain
for starters. Lance remembered the rock structure he'd found the first time in his mindscape and
wondered if it, or another like it, was still there.

He had no strength left to stand though. His arms wavered as he pushed himself up to his knees and
he knew that was as far as they were taking him.

Crawling it was.

It ended up being more of a desperate heaving drag as he pulled himself along the wet ground, as he
could not put any real weight on his mangled hands let alone the broken wrist. Each scrap, each pull
sent a whine and gasp past his lips. But he persevered, if only because it was what Shiro would do.

He dreaded to think of what Shiro would make of his attempted suicide. His hero, his leader… Shiro
had endured for a year under the Galra and had survived.

Lance...

Lance knew he hadn't even made it a week.

He was so weak.

He chanced a look at his wrists and blanched at the sight of the ugly wounds he'd inflicted on
himself, flesh torn up and exposing the tendons and muscles and veins beneath. They were still
bleeding, not enough to kill him as all of his wounds seemed to do here, but they somehow hurt the
most despite the fact they were not the worst ones he had. He'd given himself these ones though.
Somehow the mindscape seemed to know that. He hurriedly averted his eyes as acid bile welled up
in his throat again.

Outside the curtain of red rain he could make out the barest hint of a structure.

It brought him no joy or pride.

He wearily finished dragging himself to it, managing to tuck all of his limbs up underneath the
overhang and out of the rain, the bloody torrent crashing down on the rock in a cadence that was not
soothing in the slightest.
He brought a shaking hand to his face to try and wipe away the blood.

It smeared instead and more dripped from his bangs down into his eyes, turning his vision scarlet.

He whimpered at that, blinking as best he could to clear them. He blearily noticed there was a tide pool just a few feet away under the cover of the structure. He inched his way over, body dragging on the rocky ground.

It was shallow, but there was some water in it. He carefully dipped his left hand into it, hissing as the salt smarted against his open wounds. He cupped a handful as best he could and brought it to his face.

But even that was too much.

He jerked back from the wetness, water spilling into the sand.

He was going to drown.

Drown drown drown drown.

He sucked in a harsh breath and then another, the sound echoing in the enclosure, and squeezed his eyes shut as if that could block out the memory of panicked strokes and burning lungs.

Try again, he told himself. Less water this time.

He brought his trembling hand back and dipped just two fingers in, bringing them to his face and wiping away at his cheek. No blind panic descended upon him that time and he slowly did it again.

Each swipe took a little more blood away until he'd gotten as far as he could tell most of his face clean.

He reached up, pinching his bangs between his fingers.

The blood made little plopping noises as it hit the rocky ground.

He heaved, vomiting out a mixture of inhaled ocean water and stomach bile. He gingerly brushed some of the damp sand under the alcove over the mess.

Both hands were next and he maneuvered his broken one into the pool, wincing at the sting but more relieve to see the blood being washed away. He tried picturing his hands as whole once more, but there wasn't even a responding tingle.

"Come on," he whispered, "please. Please work. *Por favor.*"

Nothing.

Lance didn't want to think of what that meant.

He still heard Haggar's voice. *Look around, tell me you do not see the ruin of your own mind beginning.*

She was right. The blood rain, the churning ocean...

He'd known he was starting to break.

His mindscape confirmed it.
The water in the pool was starting to turn red and there wasn't much more he could take out.

He was still covered in blood.

It needed to come off.

He scooped up a handful of damp sand, biting back a moan as the granules made their way into his palm, and scrubbed.

His chest, his legs, his arms, everywhere.

He scrubbed until he realized the blood was now his own.

He dry-heaved, nothing left to expel.

He still didn't get it all off, ugly, sticky streaks left behind.

He closed his eyes so he didn't have to see it.

The stone was rough behind his head but he leaned back against it anyway, trying to pretend that the pitter-patter was the sound of actual rain coming down. He'd found that soothing once upon a time. It helped to drown out the ocean's roars too.

He still shivered.

Now what? Where did he go from here? His wrists pulsed angrily where he'd placed them against his stomach, reminding him of what he'd already tried and failed.

He had nothing left to give.

The only thing he could cling to was the vain, weak hope that he could hold out and continue to protect his family. Their faces flashed through his mind and this time he let them, soaking up every smile and crinkled eye as a balm to his soul.

He missed them.

He lingered on Hunk, conjuring up the smell of cooking, motor oil and the distinct honeysuckle scent that followed his best friend around. He could almost feel Hunk's steady warmth, his strength, and he grasped for it.

Reality crashed back as his wrists pulsed and the scene washed away, leaving him alone and shuddering against the rock wall.

All alone.

They weren't coming. No matter what message he'd sent, no matter what Haggar believed they were not going to rescue him. They couldn't. He'd told himself that over and over. He had to remain here to protect them. Protect the universe. But the words, once as reassuring as he could get in this place, just filled him with an unfillable ache.

He wondered how much longer he could do so.

He just wanted them to be safe.

"Thinking about your friends again, hmm?"
Lance jerked forward at the sound of Haggar's voice to find the Druid sitting across from him, calculating yellow eyes observing him from the short distance. She did not even activate her magic to freeze him.

Lance's stomach clenched with what that meant.

He was no threat to her anymore. Even in his own mindscape he was powerless against her. The ocean would not respond and in any case he was too scared to approach it again to try.

Pathetic.

But he had to at least try to be strong.

Haggar hadn't won.

Yet.

He straightened as much as he could, body throbbing with even that much.

"They have no doubt been thinking about you," she continued. "Shall I let you in on a secret, my sweet Lance?"

He didn't answer, keeping his lips sealed.

"The Paladins were going to trade the Black Lion for you," she said, smirking as Lance stiffened ever so slightly in surprise, disbelief and hope and horror warring for dominance. "They have been en route to the coordinates you so kindly provided them several quintants ago."

So it had been days.

Just days.

A few days and he had already fallen to this.

But...

They were coming? To trade?

They couldn't.

He wasn't worth it.

"You see," Haggar smiled. "I told you they would wish to come when they saw what I have done to you."

She reached out a hand towards his face and Lance flinched away from it.

Haggar chuckled.

"However, the Paladins were trying to trick us, to cheat us out of our trade. Well," her smile grew, "we put a stop to that little rescue operation. But they must have truly cared for you, my Lance, as they still insisted on meeting and conducting the trade."

Lance frowned, something curling in stomach.

Why was she describing them in past tense?
"What..." his voice rasped and he swallowed thickly, eyes narrowing as he felt a fire start to burn inside. "What did you do to them?"

"Do to them?" she repeated. "Why, nothing at all." His stomach unclenched the barest bit. "The question to ask instead is what did you do, my Lance?"

What did... he do?

"I informed them of the little stunt you pulled," she smirked, inclining her head towards his wrists. She...

What?

_Dios_ no.

"You can imagine their reactions. They were so... _disappointed_," the word practically dripped with disdain.

Lance felt his heart stutter.

No.

"What were the princess' words again? Oh, yes." Haggar gave a light cough and her next words were in Allura's accented tones. "Anyone who would fall so far to take their own life is no Paladin of Voltron."

"N-no," Lance shook his head. "No, that's..."

Exactly what he'd feared.

They were ashamed of him. They were _disgusted_.

But...

But he'd done it for _them_. To protect _them_. They had to see that, right?

No.

No they didn't.

And even worse...

They _had_ been coming. Despite everything he'd thought, despite the fate of the universe, they had been willing to trade the Black Lion for him.

And now they weren't.

Because of what he had done.

They were going to leave him here, knowing what kind of pain he was enduring, what kind of tortures.

That... that _couldn't_ be right.

It just couldn't.
"No," Lance shook his head again. "You're lying."

She had to be lying.

Haggar laughed at the accusation. "Oh, my sweet Lance. You are only lying to yourself."

"No," he protested weakly. "They wouldn't…"

Leave him here because of that.

He understood having to leave him behind because the universe needed Voltron, needed the Black Lion.

But...

But now?

"They would," she insisted. "They have no need for a weak, pathetic child like yourself. They are better off without you and they know it."

"I did it for them," he whispered. "To s-save them." A sob caught in his throat, barely audible over the sudden harsh pounding of the waves against his shelter and the howling of the wind.

"You did it to save yourself," Haggar countered.

"N-no…"

"Don't deny it. You thought only to escape. But you forgot, my Lance, that I told you such a thing was impossible. There is no escaping me."

"H-Hunk," he let out a low sob. There was no way his friend, his best friend, his brother, would leave him like that. Hunk would never leave him, leave anyone, to suffer like that. Not if he could help it.

"The Yellow Paladin?" Haggar smirked. "Oh, he may have tried. But he would have gone up alone against the Altean princess and of course my champion."

"Sh-Shiro—"

"You think he takes pity to your plight? He did, originally. But even in his darkest days he never once even entertained the idea of killing himself. He was disgusted."

Shiro thought...

Shiro thought that?

Lance whimpered.

He'd just wanted to protect them.

"You think your reasons matter?" Haggar chuckled. "They are but words, thoughts. What matters is the action. And yours have eliminated your last chance at freedom."

A sob worked its way free and he wrapped his arms about himself, though the embrace did nothing to comfort him.
He hadn't meant for this. He had just wanted to protect them. And they were going to leave him? Now? His shoulders shook and a salty tear trickled down his face.

"There, there," Haggar crooned, suddenly next to him with an arm around his shoulders, drawing him into her embrace.

He shuddered.

He didn't have the strength left to pull away.

Weak.

Pathetic.

He settled for closing his eyes so he didn't have to look at her.

"It's all right," Haggar murmured, a hand coming up to brush against his cheek well the other held him fast in her embrace. "All is as it should be."

Another tear slipped down his cheek.

"They may not want you," she said softly. "But I do. I'll take care of you, my sweet Lance. Everything is all right now."

He stiffened.

No.

No this wasn't all right.

This was wrong.

Haggar was wrong.

Her words were poison, lies. He couldn't listen to them.

She had to be lying.

There was no way, none, that everything she had said was truth. To agree to a trade and then to not? To agree to a trade of such a magnitude at all?

It was a trick.

It had to be a trick.

They still weren't coming but it wasn't because of... because of that.

He squirmed in her grasp, trying to break free, but her arm tightened painfully around his chest.

"No," he gasped, shaking his head. "No. It's not."

Haggar let out a sigh. "I can see that you don't quite believe me yet," Haggar murmured. "A pity. You are only setting yourself up for more failure and heartache. I can save you from that."

"You're lying," he insisted.

Something wasn't right.
Haggar should be *livid* if the the Paladins weren't coming. That had been the whole point; to trade him for the Black Lion. Why would she do something like this that ruined that opportunity? He was *nothing* compared to the Black Lion.

She knew that.

He knew that.

The *universe* knew that.

So why?

"Oh, my Lance," Haggar bent her head down and nuzzled his hair.

Lance froze.

What?

He tried to pull away again but Haggar held fast, breath warming his ear. "You are so much brighter than they give you credit for."

So there was something else.

She *was* lying.

He just had no idea what part was true.

"...what do you want from me?" he asked quietly.

Cool lips descended on his cheek in a kiss and Lance jerked forward, eyes widening.

"I want you," she whispered, words ghosting over his cheek.

He stiffened and she delighted in it, delighted in the feeling of his warm flesh growing cold beneath her touch.

"I want you," she repeated, pressing another kiss to his cheek, tasting the salt of his tears.

Delicious.

"Wh-what do you...?" he trailed off, breath audibly catching as Haggar pressed another gentle kiss against his jaw, drinking in more tears.

She could taste his confusion and fear and it was delicious too.

The ice he had surrounded himself with gave another crackle deep in the recesses of his mind.

"Your quintessence shines so brightly," she murmured, feeling it thrumming off the boy even as it too recoiled against her touch. "It is strong. And I desire it."

He didn't even know what he had, she realized, as another wave of fear-tinged confusion brushed against her. He had no idea of his own power.

She loved him even more for it.

The thought paused her.
Love.

Yes, she decided, looking down at the slender human she had in her grasp. She loved her Lance.

He was hers.

And now...

Now it was time to truly break him so he would be all hers, body and mind.

And of course his beautiful, beautiful quintessence.

She slipped a hand through his hair, the locks matted with blood, and she carded her fingers through them, lovingly easing out the tangles, as she contemplated her next words carefully. She had thought the idea of his team abandoning him would do the trick, but as his quintessence showed his desire to protect, to believe, was stronger than most.

Hope was a powerful weapon.

Hopelessness was even more.

She hummed. Yes.

"I admit," she said gently, keeping her voice pitched low, "I was indeed lying earlier."

Her Lance stiffened.

She chuckled. So innocent.

"The Paladins of Voltron do not know of your little... attempt," she said, bringing one hand down to squeeze on the bloodied, ripped open flesh of his left wrist. He let out a moan.

It was music to her ears.

It was much better than the absolute loss she had felt as his quintessence had blinked out of existence. What had passed then was one of the longest minutes of her life as the commander dragged the boy's body from the water and she had gripped his wrists so tightly in her hands she had left nail marks in his tender flesh as she knit it back together.

She had almost been too late. Another half dobash even and his spirit would have been beyond even her reach. It was truly fortunate he had found his mindscape earlier on. It kept him tethered to his physical body in a way those who had not ever stepped foot into their mindscape could do.

It had been too close though. She clutched him about the shoulder just a little tighter.

"I have no doubt though," she continued, squeezing his wrist again, "they are so, so disappointed. Why... if they were ever to find out what you did you would certainly be stripped of your title. Someone as weak minded as yourself has no business being a Paladin."

She inflected her words with her quintessence and smiled as she felt him flinch, felt the darkness sink into him.

The ice shield formed another long crack.

"They are coming," Haggar continued. "However..." she paused for effect, feeling the heartbeat under her hand increase in tempo. "While we will get the Black Lion as promised, the Paladins..."
well, they will get a body."

He practically stopped breathing. "Wh-what?"

"Oh, you won't be dead, my sweet Lance," she assured. "You will be quite alive, right here with me." She nuzzled her nose against the dark strands and the boy did not even try to pull away. "But they must be punished for thinking of deceiving the Galra Empire. That and I have become so fond of you I can't bear to give you up."

She pressed another kiss to his cheek. "You will stay here, with me, while the Paladins make off with a fake that will die within a half-varga. They will never know that you are still here, with me. As I told you," she nuzzled his head. "You are mine. And there is no escaping me."

"N-no," he whimpered. "You can't…"

"I can do anything I want, my Lance," she said. Her finger traced down his cheek. "Take anything I want." He shuddered and she basked in it. "And I choose you, my sweet Lance. The Black Lion is Emperor Zarkon's prize. And you are mine."

Lance shuddered.

This...

This couldn't be happening.

It was worse than anything he could have ever imagined.

The universe was about to lose their last chance of peace...

And it was all his fault.

No.

No.

This couldn't...

A sob ripped out of his throat and it grew as Haggar murmured, pressing a kiss now against the top of his head in some distorted comfort.

He didn't even try to pull away.

This couldn't be how it ended.

He couldn't do anything to save them. Nothing he did mattered.

He'd lost.

Somewhere in him he felt a crack, a shattering.

He wasn't just breaking now.

He was broken.

He'd failed.

He'd failed them all.
The Galrans were going to win. They were going to win and everyone he loved was going to die. Because of him. Because he was weak. Because no matter how hard he tried he failed.

And...

He had nothing left to give.

He'd tried to give it all and even that had not been enough.

*He* was not enough.

How had he ever believed he could protect them?

Exhausted eyes opened and looked out at his mindscape.

It was falling to ruin.

Waves lashed furiously against the rock, while crimson rain poured unendingly from the shrieking sky and the rock structure about them gave a dangerous rumble, pieces cracking off to drop into the frothing ocean.

As he watched the scene blurred with tears and the scarlet color of the rain started to bleed away, the dark indigo of the ocean disappeared.

He could feel it, a darkness creeping up around him, coloring his heart and his mind. It was the color of failure, of hopelessness.

He couldn't stop it.

Not anymore.

The blue of his eyes dulled just as the mindscape around him, color fading away to be replaced with a cold world of gray.

He closed his eyes against the colorless world, no longer able to look at what he had created.

It was over. There was no use in fighting anymore.

He had failed.

He'd failed everyone.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, a last tear trickling down his cheek.

And Lance let himself fade away into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

The end! Hehe, just kidding. We've still got a long ways to go. Originally I was actually going to pop back over to some of the Paladins this chapter, but decided that it was much too cruel after last chapter's cliffhanger and that given that mindset I didn't think you'd enjoy that scene as much if we're all worried about what happened with Lance. Next chapter though plan to see some of the other Paladins :) Managed to get the
"bonus" chapter up too so y'all didn't have to wait a full week. Yay!

I'd like to thank you all for the honest feedback regarding the end of last chapter. I will say that I have been fortunate in the sense that actions like those are not familiar to me on a personal or even family/friend level. As such, I was unaware of how they could trigger those who have had experience even though the act was not meant as one of suicide but as a sacrifice to protect his friends, and I sincerely apologize if it came as a shock. A trigger warning was put up at the top of chapter eighteen as a result of that feedback.

Regarding Lance's decision: It was certainly not an easy one to make and given his circumstances one of the only choices he actually had available left to him and he took it to protect his friends. True courage right there. Unfortunately those actions are chipping away at him and combined with everything else he's endured he's right at the breaking point. Haggar is super excited so at least one person is happy right now :p Just remember though that right now all may not be as it seems. We know how strong Lance is even he doesn't recognize it himself. Chins up, everyone.

The biggest of thanks go out to the amazing reviewers! I love you guys so much. Hugs and kudos!

As always, please do drop a comment below. They feed the author's soul.
Chapter Twenty

It was very dark here.

Lance blinked against the darkness, straining to see something. Anything.

The faintest glimmer shone in the distance, a light against the dark canvas.

Lance let out a breath... or, well, he might have.

He didn't have a body.

He was just... just there. Somehow.

Where was there? Where was here?

He didn't know this place.

"Hello?" he whispered, unseeing lips sounding out the word.'Hello' echoed over and over in the space until it eventually faded away. "Where am I?" he called out then, 'am I, am I, am I?' repeating into the void.

He didn't think this was his mindscape. His mindscape had been--

Dios.

He remembered.

He'd...

He'd...

He'd... Failure stabbed into him, burning and freezing in its intensity.

He'd...

He'd given up. Surrendered.

He'd failed.

He'd failed his family. Failed the universe.

He'd failed himself.

He'd sworn to do whatever it took to protect his family. He had promised himself that he would make sure they did not get hurt because of his weakness and failure.

And yet here he was, broken, in some dark void with Haggar out there and ready to... to steal his quintessence or something like that. He didn't really understand what that was or how it mattered, but he did know it had to be bad and he was allowing her to do it.

He should try and stop her.
Somehow.

But...

But all he ever did was fail.

What did he honestly think he could do?

The light in the distance pulsed and he found his gaze drawn back to it.

What was that?

And although he had no body to speak of he found himself moving towards it.

It shone even brighter up close, discernibly blue now, and flowing about almost like ocean waves.

It was beautiful.

He had the strongest urge to reach out and touch it, but the lack of a body prevented him from doing so. The light though wrapped about whatever it was he was, cool and warm all at the same time.

He recognized this presence.

"Blue," he whispered, almost hearing the comforting purr as the light continued to envelop him. "Are… are you here?"

No answering roar greeted him, but the pressure, almost now like a hug, increased and he found himself melting into it. There was joy here. Laughter. Smiles. Peace and comfort and hope all bundled up in this light, which he slowly realized must be his quintessence.

He was in his mind now.

There was a sharp prick then against what would be his arm and he glanced down.

There was a dark patch, a blackness, a tear, in his quintessence.

It hurt.

He tried to pull away from it but there were more now, swarming amidst the blue light, and leaving an odd mixture of both comfort and pain as the two clashed.

All of it was his quintessence, he recognized. The dark and the light. His quintessence had broken, just as he had.

He'd...

He'd hurt himself.

He stopped trying to pull away.

It was then he became aware that the quintessence itself was being pulled instead, sucked towards the opposite end of this dark world where only endless blackness resided.

Haggar.

She was trying to take his quintessence.
She was going to hurt his family with it. He didn't know how but he knew that.

He couldn't let her.

He had to protect them.

He couldn't grip anything, but all the same he tugged on the light, feeling it wrap tighter about him.

This was his quintessence. And she couldn't have it.

The blue seemed to glow at the sentiment, a new wash of warmth and love filling him.

*Protect* it seemed to echo. *Fight.*

"I'm trying," Lance whispered to it, wincing as a dark patch seared against him. His grip loosened as pain dug into him, dark and cold and biting.

*Fight!*

He tightened his grip.

He didn't know how long he could hold on for. Even with the comforting blue wrapped about him he could feel the dark pieces growing, digging into him as surely as Haggar's poisonous words.

But he had to.

He had to fight.

He had to protect them.

He couldn't give up now.

He hadn't failed them yet.

The blue glowed brighter, bolstering him.

He could still do this.

*Protect,* it whispered.

"I will," he said, surprised to find he meant it. "I will," he repeated, wrapping himself more fully in his quintessence. "I'll protect them."

He pulled with all of his might...

And his world exploded in color.

xxx

It was supposed to be a quick stop. Go in, find a strand of hair, and get back to the hanger to start building the DNA scanner. But nothing was ever simple these days and it stood to reason this would not be either.

Oh, Hunk had found the hair without too much effort. Lance had several available strands between his pillow and blankets. That part had been done right off the bat and Hunk had safely secured it in a capsule for transport.
It was leaving the room that was the hard part.

Hunk hadn't set foot in Lance's room since his best friend had been taken from them. He realized that was a mistake to the poor plants Lance had accumulated and frantically ran to the bathroom to fill several cups with water and hydrate the wilting greenery.

He didn't want them to die.

If they died...

Hunk had ended up crying over one of the pots where the leaves had begun to curl in from the neglect.

It was stupid to tie Lance's fate to his plants, but...

But that was where Hunk's mind was. He spent some time pruning them, plucking out the dead leaves and tracing his fingers over soft petals and trying to comfort the greenery in the way he couldn't comfort Lance.

He'd ended up crying again and watering one plant a bit with his tears.

He hoped the salt didn't hurt it.

Hunk had thought it strange the first time Lance had picked up a plant from one of the planets they'd liberated. His friend hated gardening of any sort and he'd witnessed Lance's black thumb on more than one occasion.

His Lion wasn't even the element of the earth or plants (and Pidge most definitely did not have floral arrangements in her room) to say it was his Lion's influence. After the third such plant Lance accumulated though he'd had to ask. And the answer had actually been rather unsurprising.

Lance had spent his entire life surrounded by siblings and caring for them in his own way, even his two older siblings. Even while at the Garrison he often wrote letters, emails and sent off silly gifts and photos on a regular basis. He'd just... needed something to look after here. And besides, he'd smirked, trying to push aside the look of homesickness that had stolen over his features, Allura had kiboshed his plans for any pets so plants it had to be.

He'd even named all of them after his siblings. It made Hunk feel even more guilty that they'd been neglected and promised them all he'd look after them until Lance was up to doing so himself.

Somehow between caring for the plants and plucking the sample hair, Hunk had found himself sitting on Lance's bed and clutching Lance's jacket to him while trying to hold back another wave of tears.

He knew he needed to get back to work. Not only did he have the scanner to work on but he and Pidge were still working on the mapping program they were devising to possibly allow for a quicker exit from the Galra (they were keeping it under wraps though until they could determine it would work because no point in getting hopes up to crush them) and he had to take point on it for now as she was busy with the hologram projector and he really needed to get back but... but he couldn't get himself to move.

He just wanted to close his eyes and when he opened them find out all of this was just a horrible nightmare, some hallucination maybe brought on by some weird space food.

He didn't want this to be real.
Because Lance...

He was so scared.

Hunk was scared of a lot of things and so that feeling on its own was nothing new. But this bone-deep, gut-churning fear that had no end, that nothing could ease, was something different entirely. And nothing would be able to stop it until Lance was back, safe, and cradled in his arms where Hunk was never going to let him go.

He knew it wasn't going to be that simple.

And yet if Lance was here, with him, Hunk knew he could do anything, or at least have the courage to try.

Without Lance...

Without Lance he wouldn't even be here. And Hunk didn't mean necessarily in space (although yes, that too), but he wouldn't have ever become the person he was.

He owed so much to Lance.

Hunk sniffled and held the jacket tighter, pressing his face into the worn but loved cloth. He swore he smelled cinnamon, the scent he had come to associate with Lance's family home.

He remembered the first time he'd stepped foot into the house.

It had been on the day he first met Lance.

He smiled even as he let out a sob at the memory, allowing himself to become lost in that summer afternoon that changed...

Changed everything.

He'd been eight years old and sitting at the base of the huge mesquite tree that resided at the very outskirts of his neighborhood. It was the border, the final marker, before one crossed the street and entered the "shantytown", the nickname for the poorer section of houses there. He liked it though because it was quiet and away from the rest of his uppity neighborhood.

Away from everyone else.

It was a gorgeous summer day and he should have been outside playing rather than reading. Again. He figured at least he was outside though, rather than closed up in the house. His mom had given a soft sigh but had nodded and smiled and agreed.

Hunk knew she was still disappointed.

His parents were concerned about him, he knew, and how he didn't have any friends. Their worry just made him more anxious and the few times he'd found the courage to try and befriend a new kid to the school he had messed it up, stuttering and stumbling over his words and making him look like a bit, fat idiot.

He didn't call himself that. The other kids did. They called him lots of names, their favorites being 'chunky Hunky' and 'Hunky the monkey,' and then make monkey noises at him and pick their noses.

He didn't know why they disliked him so much.
They just did.

Children could be cruel, his mom told him, after he’d come home from school with his knees scraped from being shoved down and his new book on airplane engines ripped to shreds. They didn’t always like people who were different from them and Hunk, with his big, beautiful brain, his mom said, trying to tickle a smile out of him with no avail, could be intimidating to them.

Hunk had not been comforted. Not even peanut butter and fluffernutter sandwiches could make it better.

His parents had talked to the school about the bullying issues but things had only gotten worse, the kids becoming better at hiding their aggressions or targeting him on the short walk to and from school.

Hunk had stopped trying, doing all he could to avoid anyone and everyone.

No one wanted to be his friend. That was all there was to it.

Instead he found his solace in his books and cooking with his mom and tinkering on engines at his dad’s auto shop. He didn't need anyone else, he told himself.

The lie was bitter but it still hurt less than the teasing and the cruel words of the other kids.

He had been reading a book on combustion engines, the thick tome balanced in his lap, when a sedan had rolled up to a house in shantytown not too far from him, the rattling engine disturbing the otherwise tranquil quiet of the early afternoon. Hunk had of course looked up to see what the commotion was. He loved to know everything going on, even when it sometimes got him in trouble. His mom called it inquisitive and curious. The other children called it being nosy and had nearly broken his nose in their taunting.

So he did not hold out much hope that the new people moving in, even if they did have kids, would want to play with him. No one ever did.

He told himself it didn't matter.

He told himself he was a liar.

Hunk wanted a friend. He wanted a friend so badly it hurt.

He watched a man get out of the backseat, speaking rapid-fire in a language Hunk only vaguely recognized as Spanish as he walked around the front passenger side of the car to help a very pregnant woman out of the seat. Only once she was standing, waving a map in front of her face at the dry Arizona heat, did the man open the backseat door closest to Hunk.

Hunk could only watch in amazement as three, no, four, no, five! children tumbled out all chattering a mile a minute in incredibly loud voices, further breaking the quiet of the afternoon.

He wondered the physics of how all of them plus who he guessed was the dad had fit in such a space.

They were all incredibly thin, wearing an odd combination of clothes that didn’t seem to quite fit. The man appeared to order the kids to head for the house, pausing himself to remove two suitcases from the trunk that was otherwise bare. The man went towards the front of the car where another man – Hunk recognized him as Mr. McClain from his church – met him. The two spoke with mostly smiles and nods and clasped hands.
Hunk realized who these people must be. The refugees. His church had been participating in a relocation program for refugees and the family they had sponsored was to be arriving sometime over the next week. Cuba, Hunk thought he remembered.

He turned his attention from the two adult males back to the kids, who were chattering away and swarming about the front yard and small porch, while their mom waved her hands in an exasperation Hunk recognized from his own mom and one of the older children, a girl maybe around twelve?, went to her side and guided her up the steps.

Within the minute all of the children were inside the house and a minute later the dad was too, Mr. McClain getting back in his car and driving off.

Hunk blinked at the lack of noise, his ears still ringing.

He wondered if any of them might want to be his friend. He knew it was a silly hope but something kept him rooted there, telling him not to leave. Hunk figured he had nothing better to do and so he stayed, hoping this feeling wasn’t just from eating a tub of raw cookie dough earlier in the morning.

He lingered at the tree for another hour with his book, only half-heartedly reading it as he kept glancing down the street at the house, waiting.

Just as he was about to head home for lunch, his stomach rumbling and his hopes sinking, the door opened and one of the older girls walked out, a boy scampering at her heels. He looked from here to be about Hunk’s age and he straightened up, squinting to see better. He was tall, at least for their age, and had a thin build and face, but a toothy grin was widening it.

The girl, who had to be his sister, was walking around the side of the house towards the backyard, calling over her shoulder no doubt for the boy to follow.

The boy looked past his sister and caught Hunk staring straight on. The larger boy blushed and ducked his head at being caught. When he finally had enough courage to look back up both the boy and girl were gone. He sighed, disappointed in himself. Maybe he’d work up the courage to go over there and introduce himself later.

Much later. Most likely never. He was a real coward, afraid of being rejected again.

He stood up and wiped the dry dirt from the seat of his shorts. It was time to go home.

Before he’d made it a step though he heard a shout and the sound of someone running, feet pounding on pavement He turned around and was nearly plowed over by the boy he’d seen a few minutes ago, who somehow managed to hit the brakes and skidded to a stop just inches from Hunk.

He was tall, Hunk thought again. And had no concept of personal space as he leaned forward, white teeth shining against his tan skin.

"¡Hola! ¿Cómo estás? Me llamo Lance!" The boy leaned closer, fingers lighting on the book Hunk was clutching protectively in front of him at the close proximity. Last time someone had gotten this close they’d yanked his books from his hands and then knocked him down too."

But this boy didn’t seem interested in yanking Hunk’s book away, merely seeming to be holding it because he couldn’t reach Hunk around it.

Hunk wasn’t sure how he felt about that but the boy seemed friendly.

Maybe...?
¿Qué estás leyendo? ¡Ese libro es muy grande!" the boy chattered. He cocked his head to the side and gestured at the house behind him. "¿Quieres jugar a escondite? ¡Estamos explorando nuestra nueva casa!

He was definitely speaking Spanish at this point. Hunk wondered if this was what he sounded like when he went into his tangents on engineering and his parents just nodded along, listening but not really understanding.

He should say something though. His tongue got lodged in his mouth as he remembered how most first meetings with new kids always went for him. His stomach flipped over and could feel the barest tinge of green overcoming him as nerves got the better of his stomach.

The boy's face was morphing from the wide smile, but it wasn't to disgust.

He looked concerned. "¿Estás bien? Te ves verde."

"Um," Hunk swallowed thickly. "Uh, hi," Hunk said, trying for a smile. "I, uh, don't speak Spanish."

At the word the boy brightened again. "¿No hablas español? Spanish? " the boy asked, trying to clarify. "¿Hablas inglés?"

"Inglés is... is English?" Hunk sounded out, earning an exuberant nod. "Yes. I speak English. But not Spanish. Er, español. I'm sorry."

The boy waved away the words, never losing his smile at this complication, and pointed at himself. "Me llamo Lance. Lance. ¿Y tú?"

Lance, Hunk repeated the name in his head. At least he thought that's what the other boy was saying.

"I'm Hunk," Hunk said slowly, gingerly releasing one hand from his book and using it to point at himself. "And you're Lance?"

"¡Sí sí! Hola, Hunk!" Lance held out a hand with a wide smile.

A handshake.

He felt something warm bloom inside his chest.

Hunk stared at it for a moment before hesitantly held out his as well, being treated a second later to an enthusiastic handshake that nearly had him dropping his book.

"Vamos a jugar un juego," Lance smiled. "¿Juega con nosotros, Hunk?"

Hunk had no idea what that meant. He said as such but Lance did not seem deterred in the slightest.

Instead he tugged at their hands, still connected, to pull Hunk towards his house. He used his other hand to cover his eyes and then mimed like he was searching for something, shielding his eyes and looking around. Understanding dawned in Hunk's a second later. "Hide and seek?" he asked.

Lance wanted to play hide and seek with him?

Lance did not answer, but tugged more insistently at Hunk to follow him. Hunk found his feet moving all on their own, leading him down the street into shantytown and up the creaking steps of the porch. Hunk barely had a second to kick off his shoes – his mom had a very firm rule
about shoes in the house – before he was being tugged inside while Lance shouted at the top of his lungs in excitement. Within seconds all four of his other children Hunk had witnessed earlier were present.

"Hunk, estos son mis hermanos: Rosie, Carlos, Geoffrey y Maria," Lance said, pointing at each child in turn from apparently oldest to youngest. "Chicos, este es mi amigo nuevo Hunk."

Hunk knew very few Spanish words – the only ones he really got were from Saturday morning cartoons – but he did recognize the word amigo thanks to the three amigos from Disney.

It meant friend.

Lance had called him his friend.

He felt his face heat up at the simple declaration, made mere minutes after meeting Lance. He held up his hand in a little wave to a chorus of "holas."

Maria was apparently tagged as 'it' for their game and Lance grabbed Hunk's hand again, gesturing with a quiet giggle to follow him upstairs to hide. Hunk's own face nearly split because of his grin, and he eagerly followed for his first ever game of hide and seek and the first of his many, many adventures with his new, best friend Lance.

He was jerked out of the memory by a knock on the open doorframe, revealing the princess, who smiled almost sheepishly at him.

Hunk blinked. What was Allura doing here?

"I am sorry to disturb you," she apologized, inclining her head. "I hope I am not intruding."

"Ah, you're fine, Princess. I'm sorry, I got distracted. Did... did you come here looking for me? I'm sorry, you shouldn't be an errand girl. I'll get back to the hangar right away."

Hunk was already on his feet, putting Lance's jacket reverently back atop his pillow, hoping it hid his shaking hands.

It's not that he was scared of Allura, even though she could be pretty intimidating.

It was just...

He didn't really know how to talk to royalty one on one like this. Allura had always been rather distant and while she had seen more of her in the past few days than he thought he had since they'd been launched into space outside of training, they had never really talked.

Well, except for when he yelled at her about abandoning Lance.

He winced at the memory.

In is defense at that point in time Allura had seemingly been more concerned about the fate of the universe over what fate had befallen his best friend, but she had changed her tune after the recording and hearing her explain her conversation they'd heard with Haggar had quelled the lingering fear he'd had that she was still going to decide it was too dangerous, that the needs of many outweighed the needs of a few, and order them to call it off.

Now all he felt was guilt that he'd yelled in the first place. Hunk didn't really yell, not often.

Even the memory of raised voice made his stomach clench although he would not take it back.
"Actually," Allura sounded almost hesitant and Hunk found his eyes drawn to hers. "I... I had hoped the two of us might speak. If you have a moment."

"Um, Y-yeah. Sure."

Hunk's stomach gave another twist.

"I wanted to ask you about Lance."

Hunk blinked.

That... That was not what he had been expecting. And hearing Lance's name from Allura's mouth was still... strange. A good strange but... different.

"Okay..." Hunk said, crossing his arms uncomfortably over his chest. "Um, what about him?"

"You two are close," Allura said, phrasing the question as a statement and Hunk nodded. "I..." she wrung her hands and Hunk blinked again.

Was Allura... nervous?

"I am concerned," she finally settled on. "Before Lance was... taken, I had noticed there was a... disconnect, I suppose, in his actions from previous. He seemed... sad," she said quietly.

Hunk felt his heart clench.

Someone else had noticed too, seen beneath Lance's boisterous and loud personality.

He honestly hadn't expected it to be Allura.

"I cannot claim to know Lance and how he will be affected by what he has suffered with the Galra," Allura continued. "But given what I have previously witnessed I... I am worried. I wish to try and understand who Lance is so I can best help him when he returns. I had hoped you might be able to provide some insight. If... if that is all right."

"Of course it's all right," Hunk said, throat somewhat choked. He swallowed and shot Allura a small smile. "He'd be really touched you're asking, Princess. He really looks up to you."

Allura looked surprised. "He does?"

"Mm. And Shiro. Shiro's his hero and you're... well, you're you." Allura's brow furrowed in confusion. "You're this... this really amazing and powerful and beautiful," Hunk felt himself blush, "princess who is traveling the universe to free it from Zarkon's reign even after all... all you've been through," his voice got quieter in solemn remembrance of all Allura had lost that set her on this path, "and he just... just really admires you. We all do."

"Oh." A light blush was dusting Allura's cheeks.

"It's... it's why Lance can be like that, sometimes. Sad," Hunk clarified, even though that wasn't quite right. "He worries about disappointing you. He... he hasn't always had it easy, Princess." He looked away, digging his fingers into the capsule. "I don't know if I should be telling you this."

"You may share whatever you feel comfortable with, Hunk," Allura said and Hunk gave a start at the sound of his name. "I had just hoped to... understand."

Hunk let out a soft sigh. He may be nosy but he was oftentimes a closet sneak, keeping what he
found to himself unless it was important to share. And this wasn't his story to share, but he had a bad feeling that Lance wasn't... wasn't going to be the same when they got him back. He was going to need all of the support and love he could get and if Allura understood him, even just a little bit more, it could make a huge difference.

"Lance is... complicated," Hunk said quietly, keeping his eyes down although he could feel Allura's trained on him. "I know he talks a big game and says a lot of stuff that can come across as annoying or rude or like he's looking for a fight, but he's not. Not really. He's just... Just trying to encourage himself because he... he can get pretty down.

"Lance is smart," Hunk continued. "He's not like me and Pidge but he's not stupid. He got told that though. A lot. English wasn't his first language and he had a lot of trouble learning to speak it fluently, so he got teased a lot at school. And I," Hunk colored, "I got teased a lot too. Lance would stand up for me but he... he never wanted to stand up for himself. I tried a couple times but Lance," Hunk let out a low, sad laugh. "Well, he doesn't like to see people hurt. He hated when I did that."

"Hunk..." Allura placed a slender hand on his arm. Hunk couldn't look at her though.

"It got worse when we went to the Garrison. It started off okay; like I said, Lance isn't stupid, but then he got put into the cargo pilot division and it just... it hurt him. All he'd ever dreamed about was being a fighter pilot and, well... yeah. I could have gone to fighter class as an engineer there but I refused to be on any team but his. He was the only reason I went to the Garrison in the first place.

"Anyways, Lance got moved to fighter when Keith was kicked out. But," Hunk winced, "he spent the entire time always being compared to Keith, being told he wasn't good enough to be there on his own merit, that he wasn't smart enough to make it... It stuck with him, moreso than usual. And then we came up here," Hunk finally looked up, meeting Allura's eyes. "Where Lance can't help but compare himself to everyone else all the time and on a team like Voltron... there's a lot of talent."

Allura pursed her lips. "I am afraid I do not entirely understand. Lance has many talents too and is a valuable member of the team." She met Hunk's eyes. "He is irreplaceable. Both as a Paladin of Voltron and... and as a friend."

Hunk felt a soft smile turn up his lips at Allura's words. "You should tell him those things," Hunk told her quietly. "It would mean a lot to him, especially coming from you."

"Then I shall," she said firmly, nodding so hard her hair bounced. Her expression sobered then. "Thank you, Hunk, for sharing this with me. I hold it in confidence."

Hunk gave her a tender smile, feeling the warmth in his chest grow at her words.

She cocked her head ever so. "What is it?"

"You keep doing that."

She looked puzzled. "Doing what?"

"Using our names. It was almost always Paladin before."

"Ah," she blushed. "If you prefer your title I can—"

"That's not what I meant at all," Hunk interrupted.

She lowered her eyes, a soft sigh echoing in the room.
"I suppose it is appropriate I share something as well," she said, lips twitching up before they fell. "I was brought up in a world of decorum and politics. Outside of my father and Coran it was disrespectful to use anyone's given name, unless their title was placed in front of it. I kept that tradition upon meeting all of you, as was appropriate.

"However... By using your titles instead of your names I never allowed myself the chance to know the person behind the armor. I believe I have been selfish. I... I have lost much, Hunk. I..." her hands moved to clutch above her heart. "I did not wish to open my heart to more loss."

"Allura..."

"It was Haggar who made me realize what you all are to me," she continued. "I hate that it was she who made me do so it but I will not deny the truth I was forced to see when the first transmission was sent. I saw not a Paladin tied to that chair but instead a boy, a child, I drafted into this war. More than that, I realized that I did not wish to lose him. That I could not lose him."

She sniffled and Hunk's eyes widened in alarm.

Was Allura actually about to cry?

He pulled her into a hug, body moving all on its own.

And to his surprise Allura's hands wrapped tightly around him, almost bruisingly. He forgot sometimes how physically strong she actually was.

"And then Haggar today..." Allura's words came out a whisper against his chest. "It was she who made me once more realize that even then I was still distancing myself. By continuing to only call you Paladins, to regulate you still, after all this, to your titles... I have been foolish, Hunk. I know I am princess of Altea and I have a duty to the universe, but I cannot, I will not, sacrifice my family in the process."

She froze then, stiffening in his arms.

"I, I mean--"

"You think of us as family?" Hunk cut her off.

"Yes," came the quiet response. "It has taken me far too long to see it but all of you are my family now. If, that is-"

"You're our family too, Allura," Hunk tested out her name for himself without the title in front of it.

It sounded right.

She let out a sound between a sob and a laugh and hugged him tighter.

Hunk returned it, feeling his own eyes misting and he discreetly tried to wipe them on Allura's hair.

"Thank you," she murmured a moment later, head resting on his shoulder.

"Thank you," Hunk echoed, giving her a squeeze before lowering his arms. "I'd... I'd probably better get back. Pidge is gonna be on the warpath."

Allura laughed lightly. "I pray not. But yes, it is probably best we both get back to our tasks."

"Piloting?" Hunk asked, Lance's door sliding shut behind them as they exited into the hall.
"Coran is watching the helm for the moment," Allura said. "I actually am going to speak with the Blue Lion." She looked a tad nervous again and Hunk laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"You're gonna do great, Allura. Blue'll listen." Hunk knew she would. The Blue Lion would do anything to bring Lance home to them too.

Allura inclined her head. "I hope so. Thank you, Hunk. I take my leave then, if you will."

Hunk brought a hand up in a wave and then turned and headed down the corridor in the opposite direction for the Green Lion's hangar where Pidge was set up.

Allura took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and turned to head for the Blue Lion's.

She had no doubt the Blue Lion would wish to help, but whether the Lion would be willing to accept her as a pilot for a second time remained to be seen.

All Lions forged a deep relationship with their Paladins. Given that they practically shared a quintessence there was no other recourse. But even so, the depth to which Lance had bonded with the Blue Lion was something completely different. They spoke to one another, and she had never seen a Lion attempt to mimic their Paladin's chosen speech before.

What the Blue Lion and Lance had though went beyond mere words. Their quintessences were as pure a match as she had ever witnessed of any Paladin and Lion bond; overlapping as surely as ocean waves. Their connection could not really be described, Paladin and Lion seemed far too generic for what the two of them had.

Family? Yes, Allura decided, the word warming her heart. The Blue Lion had as surely adopted Lance as her cub as Lance looked to her for a comfort, a reassurance, that a mother would give her child.

It was beautiful. It showed in their movements; perhaps not as graceful as some but every action was full of joy and love. It was a bond not just forged though by such like quintessences. It was made over time, with love and compassion and care and an understanding and desire to just be together. Allura knew that Lance spent much of his free time in the Blue Lion's hangar. She had found him there on numerous occasions as she took a break from the bridge, sometimes singing, polishing her until she shone, lounging on her paw as though it was the most comfortable bed in the world and one time attempting to teach her some Earth game she had learned was called checkers (with little success it seemed).

She had never intruded on those times, slipping silently away before he could notice her presence. That was a special time, she knew, for the two of them. She should have realized then what a gentle soul Lance truly had, but it was at such odds with the loud, flirtatious and boisterous airs he displayed most other times that it was almost as though there were two people. Thanks to Hunk she now knew which one was the true Lance and such a thought warmed her.

And her heart ached all the more for the Blue Lion. To have her Paladin, her child, ripped away and to be able to do nothing... Allura could imagine nothing more painful. She wondered if that is how her father had felt when he had forced her into cryo-stasis for those ten thousand long years, knowing that it would be the last time he would see her and the last time she would see him.

She would not let that happen to the Blue Lion. She would not allow another family to be torn apart, another parent separated from their child. That she swore as Princess Allura of Altea. No, she corrected herself. That she swore as simply Allura, as family.
Chapter End Notes

So this chapter actually underwent a bit of a switchup. I had not intended to go to Lance at all, but it felt cruel to leave him hanging there so hopeless. So as you can see he's not giving up yet; he just needed a reminder of who he really is. Thanks, quintessence in the form of Blue! Also, this is my headcanon for Lance and Hunk's history and that bond of friendship between the two is really going to be something that comes up. So enjoy little baby Hunk and Lance (my sister doublechecked my Spanish so hopefully we're good! Since I don't translate in text, the gist of Lance speaking is introducing himself, commenting on the massive size of Hunk's book, inviting him to play hide and seek to explore the new house and then doing introductions between siblings and Hunk.)

Hope you all enjoyed! I had a lot of fun diving especially into Allura's head and she's quickly becoming one of my favorites to write. Plus I love me some more Blue so look for her actual part in the next chapter.

Also, I have been tickled pink that we are having book discussions (fic discussions?) in the comments! Omg! ♥ I'm trying to stay out of them because I love seeing readers interact when they don't know how the story ends (and I don't want to spoil anything!). Seriously though, you guys are the best.

Muchas gracias to all of the following lovely reviewers who keep me motivated to keep writing: burple12345, Brohaikyyu, bubblebucky, WolfFire, glitteringconstellations, Laurencat10, Ms.+J, BrieCheese, AnaStick, ladykristianna, heyheroics, Fey_79, WolfHuskyBlue, nocturnalspork, Person and alexries.

As always, I'd love to hear what you thought of the chapter! Lance's revelation, Hunk's flashback, Hunk and Allura's chat... If you have a tick to spare after reading I would really appreciate a comment. Thanks so much everyone and see you next chapter! ♥
Haggar screamed as burst of blue light exploded from the prone form in front of her, searing her hands and sending her tumbling head over heels from the structure and onto the blood-soaked beach.

What had happened?

She stumbled to her feet, cradling her blistered hands to herself and looking with wide eyes at the human boy, who was gently stirring as the blue light settled into his skin and causing him to glow softly.

She had underestimated him.

There should have been not one bit of fight left in him. She had felt his surrender, felt the last of his mental wall come shattering down.

And yet...

Yet he had fought back, ripped his quintessence back to himself just as she was beginning to harvest it, to bring that intoxicating power into herself. Haggar felt its loss already and her hands burned anew, a direct contrast to the soothing cool warmth, like liquid silk, that had pooled over her hands as she soaked them in her Lance's quintessence.

She could feel around her the walls being rebuilt, still fragile, but a barrier that was once more blocking her attempts to access his mind, to settle into the cracks she had so lovingly grown. Even the mindscape was reacting to this change, the blood rain having given way to actual water that was a mere drizzle rather than a torrent and the ocean had fallen back into itself, still churning but no longer lashing out.

He was repairing his mind.

He was stronger than she had ever imagined.

A smile crossed her face even as her hands pulsed with pain.

That power would be hers.

Obtaining it would be a more difficult feat than she had imagined, but that would make the reward all the sweeter. And she had all the time in the world. Lance was hers: body, mind and quintessence. She loved every bit of it, even if right now he had caused her pain.

Well...

She would just have to return the favor.

Lance meanwhile was groaning softly as aching limbs and wounds registered, back in his body once more and not... not in wherever that other place had been. His hand twitched in front of him, brushing against remnants of sand and harsher rock and he cracked open his eyes, taking in the bleary form of the craggy structure he had taken shelter beneath.

Haggar was nowhere to be seen.
Was...
Was she gone?

What exactly had happened? There had been that blue light and then...

Then he was back here.
And while he was still in pain he felt... lighter. Brighter. The darkness that had stolen over his vision was gone, replaced with a gentle warmth he felt emanating from his chest.

Hope.
He was feeling hope.

He allowed the feeling to push him to sitting, slumping against the rough rock once he was upright as his body protested the movement and his head was spinning.

His hands and wrists were still bleeding.

Lance closed his eyes, took a deep breath and willed them to heal. He felt the barest tingle on his palm and cast a hesitant look down. They were not fully healed but some of the flesh had knit itself back together and the worst of the pain had faded.

His wrists remained jagged cuts.

He swallowed thickly, averting his eyes, as just the sight of them had a darkness pressing back in.

He'd done that.

They pulsed anew and he let out a soft moan.

But he'd...

He'd done that to protect his family.

But at the same time...

Haggar was right.

The thought sent another stabbing ache through his heart. But it was true.

They would be so disappointed in him.

But even so...

He would still protect them. He would still do whatever it took to make sure they stayed safe.

Lance lifted his head then, casting his gaze from the ocean in front of him to the beach to his left.

And Haggar.

She met his gaze with her sharp yellow although even the narrowed gaze could not take away from the pinched look of her face.

She was hurt. His eyes widened as he took in her form, cloak and robe rumpled and a few pieces of flyaway hair poking out while her hands... oh Dios, they were burned. They were
burned badly, purple flesh a harsh red and on her fingertips an almost charcoal black.

He'd somehow done that too.

The reminder had him lifting his chin with pride, remembering his promise in that dark void. "I will protect them," he promised as she lumbered closer. His words were soft in volume but strong and he felt the warmth flare in his chest again.

She let out a soft hum, a small smirk playing over her features.

"But my Lance... Who will protect you?"

She vanished from sight before Lance could even attempt to answer, reappearing directly in front of him and one of her burnt hands reached out, splaying it on his forehead and shoving his head back against the wall.

Haggar dipped her head down then, teeth nearly nipping his ear. "The answer?" she whispered. "No one."

And her hand lit up with black fire.

Lance screamed.

It felt like being burned alive, fire coating every inch of flesh and turning his vision pure black. He writhed and thrashed but his legs were pinned down by Haggar and his arms were still too heavy, too weak, to do much more than twitch at his sides.

He felt her fire consuming him, angling for a thin, cracking wall of ice.

No!

He pushed back with it, intercepting the fire and screaming again as it burst against the ice with a harsh hiss.

It disappeared.

He was left whimpering with pain, Haggar's hand still pressed against his forehead and her touch searing but no longer unbearable.

"You are alone, my Lance," she said softly, the hand shifting up into his hair, carding back sweat and blood soaked bangs. "You have no one to protect you... except for me. I can make all of this pain go away. All you must do..." her hand stilled. "Is surrender to me."

No.

Never.

He would protect them.

He felt his mental wall flare, a new layer of ice crystallizing atop the previous weakened version from Haggar's attack.

Haggar's grip tightened painfully in his hair.

"I see," she murmured. This location was not ideal. The mind was normally hers to command, to conquer, but this human boy thrived here as well. Any attempt she made now to send them to the
Astral Plane to harvest his quintessence would merely be a repeat of what happened before.

And, she glanced at her hand, flaking away, she could not afford another hit like that. Her Lance's quintessence was unbelievably strong, if raw, and while he had no control to wield it he had still done her a significant blow.

He needed to be weakened further for her to have any success.

And this was not the battleground in which to wage her war.

"I will be waiting," she murmured, bending down and pressing a kiss to his forehead.

His wide blue eyes were the last thing she saw as she vanished in a crackle of black lightning.

Lance stared unblinkingly at where Haggar had just been, a phantom burn on his forehead where she'd left her kiss.

He shuddered.

That was all he had time for as fire filled his lungs, roiling and burning and choking and his hands went for his throat, trying to breathe, he was going to drown drown drown in fire—

—and he came back with a gasp to the real world as water, cold and frigid filled up his lungs instead.

He still could not breathe.

Panic seized him as it flooded his lungs and he couldn't move as something was holding his head down and he spasmed under the hold to no avail, more water and the copper taste of blood filling his mouth and he was going to drown, drown, drown in fire—

His head was wrenched up, claws tight in his hair, and he hacked and coughed and desperately tried to suck in an inhale around it. He'd barely managed a breath before his head being forced back into the water and he inhaled another mouthful of water instead.

The hand held him there, grip unrelenting, as his struggles slowed and a familiar sense of despair, of hopelessness, closed over him. Even having drowned several times now didn't make it any less terrifying; the water filling his lungs with an icy coldness, the way his body seized as it gave up as air did not come.

He was pulled out just before the final piece of darkness clicked into place and something smashed against his back, sending lungs back into action and he wheezed and coughed, expelling water. It left him trembling, hanging limply by his dripping hair.

Tired eyes pried themselves open.

Darkness greeted him.

He didn't even have the energy to be scared this time, merely closing his eyes again.

He was so tired.

The exhaustion was as cutting as the pain, sinking deep into him.

He wished for his mindscape. As hurt as he was in there...

It was an escape.
He felt disconnected here, off, but everything hurt and that kept him tethered to this battered body.

A familiar hand rubbed against his cheek, hot breath that almost felt nice in the coldness of the room heating his cheek.

"Welcome back."

Lance had no answer for her.

He tried to summon up that warmth from before, the good warmth, not Haggar's version of it, but out here, in the real world, it did not come. His quintessence was not there to physically shroud him in its protection, its warmth, and all that was left was the gaping holes of despair and hurt that had been inflicted upon it.

He had to try though.

His family was coming.

They were coming and they were going to fall into Haggar's trap. This would be his last chance. The universe's last chance.

"Oh, my sweet Lance," Haggar's thumb brushed his cheek while he felt something else brush against his mind. He pushed back against the latter.

It was harder than before.

He was so tired.

"I told you there was no escape," she continued. "You have used up all that you had and it was not enough." Her lips moved to ghost across his ear. "Because you are not enough."

He flinched.

Even without the magic imbued behind them her words still hurt.

"You will live out the remainder of your life with me," she murmured. "And the universe shall crumble all around. And you, my Lance, can do so knowing that that all of the death and destruction is your fault because you failed."

She was right.

He hated that she was right but she was.

He had failed.

The only way to fix this was to break free, escape, warn the others of the trick.

But...

But he couldn't.

He was too tired. In too much pain.

And he was out of time.

She chuckled. "Better yet, you will be a part of it all. You will be our new weapon. Your power
alongside mine will bring down the Paladins of Voltron and we will revel in their despair... and then their deaths."

No.

No.

Not that.

He had to stop her. He had to.

"Oh my Lance," her lips pressed against his cheek. "Your determination still is admirable. It is what I so love about you. But," her voice hardened. "I grow weary of it. Commander?"

A growl of acknowledgement sounded from behind him and Lance flinched again, even though he had known without having to see who was the one holding his head. There could be none other.

"Break him."

Lance could feel the fanged grin.

"It will be my pleasure."

Her hand touched his cheek again. "The commander will not kill you, my Lance. But you will wish it so. You will spend the rest of your days hovering between life and death in mortal agony and there will be no release. You will pray for the end but it will never come. You will never escape from me and you will forever live to regret and despair.

"The only choice you have is if you wish to spend eternity in darkness or if you wish to see the universe dismantle before your eyes." Her hand moved, pressing down on his closed eyelids. "That is my gift to you because I love you. Choose. You have the power to restore your sight. You know of what I speak and the word to unlock the spell; you have done so once before. However," her hand moved to smoothe back still wet bangs. "There is one other word you must speak. You know of it, I assure you, but it has yet to grace your lips. It is entirely your decision."

There was the shuffling sound of robes as she stood, her hand falling away. "I must go now to prepare for the Paladins arrival. Commander, you have your orders. Do not disappoint me."

And with a hiss of the door signaling her exit, Haggar left.

"Now, now," Theodek rumbled, fangs nearly nipping at Lance's ear from behind and the boy flinched away to deep laughter. "Where shall we begin?"

xxx

It did not take long for Allura to arrive at the Blue Lion's hangar, as her steps were hurried and her desire swift. Allura did not have the bond the Paladins shared with their Lions, but due to her connection with the castle and Altean lineage she could still feel more than any other would be able to do. And even now she could feel the deep sorrow and guilt emanating from the chamber where the Blue Lion rested.

The Lion was still placed exactly where she'd been left after Allura and Shiro had flown her, lying down with her head between her front paws and tail curled up to rest alongside her body. It was so unlike what Allura was used to; the Blue Lion tended to move about and could be found in all manner of positions when Lance was present about the castle. Allura had been most amused to one
time find the giant cat lying on her back as if waiting for a tummy rub during one of her nightly strolls.

Now she just felt sad.

Allura crossed the room, footsteps echoing in the emptiness, and placed a gentle hand on the Blue Lion's front paw.

"Hello, Blue," she murmured, receiving a flicker at the back of her conscience that let her know the Lion was aware of her presence. She would admit she had never quite addressed a Lion so familiarly but it felt right. "I wish to speak with you if that is all right." The Lion gave the barest of hums and Allura settled herself on the giant paw, continuing to stroke it gently.

"We are to be embarking upon a mission shortly," she said quietly. "To rescue Lance."

At that she felt the Blue Lion rouse herself, the previous sadness being shot through with a flicker of hope. Allura smiled. The two were really quite alike. "I came to ask of your assistance once more in allowing me to be your pilot."

Anything the Lion rumbled, the word nearly jolting Allura off the paw in surprise as it filled the very air around her. Other than the single time in the cockpit when Blue had instructed them to turn on the recording, she had never heard any Lion physically speak and the awe was not dispersed in any way.

Guilt flowed fresh from the Lion, snippets of feelings of failure and despair, and Allura pressed her hand against the paw in an attempt to stop the spiral of dark thought.

Her smile turned sad then. The two really were alike.

"It is not your fault" she said quietly. "There was nothing you could have done. We were all fooled by the Galran's trap."

Failed my Paladin Blue intoned.

"No, you did not," Allura retorted sternly, although she felt her cheeks darken as she realized she had just scolded a giant metal Lion. She pushed onwards, speaking words she could not yet offer to Blue's paladin. "And Lance would not want you believing such." What could only be described as a groan emitted from the Lion, but she offered no further rebuttal.

"You have not failed Lance," she continued softly. "Failure is only the outcome when all hope is lost. We have not yet given up hope, Blue. We will get Lance back."

Wise Princess Blue rumbled and Allura felt her cheeks heat again at the compliment.

"I must go now," she said, sliding down from the paw and shaking out her dress. "I shall return when we are preparing to embark."

Miss my Paladin Blue near whimpered, loss striking Allura so hard that she stumbled.

When she regained her footing she looked towards the Lion's head, yellow eyes angled down towards her. "We all do," Allura said quietly, feeling her own sense of loss. She swallowed thickly. "Your Paladin is very special, Blue. But... you have always known that, haven't you?"

A deep purr sounded.
"You are the wise one, Blue," she murmured. "We all have been very foolish. But we will set things right. I promise."

Blue rumbled an acknowledgement and Allura took her leave, headed back for the bridge to relieve Coran of flying duties so he could return to his other projects.

She did not expect to run into her advisor nearly outside Blue's hangar.

"What is it?" she asked, dread already forming in her stomach. "What has happened?"

"The castle is fine, Princess, flying right on course. We're in a clear sector for about the next twenty dobashes and I am taking full advantage of it." He patted a hand on the large box he was holding, easily weighing near a hundred pounds although one would not know that by the casual air in which he held it. "Just delivering this preliminary cloaking model to the Blue Lion's hangar so Numbers Two and Five and work on it in a bit." He let out a chuckle. "Number Five's attempts to move it on her own were not going overly well."

Allura let out a soft laugh, picturing the small girl trying to heft the item that likely weighed nearly as much as her.

Her smile fell though as Coran's eyes did not crinkle in shared amusement and despite his assurances there was a weight upon his brow.

"There is something you are not telling me."

Coran let out a small sigh. "As observant as always, Princess." She raised an eyebrow as he stopped there. "It is about the half-jump."

Her stomach bottomed out. All of their plans relied on the half-jump being successful and while neither Shiro or Keith had ever even attempted to pilot something like the castle and at that speed no less, her faith in them was strong. She knew they could do it. And in any case they should still be sleeping for several more varga and should not have worried her advisor thus.

"Will it not work?" she asked quietly, hands clenching.

"Negative to that. But..." Coran's eyes shifted guiltily to the side. "We are going to deplete a large portion of the castle's energy to successfully half-jump for such an extended period. It's not like a normal wormhole jump; despite the fact we're moving at half the speed we're using two times the crystal power."

"Do we have enough?"

"To get there, yes."

Her eyes widened. "We cannot leave?"

To arrive in Galra territory and to then be dead in the water...

The entire rest of the team would be in danger.

Her nails bit into her palm.

No.

"Not quite," Coran said, and she felt her world right itself.
"Number Five has been working on the mapping algorithm that looks very promising and should allow us to complete several wormhole jumps to retreat," Coran explained. "It is quite brilliant, truly. She can use the data from our current path and copy it to areas where the quadrant is more stable. It will allow us to exit out of the Hodgkin quadrant in a mix of jumps and piloting and be out within the varga.

"That is excellent news," Allura exclaimed. She had feared their exit strategy would be a mix of the Lions returning cover fire and the castle speeding as quick as it could back through the quadrant, of which would still take nearly two days until she could reach out outskirts and then wormhole the castle to a safer location.

Coran did not smile and Allura's excitement dimmed.

"We will be on base power, Princess," Coran said. "I ran the calculations; the multiple wormhole jumps following the half-jump procedure will drain all our active crystals. We have replacements for them, but they will take a number of varga to charge and be usable."

"I do not understand the problem," Allura frowned. "We have operated on base power before and it sounds as though we have enough to make our escape without issue."

"The cyro-pods," Coran said quietly. "They too operate on the crystals and there will not be enough energy left to activate one."

Understanding dawned on her features.

"No," she shook her head. "There must be something else..."

Because Lance needed a pod. Even if he was not suffering any fatal wounds when they rescued him she knew he must be in so much pain and she did not wish for him to remain in that state for one dobash longer than necessary.

"There is not," Coran's voice sounded as drained as she felt. "It is imperative we keep the oxygen systems running and at least some form of shield and proximity alarm. Those will use up whatever remains."

"It is not fair," she whispered. "Coran, this is not fair."

Coran set the box down by his feet and opened his arms. Allura leaned into the embrace, wrapping her own arms tightly about Coran.

"I know," he agreed, drawing her in closer. "I know. We will do all we can in the interim to care for him. He is strong, Princess. He will... he will be all right. It will only be for a few varga."

He sounded like he was trying to reassure himself as much as he was her.

Allura sniffled, pressing her forehead against Coran's jacket. "I know," she echoed. "He is. I just... Coran, he has been through so much. I do not wish to see him continue to suffer."

Coran stroked her hair, closing his eyes. His own heart was aching at the thought. Lance had already been through so much, but there was nothing to be done for it. He was going to have to endure for just a little longer.

"We have much to do," he said after a moment, voice pitched low.
"You are right," Allura stepped out of the embrace, straightening to her full height. There was no time to fall into despair now. Lance was counting on them and she would not allow them to falter now. "I shall return to the bridge and continue our course."

"I will join you shortly," Coran said.

Allura inclined her head. "Until then."

"Until then," Coran echoed, watching as she hurried down the hall. He reached down and picked up the box of hardware and headed for the Blue Lion's hangar, his own steps heavy.

He was trying not to show it but he was scared too. He had no doubt they would rescue Lance as any other course of action was not acceptable. No, it was what came after. What he had seen of the Galran's cruelty, of the witch's poisonous words. And he could only pray that the boy that he had come to love as dearly as if he were his own would make it out of this with all parts of his soul still intact.

"We're almost there, my boy," he whispered, pressing his hand above his heart. "Hang on."

xxx

"Keith, buddy, time to get up," Shiro whispered.

Keith didn't so much as stir.

Shiro's expression softened. Keith was like him; a relatively light sleeper and the fact he was not responding at all only touched on how exhausted he must be. Shiro understood, he hadn't slept much these past few days either.

But he had managed to sleep nearly the whole ordered eight varga to his immense surprise, only waking up once to the sound of screaming that he'd realized upon powering up his arm was just in his head. He'd only managed to fall back asleep, chest heaving, by listening to Keith's steady breaths.

However, some things had not changed. Shiro's smile returned as he took in the way Keith had managed to dismantle his bed, pulling the blankets and sheets free from where they were tucked under the bed and had cuddled them to his chest. He half expected to see—

Ah, there it was. Keith's jacket. It was tangled up in the blankets as well and Shiro felt a sudden burst of nostalgia at the image, remembering a younger boy cuddled up to it with the promise he would one day grow into it.

He had, Shiro thought fondly. He had grown so much.

But he was still so young.

Shiro wished he could let him continue to sleep, to escape the horror of their current reality for even just a few more minutes. But time was something they did not have in luxury.

That, and Keith did not look to be sleeping peacefully any longer. His brow had furrowed over the course of the past minute, his right hand opening and closing against the blankets as though he was trying to grab hold of something that kept slipping out of reach.

"Keith," Shiro said, a bit louder, recognizing the signs of a nightmare. Keith had never been prone to them, which had been both worrisome and a relief considering where he'd come from, but when he had had them... they had been bad. Shiro had been treated once to a split lip when he'd tried to rouse
the then fifteen year old as he was in the throes of some violent dream.

Keith had been horrified and mortified at the same time, apologizing over and over even as Shiro had hastened to tell him he was all right. When he'd tried to gently inquire about it Keith had clammed right up and Shiro had not pressed. There were some things that were hard to give voice to, even years later. He'd just assured Keith he was there if he ever did want to talk about it.

He winced. He supposed he had been a bit of a hypocrite of late. It was just... hard to talk about memories that he did not want to actually remember. He felt a sudden wave of understanding, of solidarity, for what it all meant.

Keith didn't react except to squeeze his eyes shut even tighter.

Shiro frowned. That was enough. He reached down, gently reaching out to shake Keith's shoulder, prepared for a possible first flying at his face.

The knife was new.

The tip was pointed right between his eyes, unwavering, as its owner heaved out a loud breath that turned into a sort of hiccup a moment later.

"Sh-Shiro," Keith nearly squeaked, the blade lowered and slipped into a sheath so quickly Shiro almost wondered if he had imagined it.

But no.

Keith's face was a picture of bright red and ghostly pale, visible even in the dim lighting of the bedroom.

And he was shaking.

"Keith, hey," Shiro eased himself carefully onto the bed next to Keith. "It's okay. Deep breaths, buddy."

Keith sucked in a noisy inhale and exhale but kept his eyes lowered and his shoulders hunched in. Shiro placed his flesh hand on the small back and was relieved when Keith didn't try to pull away.

He didn't lean into the hold either.

"...want to talk about it?" Shiro offered, not surprised when he got a head shake.

He waited. Depending on the situation that was all Keith needed. Time. Patience.

But he remained quiet.

"Sorry," came a whisper a moment later. "I didn't... I thought..." Keith swallowed again. "Sorry."

Shiro gave Keith's shoulder a tender squeeze. "Nothing to apologize for. You okay?"

The dark head gave a bob.

Shiro knew this wasn't, shouldn't, be the end of it. But now was not the time and pressuring Keith to talk would only make things worse.

"Okay," Shiro said instead, fighting to keep his voice light. "Well, we're both up and I'm happy to report it's been the eight varga now. You feeling a little more rested?"
"Yeah," came the soft reply.

"Good," Shiro smiled. "Why don't you head to the bridge to meet with Allura and I'll go to the kitchen and grab us some food?"

"I'm not hungry."

Shiro's stomach clenched. Not even a dig at his (admittedly awful) cooking skills, about how Shiro should not be allowed in the kitchen alone.

Keith was not okay.

But there was no time to get to the bottom of this. Lance didn't have time. Later, Shiro promised himself. They were going to have a talk later because this was not something that could be ignored. Whatever this was was dangerous, both to Keith and others.

"Tough luck, buddy. Allura said we needed to be at full strength and that means you will eat something."

Purple eyes lifted to meet his and there was a steadiness to them, the remnants of the trembling now stopped. In fact, there was a different sort of horror now but it was one Shiro was well familiar with and he let out an internal sigh of relief. "You're not cooking, are you?"

"Ha ha," Shiro deadpanned, giving Keith's shoulder one last squeeze.

"Shiro—"

"I'll go grab something pre-made, promise," Shiro said. "I'll meet you there."

"Shiro?" Keith's voice was soft and purple eyes softer as they met Shiro's gray. "...thank you."

Shiro's stomach unclenched and he ruffled the dark hair with a laugh.

Things would be okay.

Shiro took his time perusing the kitchen for something that looked edible. He was pretty pleased with himself when he managed to locate a loaf of bread studded with what looked like some type of raisin and a platter of fruit that resembled pears. He filled up a couple bowls of food goo and then, carefully balancing his haul along with a jug of water and cups, headed for the bridge.

Allura was there as expected, changed out of her dress and in her battle suit. Shiro glance down at his civilian clothes and wondered if he should have changed as well, but then shrugged. It was going to be a very long, very exhausting venture and he was pretty sure this way was more comfortable. Pidge was there as well, also in her regular clothes, and sitting in her chair, tablet propped up on her lap.

Hunk was stretched out on the floor off to the side, a thick blanket pulled over him and he was dozing lightly, not bothered at all by the noise around him with a green one folded next to him likely for Pidge. Shiro didn't even ask. A lot had apparently been happening while he and Keith had been sleeping.

Pidge seemed to have picked up on his train of thought and shot him a small grin over her tablet. "We've been working nonstop since Coran said it would be too dangerous to do so while we're in the half-jump. So we figured we'd get some shut eye while you two pilot the castle and then finish up when you're done."
"And you're sleeping... here?" Shiro raised an eyebrow. Not the comfiest or quietest place to sleep and judging by the bags beneath Pidge's eyes she could really use it.

"Well," her eyes lowered. "The rooms are so far away and if something were to happen..."

Ah. Shiro understood. He crossed the room and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "We're going to be fine," he promised her. "Keith and I have got this."

Although...

Keith was not yet present.

"Pidge, have you seen—"

"I'm here," Keith's voice cut in and Shiro flicked his eyes over the entrance of the bridge. Keith's bangs were damp and his face looked freshly scrubbed. His eyes were a touch red-rimmed and Shiro quashed down the worry that boiled up at the sight.

Now was not the time.

But later would be. He would make sure of it.

"Then it's time to eat," Shiro mustered up a smile and pointed at the tray he'd set on Pidge's console. "Eat up, buddy." Keith made a face but dutifully grabbed one of the bowls of food goo and mechanically began to shovel it into his mouth. Shiro tried the bread himself and smiled. It was sweet, almost like a banana bread.

Apparently his expression indicated safety as both Keith and Pidge reached for a piece and Shiro rolled his eyes. The only thing he'd done to that was cut it; seriously, it's like they expected everything he touched to be inedible.

As he took a bite of one of the pears Shiro realized they had a reason to worry. He spat it out, mouth tingling at the sour flavor. Pidge raised an eyebrow and slowly put back the one she had grabbed. Neither told Keith.

"Paladins," Allura addressed, crossing the room towards them. Her nose wrinkled as she spotted the pears and she too reached for a piece of the bread. "We are ready to begin the half-jump once you have eaten. As you do so I will go over what to expect."

Shiro sobered from his mirth over the pear and turned his full attention to Allura, Keith doing the same.

"We have paused in a relatively clear section," Allura said, pointing behind her at the displayed map, "which will allow you some time to practice without the chance of..." she trailed off.

"Of instant death," Pidge piped up.

"Yes, that," Allura winced. "Thank you, Pidge."

"No problem."

Keith barely muffled a snort and Shiro felt his own lips twitching up despite the situation. He sent a silent thank you to Pidge for the moment of levity.

Allura ignored them. "Since there are two of you piloting, the process for taking control of the ship is
going to be similar to when form Voltron." Her jeweled gaze met each of theirs. "You will need to completely open your mind to your fellow Paladin to effectively pilot the castle. There can be no walls, no barriers, between you. I understand how... personal this may be, but to successfully pilot the castle there can be nothing that impedes your ability to communicate on such an intrinsic level. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Princess," Shiro managed, shooting a side eye to Keith whose hands had clenched at his sides.

He felt a new sort of twist in his stomach. To lay his mind bare... even in Voltron he kept up a steady barrier, filtering what thoughts and feelings he allowed the others to touch on.

It was terrifying.

"Keith?" Allura asked, looking at the silent Paladin.

"Got it," he said, voice low.

"I know such a thing may be difficult," she said softly, "but I believe—"

"I said I got it," Keith snapped, a hint of red highlighting his cheeks.

Allura did not respond to the tone, merely inclining her head.

"You will pilot the castle in this manner," Allura continued. "Once you are mind-melded with one another and the castle you will understand. I have set you up to work from the main console but have provided chairs," she inclined her head at the two seats that had been bolted to the floor, "as this will be a long, exhausting process. You will be piloting for five varga, Paladins," her gaze fixed on them. "That is no mere feat.

"That said, you may exit out of the half-jump whenever you must. Each time you must re-enter into the half-jump it will more quickly deplete the crystals' power, but it is more important that you rest as needed. Pushing through is folly and I know neither of you are fools." She kept the knowledge of the crystals' already shortened lifespan to herself as it was a worry they did not need to deal with now.

"Upon the five varga completion we will have about six varga at normal travel speed until we reach the possible perimeter of the Galra, in which we will make final preparations. I know we are asking much of you," Allura looked at them both, "but I have the utmost faith in your abilities."

"Me too," Pidge chimed in, swiveling on her chair to look at both Keith and Shiro while at the same time carefully pawning the plate of sour pears away before Keith attempted to eat one.

Shiro took a deep breath and looked at Keith. "Ready?"

The boy's countenance had hardened with determination and he gave a short nod. "Ready."

They made their way over to the console, perching on the high chairs. Allura reached across and grabbed Shiro's left hand and Keith's right, placing them atop the glowing orb that powered the castle. A jolt shot through them both and Keith's hair rose a bit as though static electricity had zapped him.

"Feel the castle," Allura instructed. "Open your minds. Meld."

Shiro closed his eyes, trying to find that sense of self he did when forming Voltron, that connection that allowed him to move without question with the others. He let out a short gasp as he felt it, but it
was not the soft pulse of other presences but something stronger, more powerful.

He could feel all of the Lions, woven as they were into the castle.

"Breathe," Allura murmured and her hands descended atop theirs. "It is all right. Concentrate. Focus. *Feel.*"

Shiro could sense more as he dove deeper into the connection; the Lions, the power, the... fear?

He traced that link, his own stomach churning.

Keith.

There was an image forming in his mind, a projection of thoughts like they had seen in the mindmeld. Shiro found he could not look away.

He was seeing the scene as though from the floor; an older man holding a familiar looking knife, yelling and shouting although all was silent. The image shifted to encompass two boys who were clearly brothers, smugly looking on before everything shook and there was a flinch and then a door slammed both in the scene and on it, cutting Shiro off with a suddenness that made his head spin.

The fear was still there but accompanying it was a dark shame mixed with a dread.

Shiro swallowed past his own fears that it had conjured and sent out what he hoped was comfort, a reassurance. No barriers could exist here. He would not look though, he would not pry, but they could not cut each other out.

He felt the barest touch of something he could only describe as red brush against his consciousness and then the sudden feeling of understanding, of focus.

They were both ready now.

Together they felt out the castle. If piloting the Lions were to be compared as driving a race car, than driving the castle was an equivalent to an armada of tanks, somehow all strapped together. And they were expected to pilot it. At barely comprehensible speeds. Shiro felt a wave of despair of his own.

A small hand placed itself on Shiro's back and Pidge's emerald-tinged light and spirit swirled into their mind link. Keith felt a heavy arm drape over his shoulders and soothe away the tension there as golden yellow warmed his soul. Their fellow Paladins did not say anything, did not fully jump into the connection, but their presence was enough to bring the peace and clarity both pilots needed for this mission.

"Whenever you are ready," Allura said softly, her voice a hum. "See where the castle needs to go and activate the half-jump with the console."

Shiro reached out to the red color that was Keith and received an affirmation, a pulse of determination. A tick later the console glowed brighter and the ship jumped forward.

It was...

Exhilarating.

And terrifying.

Space rushed by outside, stars mere streaks of color in their peripheral and broken planets and debris
rising out of the endless blackness with almost no warning.

They didn't hit one. Red and black moved in perfect tandem, guiding the castle with a grace and swiftness few could ever hope to achieve. They kept at it until a larger structure showed itself and Shiro mentally called out for a stop and Keith obliged.

Both Paladins took their hands off the console at the same time and just like that they were knocked back into their bodies, of which their hearts were thrumming and hands were displaying the barest tremble.

The two looked at each other, relief and awe and wonder and did they really just do that?

"You did it!" Allura cried, throwing her arms about Shiro from behind. Her cheeks pinkened as his turned red too at the rare exuberant display on her behalf and she coughed into her hand. "You did it," she said, more solemnly although still with a sparkle in her eye. It was not that she felt they would not, but...

But it was nice to not be dead and be proven correct.

"Tip top, my dear Paladins," Coran congratulated, having appeared on the bridge somewhere during their travel. "I'm happy to report the mapping software worked just as planned too. We should be able to wormhole in as series to the checkpoints we make whenever the Paladins emerge from their piloting."

"Excellent work, Coran, Paladins," Allura smiled to Hunk and Pidge. She turned back to Shiro and Keith. "For your reference you were piloting for just shy of ten dobashes. How do you feel regarding the five varga?"

Keith and Shiro exchanged another look.

"We're gonna need a few breaks," Shiro told her honestly. "Probably... every thirty minutes, max," and Keith nodded his agreement. Even now, a couple minutes after, he could still feel his heart beating quickly and there was a tightness, an ache, in his head.

This was going to be a long five hours.

"You've got this," Pidge said, punching their arms affectionately.

"You're going to do great," Hunk echoed, wrapping his arms about them from behind and giving them a tight squeeze. "For now, I'm going back to bed. Wake me when we get there."

Pidge also offered a cheerful good night and nearly stumbled over to Hunk, exhaustion catching up with her. She was out within the dobash, cuddled up against Hunk like a teddy bear.

"We all believe in you," Allura murmured, placing her hands atop their own again and offering them a smile. "Now go. Let us rescue Lance."

She stepped back, giving them the console.

"For Lance," Shiro whispered, dark eyes meeting Keith's amethyst.

Keith nodded. "For Lance."

And the Castle of Lions raced forward.
Is Icy actually starting a rescue? For reals? No way! Now the question remains: will everything go according to plan? After all... the best laid plans of (space)mice and men often go awry.

I'm so glad everyone enjoyed the Lance/Hunk childhood flashback. It is certainly one of the sweeter, more innocent moments in this fic.

I get asked sometimes for my music playlist and I tend to pick a "theme" song for fics. As some of you may know (via comment responses) the theme song for this fic is "My Demons" by Starset and a little dash of "The End is Where we Begin" by Thousand Foot Krutch. I have a current song I'm obsessed with to add to the lineup if you want it playing on while you read. It is "Alone, Not Lonley" by Evans Blue. And the refrain of, "I'm alone, I'm not lonely / I can't let you in / I feel like choking then holding / You're breaking the skin / This isn't hope that I'm holding / No love you can give / Not lonely, I've chosen / To bleed here again and again" just speaks so well to me of Lance's relationship with Haggar. Anyone else?

And now, self promotion time! Yay xD I recently wrote a little platonic Pidge/Lance one-shot for my yearly entry into a fanfiction contest at one of my anime cons. If some mutual whump, bonding and friendship are your cup of tea do check it out and let me know what you thought! I've got my fingers crossed to at least place this year. I went the humor route last year and apparently that was a mistake; only darker stuff ever wins so I pulled out all the stops. Mwahaha.

*cough* Okay, moving on to the most important bit of the author's notes: the reviewers! As always, thanks so much to the lovely reviewers, including: soldmysoultofandoms, BubbleGumi, PuppetMaster55, EreAsha, WolfFire, OpulenceInLife, Sharpshoooter, maychorian, cipheredsong, Ms. J, heyheroics, Immortalfey, Carley Hinman, Brohaikyuu, burple12345, Grace, BrieCheese, Coolstar422, GummyW0rm, Laurencat10, killjoy2246, glitteringconstellations, thedragonsarecats, QueenMcawesome, alexries, keepasecretgetastrawberry and FountainPen!

Please do share your thoughts below! Favorite scene, line, character moment, thoughts for the future... Y'all know how much I adore them. Thanks so much!
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Summary

HAPPY 1,000 KUDOS! Wow, you guys. For real. Please enjoy this bonus chapter outside of our normal update schedule for being amazing. ♥

Chapter Notes

**Warning notes:** Graphic violence this chapter, please proceed with caution if you are triggered by blood, torture and descriptive imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You've grown quiet, boy. Lose your tongue?" A chuckle. "I don't recall removing it but I can make arrangements."

Lance barely heard the taunt over the roaring in his ears as he fought down the taste of acid bile and blood at the scent that was curdling his stomach.

Burnt flesh apparently did that.

He was almost grateful Haggar had taken his sight again so he did not have to bear witness to what his already mangled feet looked like now. This was *nothing* like what Haggar had done when he was restrained on the table, little spots of heat.

This was...

He couldn't even describe it.

He sensed the heat of the metal rod the Galran was using warm the bottom of his right foot and he futilely tried to pull it towards him.

He had to get away.

It was no use though. Theodek had restrained him once Haggar had left; his wrists shackled together and attached to the floor and his ankles had received the same treatment. He didn't know why the Galran had bothered. He had no strength left to even attempt escape.

Even though he knew this would be his last chance.

His family was going to be so close. They were going to be *here*.

How could he give up now?

He lost the thought as the burning rod made contact once more with his foot, stabbing into what was maybe once his heel. He had no idea. All he knew was that it hurt and a high keen of pain made its way past his lips as he buried his face against his shoulder.
Would it ever end?

No.

He knew it wouldn't.

*Break him* Haggar had ordered.

He was pretty sure he was beyond broken now.

Theodek had spared no expense in the command. Lance could not even begin to count the number of burns that covered him, the slices and cuts and *stabs* that knives had made into his flesh, the number of times the shock collar had dug into his flesh as lightning erupted around his neck.

And of course the drowning.

The heat and fire was broken up with icy cold water as his head was routinely shoved under every several minutes, held down until he went limp. Twice he had gone unconscious, his body giving up the fight.

Both times he'd been brought back with a combination of the adrenaline drug Theodek was so fond of and more shocks of the collar. He could feel it being burned into his flesh, skin melting around the hot metal.

He gagged.

"You need a matching set, I think," Theodek rumbled from behind him. There was no other warning as the heated rod was laid flush against Lance's other foot.

He *wailed*, body fighting to pull the injured limb away, but Theodek held it fast. This time Lance's stomach lost the fight and he choked whatever water he hadn't yet expelled and the last remains of his stomach bile. The smell of scalded flesh filled the room once more filled the room. Lance dry-heaved, sobbing.

*Break him.*

He barely felt the thump as Theodek finally released it, in too much agony to single out an individual strike. He whimpered, dragging his feet towards him as though that could protect them.

Hot tears burned his eyes. Who was he trying to fool? He couldn't protect anyone, let alone himself.

A rough hand clamped then about his hair and dragged his head up. "I was serious about the tongue," Theodek chuckled and Lance could only flinch back as dark heat warmed his cheek. "But," a sigh, "lucky for you the witch needs you still able to speak. Pity."

He couldn't tell how long Haggar had been gone. A few minutes? Hours? Time was a blur of just torture upon torture. Had his team arrived yet? Was she conducting the fake trade?

Was it already over?

"Tell me, boy," Theodek growled, voice reverberating right behind his ear. "Do you think yourself strong now?"

Lance didn't answer.

He didn't know.
Well, he knew.

He just didn't want to admit it.

"Answer me," he snarled, yanking harder on Lance's abused hair and eliciting a soft moan but no words.

That was his answer, more than any words could say.

A pathetic moan. Because he was pathetic too.

No matter what he said to Haggar in his mindscape, he was useless here. He couldn't prevent her from doing anything. He was all bark and no bite.

He was weak after all.

"Nothing to say?" Theodek asked. "It's because you're just a weak child." Lance winced, the words just as painful as the torture. "You think yourself a Paladin? Of someone worthy of that title?" He shook Lance like a ragdoll. "You never were."

He dropped him to the floor and activated the shock collar for another round.

Lance choked out a sob and waited for it to end.

It wouldn't be long now. Each time he woke up more disoriented than the last, only to be forcefully reminded as some new torture was enacted upon him, coming out of the pitch darkness like he imagined all nightmares did. Would being able to see help alleviate even some of the terror? Maybe. Or maybe it'd make it worse, to see it coming and knowing he could do nothing to stop it.

As if to emphasize that point he found himself letting out a raw shriek as something stabbed into his left hand, directly into the earlier wound. His cry grew in volume as the grating sound of metal on metal echoed in the room.

The knife was embedded in the floor.

His hand was pinned.

Just like at the Kri Za Kri.

Break him.

Theodek picked up his mangled right wrist, the appendage so swollen and battered if it hadn't been for the pain he'd have thought it was no longer connected.

He tried to brace himself for the feeling of a knife to spear his palm, a renactment of before.

It did not come.

Instead, Theodek dug claws into the inflicted cut Lance had made in an attempt to end his life.

With a sick squelching tear he pulled the flesh apart at the seam.

Lance's scream didn't sound human.

"This," Theodek growled, shaking the limb and sending blood splattering across the floor, "was a terrible mistake, boy. Do you know why?"
Lance could only whimper.

*Dios.*

Let it *end.*

"If" – Theodek punctuated his speech with another vicious rip – "you had died" – more blood splatter – "I would have been held responsible."

Even blind Lance felt his vision going dark.

He wondered how his arm was still attached.

"Now" – another rip of his flesh – "You will truly learn regret."

Was this the end?

Lance could feel everything going hazy, a different sort of darkness.

He recognized this feeling. It had happened several times now.

And now he was staring at death for what may be the final time.

Was he all right with this?

He didn't know.

Did it really even matter?

He had no choice anymore.

If Theodek killed him then his quintessence, somehow to be weaponized, was kept out of Haggar's hands. But the Galra would still have the Black Lion. The universe was still ruined.

If Theodek didn't kill him then Haggar would have his quintessence and the Galra would *still* have the Black Lion.

One was the lesser of two evils.

Both were awful.

Both were his fault.

Theodek was talking again but Lance could not hear him.

He was fading. Nothingness was wrapping around him now and he welcomed it, welcomed the escape from both his thoughts and the pain.

It would all be over soon.

And then agony. Burning, aching, blistering, scorching agony.

He wasn't aware it was possible for a human to make that noise, but he somehow managed an otherworldly scream as fire sang through his body and he was ripped away from the comforting nothingness.

He must have lost consciousness as he awoke to what felt like a mass of burned, distorted lump
of pain that had no beginning and no end except that it existed and he thought it might have once
been his arm.

"Wasn't that kind of me?" Theodek chuckled, his voice sounding like it was hovering just over him.
"I just saved your pitiful life."

Lance wished he'd ended it instead. Salty tears were stinging unseeing eyes and he could only lie
motionless in the face of such misery, his heart beating out a ragged tempo to match the symphony of
his whimpers.

"That's one," Theodek said. "Let's make sure you truly know the meaning of regret."

Unseeing eyes widened in horror and Lance shook at the implication. Theodek's hand alighted on
the hilt of the dagger to pull it out so he could then rip and burn Lance's other arm.

No.
No.

Please, no. Dios no.

He couldn't go through that again.

Please, no—

The blade was ripped free and a clawed hand descended on his wrist before he could even think to
pull it back.

No.
Not again. Please not again.

Anything. Anything else.

And salvation came in the sound of Haggar's voice an apparent speaker system.

Lance tried not to dwell too much on that thought.

"We are about to make contact with the Paladins," Haggar's voice crackled over the speaker.

Lance's breath caught.

It hadn't happened yet.

Haggar's soft laughter sounded. "Listen well, my Lance. I yearn to hear your despair."

Lance swallowed thickly.

To the Galran Haggar ordered, "Commander, make certain he is listening. The transmission will be
incoming once we intercept their signal."

The intercom clicked off with a short burst of static.

Theodek growled and dropped his right wrist, clearly put out by the command.

Lance couldn't spare him any more thought.
They were here. They were actually here.

They were here to trade the Black Lion for what they thought was him and once it happened the universe's last hope for peace fell.

He couldn't let them do it.

He had to stop the trade.

He had to let them know he was here.

If... if they still wanted him.

He grit his teeth. No. He couldn't think like that. Maybe... maybe they would no longer allow him to be a Paladin but surely, surely they wanted to free him of this torture. They would if they could. If they knew.

If he didn't do something now then he truly was as weak as Haggar claimed. But if he could do this...

He'd show them he was strong.

And for his best chance... he needed to be able to see.

He pushed past the sick feeling that the plea made him feel. There was no room for pride here. Not when his family's lives, the universe's fate, was on the line.

"Pl-please," he mumbled against the blood-soaked floor. "Please."

No light returned.

And he remembered, stomach plummeting, that Haggar said there was another word this time.

He had no idea what it was.

He didn't have time to find out.

"What was that, boy?" Theodek rumbled. "Finally have something to say?"

Lance didn't answer him.

What did he do?

What did he do what did he do what did he do what did he do?

He needed to break free. Needed to escape the room. Needed to find a transmission hub.

All while blind.

Dios. It was impossible.

He couldn't do anything.

It hurt too much to think, to move.

What did he do?

He had to do something.
Could he feign unconsciousness? Haggar wanted him to listen, right? Theodek would have to come over then and...

And he was going to then what, headbutt him? Because that would get him so far, chained up and mutilated and *blind*.

Lance let out a muffled sob.

Pathetic.

His last chance to save the universe and he could do nothing.

Weak.

He really was just a child.

The intercom crackled and claws descended once more into his hair, dragging his head off the ground.

"Listening?" came Theodek's growl, breath hot on his face.

Lance whimpered.

There was another crackle as the transmission connected and this time the voice on the other end was so wonderfully and terribly familiar and Lance let out another sob.

It was a *trap*.

And he had lost his chance.

"*We are here to trade the Black Lion for the Blue Paladin,*" Shiro sounded, voice strong and confident and so perfectly Shiro. "*Return Lance. Now.*"

"*Not until we have the Black Lion,*" Haggar responded, a sneer in her voice. "*Those are the terms.*"

Lance could almost hear Shiro's jaw clench. "*Let us see him.*"

Haggar chuckled. "*Of course.*"

There was a few seconds of painful silence and then the sound of gasping across various mics and he heard Hunk – *Hunk, Dios,* he sounded so scared – murmur out his name.

That wasn't him.

It wasn't him.

They had to see it. They had to be able to tell.

"*You have seen the Blue Paladin, now surrender the Black Lion,*" Haggar ordered.

"*Pidge?*" came Shiro's inquiry, a breathless quality to it now.

*Dios,* they thought it was him.

"*All scans... all scans show...*" Pidge broke off with a quiet sob. "*God, Shiro, that's Lance.*"

Hunk let out a moan and a sob.
"No," Lance whispered, shaking. "N-no."

They were being tricked.

That wasn't him.

"I'm coming down with the Black Lion now," Shiro's voice was hard, unforgiving. "If you even think about touching him again..."

"He is all yours."

"That's n-not me," Lance cried, voice cracking. He flailed in the iron grip. "Shiro!"

He knew Shiro couldn't hear him.

He knew that.

But he could do nothing else.

"Quiet," Theodek barked, cuffing him upside the head.

There was silence then as Shiro and the Black Lion likely descended. This was confirmed a few ticks later as Shiro's voice came back. "I'm exiting out of the Black Lion now."

"The particle barrier was not part of our agreement," Haggar responded, clearly frowning. "There wasn't any stipulation against it either."

"Shiro, please," Lance begged. "Por favor. That's not me!"

Shiro of course did not respond.

Blue!

Lance threw his consciousness forward seeking any hint of his Lion. She would know. She could find him.

There wasn't even a whisper.

No.

No.

This couldn't be happening.

"I've got Lance," Shiro said, voice choked. "We're coming up."

"No!" Lance screamed, thrashing under Theodek's grip. "Shiro! H-hunk! Please!"

"It was a pleasure doing business with you," Haggar said smugly.

"That's not m-me!"

"Yellow's got the shuttle," Hunk said, tears clogging his words. "We're ready to go."

"Hunk, n-no," Lance pleaded, his voice barely above a whisper now as he sagged limply in the Galran's grip. "Please... don't leave me..."
There was only silence.

They were gone.

He'd failed.

"Come back. he whispered, desperate. "No me dejes. Por f-favor."

Nothing.

A few ticks went by before the communications crackled to life one again. "The Paladins have left and the Black Lion is in our possession," Haggar said, sounds of cheering coming from behind her. "Commander, I will be returning shortly."

"Understood."

Lance let out a strangled sob.

No.

Please no.

Theodek released his hair and he hit the ground with a thump and a dull clink of rattled chains. The pain as every wound flared with new life didn't even register.

It had nothing on his shattered heart.

He'd failed. He'd failed, so, so, so badly. The Galrans had the Black Lion now. Haggar had him. They would never know that he was still here.

And it was all his fault.

"Lo siento," he whispered, the words tasting as bitter as they should. "Lo siento mucho. Shiro. H-hunk. Mamá. Lo siento..."

Theodek was content for the moment to watch the human break apart, each cry a balm to his own soul that still ached at the loss of his brother.

His brother, who had been so young. He had not deserved such a fate. And the fact that this child had been the one to take his life made it worse. This pathetic, weeping child had snuffed out his brother's life. It made his blood boil. His brother had had his whole life in front of him, a life dedicated to helping Theodek continue to advance in the ranks, to be at his side when he was given his own battalion.

And that life had been ended by the cowardly actions of the Blue Paladin.

He would see him bleed. He would see him suffer for all eternity until the Druid had had her fill, until there was nothing left of this boy.

And then he would kill him. He would leave not a shred of flesh untouched, make his last moments mirror the torment and pain that ravaged his soul.

The door to the cell opened with a soft hiss and Haggar entered even more quietly, a smirk playing over her features. She inclined her head towards the hall and Theodek roused himself to follow, leaving the blood splattered cell and broken boy behind.
"It looks like you enjoyed yourself," Haggar said as the door closed behind them with a loud beep, keypad glowing bright. Security measures had been increased at the boy's cell in preparation for the Paladins arrival. Haggar was not beyond thinking they would still attempt some foolish rescue attempt and now not even her Shiro's arm would be able to break through. The only way in was her own magic signature and such a thing could not be replicated.

It was foolproof. The only one getting into her Lance's cell was Haggar herself and those she allowed with her permission.

Theodek grinned sharply. "I did."

"And?" she asked. "What of the transmission?"

"He believes it to be true."

The two shared matching dark smiles.

"The Paladins should be arriving in the next three varga for our deadline," Haggar said. "If they make it, of course. You are to report to the bridge and maintain control of the body I have prepared."

The Paladins had seen the commander several times now with her Lance. He would be the perfect piece to complete the ruse. Haggar was not fond of the idea of entrusting the guarding of her Lance to other Galrans, not after what had happened that led to his escape, but it was something she had no choice but to do. She was needed as well on the bridge to support her lord and ensure the trade went according to their design.

Theodek gave a short nod. "It will be done."

Once the commander had vacated the hall, Haggar let herself back into the cell, a fond smile crossing her face at the sight of her Lance, curled up now as much as he could against the chains and the most delightful whimpers coming from his trembling form.

She crouched down next to him and pressed her hand against his exposed cheek.

He gave the barest of flinches.

"Shh," she soothed, rubbing her thumb over the tear-streaked skin. "It is all right. I'm here now."

She bent her head down, lips descending on the top of his head. "I will always be here for you."

He whimpered.

Haggar stretched her magic out, sensing the wall that her Lance had built. It was the thinnest veneer of ice now, full of cracks and lines and just waiting to crumble down.

She decided to give it a little push.

Her Lance's true weakness was his weaker human body; unable to physically endure the trauma. When that broke... his mind would soon follow, too weak to withstand her onslaught, and then his quintessence would be hers.

She nearly laughed with delight.

Haggar waved her hand, using her magic to open up her space pocket, and retrieved a vial of saliidda she had stored there earlier.
A little something for her Lance to enjoy while she had to be away.

She attached one of the needles the commander had not used in his own syringes and then emptied the entire vial directly into his neck.

The result of the saliidda was instantaneous. Her Lance's body grew rigid and his gasps, which had been quieting, became harsh. A soft, high keening sound broke free of his lips and Haggar basked in it.

"There there," she murmured, running her hand through his hair again, sending pleasure receptors tingling even as the rest of his body was under a tortuous agony from the wounds.

A tear trekked down his cheek from beneath tightly closed eyes.

Her heart clenched.

He was beautiful.

He belonged to her.

And once this farce of a trade was finished...

So too would his quintessence. And then...

Then he would all hers. Body, mind and soul.

Her Lance.

She smiled.

She loved him so.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY 1,000 KUDOS! Wow, you guys. For real. Please enjoy this bonus chapter outside of our normal update schedule for being amazing.

... And *now* I broke him. I'm so sorry, Lance. That transmission and his (lack of) ability to free himself and warn them finally did him in. The future certainly isn't looking too good. But there's still that one last tiny bit of light he's clinging too, even though it's rapidly dwindling. Good thing Haggar can't actually hang around right now.

The real rescue is getting ready to commence! Hopefully it goes a little better for Lance than Haggar's fake one. Can't be worse, right? Right? In any case, this was sort of my "whump finale", for now at least. We went out in a blaze of glory!

Thank you to the lovely reviewers! I really appreciate the time you take to leave a comment, no matter how short or long. Every single one always encourages me to keep writing. So thank you!

Shout outs to: infinity2375, BubbleGumi, Laurencat10, WolfFire, dean_winchester_has_fallen, glitteringconstellations, Immortalfey, Brohaikyuu,
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I'd love to hear your thoughts on the whump finale and Haggar's evil little trick (or any other thought or comment you had about the chapter!). Please do drop a comment below. Please and thank you very much!
"It's over?" Keith mumbled, slumping over the console.

"It's over?" Shiro repeated, not daring to believe it.

"It is over! You did it!" Allura cheered, near giddy that it had actually worked.

It was all the confirmation Keith needed, sliding off the chair completely and hitting the ground with a thump, completely unconscious.

"Keith!" Shiro exclaimed, pivoting in his own chair and then moaning as the world spun around him and nausea churned his stomach.

The food goo he'd eaten at the fourth hour threatened to come back up and he swallowed thickly, bending over and resting his head against the console.

It had been a grueling near five and a half varga. Shiro and Keith had maintained the trajectory as long as they could, exiting when they began to feel each other's consciousness starting to pull away from the meld. They'd been treated to water and food goo and the last few bites of bread Shiro had brought up earlier by a very attentive Coran and Allura, who would not take no for an answer. Allura had at one point even tried to spoon feed Keith when his hand, shaking so badly, had dropped the utensil.

Keith's embarrassed flush and snap had not even phased Allura but Shiro had gently caught her about the wrist and shaken his head and she had nodded and backed away.

Shiro understood her concern though. Keith did not look well and he was sure he looked the same; drenched in sweat and pale and shaking with a set of dark circles becoming embedded below their eyes, which were bright red and watering from the strain of constantly peering into space and reacting to every single bit of danger.

Allura came over then, crouching down next to Keith and laying a dark hand on his head. She frowned and then scooped him into her arms as though he weighed nothing and rose, heading for Pidge and Hunk who had remained in a dead sleep the entire duration of the half-jump. Shiro again was not surprised; the two had been working non-stop and even the five hours would not be near enough to give them adequate rest.

It was all they had though. They could rest once Lance was safe.

Shiro shakily stood up, intending to follow Allura, but his legs had other plans and he gasped as he leaned forward, catching himself on the console.

"Shiro, sit down before you fall down too," Allura ordered, settling Keith next to Hunk. "Coran, would you assist him please?"

"I'm all right," Shiro muttered.

He took a shaky step away from the console and then another. On the third step he misjudged and went crashing to the floor.
"I told you to sit."

Shiro just groaned.

"Stay there," she commanded. "I shall retrieve some nunvil. That will perk you right back up."

"Or throw up," Shiro mumbled into the ground.

Allura pointedly ignored that remark while Coran let out a low chuckle.

"Here lad," Coran said, bending down and easily lifting Shiro back to his feet.

The world spun again.

"Let's get you sitting, hmm?" the Altean suggested, guiding Shiro over to the wall and helping him to sit back against it on Pidge's other side.

"Thanks, Coran," Shiro managed a small smile, tilting his head back on the cool surface.

"Rest up, my boy. I'll be just over here," he nodded his chin in the direction of the main console, "inputting the mapping coordinates for our exit."

Shiro let out a hum of acknowledgement.

Allura returned a few moments later but it was not nunvil she presented "Here," she said softly, handing him a cup of something that smelled faintly of mint. "It will help."

Shiro accepted the cup but his hand was shaking so badly again it sloshed over the rim. Allura hummed and took it back, holding it up towards his mouth instead.

"Please," she insisted as he felt his cheeks heat and he shook his head against the wall. "Allow me to assist you."

She pressed the cup back to his lips and Shiro drained it, the taste pleasing and the liquid soothing to his throat.


"And now for something to eat," she said, sticking something into his mouth before he could protest. Shiro gagged at the taste as it landed on his tongue and as weak as his limbs felt now he found strength enough to remove the offending item.

"What the fuck?" he gasped, eyes watering and not even mentally able to scold himself for his own language.

"They are Altean energy bars and very good for you," she retorted. "Eat it."

"You can't be serious."

"Eat it."

"No." Shiro was well aware he sounded like a child at this point.

He did not care.

"Eat it, Shiro."
"You can't make me."

Allura looked a second away from debating just that when there was a loud groan next to them and Pidge sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"You two are loud," she groused.

Allura immediately looked chagrined. "I am very sorry, Pidge. We did not mean to disturb you. You still have several varga to sleep, please, do so."

Pidge's gaze was clearing, although there were still too dark of circles beneath her eyes for Shiro's liking, and she looked between Shiro and Allura with a small smirk pulling up her lips before she peered closer at Shiro.

"You look awful. But," she gave him a shoulder punch that was deceptively strong for her figure, "looks like you guys did it." Her smile softened. "I knew you could."

"Pidge, I leave you in charge," Allura said, straightening to her feet. "I trust you to act like the adult here." Pidge's smirk was back full force and Shiro let out a groan. He was almost starting to miss the more diplomatic Allura. "We have about five varga before we will be in the approximate perimeter zone. I request that you return to sleep as best you are able and I will wake you when we are a varga out. Once then please make sure everyone eats the energy bars and then it will be time to suit up."

"Roger that, Princess," Pidge said, giving a sloppy salute.

As soon as Allura had hurried away, joining Coran at the console, Pidge picked up the tray of energy bars and gave them a sniff, nose wrinkling comically.

She looked to Shiro. "I'm not adult enough to do this. We're not eating the energy bars."

"I knew I liked you," Shiro teased and Pidge gave him a small grin. He then braced his prosthetic on the floor and pushed himself to standing, the room swaying ever so but not as badly as before.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, leaping to her feet and reaching out a hand to steady him. "Fuck, Shiro, you can barely stand."

"Language."

"You just said it too! Shiro!" Pidge protested as Shiro took another step.

"Shiro, where do you think you are going?" Allura was back and with all of the simmering authority of a princess used to being obeyed. "You are supposed to be resting, your body—"

"I have to talk to Black."

That brought her up short, eyes widening. "Yes, of course. I cannot believe I did realize you had not yet spoken to the Black Lion."

"You've had a lot on your mind," Shiro offered. "I won't be long. Promise."

He made his way as quick as he could down to the Black Lion's hangar, guilt churning his stomach even more than the energy bar.

He'd been so caught up with everything that the last time he'd even spoken to his Lion was when he'd disembarked from Xinsthes with barely a good bye, his thoughts centered on retrieving Lance and the Blue Lion. She was his normal confidant when he was troubled. The two never really spoke
but she soothed away the fear with her presence, a brush against his mind that assured him he was safe. No nightmares could reach him from her cockpit. Visiting Black was the closest he got to addressing his memories and even then he held himself back, trying not to think on them.

But besides that he spoke with her about the team, relayed his concerns or frustrations and it had been she who had urged him to speak with Allura about Keith and Lance's more recent interactions, to share the burden of being the leader. He trusted her in a way he trusted almost no one else and for such a bond to have happened in so short a time spoke volumes to him about how much the Black Lion meant to him.

Which made him feel even worse now. He had not once gone to her about the current situation and considering that she was at the center of it he should have. This should be her decision too.

He must have been projecting his thoughts very loudly, as before he even opened the hangar door he was bombarded with the warm feeling of reassurance. She had already lowered her jaw for him to enter the cockpit and he sank into the familiar chair, closing his eyes as he melded with her.

"I'm sorry I've been away so long," he said softly.

She mentally projected a picture of the Blue Lion followed by Lance and then of all of the Lions gathered in the circle. She always spoke in pictures of memory when the shared feelings were not quite enough.

"Blue filled the other Lions in?" Shiro interpreted, receiving an affirmation. Sadness and concern then and she projected another picture of Lance, this one of him limping towards her following one of their missions, with blood staining his hairline.

"So you know Zarkon's plan," Shiro confirmed and there was a roar of sheer anger, making his head rattle and he gripped the armrests tightly. Black immediately quieted, a wave of concern washing over him.

"I'm all right," he assured quietly. "Promise. And... and you're going to be okay too. I won't let anything happen to you."

He felt her trust flow down their link, a gentle warmth that buoyed him.

"I do need your help though... and it will be risky."

He got equivalent of a mental eye roll. For all her regality the Black Lion had her own playful side.

Shiro outlined their plan then as quick as he could. He and Keith would be sneaking aboard the Galra base while the other Paladins and Lions, with Black, would go with the Galra escort as though they were participating in the trade. Once the trade team received word that Shiro and Keith had rescued Lance then all of the Lions would leave, blasting their way out if the needed to. Black had shared a dark delight at that part. The Blue Lion would be on standby in case of complications, such as Lance actually being traded or as additional half varga of cloaked firepower to further cause chaos.

In the case Lance was actually there then Black would need to allow herself to be tractor beamed in. Just for a moment, Shiro assured, enough so that Zarkon felt he had won and lowered his guard. Then the Blue Lion would attack the tractor beam and they would all get out of there.

There was still a lot of risk involved but it was the best plan they had and Black sent her agreement. She would do it.
"I knew I could count on you," Shiro murmured. "Thank you. And... thank you." For talking with her had released a weight bearing down on his shoulders, her reassurance strong and confidence in him more so.

Black pressed upon him then the sensation of rest and Shiro shook his head. "I can't. There's still a lot I have to do."

Rest the feeling came again, stronger and Shiro swore there was a pressure in the cabin as though trying to keep him there.

He sighed, leaning back in the chair. Allura had ordered him to sleep again and he would admit he felt more than tired, limbs still shaky and a headache brewing. "Four varga," he told the Black Lion. "Not a minute more." He felt her approval and acknowledgement.

He was asleep before he could even think to recline the chair.

When Black woke him up, mentally nudging him until he came to, he did not say good bye, as that felt too final given their mission. He settled for one last pat on her console before he made his way back to the bridge. He still felt a little shaky from the piloting trip, but he felt stronger too, the rest indeed helping. Black had their backs and she was fully onboard with their plan. They could do this. They had to do this.

When he reached the bridge the other Paladins and Coran were all awake and undergoing the same briefing courtesy of the Alteans he had just given to his Lion. The Yellow, Green and Black Lions were to disembark shortly and be visible along with the holographic projection of the Red Lion and be picked up by the Galran escort. The Red Lion with Shiro and Keith would then go full steam ahead, beating the others to the base and hopefully locating Lance while the others stalled as much as they could in both travel and then during the trade. Pidge had been given lead of the mission there and was to act as Shiro for all intents and purposes. Hunk had not argued, looking green.

Allura and the Blue Lion were to set out last, hiding themselves on the outskirts of the base and to await word from Pidge and Hunk on how to proceed and when based upon what happened with the trade. There were still a lot of factors and variables but it was a solid plan.

Shiro prayed it was enough.

Allura caught his eye as he strode in. "Everything is all right?"

"We're good," he nodded. He looked to his team then. "Everyone ready?" Three decisive nods came at him. "Good. Suit up."

"Wait, wait," Hunk said. "There's something we need to do first."

Shiro cocked his head. "Did we forget something?"

"A group hug," Hunk solemnly replied. And before Keith could even try to back up Hunk pulled pulled him and Pidge against his chest and Coran enthusiastically sandwiched Allura and Shiro between his arms and smushed them into a circle.

Shiro managed to get his right arm free and brought it around Pidge while Allura did the same about Keith, who while still looking a little pale from their piloting had the softest smile Shiro had seen on him in a long, long time.

He felt his own lips turn up at the sight. There was Keith.
His smile dimmed a moment later though.

There was someone missing from this moment.

The others seemed to realize it too.

"Chins up, Paladins," Coran said, squeezing Allura and Shiro, the latter of who wheezed at the grip. "We will all be having another group hug with Lance soon enough."

Shiro sent the Altean a grateful look.

"If I may say something as well," Allura said. She met each pair of eyes about the circle. "These last four quintants have been hard upon us all, but you have all more than risen to the occasion. You have shown a courage and determination that goes beyond the call of Paladin of Voltron. You have... we have," she corrected, "come together as never before and I could not be prouder. We will get Lance back and we will all be reunited."

"Well said, Princess," Shiro said quietly, murmurs of agreement. He agreed wholeheartedly. As terrible as these past few days had been he felt closer to the team than he had in all of the months they had been in space, rebuilding his relationship with Keith and forging a new and more familiar one with Allura.

Lance had done that. Even when he was not here he was bringing them together.

It made everything seem even more bittersweet.

"Suit up now," Shiro said. "We could be hailed at any time."

They broke apart then, each Paladin heading for their hangar to don their armor and board their Lions. Shiro had stored his own armor in his room ahead of time and changed quickly after a quick stop at the bathroom to wipe away the worst of the dried sweat on his skin, still beating Keith to the Red Lion's hangar. He waited outside of it.

Keith appeared a minute later, steps heavy. When he saw Shiro he straightened but Shiro could not miss the exhaustion, the flash of fear, that had been on his face.

"You okay?" Shiro asked gently, stepping off the wall.

"I'm fine."

"Keith—"

"I said I'm fine, Shiro," he snapped, eyes flashing. A moment later though he shook his head and breathed out a "sorry."

Shiro carefully laid a hand on Keith's shoulder, relieved when Keith didn't pull away, actually leaning into the touch. "You don't have to apologize.

"What if we're too late?" Keith said quietly, not meeting his eyes.

He didn't think Lance was going to be dead. No, that he was certain of. But despite Shiro's sort of pep talk earlier Keith could not shake the feeling that something really, really bad was going to or had already happened. He was leaning towards the latter.

He knew Lance was strong. Well, he knew that now. His stomach still turned unpleasantly.
But even strong things could break.

It had been almost twenty hours since they had last seen him, and that last glimpse had been of Lance being dragged away in chains by a mob of Galrans.

Keith didn't want to imagine what could have happened since then. What they could have done to Lance.

There were so many ways to hurt a person.

"Hey, hey," Shiro's hand came up behind his neck, tilting Keith's head up while he tilted his down, pressing their foreheads together as he used to do whenever Keith was upset. "Buddy, look at me."

Keith desperately blinked back the sudden tears that were threatening his eyes but kept his gaze downcast.

"Keith," the hand at the base of his neck gave a tender squeeze. "Look at me."

Shiro's charcoal gaze was warm when Keith finally met it, intimately close.

He'd missed this.

He'd missed his brother so much.

He hated what had had to transpire to bring him back.

"We won't be too late," Shiro promised. "We will rescue Lance. And we will be there for him and we will help him get through this. You... you trust me, right?"

"Always," Keith whispered. He trusted Shiro with his life. That would never change.

"Then trust me now. It is going to be okay."

"...okay."

And although he knew Shiro couldn't actually promise that, was just as in the dark as Keith, he felt comforted.

Felt ready again to do this.

He and Shiro boarded the Red Lion, Shiro strapping himself into the low seat in the back of the cockpit. Red rumbled in his mind, impatient to go.

Keith understood her feelings quite clearly. But they had to wait.

He took a deep breath.

Patience yields focus.

He spent the next few minutes familiarizing himself with the cloaking controls on both the Red Lion and the ones Pidge and Hunk had installed into his armor. A half hour, she had warned, for their armor. They were going to have to get in and get out with Lance in that timeframe or they would be exposed and have to no doubt battle their way out.

Keith already knew those odds would not be in their favor.
"Paladins," Coran's voice sounded over the comms, more serious than normal. "We have been hailed."

Shiro sucked in a breath and Keith's hands tightened on the controls.

Coran was speaking again, coordinating with Pidge and Hunk and opening the Black Lion's hangar door. Pidge radioed back the hologram was operational and she and Pink, their codename for Red hologram, were coming out and Hunk radioed that he had already been surrounded by three Galra cruisers who were holding fire.

This was it.

"Ready girl?" Keith asked quietly, his hangar door opening to reveal the star-studded sky.

Red gave a silent roar in his mind.

"We're going in," Keith said into the comms, switching the cloaking to on.

"Mend a leg, Paladins," Coran sounded, voice thick. "Bring Lance home."

The Red Lion jumped into the sky, melding seamlessly with the landscape.

Keith's gaze narrowed with determination.

They were going to do just that.

xxx

It was hard to think. He wasn't really sure what he was supposed to be focusing on.

Pain? That consumed him, making his thoughts fade in and out without any semblance of order.

He wasn't sure if they were real or not.

Blood rain, real or not real?

Hide and go seek, real or not real?

Fire in his throat, real or not real?

Food goo fights, real or not real?

He felt that they were all real, but some of the memories were too horrifying to focus on to find out.

The only constant was that he was in so much pain.

Every breath felt like a knife was being wedged into his chest, any movement sent tongues of flames licking over his body. He whimpered as another icy stab took what little breath he had away.

He couldn't breathe.

A shaky exhale shook his chest and he moaned.

It was dark.

It was so dark and he hated it, but no matter how many times he blinked or moved his head it remained that way. He would forget too, only reminded when he realized he could not see and that
until he tried to see again and that same dark panic started over and over.

He knew pain though. He remembered that.

He wanted to escape the pain. But no matter how much he prayed and wished and pleaded, cracked lips begging for it to end, it did not. There was no welcome unconsciousness. No ceasefire. He was in too much pain, but yet not enough to black him out. It was ironic, really. If he could remember what ironic meant.

Was anyone coming? Why was he alone? Where was he?

He'd ask questions and receive parting answers from his mind. Galrans. Haggar. Paladins. They weren't coming. They'd already come? Then why was he here? Did they leave him? There was a trick. Someone was lying. Who was lying?

What did they want with him?

Water? Water sounded good. But it also sounded bad. There was too much of it. He was...he was...

His throat hurt. He wanted water. He didn't want water. But he couldn't ask for it. They wouldn't give it to him. He remembered that. No water. Just pain. He knew pain.

Another word, a color, swam to mind. Blue? It evoked a feeling of safety and love. But sadness. And remorse. Why was that?

He concentrated on the word, the first thing he had been able to in who knew how long, reforming its letters into shapes. And he made a … lion?

Clarity struck him and the pang of remorse only grew. Blue. His Lion. How could he have forgotten her? He whispered her name like a prayer. But just like every thought this one too drifted off and he was left feeling a sense of emptiness, like he had lost something.

But lost what?

Pain again. A soft keening noise sounded from his ravaged throat and he swallowed, which only made it worse. His eyes stung but he had no tears left to soothe them.

He just hurt so much. Why? What had happened? He couldn't remember. He couldn't concentrate. There'd been fire, maybe. Water?

Pain though. He remembered that. He knew pain.

He knew nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

I am a bad person. I had wanted the Paladins to rescue Lance this chapter, but then other stuff got in the way. I am very sorry. I've sent our poor baby into delusions again from pain. But help is almost there. Assuming I do not get sidetracked again. Although y'all might come after me with pitchforks in that case so I think I'll err on the side of caution. Hopefully.
To ward off any confusion (as per my sister who I run things by), the reason Lance is in so much pain right now and having trouble with his thoughts/memories is he was just injected with a vial of saliidda by Haggar, which you may remember is the touch sensory enhancement drug. After that session with Theodek he is just one big ball of agony and literally the only thing he can process is pain. Everything else is just fleeting thoughts that he stumbles upon as he tries to figure out the pain. Hope that helps explain it! I know (unfortunately from real experience) that when you are in a lot of pain it's super hard to think straight. And Lance is most definitely in a lot of it.

AND OMG! Guys, I got more fanart! *_* So much thanks and love and hugs to GummyW0rm for the piece. It's beautiful! You can see it in my gallery here (photobucket.com/user/IcyPanther/library/As%20Color%20Fades%20Away). I still cannot believe you guys draw me things. I can't even... If you ever are inspired to draw something please share it with me. I will cry so many happy tears.

And now to the thank yous! Thank you so much to all of you amazing reviewers. Seriously. You guys make me cry (happy, happy tears).

Shout outs to: OpulenceInLife, tomoe001, WolfHusky, Brohaikyuu, glitteringconstellations, Laurencat10, ImmortalFey, WolfFire, Fey_79, pietrxmaximff, AnaStick, ShadowRavenTrixter, star_set, Coolstar422, killjoy2246, hookedongayships, Grace, MemeMachine, BrieCheese, BubbleGumi, RimaPichi, burple12345, GummyW0rm, Shelby, Salty Lance, FountainPen, cipheredsong, VagabondDiesel, and heyheroics!

And now it's time to get this rescue mission rolling. Please do drop a comment below if you enjoyed the chapter/story (for all you fellow crazy binge-readers out there!) Thanks so much!
Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

So, I've been told that this is apparently Voltron whump week. What a lovely week! Although this chapter really doesn't have too much actual whump, since the story does as a whole I thought I'd surprise you all with an update. I also have a VERY IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT~! Be sure to read the author's notes at the bottom of the chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith and Shiro made excellent timing to the Galra base. They had left unnoticed out of Red's hangar, bypassing the encircled Black, Green and Yellow Lions, and went fullspeed, Keith easily maneuvering them about the floating debris.

It took fifteen minutes. That gave them forty-five more with Red's cloaking, which would be just enough for the return trip assuming they got Lance out in under half an hour.

Pidge had been instructed to stall for as long as possible, both in arriving to the base and during the negotiations. Shiro estimated that if the Red Lion had made it at full speed at fifteen minutes the others would take about twenty-five at max at a steady clip. It was going to be a tight timeline but it was doable.

As they drew closer, it became clear that the entire Galran fleet was not present. It made sense though, given the fact the Hodgkin quadrant was rather hard to navigate and bringing in the hundreds upon hundreds of ships would be a massive undertaking.

That didn't mean there still weren't a lot. Shiro estimated around twenty cruisers and thirty jets.

Plus the base.

It was a giant floating fortress, similar to the one they had rescued Allura from but not quite as large.

So far everything was going in their favor. Shiro hoped it would last.

They landed without incident on one of the smaller loading bays, picking one in which not a single Galra cruiser or soldier was spotted about as Red, as much as she tried, still landed with a resounding metal clank.

They had hoped to be able to land the Red Lion on one of the larger floating debris pieces and then jetpack over, but Pidge had said the cloaking would not cover the flames, which ruined the entire point. She had spent her time instead on making it so the two Paladins would be able to see one another through a specialized frequency to the cloaking, which was much more useful than a few moments of thrusters.

Entering the bay was no trouble either. The code Pidge had uploaded into Shiro's arm opened the door without issue and the Red Lion took that as her cue to leave and hide behind one of the many floating asteroids that surrounded the base and would return once Keith called for her. There was no
sense in parking a Lion, even cloaked, on a Galra base where anyone could bump into her.

Shiro was starting to think maybe, just maybe, things were actually going to go their way for once. It seemed about time that the universe gave them a break and Shiro would take any sign he could.

The trouble started though as Keith pulled out the DNA scanner Hunk had programmed. It had synced fine with the control pad by the loading bay door, which Pidge assured them should pull up a basic schematic of the base as the Galrans had not yet seemed to catch onto the fact their base layouts were accessible from every access point. She had gone onto a full rant about their lack of security and how had a race that couldn't even change the rotation of their passcodes have taken over the universe and had only been quieted when Coran had forced a bowl of food goo upon her.

The scanner was designed to show a dot for every instance of Lance's signature and using the map they would navigate the base, find Lance, and then get out of there.

Hunk had cautioned it might pick up a couple other signatures – say Lance's bayard and armor since there was more than likely blood or skin cells on them – but they were anticipating a couple signatures at most. Nothing that two Paladins could not cover in about thirty dobashes.

"Uh, Shiro," Keith muttered. "We've got a problem."

"More than two signatures?" Shiro moving to peer over Keith's shoulder from where he was standing guard by the door that led from the hangar into the base. His eyes widened behind his visor. "That's… not good."

It was definitely more than two. Keith was having trouble counting exactly how many, as a bunch seemed to bleed together – and God was that an awful comparison, he winced – but there were easily thirty.

Thirty signatures of Lance scattered all about the ship. He hated to think of what that meant.

"What do we do?"

Keith was not comforted as Shiro's frown remained.

Twenty-nine flashed in the corner of his visor, the counter Pidge had installed for the cloaking. It had already been a full minute and they had made no progress.

Shiro's eyes narrowed after a few seconds as he traced the dots. "This here," he said, pointing at a long, continuous line, "we can probably ignore. See how it's traversing through the rooms?" Keith nodded. "It's likely a tunnel below them," Shiro continued. "Maybe Lance used it during his escape attempt and he was… bleeding," he winced, "and left it behind."

"Do Galran ships have tunnels?"

"No," Shiro said slowly, realization dawning on his face. "They do have vents though."

They both looked up to the ceiling, as if expecting Lance to come crashing down right then. Metal beams criss-crossing the hangar were the only thing visible here, and well over fifty feet up. If Lance had tried to fall out of a hangar vent he'd have been a splat on the floor.

Shiro shoved away the image.

"We ignore this entire line," Shiro said, tracing the line of red dots. "And we focus on locations that appear to be rooms rather than hallways. Let's go."
They exited the hangar a tick later and into an empty stretch of hallway.

There were no dots even in this section, so they hurried through the corridors, having to backtrack once to dodge a sentry squad that appeared to be doing patrol. Shiro had been firm about engagement; they were only to do so upon escaping. They were not going to alert anyone to their presence or all of this was for nothing.

By the time they reached the first dot location their counter had already dropped three dobashes and had to go through two security doors. Shiro sent a silent prayer to Pidge for her genius in pre-uploading several algorithms to his arm that so far had opened the doors without tripping an alarm. Shiro just hoped if anyone was watching the cameras they didn't give too much thought to a door opening and closing with no one visible.

The door they ended up in front of did not contain any Galran keypad and Shiro doubted that it would be holding a person with so little security, but he was not leaving a stone unturned.

Nor were they going to be reckless. It could very easily look like such for a reason and was a trap. He sent a silent nod to Keith, who drew his sword and shield and he himself activated his prosthetic again, the steady hum comforting even though the purple light, blending with all of the other colors on the base, was not.

Shiro pushed the door open and Keith immediately took a defensive stance for any oncoming attack. But all the door revealed was an apparent storage room and not a single Galran lying in wait. The two exchanged as they cautiously moved inside. Why would Lance's signature be here?

Shiro found the reason a tick later, directing Keith's attention to smears of red across the floor. Bloody footprints, long since dried. But why were they here?

Keith answered that question, pointing out an open vent near the ceiling. More blood at the base of the vent indicated Lance had likely jumped from the vent and then made his way to where the footprints ended.

"His escape attempt," Keith muttered, stomach clenching.

Lance had been so close to one of the loading bays. Just a few hallways away. There were a few shuttles parked there too. If he somehow had a way to open the security doors...

He could have made it. He could have actually escaped.

It made his attempt that much more bitter.

Shiro's helmet ticked down another minute and he turned away from the bloodied footprints, the shreds of cloth that told another story they did not have time for. "Come on," he ordered.

The next dot was not too far away and led them to a somewhat familiar room that contained a chair and recording equipment. Shiro would have slammed the door shut if he could on that horrible sight, but resisted in the name of silence.

Their next mark took nearly three dobashes to reach even with jogging and Shiro's earlier hope was flagging. There were just too many, even discounting the hallways, and they were much too spread out.

They weren't going to be able to reach them all, not in under half an hour.

Shiro gritted his teeth. He was not leaving without Lance.
The newest room had a keypad to enter and Shiro had a second of hope that this was it, that they had finally found Lance. His keypad had let off a quiet beep as he scanned his hand over it and the door hissed open into the ceiling.

The sharp scent of blood and burnt flesh greeted them.

Shiro felt his heart stutter. This was...

This was a torture chamber.

A blood-stained table took up the center of the room, restraints of various sizes attached on its sides. A tray of implements, sporting a dull red coat under the purple light, lined up next to it and a pile of soiled cloth — bandages, Shiro realized, hand-made from the uniforms they'd seen in the supply room — piled on another tray.

His head pulsed.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the grisly sight.

Cruel laughter. A sharp prick. A hand smoothing back his hair. This hurts me more than it does you whispered into his ear. Pain. Pain pain pain. A flash of searing light, the snip of scissors, a sharp order of keep him awake and then more pain pain pain.

Shiro fell.

His armored knees hit the ground with a sharp clang and it snapped Keith out of his own stupor, horrified eyes fixated on the implements and wondering what they had done, where had they cut, what the fuck had they done to Lance?

"Shiro!" he dropped to his own knees, hand going to press on Shiro's shoulders as Shiro tilted forward.

Shiro didn't seem to be aware of him, his eyes wide open but not seeing, breath coming in harsh pants and misting up the bottom of his visor.

"Shiro, snap out of it," Keith shook his shoulder. Shiro's upper body swayed with the movement and he let out a choking noise but his eyes did not refocus.


What did he do?

He'd never seen Shiro like this, flinching and afraid at the low whimper being drawn from his throat.

This was what Shiro had been trying to protect him from.

Keith scowled. Well fuck that.

Shiro still seemed to be aware of sounds and movements around him, even if he couldn't tell a friendly voice from whatever memory had trapped him. Keith threw his arms about Shiro's middle and squeezed, hugging him as tight as he could through the armored plates.

Shiro shook in his arms.

"You're not there, Shiro," Keith whispered, throat choked with tears. "You're okay. You're... you're safe. You're not there. Please... Please come back." Shiro's heart was still racing, his chest heaving.
Keith tightened his hold, pressing his face into the crook between Shiro’s shoulder and arm. "Shiro, please. You're okay. It's not real. I'm real. Me. Keith. I'm right here."

Shiro's breath hitched.

Keith had no idea what he was doing. He didn't comfort people. He didn't know how. He didn't know what to say, what to do.

He always made things worse.

But Shiro needed him. And so Keith was going to figure it out.

"That's right. Keith. I'm here. I've got you."

Shiro's shudders slowed.

"That's it Shiro, come on. I'm right here. You're okay. I'm here."

"K-Keith?"

"Right here. I'm right here Shiro."

Shiro let out a shuddering breath and blinked, scene refocusing. Keith was pressed up against him, the only thing holding him up, and was wrapped about him as tight as he could, helmeted head angled against his shoulder.

They were kneeling in a blood-covered laboratory.

Shiro's breath hitched again and his head ached.

"You're okay, you're okay," Keith murmured. "It's over. You're not there anymore."

If he wasn't there anymore then why... why was he here?

Lance.

That's right.

They were rescuing Lance.

And he...

He'd fallen right into a memory.

Pink darkened his cheeks as the barest recollections of desperate pleas coming from Keith and his own moan.

"Hey," Keith's voice was sharper and he'd picked his head up, face mask inches from Shiro's own. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Shiro whispered, swallowing thickly. "Yeah. I... I'm sor—"

"Don't apologize," Keith cut in. "Not for that."

Shiro gave a jerky nod.

Guilt pooled in his stomach still, growing worse as he pulled up the countdown for the cloaking.
Twelve minutes left. He'd wasted almost five.

They needed to get going.

"Where to?" he asked, pulling himself to his feet and then reaching down for Keith's hand, squeezing it tightly as he pulled the smaller boy to his feet. He kept his eyes averted from the table.

"Down a floor," Keith replied. "Stairs are to the west a few halls over."

The next level though proved to be the most hazardous yet. It also let them know they were on the right track.

Galrans patrolled the hall in pairs, a set just about every fifty yards. Sentries squads were patrolling as well, crossing by in teams of six or twelve at the main cross sections.

Shiro nudged Keith and cocked his head towards the scanner. How many? Keith held up two fingers and concentrated only breathing through his nose as a Galran team passed by within three feet of where he and Shiro were crouched.

It was a miracle none of the Galrans had seen the stairwell door open and for the first time Keith was grateful that most Galran doors retracted into the ceiling rather than swinging out.

With no further discussion, the two slipped from their spot and moved as quickly and carefully as they could down the corridor. They ended up turning down two side halls and the Galran patrols seemed thinned here with only one set of officers accompanied by a half dozen sentries. Whether this meant that they'd taken a wrong turn in getting to Lance, or the main hall was more protected than offshoots due to access points, they had no choice but to keep going as they followed the trail of dots.

They both waited crouched outside the door that the scanner had led them to, watching as their cloaking ticked away but unable to enter until the patrols had made it past them. Nearly a whole dobash later they were finally clear and Shiro quickly used his hand, as this door had a keypad, to let them in.

It seemed to be another storage room at first glance and Shiro frowned in confusion. Why would the scanner have led them here?

"Look," Keith whispered, pointing with his still drawn sword across the room. And Shiro saw it immediately. Encased within a clear storage locker was Lance's bayard and what was left of his armor, blood splatter covering both.

"We'll take the bayard," Shiro said after a moment's decision. The armor would be too bulky and likely too damaged to use, but it was dangerous to leave a bayard in Galran hands. And Shiro knew that Lance would be wanting his back. They crossed the room within seconds and a quick armored fist to the case had glass shattering and a blue bayard clutched in Shiro's hands that he dissolved into his own armor pocket in a soft flash of blue light.

A low cough sounded behind them then and both Paladins whirled in surprise, Shiro's arm already glowing and a shield springing to Keith's other hand. A Galran stood behind them, blending in near perfectly with the dim purple lighting next to the door and previously obscured by a set of lockers.

The figure moved off the wall towards them, yellow eyes glowing in the dark room and fangs flashing. "I have been expecting you, Paladins."

xxx
"Steady on Number Two," Coran called quietly over the comms. "Not too much closer or you'll hit the Pink Lion."

Hunk gulped and froze. He couldn't help it though. There were Galra ships everywhere and they were circling about the Lions like a swarm of bees, round and around and around and around and—

"Hunk, close your eyes before you puke," Pidge ordered, voice tight. "I can hear you about to do it."

Hunk did so.

Yellow gave him a mental nudge of comfort.

"Show offs," Pidge muttered, but she was thankful. Every minute the Galra spent in a delay like this the more time Keith and Shiro had to maneuver around the base without the Galra suspecting anything.

She would admit her stomach was doing knots too, but both Allura and Shiro had tasked her with being team leader for this part of the operation and she could not mess this up. Lance was counting on her.

Green flowed across her mind, projecting rapid strings of numbers and equations that all equaled out to a sum of five, Pidge's favorite number. It was her way of comforting her Paladin and Pidge patted a hand on the console. "Thanks, girl."

The Galra were starting to come together now in a stationary ring about the Lions. Hunk was on the far left with the hologramed Pink Lion between him and Pidge and then the Black Lion on Pidge's other side. She felt comforted by the large bulk and quiet power the Black Lion was projecting, even if Shiro was not inside. Shiro had told her Black would follow her lead and Pidge swallowed again.

She had this.

She had to because Lance needed her to.

A ping sounded on her dashboard; a relay transmission that was being sent to the Black Lion.

"Number Five, you're up," Coran said, voice steady. "Mend a leg."

Pidge let out a muffled snort, a smile being pulled to her lips despite the situation. She and Lance liked trying to teach the Alteans Earth phrases (or confusing them with them, it depended on the mood) and Coran adored them. When Lance had casually told Allura over breakfast one day to "break a leg" in regards to her upcoming meeting with a diplomat, Coran had been horrified.

They'd quickly explained it was an Earth version of "good luck" but Coran had not stood for it, and declared that such well wishes should be enacted with the proper positive terms. He has taken to telling them all to "mend a leg" in place of good luck. Just hearing it gave her the breath she needed.

Pidge reached out a hand and accepted it.

"Greetings, Black Paladin," a gravelly voice intoned over the comms, audio only.

Pidge sucked in a breath.

Talk like Shiro. Talk like a leader. Talk like Shiro.

"Bring us to Lance now."
Her voice came through as Shiro's deep chords but her face flushed.

Bring us to Lance now?

*That* was what she came up with?

"Pidge we're supposed to stall!" Hunk hissed.

"Sorry!" she hissed back. "I panicked!"

There was a chuckle over the line. "So hasty, Paladin. Before we do so I will lay out the rules for this trade."

Pidge let out a silent heave of relief. Good. More time.

"Commence," Pidge decided on, crossing out 'hurry up' and 'get on with it.' She liked this though; it made it sound as though she was the one giving the order and based on the sudden growl the Galran felt the same.

Good.

The Galran proceeded to list off the instructions; they were to fly in formation with the Galra ships — numbering sixteen in total — and any moves to leave the formation outside of slight paths to avoid the debris would result in open firing.

Any sudden movements towards the perimeter would result in open firing.

When they reached the base — approximately a twenty-five minute journey — and made any suspicious movement that would result in open firing.

A lot of things apparently resulted in open firing.

Emperor Zarkon would be waiting for them on a trade platform with their Blue Paladin. Once all parties had spoken the Black Lion would be surrendered to the Galra and the Black Paladin would be allowed to step out of the Lion and retrieve the Blue Paladin in person.

They would then be allowed to send a single Lion down to retrieve both Paladins and they were to leave within the dobash. Any lingering would result in open firing.

It didn't sound like there was a lot of time or room to stall.

Pidge had no choice but to agree though. As the Galrans well knew, they held all the cards.

Or, well, they thought they did.

"Are you finished now?" she asked, a touch of impatience to her tone. If this was real Shiro *would* be impatient as every minute was another of Lance spent in Galran custody. "We understand your terms, now bring us to the Blue Paladin."

All around them the Galra ships revved up and Pidge activated Green's thrusters, seeing the Black Lion do the same and she hit a few buttons to send such an image to the Pink Lion. If one looked too close they could see the barest hint of transparency in the flames — moving holograms like fire were *hard* — but Coran had assured her he would be completely fooled.

And despite the fact her retort, frustrated and tired, had been that a lot of things fooled Coran she had held her tongue. Because as goofy as Coran was he *always* came through, always knew what to say
and she was beginning to wonder if a lot of the jokes and mannerisms were not necessarily who Coran entirely was but who he presented to set them at ease.

Like Lance.

"All right Hunk, here we go."

"I'm ready," came Hunk's response, sounding more even than before.

Pidge narrowed her eyes.

It was time to save Lance.

xxx

Shiro and Keith exchanged looks as the Galran approached them, arms spread wide. He did not appear to have any weapons actively on him, save a large rifle strapped across his back, but looks could be deceiving. They still had no idea if the Galran could actually see them or if he'd only learned of their appearance by the door opening and then Shiro breaking the locker.

They could easily take him out if that were the case.

Keith's hand tightened on his sword.

"Lower your weapons," the Galran ordered, yellow eyes narrowing as he gazed in their direction although not directly at them, proving that he could not actually see them.

"Like hell," Keith muttered, low enough that only Shiro could hear it.

Shiro though was frowning in confusion. He recognized this Galran. It was on the tip of his memory.

And although he could not explain it, something was telling him *not* to disable this enemy.

"Who are you?" Shiro asked instead and he felt Keith's eyes widen.

"Shiro, what the—" Keith hissed and Shiro spoke louder.

"How did you know we would come here?"

Because the Galrans wouldn't know they had a DNA scanner, they would not be expecting Paladins to pop up in a storage room. And if they had been they would have been guarding the front of the door, not hiding someone inside of it.

Something wasn't right.

The Galran chuckled, although it held no mirth. "The Galra Empire is not so foolish as you believe it to be. To leave a Paladin's bayard unattended? It is like drawing napalis to an apon."

Keith cursed under his breath. It didn't take a genius to understand the Galran expression. Reinforcements were probably already en route. They'd have to make a break for it and hope that Lance was in other signature on this floor. "Shiro, we've gotta go."

But Shiro was still standing there, shield undrawn and Keith wondered if he was caught up in some other memory because any other reason was *beyond stupid* as to why they were still standing here when their cloaking was going to expire soon and they *had to find Lance goddamnit*.
"Who are you?" Shiro repeated.

Something still was not right. And the fact the Galran had not once gone for his communicator, had not made any signal to other potential hidden parties, further added to it.

"I shall introduce myself if you will grant me the same," the Galran said. "But decide quickly. You do not have much time."

Shiro's frown grew.

That sounded... like a warning, not a threat.

"Turn off your cloaking," Shiro said quietly. Sensing Keith's protest he raised a hand. "We only have a few dobashes left. He already knows we're here. We need to conserve it."

Keith grit his teeth. This was insane.

But...

But he trusted Shiro.

And Shiro was seeing something he was not, could not, as the instincts Keith had come to rely on were screaming danger no matter what path they chose and he could not trust them.

"Only because it's you," Keith muttered.

A tick later both Paladins were visible although Keith did not lower his sword or shield and Shiro kept his arm activated.

"I see the Red and Black Paladins," the Galran said. "How curious that is, that you are here and yet your Lions are being piloted towards our base as we speak."

Keith swallowed. This was it. His hand trembled on a mixture of adrenaline and nerves on his sword. If he lunged fast enough he could take out the Galran before he made such a fact known, exposed the Paladins own attempted trick—

"You know who we are, now identify yourself," Shiro said evenly, breaking into his thoughts with a calmness that Keith was both envying and cursing.

"I am Lieutenant Yanden of the Third Battalion." The Galran offered a short bow and Keith felt his mouth drop.

What?

The Galran was bowing?

"Yanden," Shiro repeated, realization dawning. "You were at the Kri Za Kri."

He had been the sniper, the one who had chosen to showcase his own talent rather than his brutality. Shiro had not thought much on it then, but now, in this moment, it stood out like a sore thumb.

Shiro swallowed thickly, hope blossoming. "Are you with the Blades?" Like Ulaz had been. Did Lance have an ally here too?

"No. I support the Empire."
That was not what Shiro had been expecting and Keith let out a low growl next to him, feet shifting on the floor to a more lunging stance.

"However," Yanden continued, "I am here to assist you in retrieving the Blue Paladin."

And given what had just been said Shiro had not expected that turnaround either, even as he felt something unclench in his stomach.

His misgivings had been correct in all the right ways.

"Why?" suspicion colored Keith's tone and he had yet to lower his weapon whatsoever.

"The Blue Paladin spared my life when it was his to take. I am returning the favor."

"Not good enough," Keith snarled.

By that logic enemies times over owed them their lives, their assistance, and yet none had ever done so before. None would ever have gone against the entire Empire, against their mission if they so believed it, and willingly aided the enemy to return the favor.

Keith refused to believe so easily. Believing in people, in hoping, had gotten him in trouble before. He would not be so easily swayed.

The Galran sighed and suddenly he looked older, tired. "And yet I speak the truth. Your Blue Paladin could have easily killed many Galra, myself included, in his attempted escape, but he did not. That is noble. And admirable. Foolish too, but the Blue Paladin is a child and such naivety is to be expected."

Keith held his tongue at the backwards compliment. He had no quarter in which to be offended on behalf of Lance either; up until recently he too had thought Lance's more innocent, lighthearted manner showcased his naivety too.

He had been very wrong.

Yanden sighed again. "He is a child," he repeated. "I know you may think the Galra ruthless, Paladins, but we do have honor." Keith actively resisted the urge to snort and Shiro tensed up ever so. He had seen none of the so called honor when he had been in the arena.

"And what has happened to your Blue Paladin is not honorable. A child should never have been subjected to a Kri Za Kri no matter the circumstances, no matter his role. But more importantly," his eyes bore into Shiro's, "a child should not be left alone to that witch."

There was such venom in the Galran's tone that Keith felt a shiver down his spine.

"I have seen things I wish I had not born witness to," Yanden said. "They have given me these treasonous ideas, Paladins of Voltron, and yet I cannot look away now. It is my duty as a Galran to uphold our honor even if that means betraying my Emperor."

This Galran was going to commit treason. For Lance.

Shiro was floored and Keith's sword had dipped ever so.

There was a crackle on Yanden's communicator and he held up a clawed hand, listening to some message in the attached earpiece. He looked up at them solemnly when it had finished.

"The other Paladins have just arrived. You are running out of time if you wish to rescue your Blue
Paladin. Choose. Will you accept my assistance or not?"

"Is Lance not being traded?" Shiro asked instead.

Yanden shook his head. "That Paladin is a decoy. The witch has your Blue Paladin locked in a cell and plans to keep him for her own. For what purpose I do not know, but..." he trailed off, a pained expression crossing his face. "But it is a fate that none deserve."

"We have to warn the others," Keith said lowly.

"No!" Yanden snarled as Keith reached up towards his helmet to open a channel with Pidge. "You cannot!"

Keith's eyes narrowed. This had been a trap. Yanden had been sent to delay them while—

"The entire base has been put into lockdown mode on outside communications," Yanden said, nearly tripping over his words. "No matter how cloaked your signal it will register. They will know that you are here. We will be overrun and you will be caught."

Keith's hand hovered.

"Where is Lance?" Shiro asked instead. "The real one?"

If the Galran's answer lined up with their scanner they would have their answer.

"On this floor, down two more hallways to the right," Yanden said quickly. "There is no time to delay. Choose now."

Keith held up the scanner to Shiro, pointing at the second dot on the floor.

It matched up the Galran's words.

But something was still off.

"Why the rush?" he asked. "Don't you want the trade to go through? Isn't getting the Black Lion what your emperor," Keith spat the word, "wants? Why help us get Lance and save the Black Lion?"

Next to him Shiro gave a sharp inhale.

But the look of surprise, of having his own trap foiled, was absent from the Galran's face.

"That witch has poisoned our Emperor's mind," he hissed. "To obtain the Black Lion through such deception is not the Galra way. I will not condone it."

Keith let out a huff, a mixture of a laugh and a snort.

_No one_ here liked Haggar. The enemy of my enemy is my friend had never rang truer and the pure hate in which Yanden spoke of her could not be faked.

He gave a nod to Shiro. He would follow his lead, whatever it may be.

Shiro nodded back and turned to Yanden. "Take us to Lance."

xxx
"They're coming out," Hunk muttered over the comms, his voice mimicking what Pidge's stomach was feeling.

This was it.

They'd traveled for nearly twenty-five minutes, which according to Pidge's estimates meant that Shiro and Keith should have had about twenty at this point to navigate the base and find Lance. She had yet to receive any transmission from them though and given their current range to the base they should be able to reach out.

She tried not to think too hard on what the silence meant. She didn't dare reach out on her own either in case it came at a moment where they absolutely could not be distracted. She could never forgive herself if her impatience made further complications. They had around ten minutes worth of cloaking still. They had the scanner. They had to be almost there, they had to be okay.

Lance had to be okay.

Green flashed through scenarios then for her, codes and numbers translating into her friends and plans and she shuddered at the sheer amount of data. Sensing her Paladin's distress, Green rumbled softly and cut off the flow as Pidge massaged her head as best she could with the helmet on.

"Sorry girl," she murmured. "I'm just… I can't think of those outcomes. Not yet."

She instead focused her attention on the line of Galran soldiers exiting onto the platform, lining up in rows across from one another.

And then Zarkon appeared.

Pidge had only ever caught glimpses of him as he went toe-to-toe with the Red Lion during their rescue of Allura. He was just as massive as he had been then and she shook as his yellow gaze swept across the hovering Lions.

She swore he could see her.

But even he had nothing on the cloaked figure that trailed in his footsteps.

Haggar.

That... that bitch.

There was no sign of Lance.

"Greetings, Paladins of Voltron," Zarkon raised his arm, some distorted version of a wave. "Welcome."

"Where's Lance?" Pidge demanded, Shiro's voice echoing across the expanse of space. She resisted the strong urge to add "asshole" but muttered it below her breath on her own comm unit.

Hunk gave a sort of hysterical laugh and she let it bolster her.

"You are quite eager to turn over the Black Lion, Black Paladin," Zarkon said.

"Where. Is. Lance?" Pidge repeated through clenched teeth, ignoring the insinuation. She was going in on this as Shiro, leader, hero and not willing to leave anyone behind. He would not falter in the face of Zarkon's attempted tricks and so neither would she.
"Very well." Zarkon seemed more amused than affronted at her demand. He turned his head slightly towards the door that they had emerged from. "Bring forth the Blue Paladin."

The door opened agonizingly slow.

Pidge felt like she might stop breathing and she heard Hunk's harsh pants on the line.

A hulking Galran stepped out.

They recognized him immediately. It was the battalion commander who had played the role of torturer in the Kri Za Kri. And just like then he was appearing with a length of chain in hand that trailed off into the unknown.

They all knew who was attached to it.

He stepped out of the door, chain trailing behind him. But unlike the Kri Za Kri entrance there was no movement at the end of it.

And that was because the person on the end of it was not pulling back.

"Oh my God," whimpered Hunk as a familiar, beaten, broken body was dragged forward, a sick red smear left in its wake. "Lance..."

Chapter End Notes

And our lovely Lieutenant Yanden has made his appearance! Everyone remember him? Say hi, Yanden! I know there were quite a few of you hoping he was going to pop in somewhere and he has indeed. He's highlighted on a point I've seen in several comments; no matter his strength and fortitude, Lance is still a child and even moreso to a race like the Galrans where I picture them having much longer lifespans than the average human. (I would love to know the actual canon ranges of the different species).

Also as some figured, this isn't a walk in the park. Shiros' got some pretty bad memories locked up in there and running through a ship tracking blood is in no way good for your mental health. Just because this is primarily Langst doesn't mean I can't abuse the others. Sorry, sweeties.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT: I have been debating moving to a bi-weekly (as in two updates a week, not every other week xD) as time allows and the response to the previous chapter just given how long this fic is becoming and due to the fact I know I leave some pretty awful (wonderful) cliffhangers. I know I've sort of been doing a Wednesday/Saturday thing with the bonus chapters. Does that work for everyone or would you prefer a different schedule of probably Tuesday/Friday? Let me know in a comment which days you'd prefer (if you have a preference) :) 

Also, um, I can't spaz enough. I have more fanart! The amazing heyheroics sketched out a few scenes of Lance and Haggar and then *finished* this beyond whump enduring picture of our boy. My stomach is in literal knots of horror and happiness. See all of the works here and weep (tears of joy):
photobucket.com/user/IcyPanther/library/As%20Color%20Fades%20Away
Big, big thanks to the lovely reviewers of whom without this fic would not have likely reached its potential: Oh Dear God, Coolstar422, WolfHusky, Immortalfey, glitteringconstellations, ladykristianna, koalaoshiz, bravechicken, BubbleGumi, BrieCheese, Brohaikyuu, WolfFire, tomoe001, heyheroics, Kayley, pietrxmaximff, Shelby, MemeMachine, Grace, alexries, TabbiCC, burple12345, Wanderer_j, hookedongayships, Anielka, maychorian, and soldmysoultofandoms!

See you at the next chapter and please do drop a comment on your way out! ♥
Chapter Twenty-Five

Shiro and Keith crouched at the end of the hall as Yanden moved down it, calling the attention of the pair of guards stationed a few yards down from a nondescript door save for a large keypad panel that had no keys to speak of.

That was where Lance was being held.

And the door was coded to only Haggar’s signature to open it.

Yanden had imparted that fact to them as he outlined his plan to them in the storeroom. The witch was taking no chance of the Paladin escaping, he said, and had made the security impossible to crack. But...

He believed he had a way in.

Yanden had been assigned to monitor the camera feed of the Blue Paladin’s cell following the Kri Za Kri as the witch had demanded that only officers of competence be allowed to have any sort of role in dealing with her prisoner and she had hand-selected him based on his performance. *Those sharp eyes of yours cannot miss much, hmm, Lieutenant?* she had purred at him.

Yanden had tried very hard not to recoil as she laid a hand on his arm.

She had been right though.

His eyes did not miss much.

And they had been opened wide to just how much of a monster the witch truly was.

He had known she and the Druids were cruel creatures. They were respected for it as much as they were feared for while Haggar served Emperor Zarkon she had too much free reign to make any of them comfortable. They had seen far too many of their comrades turned into her monsters when they had failed in their tasks, had seen the gleeful way in which she tortured creatures for fun.

It was not that the Galra were immune to such barbaric cruelty. The eighty-first battalion commander for example, Theodek. Yanden understood he was suffering the loss of his brother, but the level to which he delighted in seeing the human Paladin in pain was... extreme. He had always been a bit blood-thirsty though; it was why he had been made a commander but had been kept lower on the battalion ranks as such a thing could make him unpredictable. The loss of his brother had brought out even more of a monster and he claimed such violence in the name of revenge.

Yanden understood the need for revenge.

He still did not approve of such violence being carried out on a child, no matter whose armor they wore.

It was no wonder the witch had sought him out. They were a perfect pair and it made Yanden disgusted.

He had been further disgusted to see the lengths to which they both stooped to break the child’s spirit.
Yanden had seen firsthand how strong it was, how resilient. He had been reluctantly impressed by the strength of the enemy.

A strength like that should not be butchered as the witch was trying to do.

He'd had no option but to watch as Theodek had cut the boy up, burned him, drowned him, taunted him, and watched as the boy slowly, slowly began to curl in on himself.

There was nothing Yanden could do though, he told himself. He had lost his chance for a mercy killing at the Kri Za Kri as despite the commander's threat and rank Yanden was unconcerned about meeting his end at the other Galran's hand. The cell the boy was being held in was sealed to all except the witch and her magic and he knew he would never be allowed in. He had resigned himself to being a silent watcher, a sympathizer, to the torment.

And then he had seen the witch use her magic inside the cell.

She had summoned a portal, a crackling space of black energy, and retrieved a vial that he recognized as saliidda. His stomach had further clenched as she had injected the entire thing into the Paladin followed by another one of the adrenaline shots.

There would be no escaping that torment for him and every breath would be agony.

Her cruelty knew no bounds.

But...

An idea had formed in Yanden's mind as the witch opened the cell door, summoning one of the guards stationed outside to come in and retrieve the various torture implements and empty syringes for disposal as even chained and blinded and possessing as much threat as a blade of grass she would leave no potential weapons for the Paladin to take advantage of.

She had summoned that vial with her magic.

Would it thus have her signature?

He'd called for his replacement to watch the camera feed and had scurried off to intercept the guard turned janitor. He had been lucky, the Galran in no hurry to reach the incinerator on the level below, and had relieved him of his burden via a completely accidental run-in that had sent the bloodied items rolling down the hall.

Yanden had pocketed the syringe that had trace amounts of saliidda still clinging to its sides.

Even with this possible key he did not quite know what he hoped to accomplish. It was not as if he could go in and retrieve the Paladin. He knew he could rig the cameras to go on a loop and allow for such a distraction, but guards had been stationed across the entire containment floor and he would be spotted before he'd even made it out of the hall.

If Yanden were to go into the cell it would be for a mercy killing.

He did not yet want to pursue that option, but he would do it. It was the most kindness he could give the battered child.

He'd returned to his post on the camera, fingers treacherously hanging over the keys as he made to loop the footage. If he did this then it was as good as committing to it.
He'd made the loop.

It was as he did so that he caught a flicker on a different camera, the feed to Haggar's favorite torture chamber.

The door had just closed.

He pulled up the feed of the room, noting that the motion activated lights had turned on.

But no one was there.

A few minutes later the door opened again and Yanden's eyes had widened.

Someone was aboard the ship.

And given the timeline... it could be none other than the Paladins of Voltron.

He tracked their path across the cameras as coded hallway door opened and closed and then a stairwell door heading to his current level.

They were somehow tracking the Paladin.

They were here to rescue him.

He... He could assist them.

He could willingly assist the greatest enemy to his Emperor. His hand clenched on the console. It was treason of the highest caliber.

Yanden found that it did not bother him as much as he thought it would.

He'd set his pre-recorded camera feed to loop on the Blue Paladin's cell for the next thirty dobashes, summoned his replacement again with the excuse that Haggar had summoned him and none would dare question it, and exited, trying to figure out where the Paladins would be going.

Each step he took he felt the wrong feeling that had been curling his insides righted itself.

Based on the last door he'd observed the Paladins to enter through they were on the opposite half of the floor from where the Blue Paladin was located. He did not know how exactly they were tracking him, but given the fact they had located the torture chamber full of the human's internal fluids he would assume it was somehow tied to the molecular level of the human.

There were two rooms on this floor that they would track to. The cell, that they could not get in, and the high-level storage room where Yanden knew the Paladin armor and weapon had been put for safekeeping until the technology department had a chance to dissect them.

He chose to go there as he could not wait outside of the Paladin's cell without rousing suspicion and they would need somewhere in which to likely speak. He also knew the storage room had no cameras. He'd arrived within a dobash and had set up to wait.

Not even two minutes later the door had opened without a body and he'd allowed himself a smirk.

He had then had to waste precious minutes convincing them of his sincerity but eventually they had agreed to work with him. He tried not to let the relief show on his face.

Yanden explained the security and the purpose of the vial, transferring it over to the Black Paladin's
hands. He had told them too about the saliidda that had been injected into the human and its ability to enhance sensation.

Based on the darkening glower on the Black Paladin’s face he understood what that meant for someone as injured as the Blue Paladin.

Yanden had also relayed his knowledge of the collar the child wore. It was of the Druids own design, not meant to be removed once applied. Besides its ability to deliver powerful shocks via the crystal conductor it also monitored vital levels and had tracking embedded.

In short, it was going to be one of their biggest obstacles. They would need to remove it, somehow, or disable it before they left as otherwise they would be broadcasting their location and they would be hunted down and Yanden knew his battalion, the third, which was made up of snipers and hunters, would be assigned to the task.

"The next time we meet it will be as enemies and I will not show you mercy," Yanden told them. "It is in your best interest that that day never comes."

He had left the two Paladins with one parting statement before he guided them to the cell. "It was the Blue Paladin’s mercy that ultimately led to my actions today. I ask that in your escape you consider that same act of mercy upon my comrades. We may be on opposite sides of this conflict, but we all bleed the same."

"Thank you," the Black Paladin had murmured, so much behind those simple words. Yanden had caught that gray gaze with his own, inclining his head. He did not need thanks though. He did this because it was the right thing to do.

"Come," he’d called, turning for the door. "We are losing time."

And now here they were. With a chance to rescue Lance that without the Galran lieutenant would have resulted in their discovery outside of the cell when Shiro’s arm no doubt set off an alarm.

Shiro knew that thank you did not even begin to cover how he felt, but it had been all he could offer and the Galran had not wanted even that.

Yanden had successfully drawn the guards attention and Shiro hurried from his crouch towards the door, syringe in his hand.

He prayed this worked.

Keith caught his eye as he joined him outside the cell door.

On the other side was Lance.

They had no idea what they would find.

But there was no time to contemplate what ifs, to prepare. They had to hurry, had to warn the others that the entire thing was indeed a trap. But not until they had Lance.

Shiro took a deep breath and held the syringe up to the pad.

It glowed a sick purple...

And the door opened with the barest hiss.

Shiro and Keith practically stumbled in, shutting their cloaking off as the door shut behind them.
The sharp scent of blood and sickness and more burnt flesh, stronger even than the torture chamber, assaulted them and even with their visors pulled down both felt their eyes water.

Shiro's head gave a new ache.

His own pain was pushed aside as tear-blurred eyes adjusted to the dim purple lighting of the cell... and fell on the limp, bloodied form on the floor.

Lance.

But...

But not Lance.

There was no way that thing could be Lance.

And yet Shiro knew it was.

The broken, bloodied, beaten slender form, curled up as much as blood-splattered chains would allow was Lance. The figure lying in a pool of blood, flesh torn open and angry burns stretching on dark skin was Lance. The tear-streaked, flushed cheeked, clenched eyes all belonged to Lance.

"Lance," his name passed as a breath from Shiro.

He took a staggering step towards him, a dull splash sounding beneath his foot. He glanced down.

Water.

And blood.

He dropped to his knees next to Lance, holding out a trembling hand, afraid a single touch would shatter him.

Lance reacted in no way to his presence except to let out a soft little moan, tucking his head further against his chest.

"Lance," he whispered again. His hand descended on the hunched, curved shoulder.

"N-no," Lance whimpered, his voice so hoarse and ragged that it took a tick for them to register it as a word. "No más."

Shiro looked towards Keith, the same horror reflected back at him.

Keith sank to his haunches next to Shiro, tucking shaking hands up underneath his arms as he didn't know what else to do with them.


Lance only let out another whimper and tried to curl in more, chains dully clinking.

Keith felt his blood boil.

He welcomed the rage in place of the sick fear. His hand clenched at his side.

He was going to make them all pay.

Shiro placed a hand on Keith's shoulder, jolting him out of his darker thoughts. "I know what you're
"Thinking," he said. "Believe me, I know. But not now. We've only got a few dobashes left before the camera comes back on and Lance..." Shiro swallowed thickly.

Lance was their priority.

Keith nodded. There would be time to fight later. To get their own revenge. But Lance came first.

"What... what do you need me to do?" Keith asked, hoping it didn't come out as wavery as it sounded to him.

His hands were trembling again.

"I need to cut the chain," Shiro said, his prosthetic whirring to life and bathing his face in a purple glow. "I don't know how... how awake he is so if he moves I need you to keep him still, all right?"

"Ten four."

Shiro carefully lowered his arm towards the links on the floor, not aiming to take off the individual manacles at this time, but just to free Lance from the chain holding him tethered to the floor.

Lance let out a moan and Keith reached his own hand out, pressing down on Lance's shoulder to keep him braced away from Shiro as he began to cut into the chain. Lance shuddered at the contact, a soft phrase in Spanish that Keith didn't catch whispering between his lips.

Keith took a deep breath and started to speak. "Hey, it's okay," he said, voice hitching as Lance let out another whimper and shifted below his hand. "We're going to get you out. It's going to be okay. Just a few more ticks."

He had no idea if anything he was saying was comforting in the slightest but it was better than the silence broken only by the harsh whine of metal being cut through. Based on Shiro's soft curse it was not going as well as he wanted it to.

Keith wondered what the chains were made of if even Shiro's arm was having trouble.

"Almost there," Keith attempted to comfort. "Just hang on, a few ticks more."

Sparks were flying now as Shiro pressed down, nearly halfway through the link, when Lance's soft moan turned into a higher pitched keen of not just pain but of terror.

"Lance," Keith tried to speak over the growing sound but Lance was not having it and he thrashed against Keith's hand, pulling even a louder cry.

Something was wrong.

"Shiro, Shiro stop," Keith called, having to use both hands now to press Lance into the ground as he tried to back away and Keith was afraid he was going to hurt himself if he kept moving. "Shiro!"

Shiro did so immediately, the chain finally falling into two pieces and separating Lance's hands from each other and the floor.

"What is it?" he asked, gaze flicking to Lance as guilt gnawed his stomach. He'd done something, he knew it. But he had held his hand away and other than a gentle wash of heat—

Heat.

 Burns.
"Oh, Lance," Shiro dropped the chain with a clatter and Lance winced again. Shiro mentally kicked himself. "I'm so sorry buddy, it's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. It's all right." He brought his human hand out, going to brush Lance's cheek, which other than the tear streaks looked uninjured; possibly the only part of him that was.

At the contact though Lance let out a low moan and jerked away, the action sending his shoulder colliding with Keith's knee and he tried to back away with a small cry.

"Lance, hey," Keith reached his hand out, trying to steady Lance. His hand bumped against one of the many bloodied cuts that adorned Lance and Lance... Lance wailed.

Keith wrenched his hand away as though he'd been burned and Lance curled up in front of them, hands drawn now to his chest — and oh God, his hands, Keith's stomach flipped as he really saw them for the first time.

His stomach gave another heave as he realized why his touch had hurt so much.

The Saliidda that the Galran had warned them about, the poison that enhanced feeling.

Enhanced pain.

They were hurting Lance.

"Oh God," Keith's hands were shaking again. "Lance, I...I'm so sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to..."

Lance just let out a choked sob.

"We need to knock him out," Shiro said quietly, guilt rolling in him too. He should have done so the moment they'd found Lance, seen the state he was in and realized he was not aware of their presence as anything more than new sources of pain.

He knew of a pressure point on the back of the neck, but... but it was covered up by the thick metal collar. That just like Yanden had said had no latch. They were going to need to cut it off of him.

Shiro glanced at his prosthetic. He'd never tried to use it on something so intricate; one wrong cut and he'd slice through Lance's neck.

It needed to come off though before they left. Somehow. But not yet, not while Lance was still awake and terrified and in so so much pain.

Shiro clenched his metal hand into a fist. It was not the safest of methods and definitely not the kindest, but knocking Lance out was a kindness at this point. "I'm so sorry, buddy," he apologized.

And he brought his fist down on the back of Lance's head.

Much to his relief, Lance went instantly limp.

He exchanged a look with Keith who gave him a small nod.

He'd have done the same.

As quickly as Shiro could he sliced through the chain holding Lance's feet tethered, the chain resistant like the other one and he frowned at it. What was this material?

Lance remained unconscious throughout the entire procedure. Shiro carefully rolled him onto his
back, eyes widening as brand new horrors were uncovered all over Lance's front. More burns, cuts... there wasn't a piece of skin that didn't seem to be untouched.

"Oh, Lance," he whispered.

He slipped a hand beneath Lance's shoulders and another underneath his knees, straightening up and cradling the broken form to his chest, painting the white of his armor red. Lance let out a soft whimper and Shiro froze.

The boy's eyes were still closed and based on the fact they were not wrenched shut as before Shiro knew he was still unconscious.

Unconscious and still feeling pain.

His breaths were shallow little pants, too high and thin for Shiro's comfort. It sounded like he was having trouble breathing. Shiro shifted Lance as best he could, pillowing the dark head higher on his arm to try and reduce the compression on Lance's chest. The breaths remained shallow but Shiro liked to think they evened out some.

"What's our plan?" Keith's voice broke into Shiro's thoughts.

"We need to contact the others," Shiro said. "Let them know we have Lance. But we should refrain from doing so until we're closer to the exit... if we get cornered now we're going to be in a tough spot."

Keith nodded.

"My cloaking is going to be useless," Shiro continued. It may be able to hide the DNA scanner but an entire extra person? No. Lance would be completely visible in Shiro's arms. "That means," he met Keith's eyes, "you are our only offense."

Keith's bayard shimmered into a sword and his shield appeared on his other hand. "Got it."

"Lance and I are going to to draw any fire that we encounter," Shiro said, hating that he was putting Lance into this position but unable to do anything about it. "Use that. They won't see you coming and I need you to take them out before they can retaliate."

Keith's expression darkened. "Won't be a problem."

"Keith." Shiro's voice was harder too and Keith looked at him, surprised by the tone. "Don't lose yourself to anger."

Keith startled.

"I'm angry too," Shiro said, more gently. "But we are not here to get revenge, we are not pursuing any enemies that flee. We are escaping and that is priority one. Understand?"

"I understand," Keith nodded. He swallowed thickly, trying to tamp back the dark fire of rage that had been creeping back up. Shiro was right. This was not the time for anger and revenge.

"We make for the hangar," Shiro said. "I'll figure out how to cut the tracker off then when we've secured the door. We're leaving and contacting the team as soon as that is done. Ready?"

Keith's gaze traveled to Lance, lying so still in Shiro's arms, and then to Shiro who was just as defenseless.
They were counting on him to protect them.

He would not let them down.

"Ready," he echoed.

And with a fierce protectiveness burning in his eyes, Keith pulled open the door.

xxx

"Behold your Paladin," Zarkon gestured at the limp form dragged in front of his feet. "Now surrender the Black Lion to me."

"Not... not yet," Pidge said, trying her best to keep the waver from her voice, not helped as she heard Hunk vomiting over the comms.

That... that couldn't be Lance. The bloodied.... thing, more a lump of broken and bleeding flesh than a person, down below was not Lance.

She wished Shiro was here.

"We need to... to verify that that is Lance," she managed after a few ticks.

"You have three dobashes."

Pidge didn't both that with a response, shutting off the external communication and gagging silently, flipping her visor helmet up so she could press her hands to her mouth as though to convince her stomach contents to remain inside.

She reached a shaking out hand to her console, pulling up Allura and the Blue Lion's feed.

The Blue Lion's cloaking was only good for thirty dobashes and they could not afford to waste it with having Allura hover about while they figured out Zarkon's angle. They would only have about ten minutes after accounting for the twenty minute trip at the Blue Lion's speed to the base and so they had to make those ten minutes count.

But Pidge received an error message when she attempted to connect to the Princess' headset.

They were still not in range.

Fuck.

She could have used Allura's level head right now. Her own was swarming with numbers and percentages and she was making herself dizzy as both she and the Green Lion ran the odds based on what had happened thus far.

She hovered her hand to contact Shiro but her earlier concern stayed it.

If this was a trap he did not need any potential distractions.

She would verify first if this was indeed Lance, remove at least one of the unknown variables. With that data she could then proceed.

Green sent her agreement.

Pidge nodded. Plan decided. She reached out to Hunk's comm then for him to complete the
verification scan.

Hunk did not respond.

"Hunk!" she shouted, panic creeping into her voice. He couldn't have fainted, could he? Possible, she decided. She laid on the transmission button again. "Hunk!"

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbled a tick later, voice hoarse. "I'm here."

"We need a scan."

Her words were a bit more clipped than she'd like but she knew Hunk understood.

"Starting it now."

Hunk had uploaded a version of the DNA scanner he'd made for the rescue team into Yellow's hardware, but he'd added a few additions that Yellow's advanced systems had been compatible with. In addition to the molecular component he'd also inputted a range for Lance's weight (dropping it nearly ten pounds at the lowest) and his height, that one trickier as he doubted Lance was going to be vertical when they saw him and he hated that he'd been right. Forget vertical, Lance wasn't even horizontal. He was more of just a... a pile. A pile of bloodied limbs and flayed skin and he didn't want that to be Lance because if it was then his brother had gone through something unspeakable and please don't let that be Lance.

That was his mantra as Yellow cast a beam out onto the platform, not a single Galran shifting as it ran itself over Lance's form. Hunk's gaze moved to Yellow's cannons and he had the horrible thought of unleashing them upon the platform once he was certain the figure below was not Lance, taking out flesh and blood Galrans without a second thought.

His stomach heaved at that.

That was not him.

The scanner gave a beep as it finished.

Don't let it be Lance, don't let it be Lance, don't let it be—

It was Lance.

One hundred percent.

The body weight had dropped almost eight pounds but otherwise it matched Lance's signatures exactly.

That was him.

"Pidge," Hunk choked out. "Pidge, it's..."

What sounded like a sob echoed across the line.

Hunk felt like joining her.

But they couldn't. Not now.

They had to proceed with the plan now, the what to do in case Lance was actually being traded to them version. The Galrans had said only the Black Lion could go down and Shiro was to exit, but
obviously that wasn't possible since Shiro wasn't actually in the Lion.

Which meant Hunk was going to have to be the one to go since Pidge could not without also taking the hologrammed Red Lion with her and that wasn't suspicious at all and they could do nothing that could further endanger Lance.

Hunk's hands shook. It was going to be okay. He was going to go down there, retrieve Lance and...

And...

And it was somehow going to be okay.

"I'm gonna contact Shiro," Pidge said quietly. "They need to get out of—"

"Paladins!"

Both near jumped as Allura sounded in their comms, her voice high and for her the barest note of panic.

"Allura?" Hunk returned.

His hands were shaking again.

Something was wrong.

Allura wasn't supposed to contact them first, the same reasons why they had not reached out to Keith and Shiro. And if she were here already in range it meant their countdown had begun and they had less than ten minutes before she was visible and then the Galrans would know something was up as the Blue Lion absolutely should not be here.

"Do not commence the trade," she called out. "Something is not right. The Blue Lion—"

She cut off, static buzzing.

"Princess!" Pidge shouted into the comms, but she received only feedback.

Well fuck.

"Paladins," Zarkon hailed from below. "Your time is up. Surrender the Black Lion now or the trade is off."

And the Galrans would then no doubt open fire, taking the Lion by force.

What did they do?

Lance was right there, the scanner proved so, and Pidge was not about to just leave him based on some half-assed warning from Allura.

"Hunk," she started. "You start—"

"No!" Allura cut back into their channel. "Do not move!"

"Allura—" Pidge started.

"That is not Lance!"

Her words froze Pidge's hands on the controls.
"...what?" Hunk whispered.

How? The scan had showed it was him, a perfect match.

"There is no quintessence!" Allura's voice was high. "It is not him. Fall back. Fall back now."

But as she spoke a tether of dark energy shot from Zarkon's hands and encircled the Black Lion's muzzle, tethering her to him.

He had apparently grown impatient.

And now they could not leave.

"Hey!" Pidge slammed her hand down on the console. "Let the Black Lion go now!"

She'd realized within the space of a tick she had not selected the relay transmission that projected her words in Shiro's voice from the Black Lion.

Double fuck.

All around them the escort ships began to angle their cannons and artillery on the surrounded Lions.

Triple fuck.

Zarkon's eyes narrowed although he did not release his hold on the Black Lion. "You thought to trick me?" he snarled. "You foolish little hum—"

"Give us back Lance!" Hunk shouted, opening up his external comms, voice cracking with fear but with a strength behind it as well. "The real one!"

At that Zarkon's expression went from angered to almost comical surprise. If the circumstances hadn't been what they were Pidge might have even laughed. As it was there was no time for that as her hands flew across Green's console, activating the shields for the about to be massive incoming attack.

Green told her the odds of them both surviving without the shields at such a close range barrage was in the low thirties. Pidge was going to make that at least seventy.

"Well, well," Zarkon's expression morphed into an almost feral, wild smile. "It seems this is no longer a trade at all. In which case..." He turned his gaze from the Lions and to the surrounding battleships. "Fi—"

A torrent of blue energy slammed into the platform.

It exploded.

Pidge let out a yelp as the blastwave sent all of the Lions backwards, the hologram flickering out of existence, and the Black Lion freed for the moment from Zarkon's grasp.

She had no doubt it was only temporary. Such a blast, enough to easily kill a person, would not harm someone like Zarkon. They only had the element of surprise and it was gone now.

"Retreat!" screamed Allura over the comms, volume searing. "Hurry!"

The Galra though were determined to not let that happen. Even without Zarkon's final order they had begun to fire upon the three visible Lions, the Black Lion not fighting back as attacks pinged into her
side as all of her concentration was on the platform covered in a haze of smoke and the flickering of purple light.

She opened fire on that, cannon pumping out blast after blast.

The Black Lion, Pidge knew, was more than aware of how dangerous Zarkon was. And she was the only one who stood a chance of holding him off, especially with Haggar at his side.

_Now_ it was time to finally contact Shiro and Keith.

She'd gotten all of her answers now.

She just prayed that they had gotten Lance.

Pidge keyed up the comms even as she steered Green around to block a blast aimed at the Black Lion’s flank, jolting inside the cockpit and the shields flashing a direct hit. She growled and returned fire.

"Shiro," she called, dodging another blast as space became a battlefield. "Shiro, Keith, come in."

She received a burst of static.

"Shiro come in!"

More feedback.

"God fucking damnit respond!") Pidge shrieked into the comms even though she knew it wasn't her technology that was at fault.

There was something disrupting her signal.

Some sort of satellite, she was sure, or maybe even a sort of cell tower. She just had to find it. Where was it, where was it, where—

Her search was halted as a blast, larger than before, crashed into the Green Lion's side and they were sent spinning, smashing into one of the smaller Galran ships and causing it to explode on impact and **Pidge screamed** as fire flared all around her and Green roared out in pain.

All around her warnings flashed red that the shields were back down to only thirty percent. Another hit like that and she would be dead in the water.

Or dead.

It really could go either way.

And a large blast was headed her direction just now, the same ship still pursuing her.

"Pidge!" came Hunk's terrified scream and a moment later he and Yellow were there, intercepting the blast, the larger, sturdier Lion groaning under the hit but withstanding it.

"Pidge, pull back now," Allura commanded, she and Blue still invisible but clearly a part of the fight if the exploding ships to their right were any indication. Black continued to blast the platform and so far no return fire was incoming.

A small miracle and they would take it.
"I'm not leaving without Lance!" Pidge retorted.

"Paladin, that is an order."

"No!"

Fuck that. How could Allura even ask that?

"Now!" And behind Allura’s sharp tone there was genuine fear. "Pidge, go! I... I cannot lose—"

Allura's words were swallowed by loud blaster fire but Pidge still heard them.

*I cannot lose you too.*

"I'm sorry, Allura," Pidge said quietly, a direct contrast to the battle raging outside. "But I can't do that. Not without Lance."

"Pidge—"

"I'm going to find them," she interrupted. "And we're all going to go the fuck home."

And before Allura could try and protest again Pidge wheeled Green around, activated her own cloaking under the cover of Yellow's side, and took off.

They either all went home together...  

Or they didn't go home at all.

***

Keith was beginning to wish he had a blaster.

He loved his sword and wielded it with a finesse and skill that not many could claim... but it was not very useful when trying to mow down multiple enemies all bearing guns of their own from a distance.

It was not useful at all.

And it was going to get them all killed.

He and Shiro had made it out of the cell without issue, Keith going out first and under the guise of his cloaking easily dispatching the two sets of guards on either side of the hallway entrance of the cell. He'd gestured for Shiro to come out then and they had taken off down the hall at a quick clip, Keith in the lead and Shiro trailing behind. They both knew eventually there would be a crossroads where Keith could not dash out and disable all of the guards without notice, but they would use this setup for as long as they could.

It had ended sooner than they had liked.

They had been making good progress and had gotten through almost the entire floor and back towards the stairwell they had come in on, but at that point alarms had begun to sound and reinforcements had started to arrive, drawn by the sound of blaster fire and no doubt the trail of (unconscious) bodies and broken sentries Keith was leaving behind.

He was respecting both Yanden and Shiro's wishes. And if he was honest, he didn't want to kill these soldiers. Not really.
He would not hold back though if he encountered Haggar or the Galran commander.

Keith's cloaking went out just before the staircase.

They were cornered now in the hallway they had come from by several squadrons of sentries. Normally such a thing would be a cakewalk for Keith but he wasn't just fighting for himself. He had to protect Shiro and Lance too and could not afford to dive in head first, be as reckless as everyone always told him he was.

But a sword was no match for several dozen weapons firing from a distance and he could do nothing much about it until the sentries drew closer.

"Shiro," Keith panted, blocking another blaster shot with his shield and then reaching out to strike a charging sentry. His sword clanged against the metal and he grit his teeth against the pain as the sentry got in a hit of its own, blaster searing against his arm, as it fell. "I... I can't hold them."

The admission stung but it was true.

He couldn't do this alone.

But Shiro couldn't fight either. He was protecting Lance, his own shield drawn and raised in front of them as best he could while still holding Lance in his arms.

Lance, who Keith could only tell was alive based on the barely there rise of his chest.

He didn't have much time.

They needed to go.

Keith swallowed. He knew what he had to do.

He also knew Shiro wasn't going to like it.

"Shiro," his voice was pitched low and yet he knew Shiro heard it. "You have to go."

Keith definitely heard the sharp inhale.

"I'll make a path—"

"Like hell," snapped Shiro. "What the fuck, Keith? You honestly think I'm just going to leave you behind?"

"You have to!" Keith snarled, decapitating an advancing sentry. "Lance doesn't have time! And you're not staying either."

Keith would never, ever, let Shiro fall into the Galra's hands again. He would rather die than see that happen.

"Damnit it, Keith," Shiro snarled, heart in his throat and fear twisting his insides. "That's not how this works."

"Shiro—"

"I'm not saving Lance to abandon you," Shiro growled, blocking a blast headed his way that sailed past Keith's defenses. "I will never abandon you." His voice broke. "You know that. Don't ever suggest it again."
Keith swallowed and gave a minute nod.
He didn't know how any of them were supposed to get out though.

They were all going to die.

"Switch with me," Shiro ordered. "Now."

Keith was at his side within the space of a breath and Shiro lowered Lance to the floor, Keith taking up a guard position in front of him and raising his shield.

"Contact the others," Shiro said. "We need backup."

He disappeared a second later.

Keith dimly noted that both apparently had to be cloaked to see one another.

Shiro was tearing through the sentry ranks like butter and Keith took the distraction for all it was worth, raising his hand to activate his comms.

Static burst in his ears.

What the...?

He tried again, calling out for Pidge, Hunk and even Allura.

Nothing.

Something had gone wrong, Keith could feel it.

Shiro flickered back into view, the hallway around them ringing with silence save for the crackle of broken sentry pieces.

"I can't make contact," Keith said, stepping to the side as Shiro bent down and lifted Lance back into his arms, both wincing as Lance let out an unconscious whimper. "The signals jammed or something. Shiro, I..."

"It's going to be fine," Shiro said, voice more calm than he felt. He couldn't afford to give into panic now. "Let's just get to the hangar. Focus on that."

Keith nodded and took up the lead position again, charging up the stairwell as quick as he could and Shiro's deeper inhales coming from behind.

The reinforcements had not yet made it to this level, no doubt still heading towards where the fighting had been, and the two Paladins broke into a run for the hangar. They paused only to get through the security doors, fortunately still accepting Shiro's hand as a code, although both times it had taken some awkward maneuvering to reach out and get his palm on the keypad around Lance.

Lance had remained disturbingly still throughout all of it.

They were entering the last hallway leading to the hangar when Lance screamed.

It was not a whimper or one of those breathy gurgles.

It was a wail, and he thrashed in Shiro's arms.
Shiro tightened his grip to keep hold and Lance yelled louder, scream echoing down the hall.

There was no way anyone in hearing distance didn't know where they were now.

"The collar," Keith gasped, zeroing in on the cause of Lance's sudden pain. The metal ring was let up a brilliant purple, clearly activated. Keith reached out a hand to the collar before he could stop himself, as if somehow doing so would relieve Lance's own suffering, and yelped as his fingers sizzled against it.

Lance screamed louder.

"Lance, Lance it's okay," Shiro tried to console, lowering Lance to the ground. "It's okay buddy. We're going to get it off. Just a tick. Okay?" He activated his prosthetic, trying to stop his own tremble as deadly fingers angled down towards Lance's neck. "Keith, hold him, I have to—"

Blaster fire interrupted him, pinging on the ground just in front of where they were all crouched.

Keith had his shield pulled within half a tick, shuddering as blasts impacted it, Shiro right beside him with his own.

They'd been found.

"Keith," Shiro met his eyes. "Get Lance to the hangar."

What?

No.

"Shiro, no," Keith protested. "You just... you just said..."

"You trust me, right?"

"Always," Keith choked out against his own volition. "But Shiro—"

"I'll be back," Shiro promised. "I swear, Keith. Get Lance to safety. I'll meet you there."

Shiro had every intention of keeping that promise. He had almost two dobashes of cloaking left, more than enough to take out the sentries and secure their exit. But... but in case he didn't... he needed Keith and Lance to be safe.

He needed them to go.

"Okay," Keith choked out. "Okay."

Shiro gave him a soft smile that didn't quite meet his eyes... and vanished.

Keith didn't waste any time, trusting Shiro to have his back and block any further incoming blasts. He turned his attention to Lance, who had gone silent and Keith's heart jumped into his throat.

He was almost grateful to hear Lance's soft whimper as he braced a hand on the bloodied back.

Alive.

For now.

He had to hurry.
Keith awkwardly shifted Lance into a fireman's carry, pretty positive that such a position was not good for someone with a head injury but he lacked the strength and build to carry Lance as Shiro had done. He sent a silent apology and broke into a jog.

He realized the problem as soon as he reached the hangar door.

It was a keypad open.

He needed Shiro's arm.

God fucking damnit.

He sent out a mental call to the Red Lion, but even if she were to arrive in the hangar she could not help him here. Her method of blasting open obstacles would not work, not when the hallway was narrowed without offshoots and no cover to hide behind. He and Lance would be roasted if the explosion didn't get them first.

Keith lowered Lance as gently as he could to the ground so he could withdraw his sword and shield once more and stand guard.

He found himself crouching though next to Lance, unable to look away.

It was why he was able to see the shock collar activate this time.

One moment it was a ring of silver metal and the next there were a series of purple lights beginning to glow.

Lance jolted back into consciousness with a hoarse scream.

Keith swore, dropping his shield and reaching instead to intercept Lance's hands that had risen up to try and tug as futilely at the collar as Keith had done.

But at Keith's touch Lance's scream rose in volume and his eyes flew open.

"Fuck!" Keith gasped, losing his grip on Lance's hands in surprise.

Because while Lance's irises were still a deep shade of ocean blue, the whites of his eyes had been turned solid black. They stared past Keith and he realized with a sense of cold dread that Lance was not actually seeing him.

What the fuck had they done to his eyes?

Lance let out another cry, throwing his head back so hard that it cracked against the ground, but even that wasn't enough to send him unconscious.

His hands moved back towards the collar and Keith caught them again, feeling blood slide against his palms.

Lance wailed.

"I'm sorry," Keith whispered, feeling tears prick his eyes at how useless he felt in the face of Lance's suffering. He couldn't do anything except cause him more. "I'm sorry."

The lights went out on the collar and Lance's cries turned into quiet gasps. Keith released his hands and Lance pulled them back to himself, curling up around them.
In Lance's silence Keith could hear the sounds of a battle still going strong.

It had been more than two dobashes now.

Shiro's cloaking was gone.

Keith's stomach clenched.

Shiro was alone, uncloaked, and fighting against what sounded like a small army. Maybe on a good day it would be possible, but today was not a good day. Keith knew Shiro had to be feeling the same exhaustion that was picking away at him, if not even more so, not to mention the heavy feeling of sickness that had taken up permanent residence in his gut.

But he couldn't leave Lance alone; not when he was in so much pain and defenseless and Shiro had tasked Keith with keeping him safe.

But Shiro wasn't safe either.

Keith's hands clenched. What did he do?

God, what did he do?

The decision was made for him though as the hangar door gave a hiss and the keypad lit up on their side.

Someone was coming through.

The Galrans must have a secondary entrance to it and were moving to flank them.

They would regret that.

Keith's gaze narrowed and he summoned his sword and shield to him. He stepped over Lance's prone form, taking up a guard position in front of this newest threat.

He wouldn't let anyone ever hurt Lance again. He had no idea what was going to come through the door...

But he did know that he was going to win.

Because under no circumstance could he afford to lose.

Chapter End Notes

Scene set: (Icy is dressed up as Maleficent and all the readers are the Good Faeries)

*Faeries come running up a flight of stone stairs and observe Icy standing at the top.*

"Where is Lance?" the faeries demand. *Icy chuckles and sweeps back her evil cloak to reveal a bloodied Lance on the floor* "Here's your precious Paladin," she sneers. *evil chuckling and she disappears in a crackle of lightning*

So, was the reunion what you pictured? :D A number of you were on target when you noted that Lance was still pretty out of it and might not realize he was actually being rescued. He just knows various levels of pain and fear at this point, which Keith and
Shiro are getting the joy of experiencing. As I said, this rescue is going to span a few chapters since I've been leading up to it and we've got a lot of moving pieces. Now I have four "sets" (thanks, Pidge and Shiro) to keep track of and keep them all in a semblance of a concurrent timeline. *cracks knuckles and immediately winces* I've got this. Also the cliffhangers? Prepare yourself. I consider myself a queen of them and this rescue is going to have them in spades :D

Thank you so much to the amazing reviewers. I live for feedback and I appreciate the sustenance. Shout outs to: Brohaikyyu, Kayley, glitteringconstellations, VagabondDiesel, digitallize, cipheredsong, Oh Dear God, WolfFire, FountainPen, maychorian, dean_winchester_has_fallen, ImmortalFey, Grace, hookedongayships, BubbleGumi, Night_hood, BrieCheese, Starshine_432, meow_mix9 , Coolstar422, OfficiallyDeadInside, and burple12345!

Also, if you'll be at Geek Kon come by and say hi this weekend! I'll be at table 7E. I'll hopefully even get a chapter up on Saturday. It would be incredibly rude of me not to after offering that up just last week after all :p

I would love to get your reactions to this chapter! Favorite part? Line? Scene? Thoughts for the rescue? There's so many different ways this could go after all :D Thank you all so much for your feedback and encouragement. It really means the world to me. ♥
"Almost there, just a bit more," Pidge muttered, hands flying over her keyboard. "Come on come on come on!"

She was hovering outside of the hangar door that the Red Lion had indicated Shiro and Keith had gone through. Finding the Red Lion had been easy enough; Pidge had built in tracking software to not just the Paladins' armor (she was always prepping for the worst case scenario) but also into her cloaking hardware and since Red had a version of it now it was an easy enough find.

She'd landed Green on the hunk of space rock the Red Lion had taken up perch in and while she had no idea how to communicate to a Lion outside of her own, Green must have said something as Red's signal took off like a shot and Pidge had hurried to follow.

They didn't have any time to waste. She'd just left Hunk and Allura by themselves to fight off an entire Galra fleet and Zarkon and Haggar. They had the Black Lion too, but she was pretty much regulated to keeping Zarkon at bay for a few minutes.

Pidge didn't know if they had a few minutes.

She felt sick from disobeying Allura's order; she knew the princess was right in the fact that Pidge should not be in that fight; it was too dangerous at that point. But she could not, would not, return to the ship when the others were still out fighting.

Fuck that.

She wasn't leaving without a single one of them.

She refused to lose anyone else she cared about.

Then, and only then, would she head back to the Castle.

The bay door finally opened with a silent hiss later. Pidge didn't even smile at the success — and remote hacking through an encrypted network with a battle echoing behind her was nothing to downplay — and flew Green directly into the hangar and Red following, both landing with loud thumps.

She dissolved Green's cloaking and activated her particle barrier instead and Red to her relief followed suit. Good.

Pidge was down the Green Lion's ramp and hitting the floor of the hangar running a moment later towards the interior door. It was a simple keypad encryption that should take her not even twenty ticks to crack.

She booted up her coding program and got to it.

xxx

"Black!" screamed Hunk as a blast of purple energy slammed into the Black Lion, disrupting her own attack and pushing the Lion back.
He knew where that blast had to have come from.

Zarkon.

His stomach heaved.

He and Yellow were helpless to assist though. They had their hands and paws full beating back the fighter ships that were swarming all about the scene and for every one that they took down another seemed to take its place. Hunk knew that wasn't quite accurate but as Yellow's power continued to dwindle and he had to spend more time evading strikes than taking them so he could activate his cannon and lay down a barrage was starting to take its toll.

Their one advantage in the Blue Lion's cloaking had disappeared as well when then cloaking expired a moment ago. Allura had been immediately surrounded and she and the Blue Lion were engaged in their own fight; as skilled as Allura was the Blue Lion was not hers and it showed in the somewhat jerkier movements and missed shots.

All of those paled though to the new problem that had just showed itself.

As Hunk had feared, Zarkon was still very, very much alive and he looked very, very angry.

Haggar had disappeared though but Hunk knew better than to think it was because she'd been incinerated. It had likely been her actions that had saved them from Blue's surprise attack.

He had the sick feeling the Druid had gone back into the ship, no doubt alerted to some commotion inside because at this point he knew Shiro and Keith's cloaking was long run out and they were in a base crawling with sentries and Galra and now a super creepy, dangerous Druid.

He'd tried to contact Shiro but there was only a burst of feedback on his comms. They still seemed to be working between the Lions but any communications into the base were blocked.

Forget knowing it was a trap, this was like a trap of a trap of a trap and topped off with a never ending feeling of horror that Hunk could not shake.

That feeling grew as Zarkon let out a yell and leapt off of the platform into open space, a giant shoulder cannon forming in his hands from his ill-gotten black bayard.

Hunk may have screamed, throwing his hands up in front of his face, but Zarkon bypassed him and the Yellow Lion, his sights set only on the Black Lion. The leader of the pride roared out her own challenge at her former Paladin and the two crashed together in a cacophony of light and sound that left Hunk's ears ringing.

He barely recovered in time to direct Yellow to snap a ship between her jaws before it kamikazed into them, heart thumping.

That had been too close.

Yellow shared his sentiment, a tingle of relief mixed with worry traveling down their mind link.

"Hunk," Allura called over the comms, sounding breathless. "Do you copy?"

"Here," he managed, sending Yellow into a roll to avoid another a laser blast.

"We require a plan of attack," she said. "This is not working."

Hunk blinked. Was she asking him for suggestions?
He was not the offensive coordinator by a long stretch. A long, long stretch. He could offer suggestions for workaround or an alternative viewpoint when someone else posed a plan but fighting was not his strength.

And it definitely wasn't in the middle of a battlefield where they were being hit from all sides and Shiro and Keith were in danger and Pidge had gone off on her own and Lance... Hunk couldn't even think about him. Because if that broken, bloodied lump had been what the Galra had tried to fool them with he was under no doubt that the actual Lance had to be in a similar state.

"We need to draw their fire away from the base," Allura continued and Hunk heaved out a sigh. She was making the plan. Good. He could follow a plan. And this one sounded straightforward enough. He could act as a diversion. "We must also protect the Black Lion."

Uh.

What?

Hunk knew that, of course, but...

He glanced out the window where the Black Lion was darting around space debris and ruined Galra battleships with Zarkon literally on her tail and the two of them exchanging blow after blow with one another although it was clear that Zarkon was landing more strikes than she.

What exactly was he supposed to do in a fight like that?

But as soon as the Black Lion faltered... they were all in trouble.

They had to help.

Somehow.

He heard her take a deep breath. "Hunk, I... I will assist the Black Lion. Are you able to focus on the other ships to draw them away?"

Hunk swallowed.

This didn't sound like a good plan. This was too dangerous, too risky for Allura, she could be kill—

"Hunk!" Allura snapped over the comm.

"Yes!" he blurted.

What else was he supposed to say?

"...be safe," Allura keyed in after a pause.

She and the Blue Lion took off in a burst of thrusters, angling for the duo locked in a bitter duel.

"You too," Hunk murmured, not sure if Allura could even hear it over the renewed shrieking of blaster fire.

And with a yell and a jump of his own thrusters Hunk leapt back into the fray.

xxx

Keith's heart was pounding in his ears and he found his hands were trembling around the grip of his
bayard.

Scared, his mind told him. That's what he was feeling.

He didn't like it.

But he could feel nothing else as once that door opened and either sentries or Galrans streamed in he was going to be hard pressed to keep them back while covering Lance and the thought of Lance landing back in their hands, in her hands...

No.

He wouldn't allow it.

He channeled the fear, converting it into a more familiar anger at what Haggar had done, letting it fuel him. Whoever came through that door...

They were going to find themselves run through before they could even blink.

The door opened with a hiss and Keith lunged, blade speared.

Pidge stared back at him.

Keith barely managed to redirect the blade, ending up in a sort of half-twirl as he brought it around in a deadly arc but one not aimed at Pidge.

"What the hell?" she yelped, face white beneath her visor as she instinctively leapt backwards, hands flying up and shield flying to her wrist.

An apology was on the tip of Keith's tongue but she had already looked past him and if she had been white before she was ghost colored now.

"L-Lance?" Her shield winked back out of existence as she caught herself on the doorframe, legs no longer wishing to support her.

She had thought the figure the Galrans had dragged out looked barely human. This… this…

That couldn't be Lance.

Acid bile tickled the back of her throat and she desperately swallowed against it. She couldn't pull a Hunk, not now.

"What are you—?"

"What happened—?"

They both cut off as they spoke over one another.

Lance moaned.

Keith whirled around. He knew what was about to happen.

And although he knew it really made no difference — there would be pain regardless — Keith dove for Lance, grabbing his hands as the convulsions began as the collar lit up purple and Lance's moan turned into a ragged scream.
Pidge stared.
She was frozen.
She couldn't move.
What the...
What the fuck was this?
Lance was twisting and writhing, head thrown back and exposing a glowing ring around his neck, stark against the protruding veins as he seized.
And the blood.
It was smeared all about the floor and Keith squelched in it as he tried to hold Lance down.
And the smell.
Oh God.
There was the scent of burn meat — flesh, she identified faintly — and the tang of sickness and the cutting, overwhelming odor of both fresh and dried blood.
Pidge was puking a moment later.
As she emptied the contents of her stomach she dully thought she was glad she'd removed the bottom part of visor when she'd arrived in the hangar.
Lance continued to scream behind her before it tapered off into low moans and then a somehow even more terrifying silence.
Pidge was afraid to look.
She felt shame paint her cheeks at the thought. Lance was in pain and she had... she had just... frozen.
What kind of friend was she?
Leaden legs carried her over to where Keith was crouched next to Lance, his head bowed and her breath hitched.
Was Lance...?
But she could make out the faintest rise of his bloodied chest and this close the barely there gasps.
She sank down next to them and to her utter surprise Keith reached out a hand and patted it very lightly, very carefully, on her shoulder.
Keith was trying to comfort her.
Pidge hiccuped a sob.
"The shock collar?" she managed after a tick and Keith gave a tight nod.
"It has a tracker too."
Pidge cursed.

It was swallowed up by the sound of battle from down the hall and Keith tensed next to her.

Pidge had a sinking feeling she knew where Shiro was.

"Go," she told him. "I'll... I'll watch Lance."

Keith's eyes widened and she could see the relief there at the permission to go after Shiro even as his eyes slid back to Lance's face, even in unconsciousness furrowed with pain.

"I'll be back," he promised and Pidge had the feeling he was addressing them both. "Don't touch—"

His words were overwhelmed by the sound of more fighting and a shout that had Pidge's blood freezing.

Shiro.

Keith took off running.

Pidge turned her attention back to Lance and to the shock collar masquerading as a tracker that would need to be removed before they left. She couldn't look at Lance himself. She couldn't look at Lance himself. She couldn't. Her heart was back in her throat and she felt sick if she focused too long on what they'd done to Lance, at the knowledge that this was Lance, and he was so still and she didn't know what to do and he was hurt and —

Concentrate.

Focus on the problem she could solve.

Shock collar. Go.

Her fingers touched lightly down upon it, feeling the barest tingle, and she traced it all around looking for a latch.

Nothing.

The only thing she found was a slightly larger bump that she could guess was a crystal as it felt the same as the small nodules embedded in other places.

As she was debating how to turn Lance's head so she could get a better glimpse of it she felt it warm under her hand.

That...

That could not be—

Pidge yelped as hot, shocking energy burst against her fingers and she yanked her hand back.

Her reaction was nothing on Lance's.

His back arched up off the floor as his body seized from the current and his mouth opened, revealing bloody teeth, and he shrieked, although it could be called a whisper of one as his throat was so torn up, so raw and he so exhausted that it no longer had the force.

It was even more terrifying.
"Lance!" Pidge gasped as his hands rose up and she tried to mimic what she'd seen Keith do, but Lance's hands were slick with blood and she lost her grip.

Lance rolled over to the side, curling up on his side with his back to her as the shocks continued to rock him. Pidge remained where she was, hand outstretched helplessly as Keith's warning of "don't touch—" echoed.

Don't touch... what? The collar? Lance? A particular part of Lance?

The crystal faded a too long twenty ticks later.

It gave Pidge an idea.

The collar was airtight around Lance's neck — she tried not to think too hard about how it must be embedded in his flesh at this point — and with no latch she didn't see an easy way to remove it and time was short. But what if she didn't have to remove it to disable it? What if she could just... fry it like it was doing to Lance?

The crystal was similar to the ones she had started to work with in the castle and she knew from some experiments that different crystals had different wavelengths and conductor abilities. This one, while small to fit into the collar, was no doubt extremely powerful if it was capable of powering a tracking program while shock capabilities (and strong, horrible powerful shocks at that) and the two not shorting out the other.

She just needed to figure out its conductor and then accurately charge her bayard to counter it.

She was going to have to shock Lance.

Pidge remembered when she'd first powered her bayard up and Lance had teased her about it. She'd shocked him right then and there, smug as he twitched on the ground. The memory, normally recalled fondly, only made her feel sick that she'd ever found Lance in pain amusing. The way he was trembling now was too reminiscent of that.

And to top it off, to get a reading on the crystal she needed it to be actively in use.

That meant she needed Lance to get shocked again. Twice, actually; once for the calibration and the second time to overload it.

Motherfucker.

"Oh, Lance," she whispered. "I'm... I'm so sorry. I..."

Lance let out a tiny moan.

Pidge forced herself to ignore it for the moment.

She could not afford to fall to pieces. She didn't know when the collar would activate again — and who the fuck was doing that? Who was fucking torturing him when they weren't even here? — and she needed to be ready.

Pidge glanced once down the hall, the sound of blaster fire having disappeared but the silence was not comforting either. She couldn't do anything right now for Keith and Shiro; Lance needed her more. She would just have to trust that whatever they were doing was enough to barricade her off from any encroaching enemies because she could not do this if she was trying to defend too.
She pulled up schematics via her suit and her fingers flew through the screens on every piece of data, every calculation she'd ever created for crystals while she mentally began to generate more. Her bayard was prepped at her side, shock katar and cord hooked from her suit and she pressed the end of it to the large crystal that was still easily reachable as Lance had remained curled up on his side.

She did her best to ignore the way she had to kneel in a shallow puddle of smeared blood.

Don't think about it.

Lance tensed up a minute later and muttering a silent apology Pidge braced her hand on his shoulder pushed all of her body weight down to hold him pinned as he was while the shocks ran their course.

He didn't scream this time.

It was a series of choking, strangled gasps that had Pidge shuddering along with him while she prayed for it to end and yet continue long enough for her program to run its calculations.

When it finished Lance did not go limp as he had before.

He was still awake, a soft keen building in his throat as he shuddered.

"Lance?" Pidge whispered, inching slightly closer. "L-Lance?"

She reached a hand out, placing it ever so lightly atop his head.

Lance stiffened.

Pidge trailed her fingers through his hair as she knew he liked, hoping that the familiar gesture might be a comfort, might soothe away at least a drop of his pain.

Lance jerked away, shoulder slamming painfully into the floor. "No," he gasped, the first word she had heard him speak outside of the screams.

He sounded terrified.

"N-no. No me toques. No más."

"Lance it's just me," Pidge pleaded, stomach churning as he tried to back further away, the action clearly paining him but that was somehow a better, safer option than her.

"No más," he whimpered. "Por favor."

"Lance, please. You're hurting yourself."

"No m-me toques," he stuttered. "No. N-no."

Pidge stopped reaching for him, hand dropping limp to her side.

Spanish was not all that familiar to her minus the small phrases she'd picked up on from Lance, but she recognized 'please' and obviously 'no.' He was scared and she was the one scaring him.

He had wedged himself into the corner next to the hangar door now, arms and legs tucked tight against his body and his head angled down.

The back of the collar was out of reach.
She needed that if she was going to disable it.

Pidge stayed where she was for the moment, trying not think about how much Lance looked like an abused animal cowering in the corner — and too late, that image was seared into her mind now — and looked over her data she had collected.

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips.

She had the code.

She made quick work of relaying it to her bayard, setting the shock prod to the correct output. All she needed now was access to the collar.

Pidge carefully scooted herself across the floor towards Lance.

He recoiled, trying to somehow shove himself deeper into the corner.

"Lance," she whispered his name and he flinched.

"No más," he choked out, eyes scrunched tight.

Pidge had another idea.

And she liked this one much better than the shocking bit.

"Lance," she said softly, and at the sound of her voice he shuddered again She hurried on. "I'm... no, um... Lo... uh, Lo siento?" It came out more of a question than anything, but hearing it sounded out Pidge could visualize it now. Any Spanish word would do, but this one came to her first and it seemed the most appropriate.

She repeated it, more strongly. "Lo siento." And she meant every butchered syllable. Sorry for hurting him then and now, sorry that he'd had to suffer. Sorry that they hadn't arrived sooner. So, so sorry that she had no idea how to help.

Lance ever so slowly untucked his head.

It was working.

Spurred on, Pidge murmured out a soft "hola" and she felt her breath catch as Lance fully turned his head in her direction.

An then he opened his eyes.

Pidge's breath turned into a choked inhal.

His eyes.

What the fuck had they done?

Ocean blue was surrounded by pitch black and his gaze, while turned in her direction, was unfocused.

Like he couldn't see her.

"Lance," and he flinched again, but she pressed on before he could retreat, pushing back her own fear in light of this newest development. "It's me, Pidge. Uh, ¿cómo estás? I think that means how
are you? Or is that are you okay? Um, *hola* again."

Each utterance of his native language seemed to be coaxing him out of his shell as tight limbs slowly loosened and the worst of the furrow and fear on his face began to fade even though he was still no doubt in a lot of pain.

So Pidge came up a steady stream of whatever Spanish words and phrases she could recall, even though she was pretty sure that none of them made any sense. "*Agua, hola, lo siento,*" she murmured as she inched closer. "*Burrito, adios, churros, por favor...*"

She was nearly there, hand just a breadth away from the collar, Lance's dark eyes still focused in her direction, when he spoke.

"Pidge?"

The word came out cracked and broken and almost intelligible, but it was her name. He said her name. *He said her name!*

"Yes!" she cheered, biting her lip when Lance flinched away at the volume and dialing it back immediately. "Yes, it's me. It's Pidge."

He could hear her.

"Lance, it's gonna be okay," she pressed on. "It's okay. We're rescu—"

She cut herself off as the collar lit up purple.

Lance tensed, eyes going wide and a silent scream on his lips.

Pidge lunged forward, collaring him about the neck before he could pull back into the corner and the scream that was torn from him was the most painful one she felt yet.

She realized she was yelling too as her forearm pressed against the collar.

"Hang on, hang on," she chanted, wrangling her bayard into her other hand and pressing the cord to the crystal. "Just a second, please, Lance, it's okay—"

His scream became a *wail* as she activated her bayard, a flash of green light bursting against the purple crystal.

"Come on," she pleaded, at Lance, at the collar, at everything, as the crystal *whined* but did not yet combust. "*Please!* Work godamnit!"

And with a violent pulse and a bright glow the crystal *shattered*, pieces flying and one piece pinging against Pidge's chin, hot and burning and she didn't give it a second glance.

Lance went limp.

Pidge released her almost chokehold on him, chest heaving beneath her armor.

It had worked.

It had actually worked.

It was over.
Her gaze drifted back down to Lance, lying so still, covered in gore and burns and broken and it was not over at all.

"Oh God," she choked out, pressing her hands to her mouth to contain her sob. "Oh God."

She looked down the silent hall.

No one appeared.

"Please," she whispered her prayer aloud. "Hurry. Please. Lance, he..." she looked down at the broken body that had been her friend. "Oh God..." Her voice broke. "Lance..."

xxx

"Well, well, this is a pleasant surprise."

Shiro froze.

No.

It couldn't be.

He turned with agonizing slowness, the last sentry from the battalion sliding off his hand to hit the floor with a loud clang.

Shiro didn't even hear it.

He couldn't hear it over the sudden pounding of his pulse in his head as Haggar stepped into view.

"I had hoped to see you again, my Shiro," Haggar smiled, neatly stepping over the sparking remains of a sentry and closing the space between them.

"Shut up," Shiro snarled, raising his prosthetic in front of him with a smear of purple light.

He forced himself to stand his ground.

He wasn't scared of her.

He was disgusted by her.

Haggar's gaze moved towards the glowing limb and she let out a soft, happy sigh.

Shiro's neck prickled.

"You wear my arm so well, my Shiro."

"Shut up," Shiro ground out.

"I have missed you," she opened her arms wide, as though inviting him in for a hug. "Your loss has hurt me. However..." her lips turned up. "I will admit I have found something that brings me even greater joy. My Lance is such a precious boy after all." Her eyes met Shiro's and he found he could not tear his gaze away. "I love him."

Wrong. The sensation burned into Shiro and freed him from her stare. The possession that Haggar had displayed before had morphed, distorted even further. There was a look in her eyes, an obsession, a lust that Shiro had not ever seen before, not even in his darkest memories.
"No," he got out past his thickening throat. He swallowed, words growing stronger. "He's not yours."

And Haggar laughed. "Isn't he though? His blood has spilled over my hands, his tears have brushed my fingers," Haggar advanced with each iteration. "His fears have touched my soul, his screams have made my heart beat." She was mere feet away now, eyes flashing with triumph. "He is mine and mine he shall remain."

"You'll never touch him again," Shiro growled, refusing to listen to her words.

"Oh? You mean like this?" Haggar held up her hand revealing a small silver disc.

Shiro glanced between it and her, wondering what she was up to. Not breaking eye contact with him she pressed her thumb against it.

A moment later a ragged, faint scream echoed from further down the hall.

Lance.

The shock collar.

"You..." Shiro's prosthetic creaked alarmingly as his hand clenched.

She smirked victoriously at him. "It seems even now you cannot protect him. What a failure of a leader you have become."

"I will kill you," Shiro promised darkly.

He meant it with every bit of his soul. Haggar would never get her hands on Lance again.

Never.

Haggar scoffed. "You think you can kill me?"

"Why don't we find out?"

"I like that look on you," she purred. "My Champion."

Shiro lunged forward with a roar.

Haggar was not a normal opponent. She did not fight head on, did not use strength or even his own against him.

She used tricks and deception like the liar and coward that she was, vanishing in front of him with a cackle.

Shiro would not fall for it again.

He whirled around and his prosthetic smashed against her own glowing hand as she angled for his side and where she had struck him in their last fight. Shiro moved to swing it up, to cut through her arm, but Haggar leapt backwards with a laugh, almost seeming to float.

"You have learned," she smiled. "I am proud of you. But... you have not learned enough." She lifted her hand, displaying the metal disc.

Another hoarse scream sounded a moment later.
Shiro bellowed and charged again.

She was not going to hurt Lance again. He would not allow it. Haggar danced nimbly out of the way, following up with a swipe that Shiro barely managed to block, and the power behind it still sent him skidding backwards several feet.

And then suddenly there was not just one Haggar, but a dozen, filling the narrow hall and forcing Shiro on the defensive as they all came as one.

He spun and blocked and sliced, but the Druid's cackling continued to ring around his head in a ceaseless cacophony and for every one he dispatched another took its place.

Lance screamed again.

"Aren't you going to stop me?" Haggar taunted, voice echoing from each clone.

Shiro slashed through another one, growling low in his throat.

"What's wrong, my Champion?"

"I had expected more."

"This fight bores me."

"You bore me."

The change in tone, from taunting to something darker, something crueler gave Shiro pause as he whirled out from where he'd just dispatched another clone.

All of the Haggars were looking at him...

All except one.

As if sensing his gaze that one turned her head and he knew without a doubt that was the real Haggar, standing further down the hall.

The hall that he had come from.

He'd been turned around in the fighting.

Oh God.

"My Lance though," Haggar's smirk widened. "He does not. And he needs me."

She turned her back to him.

Oh hell no.

Shiro charged forward but the clones immediately swarmed him, blocking him from going after her.

"No!" he screamed, panic making his voice high. "No! Get back here!"

Haggar ignored him, stepping around a turn in the corridor and was lost to his sight.

Her laughter and Lance's screams echoed back.
And behind door number one... Pidge! Good on those of you who called it! And now Keith is off to help Shiro (everyone realize who he's going to encounter before Shiro though? :D Mwahahaha!), Haggar's being as creepy as always and we've got Allura and Hunk taking out Galran cruisers. I have to add, I had that particular scene written out before season three aired, so Hunk's comment about Allura not being compatible with Blue makes me giggle now xD (although in my heart there is still only one Blue Paladin for this group and he's my precious child) Anyways...

I've been under the weather the last few days, and still fighting to get back to sunny skies. I write this while trying to convince myself not to vomit. I'd say it's Lance getting back at me for all the shit I've put him through except he doesn't have a vindictive bone in his body. It's probably Pidge acting for him xD If I have not responded to a previous review I am so, so sorry. I just haven't had the energy, but I will try my best to do so after this weekend and when I'm feeling better. Apologies. I'll do better this week (I hope xD)

I am at Geek Kon this weekend. I don't recommend hugging me so I don't get you sick, but if you're there please do drop by my table (7E) and say hello~! Also keep your fingers crossed for the fanfiction contest. I'm hoping Over the Edge wins! :D

Thank you so much to the lovely reviewers! I'm updating this from my phone, so don't have the names saved, but I love all you. So, so much. ♥

If you have a tick to spare I'd love if you could leave a review. All reviews will be added to my comfort kit for this cold/flu/whateverI'mdyingfrom and I cherish all even more than cough drops and decongestants.
Haggar was in no hurry as she strolled down the hall.

She wanted to savor the moment after all.

The sound of her Lance's ragged, beautiful screams in front of her and the despairing shouts of her Shiro behind were a symphony that should be played out in full. She was unconcerned of her Champion coming upon her either; his combat skills were formidable, yes, but against her he was severely outmatched.

However...

He would be such a delight to put back into the ring.

She could not believe how well this entire plan was going. Despite the setbacks of the Paladins becoming wise to her decoy and the now subsequent battle raging outside in space, things were going in their favor.

Well.

Her favor. She was uncertain at this point if her emperor would indeed manage to claim his Black Lion, but if he did not she was certain there would be plenty of opportunities in the future. After all, she was about to bring five Paladins of Voltron down to a remaining measly two. She already had her Shiro trapped and he would be easy enough to subdue and of course her Lance was waiting for her just up ahead with no doubt the secondary Paladin the Galra forces had reported seeing.

She would eliminate that one very shortly. She had no need for any others, not even to try and harness their powerful quintessences.

Nothing was as powerful and sweet as her Lance's and she desired none other.

A frown did pull up her lips though as she continued her stroll.

How had the Paladins managed to free her Lance from his cell? She swiped a hand through the air, idly summoning her tablet and pulling up the replay footage. There was no camera on the outside of the cell — that had been a mistake on her part, she realized now — but from the feed inside her Lance's cell there was no sign of an entry. He was lying there, gasping for air with those quiet little breaths, in one frame and then spirited away the next.

That she could explain. The Green Paladin had hacked her camera system. He seemed to do that often, gaining easy access to their cameras, their floor plans, their data... it was infuriating. For every patch the Galra engineers came up with he bypassed it the next time.

Haggar would put a stop to him, this danger to the Empire. He surely had to be the other Paladin that her Shiro had brought with, although she had not yet figured out how the Green Lion was flying also without its Paladin. It seemed to be a common theme though as the Black Lion was acting on its own too. The Paladins were foolish if they thought their creatures had even a chance that way. Without a pilot they were mindless beasts.
But, she smiled, she would not kill the Green Paladin. Not quite yet. She would torture the insolent human first, discover how he had gotten through her magic. *No one* should have been able to get into that cell, not even another Druid. She would wring the answer from him and she would make her Lance watch, listen to his cries as his friend was flayed open and know that he could do nothing to protect him.

It would be beautiful.

Haggar rounded the bend—

And was brought up short as the Red Paladin materialized in front of her.

Red?

A dark smile grew on her face as she traced the Paladin's face under his visor as he leapt back. He was familiar to her.

She had seen him in glimpses of her Shiro's memories when he no longer had the strength to push her out. She had not cared then, not delved deeper than the surface as her Champion was a no one before she had discovered him and his memories were worthless to her.

But this boy...

He had been in a number of them. And now here he was, serving as the Red Paladin, the right hand to the Black.

He was precious to her Shiro.

She would very much enjoy killing him. Or, her eyes lit up, she could keep him, pit him against her Shiro in the arena. With a little influence on her Champion, bending his will to her own... Oh, it would be a bloody, desperate and *devastating* battle. And once her Shiro realized he'd killed the boy, bathed himself in his blood...

Yes.

She would keep this one too, for a little while. Just long enough to use him and drink in the despair.

She laughed. Yes.

It would be perfect.

Keith was equally surprised at the sudden meeting and had leapt backwards, sword and shield raised.

But whereas Haggar seemed amused, Keith felt ice dread coiling in his stomach at the sight of her.

Shiro was supposed to be fighting *sentries*, he was supposed to be rushing to his aid to take out the rest of the robots so they could all escape, so they could go *home*.

This...

Haggar...

Something had happened.

"What the fuck did you do to Shiro?" he demanded, relieved when his voice came out a growl and not the nerves he was feeling.
How the fuck did he fight Haggar if not even Shiro could?

"Do to him?" Haggar repeated. "Nothing much, not yet." Her grin widened. "Not like what I wish to do with my Lance."

"He's not yours," Keith snarled.

And to his surprise Haggar laughed, the sound sending his hair rising. "Oh, you are his protegee, aren't you? You certainly are something special, Red Paladin."

Keith stiffened. What did she mean?

"Next to the two of you it is no wonder my Lance feels like such a failure."

"You don't know anything," Keith retorted even as his stomach clenched at the way she spoke about Lance, about his worth.

It struck too close to home, to his own previous words.

He'd been wrong. And she was too.

"I know enough," Haggar said.

And she disappeared in a whirl of crackling air, hiding somewhere beyond his sight.

Keith didn't like people like that. He didn't like their lies and deceptions and the broken promises and false hopes and how they wouldn't face a problem head on, wouldn't be honest. He'd dealt with those people all his life since he entered the foster system. It's why as much as he hated the pain, hated the fighting, he'd take the bullies, take the violent foster parents and their clear anger, their hate and their fists. He could see them coming. He could fight back.

Those that hid in the shadows with their lies and words were harder to pin down, harder to defend against. But he'd had practice. He knew how they worked. They were all cowards.

And cowards always went for the most vulnerable spot.

Keith whirled around and brought his sword up, intercepting Haggar's black wreathed hand that had been aimed for his back. He snarled back at her over the clash of their weapons, black sparks dancing along his blade.

She vanished again.

Keith disappeared too.

He leapt high into the air, jets propelling him even higher, eyes scanning down below for when Haggar showed herself. Height always had the advantage in a fight and even though he didn't have a long range weapon this way he could see her when—

"Behind you," came a whisper.

And then Keith was falling, his entire back alight with black flames.

A scream was torn from his throat as he felt his jetpack explode under the attack and the burst propelled him down the hall, slamming face first into a wall, suspended there for a moment as the thrusters ran their course.
He could hear Haggar coming up, feet pattering on the floor, and he barely managed to duck down beneath her hand going for his head, back still on fire, and her nails gouged scratches into the wall with a shriek.

Keith hit the floor, rolling, trying to soothe the flames even as the impact had him letting out another raw shout and he could feel his flesh burning both on his lower back and beneath the armor plating where the metal was searing against his undersuit.

Haggar gave him no time to even try and regain his feet, coming at him again with a black-wreathed hand and Keith struggled to right himself, digging his shield into the ground to drag him to his knees and even that had him gasping out as his back flared and only the shield kept him upright.

Keith tried to block the direct attack, thrusting the shield up with all he had.

Haggar's attack sent him smashing again on the wall and a wordless scream was pulled as his back took the brunt of the hit.

Keith's vision went white.

When it cleared Haggar was standing above him where he lay crumpled against the wall.

Keith went to move, to fight, and... And he couldn't move.

"I was expecting better," Haggar sighed, sounding almost put out.

"What did you do to me?" Keith growled, fighting against both the pain and the frozen state his body was in.

He hadn't broken his spine, had he? Was he paralyzed?

Keith gritted his teeth. No. That wasn't it. The witch had done something to him, he knew it. And yet despite having him immobilized and at her mercy, she was not following through with a final blow.

What was she up to?

Haggar did not answer him, instead retrieving a small silver disc from inside her robe.

"Your screams are delightful though," she continued. "Come, let me hear them alongside my Lance's."

Keith knew in that instant exactly what that silver disc was.

The fucking remote for the shock collar.

"You—" he growled out, fingers twitching at his sides.

Haggar pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

Haggar blinked, clearly surprised, and turned her attention to the disc. She pressed it again, heard it click, but there was no delightful resulting scream from down the hall, which should be even louder now given her new proximity.
Either her Lance had died (impossible) or someone had disabled the collar.

Her eyes narrowed.

The Green Paladin.

That boy was becoming more than a thorn in her side. She could not wait to get her hands on him.
He would beg for death and she would refuse, wringing every last scream from him that he had thought to rob her of. She would—

Haggar jumped back as a sword struck where her head had just been.

The Red Paladin was on his feet.

Barely.

Haggar gave him an appreciative look as he stood there, hunched over and chest heaving, and sword clutched tightly in both of his hands. Somehow this injured boy had fought off her magic while she had been somewhat distracted and had managed to propel himself to attacking despite the clear pain he was in.

He was strong. Very strong.

But not strong enough.

"What do you think you are accomplishing?" Haggar asked, cocking her head. "You cannot fight any longer."

"Watch me," he growled.

Haggar sent a burst of fire shooting from her fingertips with a sigh.

The Red Paladin valiantly tried to dodge, to Haggar's surprise doing so successfully, but the movement was too much and he crashed back down to his knees.

Keith's vision whitened out again as the impact shot up his back and he found himself pitched forward on his hands a moment later, bayard returned to his holster.

No.

He had to get up, he had to fight, he had to—

Haggar's foot slammed down on his back.

Keith *wailed*, crashing down to the floor.

Haggar ground his foot into his back, pressing charred armor and melted undersuit further into his flesh.

"You have lost, Paladin," she sneered.

Keith choked on his next breath, lungs seizing as she pressed down harder.

"Take comfort," she said. "You are not to die yet."

What?
She was sparing his life?

Why?

"But soon enough..." Her hands crackled with black lightning and Keith found himself frozen again, helpless as she lifted the glowing orb above him. "You will be but a memory."

Keith held her gaze, refusing to look away at her incoming attack.

He would not be scared.

Even if he had never been more terrified in his life.

"Keith!"

The scream had Haggar looking away from the collapsed figure, this time making sure her hold was strong to keep him down, taking in the form of the charging Green Paladin.

Oh.

How very interesting.

The Green Paladin was a little girl.

"Keith!" the girl shouted, so young, so scared, and Haggar found herself smiling as a shiver of excitement ran down her spine.

She was going to have so much fun listening to those tortured screams.

She may as well start now.

Haggar re-directed her attack towards the charging Paladin and grinned as eyes widened behind her visor.

It was too late to draw a shield and her weapon, a strange handled typed object, would be useless in repelling the attack.

Haggar waited for the scream of pain as it connected with the small body.

Her spell passed harmlessly through the girl.

Yellow eyes widened. What...?

There was no more time for anything else as the spell smashed into the curve of the hallway and exploded.

Debris rained down as the hall shook and Haggar found herself staggering back from the force, eyes stinging in the sudden smoke.

That had been... surprising.

Haggar was not hurt though and she turned her attention back towards the Red Paladin, still frozen under her spell.

The Green one was kneeling right next to him.

How...?
When had the girl gotten past her?

It was of no consequence.

Both Paladins were stationary now, the girl yelling for the Paladin dear to her Shiro to *move, get up*, and her shakes to him were doing nothing. His eyes were wide open, the earlier defiance from before gone and replaced with a panic and despair that warmed Haggar's soul as she approached.

Much better.

Haggar summoned another glowing orb, this one larger than her previous attack that spanned nearly the width of the entire hall.

She'd like to see the them evade this.

But before she could cast it sharp, stabbing pain filled her and a shriek bubbled forth between her own lips.

And with a thud Haggar crumpled to the floor.

Behind her the real Pidge stood, limbs shaking and chest heaving as she lowered her bayard that had delivered the most powerful shock she could conjure. "Take that, you bitch," Pidge muttered.

She resisted the urge to collapse herself.

Pidge had heard Shiro yelling faintly but had remained put. She knew their flank was well protected, the two Lions on the other side of the door in the hangar and with only one way in via the hall in front of her Lance was defended from the front by her. She just had to stand her ground and wait for Keith and Shiro to return.

But then she'd heard Keith's scream.

And if Keith were screaming then...

Then it was not just sentries up there. If it had been both Shiro and Keith would have returned already and they'd have escaped together, which meant something else, someone else, had entered the battle. Someone who had disabled both Shiro and Keith. Pidge had a sinking feeling she knew who it was.

And if she was right... then they needed help. She'd cast a look down at Lance, fully unconscious but still in so much *pain*, and had swallowed thickly.

What did she do?

She knew she could not lift Lance, but she could drag him, painfully, slowly, towards the Lions and have them stand guard, maybe even convince Green to take off on her own and make for the castle with Lance aboard. But that would take time, at least three minutes, likely longer.

Keith and Shiro might not have three minutes.

And she'd already promised herself, they either all went home together or they didn't go home at all.

She would not leave Keith and Shiro behind. *Never.*

It meant she had to leave Lance though. Just for a few minutes, she told herself. And she would still be the front guard, no one was going to reach him unless they got through her. And if that
happened...

Well, then they were all fucked anyways.

Pidge was not as physically strong as any of her fellow Paladins and she knew her fighting strengths came in speed and cleverness. It would be suicide to rush out, thinking she could overpower someone like Haggar even with the element of surprise. So she needed more.

She'd created a hologram, sending it in ahead of her down the hall. It had definitely been the right decision as Haggar had attacked it, the hologram fizzling out in pixels. Pidge had used the cover provided by the smoke from the blast and sent another hologram out, gut clenching as she sent it to Keith's side where he was just lying there and please don't let him be dead oh God please don't let him be dead and Haggar had fallen for it, turning to eliminate what she thought was both of them.

Pidge had crept up behind her and shocked the witch with every ounce of power her bayard had.

And now...

Now she was defenseless, collapsed in front of her.

Pidge could end this.

She could kill Haggar.

A shiver went down her spine. It wouldn't be hard. She could convert her bayard into the long knife she had been practicing switching it to (as once she'd learned the bayards could have multiple forms she'd known she needed some type of closer combat weapon and apparently her bayard had decided that meant a thin, almost stiletto dagger just a little large) and stab it into the witch's head.

Even she couldn't survive that, right?

But...

Should she?

Haggar was defenseless. Unarmed.

Pidge would not be killing her like this.

She'd be murdering her.

Her hand wavered, gripping the dagger that had already formed.

Haggar deserved it. She did. She had hurt Lance, Shiro. Most definitely hurt thousands of others, killed them. She'd destroyed lives and homes and planets. She was dangerous. It was better for them all if she was dead.

But could she really play the role of executioner? Was would her father say? Shiro? Matt?

Her stomach clenched again and she felt acid tickle her throat. Was this the right choice? Could she live with herself if she did this? Look in the mirror again and see anyone but a murderer staring back?

Gunfire sounded from down the hall and Pidge jerked her head up.

That was close.
She looked at Haggar and then past her to Keith, who was twitching his outstretched right hand on the ground but clearly was not going to be back on his feet under his own power in the next few seconds.

Pidge looked once more at the witch, swallowed, and then changed her bayard back into the shock katar and stepped around her fallen form and headed for Keith.

Her stomach twisted.

She had a feeling she'd just made a huge mistake.

There was no time to second guess it though as Shiro was suddenly there, sprinting full out while the gunfire echoed from behind him. His eyes saw Pidge first, widening in surprise, and then traveled to Keith, who had manged to brace himself on his hands now but he was still on the ground.

Then he caught sight of Haggar, collapsed by Pidge.

What?

There was no time though to ask, to wonder, to do anything as there was another squadron of sentries behind him and Galran officers who had appeared as soon as Shiro had finished fighting off the clones and they did not have time to fight them all.

"Go!" Shiro yelled in Pidge's direction while he bent down and hefted Keith to his feet, who nearly toppled over and a quiet but clear moan groan of pain sounded even above the firefight. But Keith was on his feet and that's all Shiro had time to note for now, slinging one of Keith's arms over his neck and using his prosthetic to clamp about Keith's side and hold him steady as he forced him into a run.

Keith didn't complain, but Shiro could hear his hitched breaths and the way he leaned heavier and heavier on Shiro with each step. By the time they were approaching the hangar doors Shiro was almost entirely supporting Keith's weight.

Shiro realized the problem as soon as Lance's curled up form came into view.

"'m fine," Keith managed, moving to disentangle himself from Shiro's hold.

"Pidge," Shiro barked as she was opening the hangar door. "Help Keith."

Pidge gave a quick nod and was at Keith's side within the moment, slinging his arm more akwardly than Shiro had thanks to her height but she pulled him forward with almost as much strength and Keith tried his best to keep his feet beneath him.

He couldn't afford to fall now because he didn't think he'd be getting back up, his vision already speckled with black spots.

Shiro turned his attention to Lance, scooping him up none too gently with a silent apology. He was through the hangar doors, hissing shut behind him, when he realized the collar was still secured around Lance's neck.

He froze.

They couldn't leave with it still on, Haggar could track them and then—

"Move it, Shiro!" Pidge yelled over her shoulder as she hit the base of the Red Lion's ramp, lowered
already and particle shield dissolved. "It's disabled!"

She didn't wait for a response, already hauling Keith up the ramp and practically dumped him into the pilot's chair. He reached trembling hands out to the controls, nearly slumping over them.

His back was a mess of charred armor and his undersuit seemed melted. Pidge's stomach twisted. That... that did not look good.

"Can you fly?" she asked bluntly, trying to hide her worry beneath the brusque tone.

He gave a tight nod. "Y-yeah."

And that was good enough for Pidge. If Keith said he could do it, he could do it.

She hurried back down the ramp just as Shiro was reaching it, having taken a moment to smash out the keypad on their side to stall the Galrans for at least an extra minute.

Lance was still cradled in Shiro's arms but it was now that Pidge noticed something else about their leader.

He was coated in blood.

Lance's blood, she knew, as it was smeared in streaks all about Shiro's chestplate and knees, but even knowing that Shiro still looked pale, his own breaths too shallow and his eyes a little too wide.

He had encountered Haggar after all.

"Shiro," she whispered.

He gave her a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. "You okay?"

She nodded around the sudden lump in her throat.

"Good. I need—" the door behind them gave an ominous rattle. "I need you to cover us," Shiro continued. "Can you do that?"

So he was aware of Keith's less than ideal state. Pidge had no doubt her most stubborn teammate would do all he could to pilot the temperamental Red Lion and he would do it, but she also had no doubt it would not be quite the usual grace and speed to which Keith flew.

And they were about to enter a large scale aerial firefight.

Assuming, that is, that Hunk and Allura were still fighting.

Pidge felt her stomach give a heave. She had left them. They were out there all by themselves against Zarkon and she had—

"Katie," Shiro cut into her thoughts and her actual name, which Shiro only rarely pulled out, startled her out of her spiral. "Katie, I need you to focus, okay?"

"'kay," she managed. "Shiro, I... It's... It's bad out there. Hunk and Allura..."

"We'll get through it," he said and despite the fact she knew he was just as worried as she his calm and confidence reassured the worst of the roiling in her. "I'm counting on you."

"I won't let you down," she promised.
Her gaze drifted to Lance then, so still, so small, in Shiro's arms.

She wouldn't let him down either.

They were all going to make it out of here. She would make sure of it.

She boarded Green and flipped the controls to bring the Lion back online, thrusters engaging with a comforting rumble. Next to her the Red Lion was doing the same, already wheeling around for the hangar door that Pidge remotely opened for the last time.

And within the minute both Lions were roaring into space.

xxx

"Does anyone copy?" Allura pleaded, tapping on her communications. "Keith? Pidge?"

No one responded.

Allura grit her teeth and rolled Blue out of the way of Zarkon's canon blast.

She could not take much more.

They needed to retreat while the Lions were still mobile. The Blue Lion was already down to near critically low power levels as much of it had gone to shielding against Zarkon's over-powered attacks and the fire from the battleships that had not fallen back even as she had engaged with their leader. The Galra had no honor, she'd snarled to herself, as they had taken her open flank to try and barrage the Blue Lion while she was under attack from Zarkon.

Cowards.

The Yellow Lion's defensive capabilities had been invaluable in keeping them afloat, but Hunk had relayed just a couple doobashes ago that even his shiels were compromised and growing steadily worse as the Lion was also diverting all offensive power to the shields, which Hunk was then using to physically ram himself into Galra ships.

He had depleted a large part of the fleet with such a method but the damage was starting to reflect back on him and they still had nearly ten enemy ships plus Zarkon.

Zarkon, who was pressing his advantage and had twice now managed to ensnare the exhausted and pilotless Black Lion, forced to battle on pure instinct without a guiding hand and it was showing. Blue and Allura had managed to unleash their own attack on Zarkon, freeing the Black Lion both times, but she knew such luck would not last.

They were out of time and out of ideas. They needed to retreat but they could not do so as they were; Zarkon would follow and they had not the strength to repel him.

They needed help.

"Allura," Hunk panted over his headset, sounding just as desperate as she felt. "Yellow can't take—"

He was cut off as coordinated blast engulfed his Lion, lighting up the yellow paneling a violent purple.

"Hunk!" Allura screamed as the Lion's eyes went dark and with it her shields.

She was completely at the fleet's mercy.
"Blue!" she cried and the Lion responded to Allura's controls, wheeling about to rush to the Yellow Lion's side. Zarkon intercepted them. He sliced out with the black bayard, a large broadsword now, and the attack clipped against Blue's outstretched front paw. The Lion screamed out her pain and recoiled from the blow. "Now now," Zarkon swished the blade to the side with practice ease. "Not so fast, Princess." Allura's breath caught. He knew she was in the Blue Lion, somehow. "Zarkon," she snarled, activating Blue's outside communications. There was no reason to hide who was Blue's pilot now. "Get out of my way." He chuckled. "As though your threats scare me. Tell me, Princess, how does it feel to finally be the Blue Lion's pilot? Is it all you dreamed of?"

Allura grit her teeth. How dare he. How dare he even think back to those quiet conversations of eons ago, of Allura listening as he regaled her with tales of he and the Paladins' missions, of her expressing her hope of one day being a Paladin too just like her father. He'd chuckled, asking her if she really wished to fly such a "temperamental beast," and she had retorted of course not, she would be the Blue Lion's Paladin as blue was her favorite color. This was not how she had ever wanted to pilot the Blue Lion.

This was not how she had ever wanted to pilot the Blue Lion. This was the furthest thing from a dream. This was a nightmare.

She responded with a sharp tail blast from Blue's cannon. Zarkon deflected it with a sigh. Blue's console flashed with a final warning of eight percent power. Enough for one more strike if she gave it everything. Allura swallowed. It would not be enough.

"I admire your efforts," Zarkon said. "Truly. But you were foolish, Princess, thinking you could go up against my empire. You have failed, completely and utterly. Look about you and see the destruction you have allowed."

"Blue," Allura whispered instead, trying not to listen to his words. Perhaps her decisions had not been the wisest but they were not foolish. It was never foolish to wish to save a friend. It was never foolish to hope. She could not let go of that sentiment, no matter the odds.

They only had eight percent, one chance, but... but they had to try.

She felt the Lion agree. As one they feinted right, drawing Zarkon in that direction as he reached out with is sword to once more block them from going around to where the Yellow Lion was surrounded now and being fired upon by the remainder of the fleet.
Blue spun though in the turn, a full somersault that flipped Allura's stomach, and let out a *roar* and a burst of light from her mouth, angled directly at Zarkon's unprotected back.

It collided.

Allura held her breath as all around her the Blue Lion's systems began to go dark, a one percent warning showing that was hovering before it too went to zero.

Had it been enough?

"Fortunately for you," Zarkon's voice echoed through the smoke, speaking as though there had been no pause in their conversation.

No...

Yellow eyes glowed through the gloom. "You will not have to live to see it."

Zarkon's sword had been replaced with a cannon, so large it dwarfed even him.

A strike from that on the defenseless Blue Lion...

Allura knew her fate.

*Lion sorry* Blue rumbled, despair overwhelming down their link. *Lion failed.*

"Oh, Blue," Allura whispered, placing a hand on the darkening console. "No. Please do not..."

*Lion failed my Paladin* came Blue's final whisper, her cry.

Her presence faded.

Allura spread both hands against the console, trying desperately to channel some of her own power, her own quintessence, into the ancient Lion.

Nothing.

There was the barest hint of power now and Allura turned her attention to the recording software, throat thick, as Zarkon's cannon charged outside, brighter and brighter with every tick.

She had no idea if it would survive such a blast but...

But she had someone she must say good bye to.

He deserved at least that much.

Shaking fingers turned the record button on.

"C-Coran," she whispered, tears threatening to spill over. "Coran, if you hear this—"

The light on the console went fully dark.

Allura let out a low sob.

This was her end.

She had *failed.*
She had failed Lance. Coran. The other Paladins. The universe.

And now she would pay for these failures with her life.

She looked up, gazing out Blue's darkened window at Zarkon hovering just beyond with his fully charged cannon.

As if knowing he had her attention Zarkon chuckled.

"Farewell, Princess."

Allura braced her hands on the console, waiting for the attack.

It did not come.

Instead there was a pulse around her, the systems flaring to life beneath her hands, and the sudden feeling of such sheer joy and love that Allura's breath caught.

It couldn't be...

The Blue Lion had come back online, restored with full power.

_**My Paladin!**_ the shout from the Blue Lion was overwhelming that Allura was physically bowled backwards in the seat. _**My Paladin is here!**_


Zarkon's attack collided with the Blue Lion but her shields were up, fully active, and dispersed it.

Power remained at one hundred percent.

Blue fired back with her own attack, a blast so large, so strong, so quick, that Zarkon did not even have a chance to shield against it.

He was sent flying backwards with a shout, crashing into and through one of the many darkened ships lying about, an explosion rocketing the area.

Blue was already moving, flying so fast Allura was plastered back in the seat, and angling towards what appeared to be a section of empty space.

"Allura!" Pidge's voice crackled in her ear. Allura felt her breath catch again. Pidge. She was okay. She was—

"Allura, slow down," Pidge's voice rose in pitch, "you're—"

Blue and Allura crashed into something and Allura, as her head rattled about in her helmet, realized they had just encountered the cloaked Green and Red Lions.

Of which Lance must be aboard.

_**My Paladin My Paladin My Paladin**_ Blue echoed, paws scrabbling against the air.

One of the cloaked Lions let out a roar of her own, not of joy but of fear, and Blue backed off immediately. Allura could feel the sudden wash of guilt but Blue offered no explanation and she did not have time to press, merely pressing what she hoped was a comforting hand on the dashboard.
"Where's Hunk?" Keith's voice crackled over the comms, faint for him.

Pained, Allura placed. He was hurt.

How badly?

Before she could answer though there was another patch of static.

"—help Yellow is—" a burst of feedback "—'t online does anyone co—"

Hunk.

He was okay.

For now.

"I will assist Hunk," Allura said, the Blue Lion fully charged once more and more than enough to take out the few ships blasting away at the floating Yellow Lion. "Pidge, Keith, how much cloaking do you have left?"

"Twenty dobashes," Pidge chimed in while Keith muttered out a smaller, "four."

"Pidge, with me," Allura ordered. "Keith, can you assist the Black Lion?"

Meaning could he take on Zarkon? He had gone one on one with the emperor before in the Red Lion and was their best chance at successfully drawing fire away from the Black Lion so she could make her own escape, but if he was injured—

"On it," came the short reply.

"Good. Once clear retreat for the castle. Everyone copy?"

Pidge and Keith both gave the affirmative. Hunk remained silent.

The cloaked Green and visible Blue Lions whirled away, Blue letting out a mournful sound as she was separated from her Paladin, and Lance twitched in Shiro's arms as though he'd heard it, although he remained fortunately unconscious.

Shiro looked up from Lance to where he could make out just a glimpse of Keith's arm from where he had wedged himself into the corner of the cockpit, legs braced as best he could since the seat was out of the question with Lance in his lap, the dark head pillowed against his chest and shallow breaths hot against Shiro's neck.

He couldn't really see Keith but he'd heard the pain, the exhaustion in his voice when he answered Allura.

"Keith, are you okay to—"

"I'm fine, Shiro," Keith interrupted. "I can do this."

Shiro gave a slow nod. Keith didn't need any backseat driving right now or a concern he could not give into. "Okay," Shiro said quietly. "You've got this, buddy."

Keith didn't answer but Shiro felt Red's engines thrum beneath him and they were off.

Keith didn't allow himself to falter, even as his head pounded and spots continued to dance in his
eyes. Red helped him, her natural grace and speed lending him the strength he needed to pilot her, angling her through the debris field and towards Zarkon and the trapped Black Lion.

Keith's eyes narrowed.

Not on his watch.

It was not honorable what he was about to do, attacking an enemy unseen.

Keith could not afford to care about honor right now. Not when he could feel himself fading, knew he had only a couple minutes left before he gave into the blackness trying to fill his vision.

"Red," he whispered and his Lion spewed out a burst of flames.

They caught Zarkon completely unaware.

The Galran let out a shout, more likely surprised than hurt as his armor had shown to be more than what it appeared, and was blasted across the sky.

Red let out a roar and the Black Lion pulled herself away free from where she had been crunched into part of the base, echoing a weaker version of it.

Her thrusters fired up behind her, moving to join the Red Lion, to retreat—

And a beam of light intercepted her.

Shiro felt a sudden rush of despair, of anger, and it took all he had not to yell out as Black's roar shook the very space around them.

"What happened?" he demanded, unable to see.

Black let out another roar.

"Keith!"

"A... a tractor beam," came Keith's quiet, horrified reply. "Shiro, I..."

The Red Lion wasn't strong enough to push Black out without getting caught herself and it would take several passes and hits on the origin of the beam to halt it.

Time they did not have as Zarkon was coming back to the fight.

Keith whirled Red around, one minute left of cloaking, and fired, taking the Galran by surprise yet again and Zarkon went spiraling through the air. If they weren't in such trouble Keith might have allowed himself a smirk at the pinwheel Zarkon made.

"Get out of the way!" Hunk screamed over the comms and Keith barely had time to fly Red higher before the Yellow Lion was there and crashing into Black like a freight train.

Hunk had thought he and Yellow were goners.

Her power had been on very base, just enough to keep her oxygen systems online, and the Galra had been open firing, blasts smashing into her sides and Hunk kept praying that they would somehow hold, that he wouldn't be blasted, sucked out into space, where he'd die and—

It had taken several heavy breaths and the barest murmur of presence Yellow had left to pull Hunk
back from that edge.

That hadn't happened yet. He had to make sure it didn't.

Communications had shorted out from the low power but Hunk didn't let that stop him, plugging the system into his suit and allowing Yellow to draw power from it. He'd managed to send out a line requesting assistance and it must have been heard as a minute later the Blue Lion was flying down, incasing the ships about him in ice and... and vines?

Hunk had realized then that Pidge must be there, still cloaked in Green. And if Pidge had returned to the battle then...

Then Lance was with her.

They'd done it.

There was no time for celebration though as a roar echoed through all of space and Hunk had turned to see the Black Lion caught up in a tractor beam and being reeled in. The Red Lion flickered into view then, her cloaking gone, and floating just outside the beam but helpless to intervene.

The mission had been to rescue Lance and that had been accomplished. But losing the Black Lion was an unacceptable loss, especially when he could prevent it. If it had been between Lance or Black Hunk knew who he would pick in a heartbeat. But Lance was safe now. And now it was Black's turn to be saved.

"Hey girl," he'd whispered to Yellow, pushing all he had left from his suit into her systems, feeling the power and compression about him lessen as he drained the crystal. "Think you're up for one more hit?" In answer she had converted all of her remaining power to her frontal shields.

And here they were. Thanks to Yellow's bulk and momentum when they slammed into Black both Lions were pushed clean out of the beam.

"Go!" roared Allura in his ear and Hunk did not need any second urging, wheeling Yellow around and taking off after the visible Blue Lion with Black and Red hot on his heels.

Keith glanced in the rearview as they fled from the carnage they'd left behind.

Not a single Galran cruiser remained, all blackened husks and floating aimlessly through the air. He faintly heard Zarkon's shout of rage and it brought the smallest smirk to his face.

"We did it," Keith murmured, needing to say it out loud to make it real. He slumped then in the seat and gave Red the mental command to take over. Her concern, hot and sharp, pressed against his mind and he lifted a leaden limb and let it fall against the armrest in as much of an answer as he could give, his head feeling fuzzy and everything being overtaken by the darkness now while his back throbbed with a fire that burned only hotter when Red gave him a mental nudge and he tried to contain his groan.

He just...

Just needed to close his eyes for a moment.

He'd be fine when the world stopped spinning.

Just a moment.
His head tilted back against the seat...

And Keith passed out cold.

"We did," Shiro said allowing himself a small, relieved smile. His expression turned grim though as Lance shuddered in his grasp, an indistinguishable word passing between bloodied lips. "It's not over yet though."

Silence echoed in the cockpit.

"Keith?" Shiro inquired, hating the familiar feeling of his stomach clenching at the quiet. "Keith?"

Still no answer.

"Keith? Buddy, answer me," Shiro called, unable to move so as not to jostle Lance. Still no answer.

Cursing under his breath, Shiro inched his way out of the corner so he could crane his neck around the pilot’s chair. His stomach officially dropped at the sight of Keith lying motionless, only the armrest keeping him up right.

"Keith," Shiro called out again, pitch rising. "Keith, answer me."

He tried to recall what he'd seen in that brief, panicked moment when he encountered Pidge and Keith that would indicate a fatal type of injury but all he could remember was urgency and blasts and Keith's pained breaths as he hobbled along with Shiro's help. Keith had been talking though? And walking, sort of. And he'd have said something if he'd been hit, right?

But what if he didn't realize it had been that bad? What if—

Shiro took a deep breath. Panicking was not going to help and there was nothing he could do for the moment. Besides, he calmed himself, Pidge had been there. Pidge would have seen if Keith had been wounded that badly and she definitely would have said something.

It was as close to reassured as he could get at the moment.

Shiro let out a deep sigh, willing his heart to stop its timpani.

Roused by the movement, Lance stirred in Shiro's arms.

"It's just me, buddy," Shiro soothed, being careful not to touch Lance any more than he already was and keep his voice level to calm Lance as much as to calm himself. "You're safe now. It's all right."

It was all going to be all right.

Whether Lance actually understood him or not, he drifted back into the clutches of unconsciousness within the moment, although the little whimpers he'd been making that Shiro had almost gotten used to were definitely more pronounced. Damn it.

He needed to contact the team. His hands were a little bit full though and given how even heavy breathing was enough to disturb Lance he didn't dare try and retrieve his arms and risk actually waking Lance fully up.

He somehow managed to activate his headset comm by clunking his head against the wall.

"Paladins, do you all copy?" Shiro asked quietly. The question was simple but something must have shown in his tone because as everyone keyed in with an affirmative Allura's responding "What is it?"
"We're going to need two cryo-pods," Shiro said, keeping his gaze locked on Keith and visually confirming that the boy's chest was indeed rising and falling. "Keith's hurt pretty bad too, I think."

"I knew it," Pidge muttered, but she sounded more concerned than anything.

"We may have a slight problem," Allura said after a pause. "The truth is… we will not have any cryo-pods available to us for at least a few varga."

"What?" Shiro asked shortly, not even caring that it was incredibly rude. Static crackled behind him as though to back up his ire.

"The half-jump used up most of our crystal power," Allura hurried, "and we must use the remaining to enact the wormholes."

"What?" Shiro repeated, voice flat.

"How long have you know about this?" Hunk sounded angry and Allura winced.

"Just before we began the half-jump," she admitted. "There was no sense in worrying you all though with something we cannot control."

"Allura, Lance doesn't need one cryo-pod, he needs like ten," Pidge snapped.

"I know!" the princess cried. "I know! But—"

"You made the best choice you could," Shiro cut in, closing his eyes in resignation and resisting the urge to tighten his arms around Lance. "You're right. We need to find a safe location where Zarkon cannot follow. We can take care of Lance and Keith in the meantime."

There was silence then.

"For what it is worth, I am sorry it had to be this way," Allura said quietly. "I would never wish for Lance or Keith to suffer more than they have already endured."

"No need to apologize," Pidge sighed. "I'm sorry too. I know it's not your fault."

"Me too," came Hunk's guilty tone.

"We should be within the castle's communication space in the next dobash," Pidge said a moment later. Before they left they had made it so the castle could not receive or send out transmissions unless the signal came from within a certain distance. It helped to cloak the castle from any Galran probes. "And… we're in limit."

Shiro went to activate his headset first, but Coran beat them all to it. "Paladins? Princess? Please tell me everyone is all right. Is Lance with you?"

"We are all here, Coran," Shiro said.

"Oh thank Alaaran," Coran breathed. "And Lance—?"

"It's not good," Shiro said. "He really needs a cryo-pod, but Allura told us they're out of commission."

"I'm sorry, lad," Coran apologized. "We'll do the best we can in the meantime. Can you give me a
quick run-down of Lance's most severe injuries so I can begin preparing treatment options?"

"Uh…" Shiro wasn't really sure where to begin. He only had basic medical training and describing Lance as one human-sized lump of pain wasn't very descriptive. Pain. Right. "They injected something into him. Sah-lee-dah," he sounded said, recalling the strange word.

Coran's intake of breath was hard to miss. "Did you say saliidda? They injected it?"

"Yes," Shiro confirmed, recalling the syringe that had been used to garner entry into Lance's cell that he'd had the foresight to pocket. Leaving it behind would have been a clue as to how they had gotten in and Shiro would not return the Galran lieutenant's kindness by leaving evidence that would implicate him in the rescue. Shiro had seen enough Galran justice to know how that would go and despite choosing to continue to fight with the Empire, Shiro had seen enough of Yanden's character to know that should — when — the war cease someone of his ideals would make a valuable ally and be instrumental in returning the Galra to a code of true honor and morals.

He hoped they one day did meet again, but across from one another at a diplomatic table rather than in the crosshairs of the Galran's rifle. Shiro did not like to think how that would end.

"Saliidda is not meant to be used like that," Coran growled, cutting into Shiro's distracted musings. "It is for topical use only! For medical purposes! They… they…" he trailed off into a stream of Altean curses that had all of the Paladins wincing. "How much is in him?" he asked.

"I think about a syringe worth, maybe four ounces," Shiro estimated from his recollection of the attached vial, looking down at Lance with even more worry. His breathing was becoming more labored and Shiro was afraid that at any second it would stop altogether.

"When you land bring him straight to the Princess' chambers," Coran ordered. "I'll start the tap on her bath. Hydration is the only way to remove saliidda from the body and the buoyancy of water should eliminate much of the immediate pain. Are there any other major injuries you can identify, Number One?"

"I'm not sure," Shiro admitted, voice catching. "There's... there's a lot of blood."

There was so much blood. The only comfort Shiro had was most of it seemed to be smeared rather than gushing from any particular wound. There was a slash on Lance's stomach that was still sluggishly leaking but that did seem to be the worst one for the moment. He didn't think it was fatal.

"We're less than five dobashes out," Pidge updated them, clutching Green's controls as if that could make them go faster. "What... What are our plans when we land?"

"Direct all of the Lions to the main hall for landing," Allura commanded, voice steady despite the circumstances and Shiro felt reassured in the face of her confidence. "I shall go to the bridge to activate the wormhole jump. Pidge, you are with me for now to provide support. Hunk, you shall assist Coran with Lance. Shiro, you are responsible for Keith. Understood?"

Nods and affirmations sounded over the comms.

Shiro disconnected his with another head thunk.

Lance shuddered again.

"We're almost there, buddy," Shiro murmured looking to Lance and then to Keith. "Don't give up on us now, okay?"
A soft moan and gasp was his answer from Lance. Keith remained silent.

"Almost there," Shiro repeated, trying to find comfort in the words. He turned his gaze to Red's front window, the castle a speck on the horizon. "Almost there…"

Almost was still so, so far away.

Chapter End Notes

The end! Thank you all so much for your support and… oh, it's not the end yet? I promised hurt and comfort and bonding and cuddles? Hmm, that does ring a bell. Yes. Okay, this is the end of part one then. Onwards to round two!

The rescue has officially come to a close. Pidge got to be a BAMF like we all know she is, although she's morally hung up right now. Can you blame her? Keith was pretty bad ass too. Really, everyone is amazing. Hunk saved Black, Allura and Blue faced down Zarkon and death (doesn't get more real than a giant cannon preparing to blast you into pieces) and Shiro is getting them all to safety. Although I have been enjoying writing this entire rescue, a lot of the "scenes" in this chapter have been my favorite. I hope you all enjoyed them too!

Huge thanks as always to the reviewers who keep me going (especially writing this while sick still. Uggggghhhhh. I super appreciate all the well wishes too! :*) Major hugs (from a safe, no-germ distance) go to: heyheroics, Chiakara, digitallize, Fey_79, WolfFire, WolfHusky, cipheredsong, prettysicknasty, glitteringconstellations, BubbleGumi, Brohaikyyu, Coolstar422, meow_mix9, keepasecretgetastrawberry, burple12345, maychorian, ImmortalFey, Silfrvarg, koalaoshiz, bravechicken, soldmysoultofandoms, BrieCheese, Grace and to FountainPen who put together a lovely cover image for Color! Check it out in the photo gallery (link on profile).

I also wanted to announce that Over the Edge placed first in Geek Kon's fanfiction writing contest! I'm over the moon! If you're a fan of platonic Pidge and Lance with some whump and action, feel free to take a look!

I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter/rescue. Favorite section? Line? (I seriously love hearing your guys's favorite quotes, I'm not joking). Thoughts for the next chapter? Anyone see the potential problem brewing? Mwahaha.

Thanks again everyone! Look forward to hearing from you and see you next chapter!
Normally graceful, the Lions all but collapsed inside of the main hall, powering down immediately as they were almost all running on the barest of fumes and if they went completely out the recharge would take even longer.

The only one who was still aware was Blue, her yellow eyes tracking every movement on Red where she knew her Paladin was located.

She had allowed the princess to exit and the royal had taken off immediately for where she knew the bridge was located. The little human female had exited Green, but had not immediately left to follow, instead meeting Yellow's Paladin at the bottom of his ramp.

They spoke quietly, too softly for Blue to fully understand, but she caught the words 'see' and 'Spanish,' which she knew was the pretty language her Paladin sometimes sang in when it was just the two of them. Only after her message was conveyed did Green's Paladin follow the path of the princess and Yellow's Paladin hurried up the open ramp of Red.

Seconds later, after hearing some indistinguishable words being uttered between the pilots, Yellow's Paladin emerged and cradled in his arms was…

Blue let out a soft whine and lumbered to her feet, tail flicking back and forth in a mixture of joy and worry. My Paladin! she cried aloud, startling the human carrying him. But she could not be bothered with his surprise, lowering her head to closer inspect her own human.

Blue let out a low cry at the state her Paladin was in. She wanted to comfort him, wrap him in her quintessence, but he was completely unresponsive. She mewed in distress, only refraining from bumping her head up against Yellow's Paladin because she did not want him to drop her Paladin. Her precious, precious Paladin.

Black's Paladin emerged then, a figure in his arms too. Red's Paladin. Red had snapped at her when she had gone to embrace her, to get as close as she was able to her Paladin, for her actions had caused Red's Paladin pain. Blue could see why now; he was badly hurt too.

"Blue," Black's Paladin said gently but firmly all at once. She turned to look at the human's leader, her despair rising at the red streaks that covered him. She could tell immediately came from her Paladin. Her Paladin who was so lifeless. Her Paladin should never look like that.

She let out a mournful cry, tail flicking in distress.

"He's going to be all right," Black's Paladin assured her, drawing her attention back to him. She did not miss his waver of doubt that shook his words, but he continued, "You need to let us take him for medical treatment now."

You will take care of my Paladin she rumbled, the words an order but mixed with such pain that it came out more as a plea.

"We will," Yellow's Paladin said, sincerity and honesty embedded in his voice. Blue inclined her head. She would trust them. They loved her Paladin too. They would help him.
She watched morosely as the remaining four humans hurried away into the confines of the castle where she could not follow. Heaving a sigh, she curled up on the floor, pressing her back against Yellow, and placed her head on her paws.

All she could do now was wait.

xxx

He did not understand what was happening.

There were voices. So many voices. Yelling and screaming and then whispering. Rough hands had touched him, forcing his body to move and creating pain on top of pain.

There'd been heat. He remembered heat. The burns covering him told him heat was bad. He'd cried and tried to get away, but the voices hadn't let him. He wished they would just kill him. He had nothing left to live for and somehow, although he couldn't remember why, living as he was was bad. Dangerous.

He was going to hurt people. Somehow.

He didn't want that.

Let him die.

More pain had followed. Shouting. Gunfire. He flinched at the memory. Then all-encompassing agony. He'd screeched and cried and prayed it would stop. It did, only to return again and again. He couldn't even think then, just wanted everything to stop.

Why wouldn't it end?

Someone had touched him, tried to pet his hair. Haggar. The name sent dread all through him even though he was having difficulty remembering who it belonged to. He'd pleaded for her to stop although he knew it would do no good.

But it had. And then came more words, garbled and uncertain, but the cadence soothed him over the pounding of his heart and the fire coursing through his veins. He recognized those words. They were words of home. Clarity had struck for the first time in a while that he could really recall as he listened. And... and the voice had sounded like Pidge. He remembered Pidge. He could never forget her. He thought he'd tried to inquire, but then agony had started anew.

He couldn't make sense of it. Pidge had tortured him? No, impossible. Pidge was gone. They were all gone. He knew that. The Galrans tricked them. Or had they tricked him? He was so confused. He just wanted it to stop.

It had for a bit, he thought. But now it was back. The voices were loud again. Every piece of him ached and cried out as his body was jostled about. He vaguely realized he was being carried and he weakly tried to pull away. A new location always meant bad things.

No more.

He couldn't take any more.

But something was wrapped securely around him, pressure aggravating his wounds even more and he let out a sharp keen as something pressed directly against his mangled arm and hand.
And then there was water.

He recognized that immediately. His feet touched it first and he felt the rest of his body being lowered in. It rose up, sinking in fangs to drag him further down.

He was going to drown.

Drown drown drown.

Not again.

He couldn't do it again.

Lance forced himself into action with the last bit of himself he had, thrashing as best he could, feet kicking up spray that only had him flinching more as it struck against his face. "No!" he cried. "No! N-no más agua! Por favor! No!"

His eyes flew open but they saw nothing. It only made him scream more, fighting against the hands wrapping around him and the water trying to drag him under, rising further and further.

The voices were growing in intensity and he shrunk away, his own words, pleas, giving way to gasps as his breath and energy faded.

He had nothing left in him to fight.

Failure.

Weak.

Pathetic.

He heaved out a sob, feeling the water trying to come higher.

And then it stopped.

It receded.

He was being lifted out of the water and then there was a voice against his ear, whispering hot breaths, and he shuddered, whimpering.

Haggar.

But...

This was not Haggar's voice.

It was...

No. Impossible. They were gone. They were gone and he was here with the Galrans and he was never going to escape because he was weak.

But the voice continued, murmuring words of comfort and the water was gone and this was... this was...

He recognized this voice. He knew this voice. Even the arms gripping him suddenly did not seem so bad; they were secure. Safe.


And as the words continued Lance found himself listening with a feeling of… belief? Hope? Was this just like with Pidge? Had she actually been real? Was this real? Was this really him?

"Hunk?" he whispered, voice breaking.

It couldn't be.

"It's me," came the reply, and something warm and hit him on the face. He cringed, waiting for the pain that was sure to follow. But another drop and then another fell and other than the shock of the action nothing else was forthcoming.

Tears, he realized. Those were tears. Hunk was crying.

It was Hunk.

He was here.

"Hunk," he repeated, breathless.

"Sí, it's Hunk. God, Lance…” The arms about him tightened and Lance whimpered at the increased pressure. It lessened immediately. "Oh God, I'm so sorry. You're safe now. We've got you, hermano. You're in the castle."

A second, accented voice chimed in. "Number Two is right, Lance. We'll have you fixed up in a jiffy. Well, as quick as a jiffy as we can make it."

"C-Coran?" he rasped, trying to make sense of it all. He didn't think he was dreaming. This certainly wasn't his mindscape. Everything felt wrong though, but in a good way. This wasn't a trick of Haggar's was it? Make him think he was rescued so he'd let his guard down?

"We rescued you," he heard Hunk say as if sensing his confusion. "It's going to be all right."

It was too much. He couldn't think straight. Clarity was bleeding away as pain battled to the front and he groaned, closing his eyes against the darkness. It felt like everything was spinning, even though he was pretty sure he was standing still. Sitting still. Hunk was standing.

"Lance," Hunk sounded scared. "Hey, stay with me. Eyes open. Come on, you can do it." Lance blearily managed to raise his eyelids even though nothing changed. It seemed to appease Hunk though. "Good job. Good job, hermano. Can you keep them open for me? Por favor?"

Lance found he could not. They were drooping on their own accord and he vaguely heard Hunk curse. That startled him enough into trying to see, even though he could not. Hunk never cursed. Ever.

Coran said something then and then Lance was aware he was being moved again and he whimpered as the new arms touched on a variety of different wounds. "I've got you, my boy," murmured the new person, and Lance had to remind himself that that must be Coran, even as the address had him freezing.
My boy.

My Lance.

He shuddered.

The voices were going in and out and he vaguely realized he was losing the battle with his eyelids again, with exhaustion. But unlike past times he did not want to fall unconscious, for even if this was a fever dream he found comfort in it.

"You've got some saliidda in you," Coran continued, voice a lilting cadence that reminded Lance of a song. He tried to focus as Coran was still talking, but the words were fading and sounds were taking their place. They were nice sounds though. Comforting. Soft.

He was so tired.

Then he was moving again and he tried to remember if that meant anything. He felt like it should. Something else wrapped around him now and despite the pain it caused he butted his head against it. It was warm. He'd forgotten what warm was. Warm was nice. Warm was good.

Hot though. Hot was bad. He shuddered at the memory and all of a sudden he wasn't sure if the warmth was so good. It came before hot. Still though, this was not hurting. Not more than anything else. He rubbed his cheek against it, the warmth smooth to the touch and soothing.

But then there was the feeling of something odd touching his toes and a second later he recognized it as water. He gasped, trying to free himself from whatever was holding him.

Not water. Not again

Please no.

He tried to speak, but the words were becoming lodged in his throat and all he could manage were little breaths that stabbed his chest in pain.


The water came again, rising above his chest now and Lance whined. Any second now he was going to go under. The water was going to drag him down and they wouldn't let him up until he was choking and couldn't breathe. And they'd do it again and again and again and again and–

The voice was saying something again and Lance tried so hard to listen to it over the beating of his heart and the panic threatening to swallow him. It still sounded like Hunk. And the water was still there, but it wasn't over his face. They weren't drowning him. He could still breathe. He took in a big gulp of air to make sure, in case they changed their minds, in case this wasn't real, but that only set fire racing through his chest and he coughed out what he'd inhaled.

The voices were murmuring now. He couldn't make out anything in particular, but it was comforting. He closed his eyes, letting the tones wash over him. They weren't hurting him. Even after struggling they weren't doing anything. Theodek – and the name conjured up the image of a dark grin – would surely have punished him by now.

But Theodek was not here.
He was not there.

He was in the castle.

Why was that so hard to remember?

He was so tired.

He felt the water shifting, rising up to cover his chest now. He tried not to cry out, keeping his lips firmly sealed. Just in case.

But then the water stopped. It did not go any further. And to Lance's surprise, the constant screaming pain that had become his world was starting to fade. A little bit. There was still pressure, particularly on his back and shoulder where he could still feel hands – Hunk's hands, he had to remind himself, not Haggar's – supporting him.

But the pain.

It was becoming bearable.

He could think.

The water too wasn't anything like before either. Now that he wasn't flailing to get out of it he noticed the difference. It wasn't cold, but it was not quite hot. Lukewarm, he decided. It wasn't so bad. So long as his head didn't go under. He stiffened at the very thought. He couldn't go under. He couldn't he couldn't he couldn't. The water lapped at his chest and he whined, pressing himself more against Hunk. Hunk would protect him.

"Lance, it's okay. See? Estás bien," Hunk murmured. "I've got you. I won't let you fall."

And Lance let himself slowly relax. He pressed his head again against what he was figuring out now was likely Hunk's chest and the source of the warmth. It smelled like Hunk too; a mixture of honeysuckle and oil.

And blood.

A lot of blood. Lance's eyes widened.

"S-sangre?" he whispered, trying to move his hand to figure out where it was coming from. But that only sent lightning racing through the mutilated limb and a soft scream tore from his ravaged throat. He could taste the blood now too and he coughed more, trying to clear it.

All that did though was send icy stabs through his chest and lungs. He couldn't stop though. He was aware of Hunk murmuring and one of the supporting hands ever so gently raising him up so he was more or less in a reclined position rather than lying down, the water receding. It hurt, but he could breathe again. A little.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Hunk comforted, holding him close. "I know everything hurts. But we're going to make it better."

And Lance believed him. He knew, felt, that this was Hunk. Hunk always made everything better. And so Lance gave the barest nod of his head.

"Pidge said she didn't think you could see right now," Hunk continued. "So I'm going to tell you what we're doing, okay? Will that help?"
Lance gave another tiny nod, that action alone exhausting him. His eyes closed again and he tucked his head against the crook between Hunk's arm and chest.

"You have saliidda in your system," Hunk explained. "That's really bad. Being in the water will help with it since it is touch based. Are you feeling any better? Even just a little bit?"

Lance couldn't move his head anymore. He was finally almost comfortable and if he moved he was going to wake all the dulled pain back up. So he rasped out a "Sí."

He could almost feel Hunk smile. "Good, good, bien. Okay, so that's why we're in the water. I've got you though. I promise. So next we need to get some fluids in you. Coran said that's the only way to really flush the saliidda out."

There was the sound of a slight splash further away and Lance instinctively shrank back against Hunk. "So sorry," came the contrite voice of Coran. "The Princess' bath is deeper than I had anticipated. You rather are quite tall, Number Two."

The sloshing came closer, but it did not resemble the metal enclosure's jets starting up at all. Coran, Lance told himself. It's just Coran.

"Lance, I've got some water for you to drink," Coran said, voice very close. "We'll help you, all right?"

Then there was the rim of a glass pressed against his chin and without meaning to Lance recoiled, slamming his head against Hunk's arm in the terror that the feeling of the water brushing his lips created. "No," he whimpered. "No más."

"Easy, easy," Coran crooned, the glass withdrawing immediately. "It's all right. It's just water."

"I think water is the problem," Hunk said quietly, the comment directed at Coran but Lance heard it anyway. He could almost feel shame dripping off him at the observation. He almost wished the pain was so overwhelming again so that he couldn't be bothered by such things. Yet here he was. Embarrassed by a glass of water.

"There now," Coran said gently. "It is all right."

Lance weakly shook his head, feeling the flush on his cheeks. It was as Haggar had said. He was weak.

Pathetic.

"Lance, it's okay," Hunk comforted. "Estás bien."

"How about a farkledapple?" Coran suggested. "I think I've got one right over in my things. Just a tick!"

"A farkledapple?" Hunk repeated under his breath, clearly confused. Lance was too and once upon a time he might have made some comment about how all Altean things had such weird names. But he said nothing now, just closed his eyes again and tried to ignore the water still lapping gently around him. Any second now it could turn. It could turn into a roaring wave and there was nothing he could do. He felt his breath pick up tempo and buried his face more against Hunk as if that could make it stop.

"And here we are," Coran said, this time making his way over with nary a splash.
"That's a straw," Hunk deadpanned.

"It is a farkledapple," Coran countered. "A most excellent device for drinking the thick nectar of the kumiwi fruit."

More gently Coran said to Lance, "How about we try again? Just take a sip when you are ready."

Something poked against his mouth then, but it didn't really hurt. Just startled him. It wasn't water though and apparently to his messed up mind that made a huge difference.

Neither Coran or Hunk rushed him and the straw remained stationary. After a few ticks Lance gingerly opened his mouth and pulled the straw between chapped and bleeding lips. It hurt a little bit, but it wasn't intolerable.

He took a cautious sip and promptly choked at the sensation of water sliding down the back of his throat. That little trickle turned into a wave and he could feel his head being forced under while laughter sounded above, distorted. He coughed and gasped as air returned and he expelled what little bit he'd swallowed.

"Oh Lance," he heard Hunk murmur, bringing him back to the present. That's right. He wasn't with Theodek. He was with Coran and Hunk and he'd just lost to a straw.

"L-lo siento," he managed, feeling his eyes grow hot even though he had no tears left to shed.

Pathetic.

That time it sounded like Haggar's voice in his head and he couldn't help the shudder that ripped through him, resetting each nerve back on fire.

"Don't apologize," Hunk admonished with no heat.

"We'll just try something else," Coran said brightly. "In the meantime though, would you be all right with a vein valve? I can get one set up in just a few dobashes."

An IV? That… that might not be so bad. Couldn't hurt worse than anything else. He nodded after a moment.

"Alrighty then, hang tight. I'll be back before you can say hunkledorp."

Seconds later the sound of a door closing sounded and then it was just Lance and Hunk. And Hunk, true to form, did not pressure or ask any questions that Lance was not ready to answer. Wasn't sure he was ever going to be ready.

Hunk instead began to hum, the vibrations echoing down his chest and rumbling against Lance. It reminded him of a kitten purring and it was made all the more vibrant thanks to the saliidda.

This was a good feeling.

Lance relaxed into it, barely even tensing as Hunk shifted slightly and the water moved with him, rising an inch or so higher. Despite the still constant pain he was in, this was the most comfortable and safe he'd felt in forever.

Lance blinked.

Safe.
He felt...

He felt *safe.*

He wasn't a prisoner of the Galrans anymore; some toy for Theodek to break over and over. Haggar wasn't here, prying into his mind and threatening his friends. And he... he hadn't given her *anything.* His friends were safe. The Lions were safe. Black was safe. Blue, and his heart jumped at the thought of her. Blue was safe.

He was safe. No more shock collars. No more torture. No more cold and thirst and hunger. No more laughter and taunts and jeers. No more Haggar. No more touches.

No more drowning.

A sob tore at his throat. Then another. And another. It hurt so bad, but the sobs would not cease. Hunk had stopped humming at this point and he felt his friend pulling him closer, in as much as a hug as they could get right now.

He cried harder, lungs seizing and chest burning, and still he cried.

He wanted to stop. He couldn't. Relief warred with shame and that battled against shock and hope and all of the pain.

They'd come for him. They hadn't left him, as weak as he was, there to die. They'd rescued him. They'd *saved* him.

They'd saved the pathetic boy who had tried to kill himself to escape.

His shoulders heaved. They'd find out. They'd see and know and then they wouldn't want him anymore and they'd have wished they didn't save him and that they'd found a new Blue Paladin instead because this one was *weak* and didn't deserve the title at all and they would be better off with a different one who wasn't so pathetic to have tried to take his own l—


He buried his face against Hunk's chest, as if that could hide him from himself. Breathing was harder this way, but Lance couldn't find the energy to move. He just wanted to stay here, where no one could see him, forever.


"I have the vein valve," came Coran's voice, and Lance startled out of his hiding spot. He hadn't even heard him come back in. He desperately wished he could see. His throat seized up at the thought he might never get it back. More invisible tears pricked his eyes and he swallowed harshly to push them away.

"Whenever you're ready, Lance. I'm just going to place it..." he felt a finger very gently tap his left forearm, which still sent shivers through him thanks to its proximity to all of the gruesome injuries. "Right here."

Coran had to place it there because his hands weren't an option anymore. Lance bit back the new sob that threatened him then at the state of his hands. He wasn't even sure they could be fixed.

He managed a tiny nod and a tick later he felt what felt like a small knife stabbing him and he inhaled
sharply.

"There, all done," Coran said after just a few more moments. "Excellent job, lad. Those fluids should start doing their job in a matter of do bashes."

Lance slumped back against Hunk with a muffled, exhausted whimper.

"Rest now," Coran said lightly. "You are safe."

The words were like a spell. Each one seemed to increase his desire to sleep. Hunk was humming again and Coran was speaking softly, but the words were indistinct now. It was a comfortable thrum.

He was safe.

He was.

And he allowed himself to slip off into the world of nothingness.

Chapter End Notes

And the flangst and hurt/comfort begins. I was actually really excited to start this chapter off with Blue's POV as I've never written from a Lion's perspective yet and she is one of my main characters. And then we go to Lance who is so deliciously confused and scared and it was so much fun to write. As predicted, he did not like the water. :p

Since I used a bit of Spanish in here, the gist of what Hunk is saying at any given point is "It's okay, you're okay, I'm here, it's Hunk, your best friend, your brother, and water." Nothing too crazy, because my view of Hunk's fluency is that he does best either hearing it or seeing it written down (just like me) rather than speaking, but having grown up around Lance when he was learning English and being in Lance's family home he has picked up some but doesn't practice it hardly ever to keep it fluent. Still, he knows the basics and is going to be the go-to translator here.

Given the rapid updates the last two weeks, I'm just going to plan for an update next Saturday and skip Wednesday. Lo siento. BUT: I do have something else planned for Monday! I've been getting a number of questions via reviews and responses and figured it might be fun to have an actual Q&A session about Color, writing, and anything else you guys can come up with. Maybe I'll even post a few sneak snippets too :p Link: docs.google.com/document/d/1BotLhp9FqndcFR51Vuobg_kpBvmlwCgiLC7Q7j2AJzM/edit?usp=sharing

It is an editable googledoc so you are welcome to post questions ahead of time if you have one and I will answer them at the Q&A. I'm setting it for 1600 CST for about two hours on 09-04-17, but we'll see if anyone shows xD If you like the idea but can't make it, please do let me know and I can always try and schedule another one :) 

Muchas gracias to the lovely reviewers. I love you guys so much! Hugs to: glitteringconstellations, someonewhosebadatcommenting, belletiger_BT, BubbleGumi Jack, Coolstar422, soldmysoultofandoms, dean_winchester_has_fallen, WolfFire, prettysicknasty, SimplyFox, VagabondDiesel, Moonpie, Brohaikyuu, Shelby, WolfHusky, MemeMachine, ImmortalFey, Proxy_17, AnoraStone, Fey_79, Tina
Tissington, Person, ladykristianna, burple12345, cipheredsong, Corralfur, heyheroics, jadeturtle13, Grace, keepasecretstrawberry, maychorian, Ohoho my friends, BrieCheese, Marasetta and Catherine H!

As always, I super appreciate your comments! We're turning a new page with this chapter so I'd love to get your initial thoughts on how saga hurt/comfort and fluffy angst is going. Thank you all! Perhaps "see" some of you on Monday!
It took an agonizingly long three minutes, but finally Lance fell into a restless sleep aided by the sedative Coran had added to the vein valve.

The Altean and human met each other's eyes over Lance and saw the same grief and horror reflected back at them.

"What did they do to him?" Hunk whispered, more tears trekking down his cheeks to plop onto Lance's upturned face. "Coran, what…" He couldn't even voice all of the horrors he'd just witnessed.

It wasn't just the physical injuries, which were already beyond anything Hunk could have ever imagined before. Lance was beaten and stabbed and burned and broken; barely an inch of flesh escaping the abuse. He was in so much pain, whimpering and crying and his breathing hitching with every gasp even in this state of unconsciousness, although it had become slightly less.

It was a good thing Hunk had already thrown up back in Yellow when they'd seen what he thought had been Lance, because otherwise he'd have done it when he entered Red's cockpit to retrieve him from Shiro.

But suffering from grievous wounds wasn't apparently enough for the Galrans. Lance hadn't been just scared when Hunk tried to lower him into Allura's in-floor bathtub. He had been beyond terrified as soon as he'd realized there was water.

Lance, the boy who would probably turn into a prune if he'd had his way with all the time he spent in lakes and pools, was terrified of water. Hearing him plead had just wrenched Hunk's heart in a way he hadn't been aware was physically capable.

What had the Galra done to him? What had they done?

And although Pidge had forewarned him, he still had not been fully prepared for when Lance's eyes opened and the whites of his eyes had been turned pitch black and blue orbs had sightlessly stared past him, wide with terror and pinpricked with pain.

He and Coran had decided a more steady approach would be best after Lance had thrashed so hard Hunk had nearly dropped him, so while Coran held Lance, Hunk stripped off his outer armor before pulling Lance back into his arms and descending into the tub with him.

Lance had flinched at every sound, every pulse of water. Even when he'd somewhat relaxed as the buoyancy of the water did indeed help with the poison's effects, he had been so scared and still in so much pain. Pidge had been right again that Spanish was the way to pull him out, but Hunk's heart sank as he realized he hadn't heard Lance utter a single word outside of his native language. Not that he really spoke at all.

Hunk's heart hurt anew.

Lance had recognized Coran's voice though. That was good. Lance seemed to be confused, aware one moment it was Hunk and the next struggling again as though expecting something else.

Hunk hated that he wasn't surprised. The injuries alone and their pain had to make coherent thinking
hard, but Lance's cheeks were flushed too and the bags of exhaustion that colored his skin were painful to look at. Hunk wondered how much the Galra had let him sleep over those four days.

Both he and Coran had quickly discovered that Lance was most at ease when he could hear them so the two had kept up a steady stream of low chatter and soothing noises. Even talking about the crazy Altean straw had helped and Hunk had to admit it helped him too as he was dangerously close to just sitting down and sobbing. Or throwing up. Or both.

But the water again had thrown everything off. When Lance tried to actually drink something the result had been just as disastrous. It was like… like...

"Hunk," Coran said, voice uncharacteristically grim and interrupting Hunk’s train of thought. He was hovering a small medical device over Lance’s chest while he fitfully slept in Hunk's arms. "Tell me. Are humans capable of breathing underwater?"

Hunk shook his head. "No. We can hold our breath; some for a lot longer than others, but we can't actually breathe." His stomach curled. He had a terrible feeling where this was going. "Wh-why?"

"Because there is fluid in Lance's lungs, according to the scanner," Coran said.

Hunk let out a choking noise.

He was right.

They had drowned Lance. The Galra had drowned Lance. How Hunk didn't know but multiple times, he was certain, if Lance's violent aversion was any indication.

They'd made Lance afraid of water.

If he hadn't been holding Lance to prevent him from sinking, Hunk's fists would have been clenched in rage. As it was his expression was rather murderous judging by Coran's reaction.

And then fear sank in. Because besides the terror and pain of the action itself drowning came with its own set of complications. Like pneumonia. Which involved water in the lungs. Hunk mentally hurried through his checklist of symptoms. Fever? One glance at Lance's flushed cheeks confirmed that, although it could just as easily be from infection. Shortness of breath? Again, multiple injuries could be the reason, but it was there too. Fatigue? Most definitely.

"He might be sick," Hunk blurted out.

"Sick?" Coran repeated.

"A human illness," Hunk hurried. "I can't be sure since there's so… so much, but he might be. Do the pods heal things like that?"

Coran shook his head. "I am afraid not. They cannot heal poisons or illness; only physical wounds. And given that Lance has saliidda in his bloodstream – and my readings show there are near lethal levels – we would not have been able to place him into a cryo-pod anyway until it had been removed. Also…"

The advisor trailed off, his face seeming to age in a matter of seconds. "There is another complication. Druid magic does not mix well with the healing chamber and in Lance's state I do not want to risk the pod malfunctioning."

"Druid magic?" Hunk repeated.
Coran gave a short nod. "I trust you have seen his eyes? I am afraid I am not as fluent in their magics as I wish I was, but that is definitely a result of a Druid."

"So he can't go into a cryo-pod until they're fixed?" Hunk asked, voice small. He tightened his hold on Lance then, wishing a hug could just make everything better the way it used to when they were kids.

"Unfortunately so. But if we are unable to figure out how to remove the magic we may have no other choice." Coran's voice dropped. "He is in very, very bad shape, Number Two. If he does not get into a cryo-pod soon he may..." Coran's eyes closed as if in physical pain himself. "The wounds on his hands and feet are beyond my skill level. He may lose them... and even should we get him into a pod soon, I cannot say for certain they would be able to heal them either. The damage is... extensive."

"What?" Hunk breathed, glancing down at the limbs in question. Lance's feet were submerged in the tub, but his hands were pillowed on his stomach. It was difficult to make out due to the sheer amount of blood that covered them, but there were definite gaping holes, the sheen of bone faintly glinting in the gore and even more blood and uneven flesh down his wrists and arms. Manacles still clung to the base of each wrist and Hunk dazedly wondered if they were going to have to cut them off.

The right was particularly gruesome. The limb looked almost dead; the tan color of skin replaced with shades of black and blue and the entire thing was twisted in a way that limbs definitely weren't supposed to go. More cuts and blood covered it but the most damaging seemed to be a rough burn that had scalded the flesh from the base of the hand up to near the elbow.

There was also something... something different about the injuries that dominated both of Lance's inner arms Hunk thought. The right one was mostly covered up by the burn, but the left one sported a gash that was wider at the top and trailed to a thinner line that appeared to have been hastily healed, if the bruises dotting around it and the uneven coloration were any indication. The cuts ran from the very base of Lance's hand to about mid-arm and seemed to vary in depth, as by Lance's hand they were bleeding freely and the skin was ragged and the penetration deep while it was less severe further down.

There was not a single injury like them anywhere else. Cuts and bruises and gashes and burns covered near every inch of skin, but none matched these wounds.

Hunk glanced up to see Coran carefully scanning Lance's right forearm, his face more pinched than it had been. As if summoned, Coran looked up to catch Hunk's gaze.

"Coran," Hunk started, licking his lips as he felt the feelings of even deeper dread stir his stomach. "What... what weapon would have caused these?"

Coran, bless him, answered clinically although the sheen to his eyes only confirmed Hunk's growing suspicions. "It is not from any knife or blade I am familiar with," the Altean said. "The injuries are much more severe – deeper, I would say – towards the hands as if more force was used. I'd say based on the wound that whatever instrument was used was... was dragged along the length of the arm in a downwards motion."

The Altean's expressive eyes met Hunk's then. "Hunk," he said gently and the use of the boy's first name made the situation all the more dire, "these injuries... I do not entirely understand the human body's physiology, but in an Altean we have a vital vein that—"

"Humans do too," Hunk interrupted, his heart lodging in his throat as tears made their appearance again.
"Then—"

"Don't tell the others," Hunk pleaded. "Not… not until we talk to Lance. To… to understand."
Because Lance wasn't suicidal. Even when he was upset, frustrated or in one of those lower
moments where he saw only flaws when put up against others, he would never, never, consider
taking his own life. He was a fighter. He didn't give up. Not like this.

There had to be something else there, some other reason or cause for these wounds.

Because Lance...

No.

He wouldn't.

Coran nodded. "That is my assessment as well. Perhaps not is all it seems. It would be unwise to
jump to conclusions and cause undue panic amongst the team and additional suffering on Lance's
behalf. We will keep this between us for now until we are able to speak with Lance." Hunk felt a
trickle of relief that Coran understood as well; that the older, wiser person held the same opinion. It
validated his own.

The Yellow Paladin looked back at Lance's arms again and tasted bile though he held it back
through sheer will, hurrying his eyes to a new site. They landed back on Lance's face, which
compared to the rest of him was practically pristine. If he didn't look past that he could almost
pretend Lance was just sleeping.

Not that he'd almost died.

That he might have...

But even if he ignored that looming problem for now, it didn't eliminate the observation Coran had
initially made in that Lance's hands and feet might be beyond repair. Sure, the technology up here
was light years away from what they had on earth and between him, Pidge and Coran and using
Shiro's arm as a model they could probably make some really neat prosthetics. But he
didn't want Lance to have to have those. Lance, who thrived on touch and feeling, couldn't have
some metal attachments that felt nothing. He just couldn't.

"We must focus on what we can do now," Coran said, interrupting Hunk's morbid train of thought.
"The sedative should hold for maybe about a varga and I don't dare give him more until we flush out
more of the saliidda; it can have a very nasty side-effect paired with other medications but Lance's
body and mind needed the rest."

"What do you want me to do?" Hunk asked. He had the basic medical training the Garrison had
insisted on, but he doubted knowing how to stop a bloody nose was really going to help in this
instance. There was just so much blood. It had already leaked into the water and turned the blue
surface into a muddy purple in places.

As if noticing that, Coran crossed over to the lever to activate the drain, and began to fill the tub with
new fresh water from the spout. He came back with two towels that reminded Hunk almost of silk,
but more durable.

"Before we can do anything we need to clean him up," Coran said. "Come, bring him over to the
spout." Noticing Hunk's widening eyes Coran was quick to assure him, "We won't put him under it,
of course. But we have access to the freshest source there."
The bathtub really wasn't all that big – about the size of a jacuzzi whirltub just much deeper – but it still felt like it took eons to cross over, Hunk gliding as smoothly as he could so as not to jostle Lance and Coran carried over the bag full of nutrients to place it on the ledge once they were situated, careful not to pull against the valve in Lance's arm.

"All you need to do right now is just continue to support him," Coran said, wetting one of his towels under the water. "I will handle the rest."

Hunk hummed an affirmative, honey eyes tracking as Coran's first gentle pass with the towel on Lance's shoulder turned the entire thing red with a mixture of both dried and semi-fresh blood, revealing what appeared to be both a cut and a laser burn.

Coran gave a low chuckle that was anything but humorous. "It appears we are going to need quite a few more cloths." He glanced at Hunk, concern swimming in his eyes. "This may take longer than I had thought. Are you all right to continue holding him?"

Hunk may be a leg of Voltron, but right now he was representing the arms of a friend. He nodded. "For as long as he needs me to."

Coran's face softened. "I had no doubt. Then let us continue."

And the water around them swirled with blood.

xxx

Shiro ended up having to resort to scissors. He sent a silent apology to Coran for the destruction of the uniform, but he was out of options, and quite frankly the suit wasn't likely to survive much longer anyway.

He'd taken Keith straight to the infirmary where they kept the basic supplies well-stocked for when the Paladins chose not to go into the cryo-pods. His concern was mounting by the minute as Keith remained well and fully unconscious despite the rough handling and was lying now on one of the medical exam tables, haloed in the dim back-up lights that had kicked on once they'd all boarded the castle.

Shiro had been able to unclasp the armor plates, which were burned and warped badly on the back and the power lights had gone out on the torso pieces indicating heavy damage, but removing Keith from the black underamour was not happening. The material was practically glued to the younger boy's back, melted Shiro thought with horror, and no amount of tugging was loosening it. It did elicit a moan though and Keith's eyes fluttered beneath his lids.

"Hey, buddy you waking up?" Shiro asked, stopping his movements. But he still after a few ticks and Shiro went back to his examination, trying to hurry.

Most worrying were the dark patches that had leaked through the shirt. Shiro ended up having to take a pause to discard his own upper armor and wash his hands, as all of it was well coated in Lance's blood. He had enough medical knowledge to understand that he did not want to cross-contaminate.

He managed to slide the scissors down the side and sliced up the shirt with ease. He found out his fears were confirmed; the inner layer of the underarmour seemed to have melted against Keith's back.

God.
"I'm so sorry, buddy," he apologized, grabbing a towel and a large glass of water. "This might sting a bit." Might sting a lot. He dampened the towel and then placed it against the shirt, rubbing gently. The material loosened with a bit of water and he pulled up on the corner, gently trying to tug the section free.

That definitely woke Keith up. He startled with a gasp, eyes flying open and a curse on his tongue.

"Easy, it's just me," Shiro said, dropping the shirt and hurrying around to the front of the table so Keith could see him more easily. "You're okay, it's okay."

"What the hell, Shiro?" Keith gasped, his hands fisting around the edges of the table and eyes blurring with reflexive tears.

Before Shiro could apologize, could reach out and try to comfort Keith through his pain, those purple eyes hardened and locked on to his with such an intensity they almost burned. "Is Lance—?"

"Coran and Hunk are helping him right now," Shiro cut in. His stomach clenched in worry. "We're all back on the castle."

Keith struggled to sit up. "I need to—"

"You're not going anywhere right now," Shiro said, easily pushing him back down with minimal force to his head. "We need to get you patched up first. Your back is pretty bad." Really bad. "Just... hold still for me. I'll go as quick as I can."

Shiro returned to carefully peeling up the shirt, Keith quietly hissing but otherwise doing his best to remain stationary, twitching a few times as a particularly difficult piece was pried up and one time even letting out a small whimper before he cut it off, pressing his face against his inner arm.

Shiro's heart broke.

Keith's pain, his tolerance.... it made him think back to the two of them, sitting on the curb to the agency and Keith trying so hard not to cry and admit how much he hurt and what had happened. Shiro's hands unconsciously tightened on the ruined shirt. He forced both them and himself to relax, taking a steadying breath.

"Care to tell me what happened?" Shiro asked, pushing away those old memories and concentrating on the ruined, reddened flesh. Mostly second degree burns, possibly a low third in one place right at the center of Keith's back, with a smattering of first degree superficial ones on his shoulders and right above the tailbone.

"Fireball," Keith muttered between clenched teeth. "From Haggar."

Shiro froze in his ministrations. "You fought Haggar?"

And a fireball? That explained a lot.

" Tried to. Didn't do much." Keith let out another low hiss as Shiro tugged on one of the last pieces. "If Pidge hadn't shown up..."

"Pidge fought Haggar?" Shiro suddenly felt light-headed.

As it was, he was still trying to figure out how Pidge was there and not up in her Lion with the others.
Keith managed an actual small grin around his pain. "She was awesome Shiro. Fooled Haggar with her holograms and then zapped her."

Keith gave another moan of pain as Shiro pulled more of the ruined shirt away and the sound dragged him from his thoughts. "Sorry, sorry," he murmured. "Almost done with this part."

"...Did you fight Haggar?" Keith asked after a moment. He may be in rather excruciating pain, but he hadn't missed Shiro's reaction to the fight. And it would make sense, given the fact she had come from Shiro's direction.

Shiro gave a self-depreciating laugh. "Fight might not be the right term."

And at that Keith rolled slightly so he could look at Shiro over his shoulder, concern filling his face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"But are you all right?" Purple orbs had narrowed into a calculating gaze now and Shiro felt the barest hint of pink dust his cheeks. He was supposed to protect Keith, comfort him, not cause him to worry more. But that's all he'd been doing recently; talking about the arena, breaking down at the sight of the bloodied lab table...

Shiro wanted to say yes. Of course he was. He'd barely even fought her after all and other than a few glancing blows and swipes he hadn't even been injured.

But he knew that wasn't what Keith was asking.

And it was so much more. Haggar had taunted him, both with her words and Lance's screams. She'd mocked him and made him feel as helpless as he could recall feeling strapped down to that table, her whispers in his ear and his own screams echoing.

Being forced to listen to Lance's torture, to be unable to help, to fight back... that had been worse than any physical wound she could have inflicted and Haggar knew it too.

"Not really," he eventually sighed, unable to lie to that piercing gaze and he wasn't sure he wanted to. Not anymore. "But let's not worry about me right now, okay? Later," he said, almost feeling the protest. "Right now you, Lance, and getting us all somewhere safe are my priorities."

And now to figure out how to treat Keith. What he needed was a pod but those weren't available. Shiro ordered Keith to remain still and walked over to the medicine cabinet, scanning labels that Coran had been kind enough to re-label in English.

One item was a burn salve. It wasn't enough, nothing was going to be enough, but it was going to have to do for now.

Shiro returned, already regretting the next part. "I'm going to wipe down your back, okay? And then I have some salve to put on until... well, until a pod opens up."

Keith grit his teeth. "Just do it."

Shiro gently wet one of the clean clothes with cool water from the infirmary sink and brushed it against Keith's back.

The boy jerked, nearly upending himself off the table.
"Sorry, sorry," Shiro apologized even though he knew Keith didn't want to hear it.

Once he'd wiped down the worst of it, some of the burns blistering and bleeding now, he went for the salve. It tingled against his fingers as he dipped his hand into the jar and he carefully wiped them against one of the lesser burns on Keith's shoulder.

Keith shivered.

Shiro put most of it onto a cloth and went to do the rest. As soon as he touched down though on the largest, darkest, burn, Keith jerked again, a strangled moan pulled from him.

"Fuck," he whispered, voice tight and clogged with tears.

Shiro didn't say anything except to apologize again.

"There, all done," he said far, far too many minutes later. "I'm gonna help you sit up, all right? I need to bandage it."

Keith gave a small nod and Shiro very carefully helped him to sit, pulling on his arms and doing his best to avoid the laser burn there. Keith's front was much better off, peppered only with a couple bruises and another laser burn on his stomach.

Bandaging took but a few minutes even with Shiro applying them liberally as he wanted Keith's back very well padded, and wrapped a few about the smaller laser hits for good measure.

Leaving Keith sitting on the table, he hurried to get the Altean equivalent of aspirin (which was a seed from a Glornack tree) and a glass of fresh water. Keith tossed them back and then...

He made to hop off the table.

Only quick reflexes on Shiro's end halted that and he pushed Keith back fully onto the table, legs dangling over the edge.

"Uh uh, where do you think you're going?"

"To help," Keith said, not shirking in the slightest. "To see Lance." To make sure the other boy wasn't... wasn't...

Shiro shook his head. "You need rest. You were completely unconscious, Keith. You're exhausted. You need sleep. And healing. Your back is a mess and if we had the cryo-pods available you'd be in one right now."

As if to emphasize the castle's current lack of power the already low lights flickered around them before returning.

"There is no way I'm sleeping right now or staying here," Keith said once everything was settled. "You can't honestly believe that, Shiro."

Shiro sighed, running a blood-stained hand through his hair and unknowingly placing streaks of red in the white. "I know."

"Then why would you even suggest it?"

"I can't be worrying about you and Lance," Shiro said, the words coming out harsher than meant them to and he sighed again. He just wanted Keith to rest. To heal.
"I'm fine."

"You were unconscious for over twenty minutes. You do not get to decide if you're 'fine' or not," Shiro said, "I do. And I say you need to be resting."

"You can't make me." Keith went to cross his arms, winced as the movement pulled against his back, and instead settled for clenching his hands into fists.

Shiro let out another heavy sigh. Keith winced, guilt filling his face. He hadn't... hadn't meant to hurt Shiro, he just... he couldn't just stay here, doing nothing, while Lance was...

"Let's make a deal then," Shiro said quietly. For as much as he wanted Keith to sleep for the next week undisturbed, he also knew if he were in Keith's shoes he would absolutely rebel against the idea. That, and despite the circumstances, Shiro felt the rush of pride and familiar warmth it brought at how determined Keith was to see Lance. It was a far cry from where the two had been a week ago and the relief such clear concern brought was a balm.

"You are in no condition to be moving about," Shiro continued, "and don't argue. I'll help you to the main lounge where you will wait for me while I check in with Allura and Coran and then report back. Fair?"

"...fair," Keith responded quietly.

Shiro gave him a soft smile. "Good. Let's get going then."

Shiro hovered as Keith pushed himself off the table and it was a good thing as upon standing Keith very nearly toppled right back over. He said nothing though, just took one of Keith's arms and carefully brought it around his waist, his shoulder too high to stretch Keith's injured back up to, and then secured his own arm very, very gently across Keith's lower back where the burns were less.

And moving both quicker and slower than either would like, they headed for main room.

xxx

"Pidge!" Allura exclaimed as the girl joined her on the bridge. "You are hurt!"

Pidge glanced down at herself, eyes widening as she took in the state of her armor. Blood was splattered against her chest plate and in spots down her arms. Her leg braces had fared the same, messy streaks from ankle to knee.

"That's not mine," Pidge said, voice rising in pitch with each word as Allura hurried towards her. "That's not mine. It's... it's..." Oh God...

"Lance's," Allura finished for her, gait slowing now that she knew Pidge wasn't in immediate danger. Her jewel eyes though still traced over Pidge, scanning for any wounds that did belong to her as the littlest Paladin seemed rooted to the spot. They softened as Pidge struggled to unclasp her armor, hands shaking and eyes still wide in horror.

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"Here, allow me," the princess said, easily locating the latch and pulling the entire chest piece off over Pidge's head. Pidge hurried to unclasp her leg plates and shrug off her gloves, which felt wet to the touch and fell to the ground with a little plop.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Pidge repeated, even as she yanked off the arm guards and they joined the growing pile of bloody armor. "I'm fine, I'm fine."
"Pidge—"

Honey eyes, frightened but still calculating underneath the fear, fixed on Allura as she interrupted her. "Shouldn't we be wormholing right now?"

She desperately needed to focus on \textit{anything} other than the blood and who it came from.

"In just a dobash; we are waiting for the system to finish charging." As Allura spoke the lights all around them shut off and back-up emergency kicked on, bathing them in a cool blue light. "And that should do it."

Allura moved back to the console, pulling up the coordinates that the tracker had collected. If all went well – and quite frankly she thought they deserved at this point for something to go right – they would wormhole jump to the third quadrant of the system, traverse it to the second, and then wormhole jump again to a safe location she had picked out for them to recharge and heal.

And to Allura's great relief, the first jump was met without issue and there appeared to be no signs of any other vessel jumping with them and Pidge quietly reported all readings for the ship remained steady. She slumped against the console as the castle straightened itself from the hole, deciding she could afford a dobash to retake control of herself before she piloted through the quadrant, which was still rife with debris.

Her legs were still shaking from her encounter with Zarkon. She had honestly thought that was the end for her. She squeezed her eyes shut to stop the sudden tears that had cropped up at the memory. She had prepared for the worst back when she had been caught on the infiltration mission with Shiro, but at that time Zarkon had wanted her alive.

Now he seemed to want her dead.

If Blue had not come back online at that moment, roused to life from sheer love and such a thought warmed Allura despite the horror of the moment, she would not be standing here.

"Allura?"

And it spoke to how distraught she was that the Altean jumped nearly a foot in surprise at the sound of Pidge's soft voice and it showed how upset the human girl was too as she didn't even raise an eyebrow or make a comment about the reaction.

"Are you okay?" Pidge asked bluntly.

"I – yes, of course," Allura replied, wiping at her eyes. "Perfectly peachy."

By the look Pidge gave her, made even more intense without the cover of glasses, she did not do a very good job of lying.

"It has been a very long quintant," Allura acqueised quietly. "I shall be better once I am certain everyone is safe."

Pidge toed the ground in her socks, looking somehow even smaller than normal without all of the armor. "About that... I'm sorry for disobeying you. For... for not leaving when you told me to. But I... I \textit{couldn't}. I'm sorry. I know you were scared, but I..." Pidge's voice dropped to a whisper. "I was scared too. And I needed to help. I needed to do \textit{something}.

"Oh Pidge," Allura sighed. "I should have never issued that order. I am sorry as well. I let my fears get the best of me. I have no doubt it is thanks to you and your courage that things ended as well as
they could have."

Pidge felt her face darken at the praise. Her? Courage? She hadn't felt very brave then; she had been as scared as Allura by everything happening and then that fear had grown when she'd found Lance, cringing and screaming on the floor as the collar lit up around his n—

"You are hurt." Allura's voice cut through the memory that had grabbed hold of her. And then her face was gently being lifted and a dark hand was inspecting the wound left by the exploding crystal.

"It's nothing," Pidge said, color coating her cheeks as Allura turned her face this way and that. It really wasn't. Just a small burn; nothing compared to what Lance was suffering.

"It is still something," Allura said. "And you are bruising too." A finger traced a mark blossoming on Pidge's forehead and Pidge vaguely recalled her head rattling around in her helmet following the explosion she and Green had been involved in. "I require your presence to observe the proximity alarms while I am engaged in piloting, but once we have reached the second jump you are to report to medical."

"Some ice will do the trick," Pidge said. "Really. I swear Allura, I'm all right."

"If you so insist."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"You're shaking." The words were delivered bluntly but there was fear, worry behind them.

Allura looked down and glared at her legs, which were still trembling slightly, and unable to hide behind flowing skirts thanks to her battle outfit.

"Oh, that." She waved a hand, trying to dismiss it, to dismiss the memory that had caused it.

_Farewell, Princess._

"Just a side effect from piloting the Blue Lion," Allura fumbled an excuse, not yet willing to share the lingering horror that had settled in her stomach. "It has been a long time since I piloted any craft since the castle and..." she trailed off as Pidge fixed her with a look that said she very much did not believe Allura's reason.

Allura let out a soft sigh and tried to muster up a smile. "I shall explain later. But I assure you, I am all right."

"If you so insist." But Pidge offered up a small smile to take the sting from the words and moved to her station.

Allura made her own way back to the console to pilot the castle to safety. Her hands clenched on the controls and she moved as quickly as she could through the quadrant. Because only then, when they were somewhere safe, would she be able to check in on her team. Her _family_.

"Faster," she murmured under her breath. And as if hearing her plea the castle sped to attention, planet pieces and space rocks racing past the windows.

And they flew.
Well this was fun to write! I always enjoy popping around to all of the characters and getting to hit everyone in one chapter (minus Lance, but he got nearly all of last chapter) was quite the indulgence. I hope you enjoyed the check-in as well!

A big thanks to everyone who popped by the Q&A! I had a lot of fun and I hope y’all did too! You can still view the document (link on last chapter) if you’d like to see our discussion. Quite a bit more writing questions than I thought there would be (I was honestly anticipating going "spoiler!" and not answering a bunch :p). If you missed it or would like to attend another one, let me know if you have that interest and I am more than happy to set one up (different time too for those in very opposite timezones).

I won't ramble too much today. Just as always a huge thank you to the amazing reviewers. Seriously, you guys were awesome last chapter and I have never felt more loved (I really needed that too because the return to my HP fanfic was less than lukewarm XD). So yeah. You guys are awesome. I still don't what what I did to deserve all of you and your beautiful, encouraging comments.

Huge thanks to: dean_winchester_has_fallen, burple12345, SlideWhistler, WolfFire, Kayley, Kipper, Ahhuya, Fey_79, cipheredsong, heyheroics, Brohaikyuu, SimplyFox, BRICKbrick, soldmysoulofandoms, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Shelby, Grace, Mooniepie, keepasecretgetastrawberry, maychorian, wei_wei_wei, BubbleGumi, Kasey Remer, TabbiCC, RimaPichi, Catherine H, Jack, ImmortalFey, WindyOccamy, hookedongayships, alexries, glitteringconstellations, Proxy_17, and koalaoshiz!

If you enjoyed the chapter I'd love to hear your thoughts. Favorite scene (we did jump around quite a bit!), quote/line (I personally just loved Shiro being all flabbergasted that everyone fought Haggar :p), question, concern, favorite part about autumn (cooler weather and the beautiful *colors*; fitting for this fic, eh?), etc. Thank you all so much!
Coran had served the Altean royal family and the Paladins for as long as he could recall. It was a role he had gladly taken on when Alfor had approached him, back when the two were still just young men and Alfor a prince, and asked for his help when he became king to lead Altea to an era of peace and prosperity.

He had taken on the task with a determination few could hope to match, learning all he could on every subject so he could be the most knowledgeable advisor Altea had ever seen. He traveled in his youth, joining diplomatic parties all across the universe to learn about foreign customs and planets. He studied medicine to assist the Paladins with any injuries they sustained in missions and technology and engineering to upkeep the Lions and the castle that his grandfather had constructed.

When Allura came into the world he learned all he could to best take care of the young princess and had become her caretaker when her parents were tasked with diplomatic matters that took them away from their child.

Over his many years of life he had faced countless injuries of Paladins of the past, seen truly horrific deeds done by warring races as Voltron worked to spread peace throughout the galaxy. He had battled at the injustices done to innocents, cried for those lost to tragedies and rejoiced in the good the world showed him it still had to offer.

He considered himself a well-learned man and had believed that whatever the universe could throw at him he could overcome. He closed his eyes then in memory, willing it away, for now was not the time to get lost in that grief, even as his hand found its way to press above the necklace hanging over his heart. Even when Alfor had asked – begged – for Coran to enter a cryo-pod and remain with his daughter as the world crumbled around them, he had done so without hesitation and with the knowledge that whatever happened he would protect Allura and all would somehow turn out okay.

And yet none of the cruelties and pain he had witnessed could even come close to the agony he felt right now as he gazed upon the human boy he had come to view as a son and what he had suffered.

The Galrans were monsters. There was no other word to describe their race. And Haggar. His normally genteel eyes flashed steel. He would kill her if she ever dared show herself in his presence. She would not leave his sight alive.

He and Number Two had moved as quickly and as carefully as they could to clean the blood and filth from Lance, going through nearly all of the cleaning cloths the castle had and even then they had not been able to fully clear all of it away as wounds continued to sluggishly leak.

After Hunk had quietly explained his theory of drowning, Coran was loathe to put Lance's face anywhere near the water, but he still did his best to wash the normally immaculate hair and gently dab at the few spots of blood that decorated Lance's forehead and cheek.

Between the two of them they'd been able to switch out Lance's shorts for a new pair Coran had had the foresight to grab from Lance's room before the Lions landed, and had settled him now in Allura's large bed with a few layers of sheets beneath him until they could fully wrap all of the injuries. The
pajamas he had retrieved were set atop the dresser as Coran knew given the constant upkeep to the bandages they would only provide a hindrance.

Coran had been beyond relieved that other than the gunshot wounds that started on the front of each upper thigh and exited out the back, there had been no other injury or damage hidden by Lance’s last shred of clothing. The Galrans, despite all of their atrocities, were not normally ones to commit violence of that nature, but he could not say the same for the Druids and given the nearly lustful gleam in Haggar's eye when she spoke Coran had worried. But that at least was one horror he could put away.

Lance had remained nearly unconscious during the entire process, just soft little whimpers or moans when Coran hit a particularly grisly wound, but the sedative did its job and kept him otherwise oblivious. He wished he could continue to administer it, but as it was the drug wasn't supposed to be for humans – they still had no idea if prolonged use had side effects – and combining it with the large quantity of saliidda could result in complications.

He and Hunk were now wrapping up the injuries as best they could with long swathes of bandages, but it was a temporary solution. And that was just for the smaller injuries of blaster wounds and stabs and cuts. It didn't even take into account the sliced open flesh of Lance's feet nor the lumps of tissue that were his hands and wrists; so abused that Coran prayed they could be saved. Hunk had lost the battle with his stomach once Lance had been carefully deposited in the bed at the sight and Coran felt even his steel innards doing a flip.

He wanted to pop the boy into a cryo-pod immediately, but of course he could not. Even had the pods been available he would be hesitant to do so as there was the component of Druid magic afoot and it could wreak haywire on the Altean magic and technology. It would be a last resort to put Lance into a pod with his eyes still darkened, but if it came down to it Coran would take that bet. He would prefer though very much to lift the spell.

What little he did know of spells was that they could be undone. Whether it was from some word or phrase or even the partaking of a certain concoction they could be broken. Their only chance was that Lance was aware of what had been placed upon his eyes and they could scour all of their resources to find an answer.

And if there was none, they may have to take their chances with the pod. But not until they determined if Lance was suffering some sickness. Because if he was and it could turn deadly that would need to be treated first. Before… Coran glanced at the damaged hands, resting on a small pile of towels and bandaged, hiding the damage beneath. Already though the cloth was becoming stained.

He hated to even think it, but if it came between saving Lance's life then Coran would sacrifice the boy's hands. They could make something to replace them, he was certain. But they were not able to replace their Blue Paladin.

There was no one who ever could.

"He's going to need stitches," Hunk said quietly, jolting Coran from his thoughts. "He can't keep losing blood like this and I don't think he can wait for the pods to be ready either. Probably needs a transfusion too."

"Stitches?" Coran repeated, sounding out the word. The only reference he had to such a thing was the art of clothing making and tapestry weaving.
Hunk nodded, keeping his eyes downcast as he placed a piece of tape over one of the bandages covering a gunshot wound on Lance's chest. "Yeah. Needle and thread to hold the wound together until we can get him in the cryo-pod."

Coran sucked in his breath in horror, drawing Hunk's attention. "You… mean to sew his skin?"

"...yes," Hunk said after a moment, brow furrowing. "It's what they do in hospitals."

"Humans do this to one another?" Coran was aghast.

"It's a common medical practice," Hunk said. "The stitches sometimes dissolve into the skin, otherwise they get cut out once the injury heals."

"That is…barbaric."

"What do Alteans do with a wound like this then?" Hunk asked.

"Cryo-pod," he responded promptly.

"And if no cryo-pod is available?"

And now Coran was stumped. Such a situation had never come up before. They had bandages, of course, and various salves and medicines to relieve various pains and ailments, but for any serious type of wound it was always straight to a cryo-pod.

"I see," he said after a moment. "My apologies, Number Two. I did not mean to insinuate that your kinds' medical practices are… heinous. There is still much we have to learn about humans, I am afraid."

"It's nothing," Hunk said, waving it away.

"However, if I may," Coran said. "Although Lance may require these 'stitches' it would be best to wait until the saliidda is entirely clear of his system. I imagine it would be a very painful process normally and with the saliidda it would be even more so."

Sewing the skin. Coran shuddered again. Barbaric.

"I don't know how to sew either," Hunk admitted, feeling despair well inside him. "I don't even know his blood type, Coran." His own hands shook. "What if… what if…"

What if all of this was for nothing? What if they rescued Lance only to lose him to infection? Or blood loss? Or pneumonia? He was definitely running a fever, made more obvious now that he was out of the water and the flush of his face had not abated at all even though he was much, much too pale underneath the pink cheeks. Breathing was still a challenge too, if the little gasps and coughs were anything to go by and Hunk had begun fearing when it took a few extra seconds for the next shaky exhale to sound.

What if, despite all that they did, it was not enough? A tear ran down Hunk's cheek then and he swallowed back the loud sob. He couldn't lose Lance. He couldn't. Not his best friend. His brother.

Lance couldn't have gone through all of that pain and suffering and torture and then die here. No. It just couldn't happen.

But as he gazed down through watery eyes, he knew it was a reality he had to face. Despite all that they'd done, Lance was nowhere near close to healed. He didn't know enough – and he didn't think
any of the team did either — to combat any severe illnesses and Coran's knowledge of the human body was limited.

He could lose Lance. Here. Now. And there was little he could do about it.

"There, there," Coran comforted appearing at Hunk's side and placing a comforting hand on the broad back. "It's going to be all right."

Hunk just gave a shaky nod and hiccupped another sob.

They remained in silence for a few moments, Coran continuing to rub gentle circles while Hunk struggled to pull himself back together. Hunk was certain that once everything was more stable he was going to have a good, long cry. But right now he had to hold it together. For Lance. He sucked in a breath. He had to get it together.

"I'm okay now," he told Coran softly once he was certain he wasn't going to start crying, although his voice was still tight.

Coran hummed and gave his back one last pat before rising. "In that case, I am going to rendezvous with the princess and provide an update. I'd estimate Lance will still be under for at least another twenty dobashes. Are you all right to watch over him?"

"Yeah. We'll be good." He patted his helmet sitting on the foot of the bed. "The comms in here still work, right? I'll radio the others if anything happens."

Coran nodded. "Sounds like a plan. I shouldn't be long, my boy. Hold tight."

He left quickly and Hunk turned his attention back to the much-too-still figure of his best friend. His hands fisted in one of the sheets, knuckles whitening and treacherous tears swam in his vision despite his best attempts.

But it was just him and Lance now. And he had a little while before anyone would come back. He didn't have to be strong quite yet.

"I missed you," he whispered after a few moments, voice cracking. "I… I really missed you, hermano. We all did." There was no reaction save for another harsh inhalation.

"You're going to be okay," he continued, fighting his instinct to just cuddle Lance to him. Hugs had always made everything better before, but he knew it wasn't so simple anymore. "We're all going to help you get better."

He bowed his head, no longer fighting the tears or the breathy quality his own voice had taken on. "And I know you… you're going to blame yourself. And you won't believe me when I tell you, but none of this… none of it's your fault. Okay? You have to believe that. Please? Por favor?"

A tear dripped down Hunk's cheek to land on his hand followed by another. "It's all going to be okay," he repeated. "I promise. So please… come back to us. Come back to me. Please."

Another sob wrenched up his throat. "Please."

xxx

Coran nearly crashed into Allura as he rounded the end of the hall at a quick clip and only both of their startled jumps backward saved them from a collision.
"How is Lance?" Allura asked before Coran could speak. She peered over his shoulder as though looking towards her chambers could provide answers, worry etched on her face.

Coran shook his head, moustache drooping. "It is not good, Princess."

He was unable to say more as Shiro came rushing around the corner, bangs dripping water down his face as Keith had pointed out to him he’d managed to stain them red with blood. A quick trip to the bathroom had been all that paused him before he’d gone to head for Allura's quarters. "How's Lance?" he panted, skidding to a stop.

A tick later Pidge also barreled around a different corner and just missed hitting Coran, a rough bandage taped to her chin. "How’s Lance?" she gasped.

"Perhaps we should make this a single briefing?" Allura suggested looking at the assembled group. "Where is Keith?"

"In the lounge," Shiro answered. Sensing Allura's next question he quickly said, "He'll be okay. It's... it's not good but it's..." Not as bad as Lance. He met Allura's eyes and she understood, giving a nod.

"Let us continue our discussion there," Allura decided. She looked to Coran. "Will—?"

"Number Two is with him. He's in good hands for now."

She nodded. "All right then." They made a silent consensus to not discuss anything until they reached Keith, but Allura could not hide the frown at Pidge's bandage, which appeared at second glance to be a wadded scrap of towel. "I believe I told you to report to the med bay."

Pidge shrugged. "It would take too long. This is fine." Besides, she'd been delayed in the bathroom and a half-container of soap had paid the price. But she was near one hundred percent sure that she had finally gotten all of Lance's blood off her and her scrubbed raw hands attested to the effort that went into it.

They made it to the main room of the castle, where Keith was lying stretched out on his stomach on one of the couches with his hands pillowed beneath his head.

"Are you all right?" Allura asked, seating herself on one of the chairs near Keith's head.

"Fine."

She turned to Shiro for confirmation, as she had not missed the tense pain on the boy's face when they had entered and the way he had almost forcibly tried to smooth the worst of it away.

"He's got some really bad burns all over his back. He needs a pod, but for now—"

"I'm fine," Keith growled. His injuries were insignificant. There were much more pressing matters right now. "How's Lance?"

All heads swiveled to Coran, who had remained standing but was leaning against one of the couches.

"As I told the Princess, it is not good," he began. "The short version? He is suffering from burns and wounds on a good percentage of his body, which seem to be from a mixture of blunt force, blades and laser blasts. Some do appear semi-healed some but they seem to carry signs of infection based on the color. He may be suffering from a human illness – Number Two could explain more – that
involves water in the lungs and he is under some type of spell from the Druids—"

"Spell?" Shiro interrupted, the back of his neck tingling in unease at the same time Pidge gasped out "pneumonia?"

Coran inclined his head towards Shiro. "He does not seem able to see us," he said, drawing sharp inhales from Allura and Shiro, "and given the color of his eyes I believe it is related to Druid magic. As such even were the cryo-pods working right now he would not be able to enter one.

"In addition to those, his hands and feet…" Coran trailed off, bowing his head. "I do not know if we can save them. The damage done to them is beyond brutality."

"What?" Pidge whispered, clutching the armrest for support. Lose his hands and feet? Her gaze flickered to Shiro's prosthetic. No. No.

Absolutely not. Not Lance.

"He is also losing a lot of blood," Coran continued. "Several of his injuries appear to have been healed at some point, but many show signs of being reopened or are new altogether. Number Two suggested a transfusion as well as… stitches. But he said he was not familiar with Lance's blood type, although I admit I do not know what that means, or the process of making these stitches. But it is imperative we stop the bleeding." He thought back to the pile of bloody cloths and the stained sheets and knew that time was imperative.

"He's a B negative," Pidge replied. She had hacked the files of both her teammates at the Garrison and recalled that fact easily because it was the second rarest blood type humans had. She glanced around the group, trying to ignore the growing pit in her stomach. "Only two percent of the human population has his type. If we mix the wrong blood…"

"What is so vital about this type?" Allura asked, brow furrowed. "All Alteans share the same blood."

"You can die if you're given the wrong one," Pidge said gravely. And they only had four others to draw from. "The human body… it can't just take anything." She felt despair welling up. "I'm an A positive and Hunk is an O positive. Not compatible. Keith?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted quietly. "I..." he shook his head. "Sorry. I don't think I'd be compatible though."

Shiro though was smiling, a small thing, but it was there, and spoke before Pidge could question how Keith didn't know his own blood type. "I'm O negative," he said quietly.

A universal donor.

"Shiro, I could kiss you right now," Pidge said, stomach righting itself. "You can donate!"

"But not yet," Coran cautioned. "Lance still has saliidda in his system. It would make the transfusion rather painful. Number Two described this stiches process as well and it does not sound pleasant." He looked around the group. "I also admit I know little in terms of how to sew. Do any of you…?"

"Don't look at me," Pidge said, holding her hands up. "Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I do stuff like that. I can thread wires and ports but sewing with a needle? Through flesh, her mind reminded her. Through Lance. She shook her head fervently.

"I can," Keith said quietly although he looked slightly green at the thought. "If… if there's no other way."
"Very good," Coran said, relieved to have at least that settled for now. "But I regret there is more I must tell."

"More?" Shiro asked. What more could have been done? What more did Lance suffer from?

"The collar around his neck," Coran said quietly. "It still needs to be removed, but I fear we may need to inflict some measure of pain to free him from it. It has burned into his flesh and upon my inspection there is no latch. The sooner we can get that off of him the easier he may find it to breathe and I think it would go a ways to making him more comfortable."

"It is burned into his neck?" Allura repeated, recalling all too clearly the memory of Lance thrashing on the ground as it activated. Just… how many times had it been used to warrant such an injury? Her hand went to her own neck, feeling the high collar of her battle uniform. She had the sudden urge to change into her loose robes and remove the constricting material.

"In addition to the collar he still has manacles attached to both wrists and ankles. They are fortunately not so deeply embedded as they seem relatively new and were not subject to the same shock feature. Still, they will need to be removed as well." The ankle ones were not quite so bad, as no injuries were really prominent at that point on Lance's leg, but the wrist ones were interfering with bandaging the beyond severe ones on his hands and forearms and would need to go as soon as they safely could.

"Lance also had a very negative reaction to water," Coran continued softly. "He was unable to drink it upon regaining consciousness as well. Number Two and I agree that such a response, along with the damage to his lungs, indicates he was likely drowned. Repeatedly."

It was though a bucket of icy water had been dumped over all of them and Pidge echoed the word, voice small. "Drowned?"

Coran nodded. "Yes. He also has an aversion to any and all touch, although I warrant that may be a combination of his lack of sight and the action of the saliidda. The immense pain he is in is also likely the reason for his confusion and only Number Two's knowledge of Lance's other language was able to calm him. He has spoken in nothing else since awakening and I regret that our language sensors are not familiar with this dialect."

"Spanish," Pidge said numbly. "He… he spoke it to me too in the hall."

"What were you doing there anyway?" Shiro asked. "What happened with the exchange?"

What followed was a quick recap by all parties of the events that lead up to this point, the explanation darting in and out of chronological order as they interrupted one another in their haste to know that each other was all right.

Pidge explained that she and Green had exited the firefight, looking meekly in Allura's direction and receiving a soft, gentle smile, and had gone in search of Shiro and Keith since communications were being blocked and they needed to be informed of the trap and the subsequent battle. In her mission she'd found Lance and Keith, who had left to assist Shiro, and had discovered a way to dismantle the shock collar and tracker. She hadn't gone into detail about the how, trying not to remember Lance's screams, but mentioned Spanish had calmed him down and he had said her name, once, before he'd blacked out.

Keith and Shiro hadn't returned at that point and she had gone in search of them and found Haggar instead. Pidge had gone even quieter then, hunching almost protectively over herself and merely stating she had incapacitated Haggar and then they had all retreated. Shiro made a mental note to his
growing list to talk to her more about those circumstances; while Pidge was not as boastful as Lance, she did enjoy talking about her battle accomplishments. And while given the circumstances he understood why they weren't receiving a play-by-play, but she didn't even mention how she'd done it. Allura met his eyes over the auburn head and he nodded. Later.

Allura then shared how she, Hunk and the Black Lion had been near overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and Zarkon's entry into the fight. She skipped over her own fears at facing death and the entire experience itself, merely stating that they had been able to hold off Zarkon long enough to make a retreat. She felt Pidge’s eyes on her then and she internally sighed. It looked like they all had a few secrets they weren't quite ready to share yet.

Shiro gave a brief version on how they had been assisted by a sympathetic Galran – the sharpshooter lieutenant from the Kri Za Kri – and with his help had made it to where Lance was being held and into the cell. He explained that he and Keith had been forced to separate as they were overwhelmed by soldiers and how Haggar had later involved herself. Shiro felt like it was a growing trend as he skipped over their exchange, feeling the worried eyes on him now, and instead quietly thanked Pidge for her help.

Keith shook his head when asked if he had anything to add to either account. His didn't want to talk about, to remember, any of the pain, the horror, he had witnessed.

Allura updated that they had now wormholed twice thanks to Pidge and Hunk's efforts and were anchored off an uninhabited planet in the Nevarra system without incident. No Galran ships had followed them into the wormhole and the castle had not picked up any sense of them now.

All castle systems were still in back-up mode with the one exception being Allura's quarters where Coran had streamlined power so they had good visibility to assist Lance. Coran had already pulled the new crystals they would need and was going to head straight to the generator to install them following the debrief. He estimated it would take at least four varga for the castle to come fully back online. In that time they needed to stabilize Lance and hopefully figure out how to disable the Druids' magic so he could go right into a cryo-pod when they became available.

"All right," Shiro said softly as Coran finished. "It looks like we've got a lot we need to do in a short timeframe."

While they were all exhausted, hurt and on their last legs as well. But they would do whatever was asked of them, Shiro knew, if it could in any way help Lance.

"I want to see Lance," both Pidge and Keith chorused in tandem. They could almost hear an exuberant "jinx" echoing in the silence that followed and Pidge had to blink back the sudden tears.

Shiro looked to the closest thing they had to a doctor. "Coran? What do you think?"

"Given his condition I feel it would be best not to crowd him," the Altean admitted. "Yet at the same time being in the presence of his friends may go a ways to assuring him he is indeed safe. I believe if everyone remained quiet and kept their distance visitation would be permissible."

Keith let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and Pidge tucked trembling hands up against her with a nod.

"However," Coran said, holding up a finger, "should I ask you to leave you will do so without question or complaint. Understood?" Because in the chance Lance's condition worsened... he did not wish for them to see the end.
"Of course," Shiro nodded. He looked at the two younger Paladins, who gave jerky nods.

"But first we need to gather supplies," Coran said. He looked around the gathered assembly, noting injuries and exhaustion and who at this point would be capable of doing what.

"Number Five, could you retrieve some more vein valves and empty supply packs from the infirmary for this transfusion? Also, another pack of the human fluids; it is stored in the cooling unit under the sink. Number One, I require your assistance in positioning the crystals. It will hopefully not take too long so we can then begin withdrawing your blood for Lance. Number Four, you and the Princess will proceed to the Princess’ quarters."

"Understood," Allura said, rising gracefully to her feet. "I have my embroidery supplies there as well. Will that be sufficient for these stitches?"

"I think so," Shiro said slowly. "Probably the best we're going to find on such short notice in any case."

"Then we will see you shortly," she said, assisting Keith to his feet as the boy was unable to hide the wince while returning to a seated position. She turned to Keith, taking in the paler than normal skin tone. "Are you all right to walk on your own? I am happy to carry you if—"

"I can walk," Keith cut in, a slight blush overtaking the white hues.

"Slowly," Shiro cautioned as he and Coran made their exit. "Pidge, you be careful too." She gave a nod and scampered away, sock-clad feet slipping on the floor and Shiro uttered a silent prayer that she didn't careen into a wall and knock herself out.

"Let us go then," Allura said, remaining steadfastly at Keith's side, but not encroaching on his personal space as the room cleared out. Her voice sounded clear, but there was an undercurrent of urgency and her eyes were flickering between him and the hallway. Keith realized within a tick that unlike the rest of them she had yet to actually see Lance and assure herself that he was… well, not all right, but safe now.

"You can go ahead," Keith said quietly. "I'll just slow you down." Every step was a struggle and he hadn't realized how much of his weight Shiro had still been holding as they went to the lounge. He wouldn't ask Allura for assistance though. He didn't need it.

She shook her head. "No, I shall not leave when you are in such a state of injury. Come, we will go together." A half-smile tugged up her face. "As quickly as we can though."

Allura's quarters were fortunately not too far; only a few minutes walk on a normal night. By the time they reached Allura's room though Keith was shaking with exertion and pain and Allura had one of his arms draped over her neck, nearly carrying him anyways from her sheer strength by just the limb.

The door slid open with a hiss and both squinted at the bright light after the dimness of the rest of the castle. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust, but once they had Allura all but dragged Keith forward.

Still though, she took the time to carefully seat Keith on one of the plush chairs that Coran had preemptively brought over to the side of the bed before she was hurrying even closer.

"Lance," she breathed, sinking down on the floor near his head opposite Hunk.

She had been prepared given Coran's count of his injuries. But even that was not enough in the end.
Her jeweled eyes traced him from head to toe, taking in the shivering and harsh gasps of breath, the high flush of fever and the crease of pain still evident on his face even as his eyes were closed in sedative induced sleep.

Her eyes trailed over bandages, already stained red, and mottled, burned skin and dark bruises. They tracked to the collar, looking just as terrible as Coran had described. "Oh, Lance," she whispered, reaching out a shaking hand and only just managing to retract it, burying it into the sheets and blankets spread out beneath him.

And to her horror Allura could feel the sadness giving way to rage, her hands fisting out of sight. She swallowed heavily, trying to force that acid burn to retreat for now. This was not a place to anger, this was a place to heal.

Anger and hate would come later. She would not let this pass without recompense. No one, no one, harmed one of her Paladins, her family, and got away with it. She would make them pay. Her eyes narrowed. She would make them bleed.

"Allura," Hunk called gently, his voice a tremble of what it normally was, and that snapped her back to the here and now, the fury bleeding from her eyes as she met Hunk's tear-lined ones.

She mustered up a smile although she was well aware it probably looked more like a grimace. Hunk understood though and he tried one of his own, but his gaze drifted back to Lance shortly thereafter. His own fingers were tightly gripping the bedsheets, knuckles white against his dark skin.

Allura took the moment to look over the larger boy, noting that he was still damp and as a result was shivering slightly, his bandana tails drooping like the rest of him. Like Pidge he'd stripped off his outer armor but had remained in his undersuit, which was also still wet from his trip to the bath. Yet she knew it was pointless to mention as nothing would be prying Hunk from Lance's side for the time it would take to change.

Rising gracefully to her feet, Allura went around the bed to one of her wardrobes and pulled down several additional blankets and pillows that Coran had not yet commandeered for Lance.

She stopped first at Keith, who was hunched over his knees, exhaustion clear, but his gaze was steady on Lance. "Here," she said softly, draping a light silken blanket that would not stifle his burns across his shoulders. He looked up in surprise, having not even noticed her while his hand instinctively clutched the blanket to him. Such a sight made Allura's heart clench.

He was so young.

"Thank you," he murmured, ducking his head.

She smiled and made her way to Hunk, wrapping a thicker blanket about him and smoothing out his bandana tails over it. He didn't say anything nor look at her, but he brought up one hand to clutch onto hers and she squeezed it back, feeling her own eyes misting.

"He is going to be all right," she said, as much for her own assurance as what Hunk needed to hear. "He will be."

Hunk gave a jerky nod and some of his tension seemed to slip away at her words.

Allura prayed she was right. She had to be. Because if she was wrong...

If she was wrong and Lance, their heart and light, remained broken… then Team Voltron would be no more. Their family would fall apart.
And then the universe would soon follow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the patience with this chapter (I know, a whole week now feels like forever!). Been busy with real life work and con prepping (more on that in a bit).

This chapter was sort of Lance-centric without him really being an active part of it :p But unlike us, the characters have no idea what's been happening so a fill in was necessary. Plus, Coran going down the list one by one really puts all of that into perspective, huh? And on Coran; I love him and prepare for more of our gorgeous man.

Huge thanks as always to the amazing reviewers who keep me going: Marsetta, Ahhuya, koalaoshiz, burple12345, petrichor_sky, Brohaikyyu, heyheroics, Fey_79, soldmysoultofandoms, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, keepasecretgetastrawberry, Person, ImmortalFey, Ashlielle, cipheredsong, Grace, WolfFire, Carley Hinman, TabbiCC, jadeturtle13, maychorian, glitteringconstellations, proxy_17, RimaPichi, BrieCheese and Redwizardfox.

I can't say for certain if I'm going to get a chapter out for Wednesday, as I'll be at RamenCon (South Bend, Indiana, come say hello if you're attending!) all weekend, which is my writing time. Depending on what I can do though early in the week and as always your lovely responses shall determine next week's update schedule. I do promise we are finally getting back to Lance though and oooh, I can't wait till you all see what I have planned!

Thank you all and I'd love to hear from you! Hit that comment button thing below!
Allura's bedroom was easily the largest living quarters in the castle. Even so, with five humans, two Alteans and four mice it was beginning to feel a little cramped but no one was willing to leave.

Keith had taken up the entirety of the plush chair, slouched sideways against the armrest and keeping an eye on the scene with half-lidded eyes from his vantage to the bottom right of the bed. Just above him was Hunk, who refused to vacate the chair by Lance's head, and Platt and Plachu were curled up on his lap.

Shiro was sitting on a small ottoman, his back braced against the foot of the bed while Coran sat on a matching chair and held the transfer bag that was slowly filling with blood. A finished one already rested in a small cooler by his feet. The leader of Voltron was looking more than a little pale and had one of the Altean energy bars held loosely in his prosthetic hand that Allura had forced upon him. He had forced himself to take a few bites of it but now his stomach was swirling and he'd stopped.

Allura herself had commandeered her last actual chair and it was pulled up opposite Hunk and the other two mice were keeping her company. Pidge had opted to sit on the actual bed with Coran's permission, as her small size barely even made a dent in the large mattress.

She had taken up a post by Lance's head, her back against the wall and her small hand gently carding through Lance's bangs as she knew he liked. Coran had said the only injuries to Lance's head included a few minor scratches and cuts on his face and a larger lump on the back of his head so she was in the clear. Besides, the advisor had smiled, the gesture might help assure Lance he was amongst friends.

It had been near a varga since they'd all gathered in the room and Coran had said it was actually very good that Lance was exceeding the time limit from the sedative. It meant that although he was still in pain it was diminishing enough to the point where he could get some rest. The effects of the saliidda were fading too with the addition of the fluids and Coran estimated that as soon as Lance awoke and was aware of what was happening they could try and stitch up the worst of the wounds and begin a blood transfusion, as Lance was in desperate need of it, his face still far too pale beneath his fever.

The advisor couldn't take too much more from Shiro right now either, as he had already given a pint and he was well into a second. Coran had wanted to stop the donation after the first pint, which is what Pidge had informed him was standard practice for humans, but Shiro had insisted, a look of guilt swimming in his eyes and said that it was the least he could do and had murmured, "Lance needs it more than me." Coran couldn't exactly disagree and he could feel that Shiro needed to do this so he allowed it with the rule to not move and to eat and drink.

Despite the fact the entirety of the castle's occupants were present, the room was near silent, broken only by the regular sharp gasps and coughs from Lance.

It felt like a tomb, Pidge thought. It reminded her too much of her own home after her father and brother had been declared dead. So many people had filled the space, offering condolences and support to her and her mother, but despite the numbers there was a stifling blanket of silence over everything.
She hated it.

But she couldn't find a way to break it. Lance was the one who was good at making people comfortable and lightening up the mood. But he couldn't do that now. He was the one causing all of this. "You jerk," she muttered below her breath, absolutely no heat behind it. She'd do anything for him to wake up. He could tease her about her height and ask all the questions he wanted about her tech and she would answer every single one if he would just wake up. If he'd just wake up and be okay.

And to her surprise, as if summoned, she felt him twitch ever so slightly beneath her fingers in a way that was different than the shudders and gasps. Her hand stilled its movement, thumb hovering on his forehead as she waited for another motion.

There! Another twitch.

"Lance?" she breathed, drawing everyone's attention. Her heart quickened as she peered down at him, his eyes fluttering beneath closed lids.

Coran had cautioned them that Lance could wake in a number of ways. It could be slow and peaceful thanks to the sedative and depending on what he recalled prior to falling asleep. It could be sudden and violent if he felt he was still with the Galra. Pidge was personally hoping – despite knowing that it wasn't possible – that Lance would wake up, smile at them and crack a stupid joke that she would laugh so hard at she'd cry.

But it was none of those.

He woke with a scream, not so much as pained but terrified.

Sightless eyes flew open and he wrenched himself violently away from Pidge, but went nowhere thanks to the mountain of pillows and blankets. "No!" he cried. "No! No me toques!"

"Lance!" everyone exclaimed in varying degrees, as he continued to struggle to move, his efforts dislodging bandages and sending streaks of red across the linens.

"Lance, calm down," Pidge begged, reaching out, but retracting her hand as Lance wailed when it bumped against his shoulder.

"Please," Allura begged. "Lance, it is us. You are safe."

Lance continued his attempted retreat, looking for all the world like a cornered animal.

Shiro had lumbered to his feet at this point, valve ripped from his arm and Keith had shot out of his chair while the Alteans were standing around the bed and everyone was speaking at once, individual words barely discernible over Lance's harsh breaths and whimpers as he tucked himself as far away from them as he could manage.

"Lance—"

"It's okay—"

"You're safe."

"Lance, please—"

"No," Lance panted as this time Shiro reached out to try and steady Lance before he did any more
damage to himself. "No me toques!" voice rising in pitch as soon as the hand had wrapped about his upper bicep. "No, no no!"

"Stop!" Hunk roared, batting away Shiro's hand with surprising force and freezing everyone else in place at his tone.

Hunk never yelled. Never. Silence reigned in the room, save for Lance's crying and still futile attempts to free himself from the blankets that had gotten wrapped about his feet.

"Quiet, please," Hunk requested softer, meeting each pair of wide eyes before he pulled himself up onto the bed next to Lance, but made no move to get any closer.

"What was he saying?" Pidge asked, voice small. "Did I hurt him?"

"I don't know exactly," Hunk admitted, not having heard most of Lance's words and pleas over the others. "But all of us talking at once is overwhelming him. Let me try, okay?"

Everyone gave nods and quiet murmurs, guilt heavy in the room. They'd just... They just wanted to help.

Apparently they didn't quite know how.

"Lance," Hunk cajoled softly, wincing as at the sound of his name Lance pulled even further away. Wherever Lance was, he didn't think he was here with his friends. He tried again, omitting his friend's name. "Hey, hermano, it's me. Hunk. Soy Hunk. Estoy aquí."


Lance slowly moved his head from the pillow, sightless eyes that were all wrong looking in Hunk's direction. Hunk could hear Allura's sharp breath at the sight, but he tuned them out, his entire world focusing in on his best friend and letting the words of home spill from his lips in the little comfort he could offer.


And although it barely sounded like Lance, hoarse and choked and so very rough, the whispered "Hunk?" was the most beautiful sound the Yellow Paladin had ever heard.


But unlike last time Lance did not go limp with relief, did not relax. He kept his body tight and away and Hunk didn't dare reach out to him. Not yet.

"¿Recuerdas la salida?" Hunk asked gently, wincing as at the word Lance grew rigid. "Coran piensa que la salida ya no está allí. ¿... te sientes mejor?"

It took a few seconds, but Lance gave the barest of nods.

He did feel a little better.

But not better enough.

Hunk started speaking again and Lance tried so so hard to listen, but they were fading, lost to the sound of his own pulse beating in his head and the heavy breaths that hurt his lungs. And no matter
how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to get enough air, his lungs feeling like they were collapsing in on themselves. He went for a deep inhale and regretted it immediately as his chest seized at the action.

Distantly he heard Hunk call his name again as he hunched over, gasping. Instinctively his hands went to his throat as though he could push the air through.

He touched cold metal.

What?

The... the collar?

It was still there?

Trembling fingers reached higher, breathing becoming harder and harder as instead of flesh they lighted upon the collar burned into his neck. He bit back the soft keen of fear.

He hadn't been rescued, had he? This was all some trick. Haggar was trying to fool him. He was still there, after all. He'd just felt her; her hands in his hair and then Theodek's bruising grip on his arm when he'd tried to pull away. He knew she was capable of imitating voices; she'd done it in his mindscape.

This was a trick.

"Lance, it's okay—" he heard Hunk – not Hunk – say, but Lance was too frozen with horror to hear anything else.

The collar was there. It was still there. That meant he was still with the Galrans. With Haggar. He'd dreamed up – hallucinated? – Hunk and Coran. And Pidge.

Had they asked him anything? Had he betrayed them?

What had he said?

He wracked his mind, but his thoughts were tripping over themselves and he could hardly hear them over his own gasping and the pain that was making itself more and more known.

Maybe the saliidda was still there after all.

"Lance please," the voice of Hunk begged. "Por favor. Cálmate, está bien."

It wasn't real, he realized. None of it was real. It was a cruel dream, the harshest of nightmares. She was using his friends against him. Using their compassion and love and trying to force him to give them up, to give up their secrets.

And he was so stupid. Believing the first hint of kindness to be real and not some conjuration Haggar had made. He knew his family had already come. Come and gone.

And he'd been left behind.

"No," he rasped, trying to drown out the sound of the fake Hunk pleading with him. "No, no no!" Each exclamation stabbed him with betrayal. He had almost believed, almost given in. It was exactly what Haggar wanted. He couldn't. He couldn't fail them. Not now. Not ever.

"Lance—"
"No es real," he gasped, backing further away from where the fake Hunk was located. "No es…"

"Real?" he heard someone – Pidge? Fake Pidge? – attempt to repeat. "Hunk, what does he mean?"

"This… this isn't real," he managed, dredging the English words up from the thick molasses that had become his mind. Haggar had to know. He had to let her know he was wise to her trick. She had to stop before he forgot again and said something he'd regret. Even now he could feel her lingering in his mind, just waiting to pounce.

"Lance, no," fake Hunk whispered, tears in his voice. "Estás seguro. Por favor, creéme."

"This isn't r-real," he repeated, voice breaking.

"Lance—"

"Get out of my head!" he screamed, hands going to his head as though he could force her out himself. He dug his nails in, felt the sting as the left side pierced flesh and the warm trickle of blood paint his fingers.

She was in his head. She was in his mind and he needed her out.

"Lance!" he heard Allura's horrified gasp.

"Lance, stop!" he heard multiple voices – Keith, Shiro, Hunk – plead while a soft "my boy" made him stiffen and try to gouge his head even harder.

"No," he rasped. "No!"

"Lance, lo siento mucho, I'm so sorry," he heard Hunk's voice, closer now and just in front of him. He had no chance to lash out at whatever it was before something was being wrapped around him – not more restraints, please no, let him go – and he was being pulled towards the fake Hunk. His arms were pinned at his sides and his legs were barely responsive, each attempt to move them only sending flares down the limbs.

He screamed out his distress, trying without success to dislodge a hand, anything, so he could fight back. But the restraint – under the guise of a blanket, he realized – was becoming even more constricting and he felt himself being lifted into what should have been comforting, familiar arms and cradled close.

"St-stop," he pleaded, "por favor. I know. I know. Yo sé."

He heard the fake Shiro calling out to Hunk, panic and worry and desperation all rolled into one and Lance squeezed his eyes tight at the horrible realness of it all. He wanted it so badly to be true. He wanted to live in this dreamworld forever. But he couldn't. It wasn't an escape. It was a lie. And despite how many times he'd failed now he couldn't fail in this. He couldn't let her hurt them. He still had to fight.

He was moving now, a faint wind brushing his face and the heavy gait jolting every injury to new life. He was barely aware of the muttered apologies that sounded sincere but he knew were just a cheap imitation. He needed to wake up from whatever this was. Even now, with clarity burning strong from fear, he could feel the all too constant cloud descending.

"You're okay, you're safe," Hunk chanted above him. "Estás seguro, estás bien." The words that had filled him with such peace before only brought the panic back and he thrashed again in the
cocoon of restraints. He didn't believe it. Not a word.

He couldn't believe it.

It wasn't real. It wasn't. He had to keep telling himself that. He wouldn't give in. Nothing they said or did could convince him otherwise.

But then...

His eyes widened and without meaning to he ceased his struggles. No… it couldn't be. But this feeling… this was… this was…

*My Paladin!* roared out the voice of Blue, echoing both inside and outside his head, the almost overwhelming feelings of comfort and despair and *love* washing over him.

Lance flinched at the address — not my, not hers, he wasn't hers — but soaked up the presence. "Bl-Blue?" he whispered, voice a mere rasp.

It couldn't be her. He was with Haggar, with the Galrans.

But...

Safe with Lion she rumbled, her gentle presence wrapping about him. *My Paladin with Lion.* He shuddered against his will at the address again and although the warmth of her comfort did not vanish the despair became more prominent. *What have they done to my Paladin?* Blue whispered in his mind.

She could feel the unease at the declaration of love that normally filled her Paladin with such joy. So she changed tactics, twining her own quintessence about the battered makeup of her Paladin's. Cub she intoned instead, nuzzling his light with her own. Lion here. Cub safe.

"Blue," he breathed, just saying her name releasing something he didn't know he'd been holding.

Was she real? How could she not be real? He could feel her, her deep purrs reverberating inside. Lion here she repeated. Cub safe. Paladins and Lions saved cub.

And he...

He believed her. There was no way for Haggar, for anyone, to copy Blue. He sensed her comfort, her fierce protectiveness, and let it surround him. She was here. She was actually here. Which meant that…

That the arms holding him were Hunk's. His best friend. His brother. He was here. It wasn't a dream. It was real.

"Hunk," he whispered, the blanket binding his arms to him no longer seeming as suffocating, the arms not so constricting. "H-Hunk."

"Right here," came the choked reply. "I've got you, hermano."

Lance felt a sob tear itself from his throat, making it even harder to breathe, but for the first time it was a good pain. He buried his face up against Hunk's chest, breathing in the scent of honeysuckle and engine grease.

He was *safe.* It wasn't a dream. They had rescued him. The blurry memory of the last time he'd found himself crying in Hunk's arms surfaced and he tamped it down, along with the growing panic...
that they would find out what he'd done. He felt Blue's worry swirl around him then, but he pushed it away. Not yet. Not now. And Blue respected that, withdrawing although her fear was still palatable underneath the love and concern flowing down their link.

Blue turned her gaze to Yellow's Paladin as her own seemed to settle slightly, the tension bleeding from his shoulders. Tension and real blood. She felt her hackles rise. Black and Yellow's Paladins had sworn they would take care of him. Why was her Paladin still hurt?

She turned her speech outward to Yellow's Paladin, who was being quickly followed by the Black's Paladin and the Altean advisor into the hall. *What happened?* she demanded, keeping her roar low. *Why... why Cub still hurt?*

"He can't go into the pods yet," Yellow's Paladin explained, and once more she felt the honesty embedded in his words as well as the same despair and hurt she felt. "They need to charge."

"Soon?" she demanded. Her Paladin needed *healing*. He was *hurt* and in *pain* and she *hated* it. But she hated even more that she could not ease his suffering.

"As soon as possible," Black's Paladin spoke now, and Blue did not miss the way that her Paladin both stiffened and relaxed at the sound of his leader, and she felt a trickle of shame course down their bond. She sent back love and reassurance to drown that negativity out and was surprised to feel her Paladin shudder at the thought. She caught the glimpse of dark water before the image was pushed away, fear and horror prominent.

She turned her own attentions inward again. *Cub safe* she reassured. *Cub has nothing to fear. Lion will protect Cub. Lion promises. Lion will not fail Cub again.* Even with her reassurances she could feel his turmoil and shudders. She whined low in the back of her throat, wanting to do more. But after one such shudder she could feel the smallest release, of peace. It was not even close to what she wanted her Paladin to feel but it was a bit better.

A bit.

"We need to take him back to bed now," Black's Paladin continued, drawing her gaze and her orbs narrowed at the pale, haggard state this human was in as well. "He needs medical attention before he can go into the pods."

*Paladin's leader also needs pod* she observed. He had not looked so bad earlier, but she would bet one good tap with her paw and he would keel over. She felt the spike of fear from her Paladin at her words, but Black's Paladin huffed a genuine laugh.

"I am all right, really. Thank you for the concern though, Blue. But I'm all right."

And truth hung in his words behind the exhaustion even she could feel. Behind her she felt Black stir restlessly, but she did not get up from the floor; too weary after the onslaught with her old Paladin, but the fact there was not getting up to check for herself reassured Blue more than any other action.

*Then rest* she ordered the both of them, getting a mental grunt from Black at the chain of command being turned but her own leader did not argue.

*And you, Cub* she silently intoned. *Cub safe. Lion will not let any harm come to Cub.* And although the fear did not vanish she felt it recede at her words. Better still. She gave his quintessence another gentle nuzzle, projecting all the warmth and love she could. *Lion see Cub soon. Cub must go with Paladins now.*

"Lance?" Yellow's Paladin asked quietly. "You all right to go?" Her Paladin managed a small nod,
burrowing his face somehow deeper into Yellow's Paladin's chest. "Thank you, Blue," the human said to her.

Yellow's Paladin wise she said in turn. He had known exactly what her Paladin needed to set his own mind at ease. She had sensed his distress as soon as he was within distance of her. Lion thanks Yellow's Paladin for bringing Cub to Lion.

Yellow's Paladin gave her a genuine smile then. "We'll take good care of him. I promise."

She inclined her head.

The assorted group left then, walking at a rather sedate pace both for Lance and Shiro's sakes, as the latter realized jumping up and running down a hall after giving so much blood had not been the wisest choice, spots dancing in his vision that he tamped down by sheer force of will. Still, when Hunk had taken off with Lance bundled in his arms with no explanation whatsoever he'd had to follow.

He was certain everyone would have come too, save for Coran's unusually sharp bark to remain seated that had rooted both Allura and Pidge to the spot. Despite Keith's stubbornness to not listen to commands, both between his initial promise to Coran and his own injuries he'd remained stationary as well.

There were so many things Shiro wanted to say, wanted to ask, but he felt his tongue tied and everyone seemed to be the same as they made a silent procession back to Allura's room. That was, until surprisingly Lance broke the silence, tilting his head out from where he'd hidden it against Hunk.

"Sh-shiro?" he whispered, his voice a dry, distorted version of himself. "Coran?"

"Right here, my boy," Coran said, and all watched as Lance seemed to flinch. They exchanged confused, worried glances. But since Lance had instigated it, Coran ever so lightly placed a hand on the blankets surrounding Lance near his shoulder.

"I'm here too," Shiro murmured, coming up and placing his flesh hand just next to Coran's.

"You're real?" he asked, voice small. Hunk's arms tightened ever so slightly around him.

"As real as magical Lions and a castle ship in space," Shiro said, his own small smile falling as it failed to elicit any type of similar reaction in Lance. "We're real, buddy. You're safe now."

Lance managed a tiny nod. He turned wide, sightless eyes to them, the faintest of tears brimming in the black corners. "I'm… I'm so sorry," he choked out. "I—"

"Now, now, none of that," Coran cut him off. "You have nothing to be sorry for, my boy," and he frowned as Lance winced again. The advisor had a sinking feeling now as to what was causing such a reaction and his eyes narrowed while grief tugged at his heart. "You just need to concentrate on resting so you can get better," he continued, forcing aside the ugly rage that had sprung up in the direction of that witch.

Lance did not look convinced in the slightest.

"Coran is right," Shiro said gently. "No apologies needed."

"But—" he tried, chest growing tight. He had to apologize.
For everything. For his weakness. His capture. His failures. His... his... Lance's wrists twinged and he choked on a whimper.

"You're still really hurt, Lance. And sick too. You just need to rest right now, all right?" Shiro interrupted him. "We'll talk about everything else later."

And Lance was too exhausted to argue anymore and so he gave the barest of nods. Later.

His stomach curled already.

"Almost there," Hunk said, as if reading his mind.

"You'll stay?" Lance asked, hating how pathetic it sounded but unable to fight back the fear that was starting to bloom at the idea of Hunk leaving.

"I won't leave your side."

They must have returned to their destination because all of a sudden a chorus of "Lance!" had him recoiling at the noise and seeking refuge in Hunk's embrace, even as he recognized the voices as those of his friends, his family. He squeezed his eyes shut to hide the sudden tears that he couldn't fully explain.

"Easy, give us some space," Coran instructed and a few ticks later Lance felt himself being lowered from Hunk's arms, a sharp pang of loss immediately striking him while at the same time relief that no one was touching him. But he could feel Hunk's presence still, hovering just off to the side and the pillows and blankets below him soothed away some of the hurt.

"Lance," he heard Allura murmur, her regal tones sad. He startled ever so.

Allura had... said his name?

"Everyone's here," Hunk explained to him, thinking that was the reason for his movement.

And Lance believed him about that. But at the same time he needed to know for himself. Without his sight – and the familiar gripping fear invaded at its loss – he couldn't know for sure. They weren't like Blue where he could feel their presence and assurance. At the same time he was so afraid of the unknown, of even a gentle hand settling on his shoulder like Coran and Shiro had done. But feeling them, knowing it was them, had calmed him like nothing else could have. He was absolutely torn on what he wanted and had no idea how to express it. He needed to know they were all there, all safe, but he was still so scared of the action itself. Traitorous tears pricked his eyes again.

Pathetic.

"Hey, it's okay," Hunk said, picking up on what Lance couldn't voice. "Estás bien, Lance. How about everyone goes one at a time, okay? Just like Coran and Shiro. I'll be right here too. Can... can I put my hand on your shoulder?" Lance managed a nod and a large, warm and always gentle hand lighted upon him.

Lance released his breath, regretting it immediately as coughs wracked him, but all that happened was Hunk kindly rubbed his thumb in a circle on Lance's shoulder as he regained himself. He managed another tired nod, his eyes fluttering closed.

Hunk nodded at Allura to go, as Lance had already heard her speak. The princess returned the gesture solemnly. "Lance, it is Allura," she said. And butterfly-light her slender hand settled next to Hunk's.
"Allura," Lance repeated, feeling the weight on his chest lessen slightly.

Hunk nudged Keith to go next, as the smaller boy was swaying on his feet, face tight with pain, and really should be lying down himself. "Hey," he said thickly. "It's... it's Keith." And he brought his hand down on Lance's other shoulder. He felt the muscles stiffen beneath him before they smoothed out.

"Keith," Lance murmured. He had never heard his rival sound so choked up and the thought warmed him that that concern was for him. Maybe... maybe Keith didn't dislike him as much as he thought.

There was silence then and Lance broke it with a rasped, "Pidge?" as he tried to hold back the fear that something had happened to her. A sniffle near his head sounded from where Pidge had clambered back onto the bed, her arms not able to stretch like the others.

"Right here," she said. And her hand descended to rest on his head, short fingers smoothing through his hair.

Lance's breath hitched and before he even realized what he was doing he was jerking up, backpedaling away from her, and instinctively gasping out "don't touch me," as the feel of long nails and distorted caresses took Pidge's place. "Don't touch me," he repeated desperately, squeezing his eyes shut as a dark croon caressed his mind.

It was wrong.

It was wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong.

"Lance..." Pidge's broken sob brought him back to the present and he felt his stomach churn.

He'd hurt Pidge. She hadn't meant it. She wasn't Haggar. But still he found himself shuddering away from even Hunk's hand that came to rest back on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he managed. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm—"

"Lance, it's okay," Pidge whispered, although she didn't sound okay at all. "I'm the one who is sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean to... to hurt you." She seemed unsure and Lance hated that he had made her doubt, but he didn't even know how to try and explain why he didn't want her touching him. Shame burned his cheeks and he ducked his head so no one could see.

Around him the others were exchanged confused, scared glances, not sure what had brought on such a reaction and loathe to repeat it again. Lance was still cowering up against the headboard, face pale beneath the flush of fever.

"Estás bien," Hunk murmured. "Come on now, let's get you lying down again. You'll feel better." He carefully coaxed Lance out of his self-made corner and eased him back down onto the newest set of fresh sheets that Allura had the foresight to change while they were with Blue. Pidge scooted off the bed and dropped to the floor, shoulders hunched in. Allura drew her into a side embrace, rubbing the girl's shoulder gently.

"Can you hear me all right, Lance?" Coran asked. He received an exhausted inclination of the head against the throne of pillows propping Lance up. "I'm going to outline what is happening because time is of the essence. I know it might be a little hard to focus, so if you don't understand just let me know, all right?"

Another nod.
"I'll be brief. As Number Two said, I believe the saliidda should be about removed from your system and we have been giving your body fluids to replace what you have lost. You have also lost a good amount of blood, but we are doing what we can to replenish some of it. We have bandaged the injuries for now until a cryo-pod is available, but the best solution may be a medical procedure called stitches so as to best eliminate you from losing much more."

At that Lance's eyes pried themselves back open and even surrounded by black the fear was clear. "No," he whispered, the image of a needle bringing back the sharp sting of the injection that Theodek had used over and over and over. A single prick for the IV was all right, but anything else? He blanched. "Pl-please no."

"No stitches then," Coran assured, knowing that at this rate they may need to find something else to help close the injuries in the meantime as bandages were not doing the job. The Altean could almost feel Keith behind him wilt with relief too. He knew that this barbaric human practice was probably the best, but he would not force Lance against his wishes. They would do what they could and hope that a more stable environment would assist in the clotting.

"There are three other things we must take care of before you can go into the cryo-pod," Coran continued as quickly as he could. "One is the collar about your neck." Lance's breath hitched at the very mention of it. "Number Five disabled it, but we do still need to get it off. Unfortunately it does not have a clasp and we may have to resort to cutting it."

And Lance realized what that would mean. More pain. He swallowed back a sob. It never ended. Even here, amongst his family, he couldn't escape it. He couldn't escape anything. Haggar's dark promise rose up then, and he could almost hear her breathy cackle, hot on his face. There is no escape for you she whispered. Not from me.

He realized he must have gotten lost in the memory as he heard Hunk gently calling his name and only the soothing tones led him out of the darkness that had invaded his mind. "You with us again?" Hunk murmured, his hand a reassuring weight where it rested at the top of Lance's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, feeling his cheeks turn dark again. "I'm here."

"I am so sorry, Lance," Coran said, voice tinged with regret and his moustache drooping. "We will make the process as quick and painless as we possibly can."

And he knew that. Coran was no Haggar. So he forced himself to give a nod, even as a new wave of fatigue swept over him.

He was so tired.

"The next part is your fever," Coran said. "You are sick, ill. Given the severity of your injuries though we may have to allow them to take precedence; however, we have a few varga more until we can even think of a cryo-pod and it is my hope we may ease your fever and breathing before then." Lance inclined his head in acknowledgement, exhaustion tilting it more than himself.

Silence sounded then.

And? Lance wondered as Coran paused. What was the third thing? He could feel his focus starting to slip as the shock and fear from earlier gave way to the pain and exhaustion that had plagued him since he'd awoken in Galran captivity. He was just so tired.

"Your eyes," Coran said, voice low and heart aching as Lance stiffened again. "I am of the thought it is some type of Druid magic, but I'm afraid I know not much beyond that. Do you happen to know
the cause so we can correct it?"

The cause?

*It is my gift to you because I love you.*

Haggar's words bounced in his head and he moaned, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

She had done this. Because he had... he had... his breath caught and somehow the pain emanating from his wrists seemed to amplify. He moaned softly, squeezing his eyes tight. They were going to find out what a coward he was. How pathetic he was. Haggar was right. Haggar...

"Hey, hey," and Hunk was there, breaking through the fog again and Lance clung to his voice like a lifeline. "It's okay. *Estás bien.*"

"Let's not worry about that for right now then," Coran said. It was obvious the topic caused severe distress — more than he had expected even given the witch's involvement or he would not have brought it up so soon — and Lance was mentally in no state to respond right now. "We have a number of varga to go anyhow. How about we get you set up with some more fluids, hmm?"

Lance nodded to that and Coran set about prepping both the donated blood and another fluid pack. Miraculously the original one had remained secure after Hunk's dash from the room as it had been caught up in the blankets. After a few ticks of indecision, Coran opted to place a small amount of the sedative into the fluid bag this go around but knew this was likely the last time he could use it safely on the human body. He was tempted to hold off until they tried to remove the collar, but the boy's body needed rest now to strengthen it for what still had to happen.

"Get some sleep, Lance," Hunk suggested gently, his hand still lightly resting on the bed just above Lance's shoulder. He could see that his friend was losing the battle against exhaustion. "We'll figure everything out when you wake up."

"St-stay?" he whispered.

"We're not going anywhere," Hunk assured. "I'll be right here."

With Hunk's comforting presence hovering right next to him and projecting a safety he didn't think he'd ever experience again, the fear that was forcing him awake ebbed away.

"Sleep," Hunk murmured.

And Lance did.

Chapter End Notes

I had a number of ways I played around with for Lance waking up and really waffled between a few. I think after all he's been through Lance has every right to be suspicious of anything out of the ordinary. When he first wakes with Hunk and Coran he's in so much pain and so confused that when they take away some of the hurt (the water counteracting the saliidda touch) he accepts it. But now that he's able to think a tad more clearly with the absence of the saliidda he's suspicious because *this* isn't normal. Poor baby.
Blue steals the show again as a Lion of her majestic-ness should do. Who better to soothe Lance's fears than the one being that Haggar could not possibly hope to replicate? Lance knows he's safe now, but it's clear he's got some triggers that the team is slowly becoming aware of. How do you comfort someone who is terrified of comfort?

Extra big hugs to those beautiful reviewers who y'all should thank too for the early chapter: koalaoshiz, A_Zap, Brohaikyyu, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Person, glitteringconstellations, starrymellie, burple12345, Marsetta, Shelby, Fey_79, Catching_Rivers, Grace, PuppetMaster55, keepasecretgetastrawberry, soldmysoultofandoms, WolfFire, Faith, SketchyPeanut (FSPwrites), Redwizardfox, maychorian, Carley Hinman, alexries, Immortalfey and BrieCheese!

I'm pretty excited about this chapter and hope you all enjoyed it too! Please do drop a comment below. Thank you all so much!
Chapter Thirty-Two

Zarkon was furious.

He had been so close, the Black Lion within his grasp, and then those cursed Paladins had somehow overcome all of their injuries, their failures and fought back. They’d taken his Lion from him.

Broken sentries scattered the ground around the enraged Galran, an outlet for his roaring anger. He blasted one already prostrate on the ground, not even the resulting explosion cooling his temper. Haggar should have been there, he seethed. She should have been assisting him in the collection of the Black Lion rather than going after the Blue Paladin that she had become obsessed with.

Still… his lip curled into a dark grin. If he had to lose out on the Black Lion, again, at least she had lost something too.

Because if Zarkon was furious, than Haggar was beyond rage. And hearing the Druid’s shrieks of despair and anger was more than enough punishment to appease Zarkon.

Haggar had awoken alone in the destroyed hallway, body wracked with a pain she had not encountered for ages and she swore a painful death upon the Green Paladin. But that pain was nothing compared to the absolute agony that overtook her when she realized her Lance was gone. He and his quintessence were gone.

She had the barest drop of it in her possession, gathered in the instant before he repelled her back in his mindscape. And that drop taunted her, its power pushing against the confines but useless all on its own. It was delicious. Intoxicating. And it had been stolen from her.

Her Lance was an unexpected prize of this ruse. What had started as a simple trap and an opportunity to gain information had turned into a lust that could not be sated. She had to have him. She needed his quintessence. She could not live knowing that it existed outside of her.

There was only one viable solution. She would just have to go after him herself.

And, she thought, she may have an ally in her excursion.

She’d gone then to the officer’s quarters, lip curled in distaste, and all but the brooding Galran she sought had vacated, mumbled excuses. She sneered. Pathetic, the lot of them.

One was not quite so pathetic though, although his quick knockout on the bridge during the trade had done nothing for his image. But she supposed everyone perched there had been caught unawares by the barrage and she had been fortunate she had been able to shield herself as had. The fact he lived spoke to his own strength.

Theodek was an interesting specimen of Galran for sure. He had been assigned to assist her, yes, and she had written him off as nothing but the ordinary brutes that populated the ranks, but she had discovered his reasons for torturing her Lance ran much deeper than that. It had been thrilling to watch as he exacted his revenge for his fallen brother.

But...
He had not yet completed his revenge and the thought had to be just killing him inside. Still, he was so loyal to the emperor – and that was an excellent trait, to be sure – that he would never venture off on his own. But with a little outside view he may sing a different tune. And as much as she was loathe to admit it, she could not do this alone. She needed someone at the very least who was a skilled pilot as she would be likely too occupied with preparations to fly a craft after her Lance. And so…

"Commander Theodek," she called, voice a low rasp.

He ignored her.

She frowned, eyes narrowing dangerously.

"Commander," she repeated, sharper. "You will listen to me. Now."

The Galran’s head slowly lifted, yellow eyes narrowed.

"You will come with me on a retrieval mission," she said, meeting his gaze without a flinch.

Theodek growled, hand tightening about the gun he had been cleaning. She dared mock him, knowing that such a mission was how his brother had lost his life?

She chuckled, the sound low and dark. "Come now, I am not your enemy. We have a common goal, do we not?"

"You promised me his life, witch," he spat, no longer caring for the rudeness of it, "and you have gone back on your oath. What makes you think I would help you?"

"His life is still yours," she said placatingly, spreading her long fingers out before her. "I shall retrieve his quintessence, by force as it looks to be, and you may do with his body as you like after. His blood for your brother's."

His fists clenched at the reminder of his lost kin. Kin who had not yet been fully avenged, would not be avenged until the human ceased to draw breath.

He wanted the boy dead. He wanted him to suffer. What Haggar proposed was beyond tempting... but it was impossible. He knew the tracker had been disabled and their fleet had been unable to follow the Altean ship as it fled through a wormhole. They could be hiding anywhere in the universe.

"How?" he asked instead, not yet committing to anything.

Haggar removed a long chain from her neck, a small glass vial with a drop of ethereal blue shining at the end. "With this."

"Quintessence?"

"I can track my Lance," she said, gazing at the vial with a longing that made the commander feel more than uncomfortable. "Soon he will be back within my embrace."

"How long?" Theodek asked, contemplating. There was something else to this, he knew. The witch was not a generous sort to include him merely for his opportunity for revenge. She had use of him. He just wasn't sure of what.

At that a frown crossed her lips. "I will need time. Several quintants. It will be difficult to track it
with such a small amount and in such a vast area, but it is possible."

Theodek gave a slow nod. "I shall alert Emperor Zarkon," Theodek said, rising to his feet. Surely their lord would relish the opportunity to track down the Black Lion this way. It was no secret after all that his previous method of using the Druids' power was at a stalemate. And besides, with the mission approved by the emperor there would be none of Haggar's trickery aimed at him.

A wave of magic crashed down upon him, rendering him inert. "What is the meaning of this?" he snarled. "You dare go against Emperor Zarkon?"

He was right. The witch was up to something.

"I would dream of no such thing," Haggar said, waving a hand but not releasing him from her hold. "But this is an operation of stealth. Several thousand Galran warships would hinder my plans. And yours as well, Commander. If the entire fleet were to come then I daresay you would be forced to command them rather than exact your revenge."

Theodek huffed, seeing her logic. But still. This was near treason. Abandoning post and going off on an unapproved mission? Haggar may be able to get away with it, but he? A mere commander amongst hundreds?

"Oh, do not think so poorly of me," Haggar sneered, releasing him at last from her magic. "Everything I do is to assist my lord. Have you not heard my mention of my Lance's quintessence? Once I have it in my possession I will use it to dismantle the Paladins of Voltron from within and return with the Black Lion as a prize for Emperor Zarkon. And if you play your cards right, Commander, this could be a boon to advance you within the ranks. Perhaps even to the main fleet."

That gave him pause. He knew, knew, he should inform Zarkon of these plans, but the witch was right. If he did that then his brother would not be avenged by him, and that was the most important thing to him. But the promotion dangled like a carrot before him and he wanted it. Badly. He had been working to advance up the ranks, but there were so many Galra just like him eager to do anything for the Empire that he was one of hundreds.

This though. This was different. It would give him an edge. And when he advanced, just as his brother had hoped to help him, it would be like having him at his side again.

And that, he decided, was worth everything, even trusting the witch against his better instinct. What she spoke was truth, for now. He would go along with her plans for now, and should she show any signs of deceit... his hand tightened on the gigantic blaster. She would not live long enough to regret it.

"Fine," he bit out, trying not to show his pleasure at the thought. Haggar just laughed.

"Amuse yourself until then," she said. "Dream of revenge, ready your weapons, but do also prepare us a ship. As soon as my tracking is complete we will leave."

He offered her a short bow in answer and she swept from the room with a please smile. A dark grin pulled at his teeth. "Soon, brother," he promised, to the empty room. "Soon you shall be avenged."

xxx

The entire room was perfectly silent as Lance finally drifted off, broken only by the high squeaks of the mice as they popped up from where they'd hidden under the bed in all of the commotion. They scurried immediately to Allura, clambering up her legs to nestle against her neck.
"All is well," she assured them, but they could tell she was not being entirely truthful. Their own gazes drifted to that of the kind human who loved to play with them and sneak them food. They chirruped to one another, but did not dare approach to offer their own comfort in case it was anything but.

"Well," Coran said, clapping his hands together lightly so as not to rouse the sleeping occupant, "it seems we have some more to discuss. But Number One, Number Four, please sit down before you collapse."

Keith sank back from where he stood, just making it onto the chair and Shiro followed none too gracefully to the floor, the adrenaline that had moved him earlier all but gone and only Allura's quick reaction speed prevented him from smashing his head against the foot of the bed. Pidge felt like collapsing too, guilt gnawing at her stomach and making her legs shake. She still wasn't sure what exactly she'd done, but both times she'd touched Lance he had been terrified.

She tucked the offending hands to her chest, cradling left over right and feeling the tremble course through her. Was he scared of her? Was it because he remembered her when she disabled the collar and caused him such pain? Did he associate such a thing with her now?

She wasn't completely able to hold back the sob at the thought, drawing every eye in the room. Pidge tilted her head down like Lance had so they could not see her face. "I'm… I'm so sorry, everyone. I didn't mean to… to do that."

A pair of strong arms wrapped about her then and she sank into Hunk's embrace. "Oh Pidge," he murmured. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"But—"

"You didn't," he insisted. "We… we need to talk about what happened, but it isn't your fault. Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, not quite believing it but trusting Hunk.

"Number Two, your assistance again please," Coran requested. "Princess, Number Five, how about you retrieve some nourishment from the kitchen? We all need to keep up our own strength."

Allura nodded, seeing the wisdom of the suggestion. "Excellent suggestion, Coran. We shall return shortly." And gently steering Pidge from the room with the mice scampering to rest in the brunette's hair, the two left.

"Coran—" Shiro started, but was cut off by the advisor.

"Shiro," he said seriously. "Your body is very weak right now. Sit there and rest. Number Two and I will assist Lance." He turned to look at Keith. "You too, my boy. Stay right there and do not move."

Keith barely managed a nod, curled up on his side so he could watch the bed but so his head was cushioned on the armrest. Coran estimated he'd be asleep within a few minutes. Piloting the castle ship, then straight into a mission and battling Haggar and following it all with severe injuries? It was a wonder he was even awake now and a testament to both his strength and his stubbornness.

"What do you need me to do?" Hunk asked, making his way to the Altean's side.

"All of his bandages need changed," Coran frowned. "I have an antiseptic cream we shall apply too; my hope is that in addition to assisting in the prevention – or worsening – of infection it may help to clot the wounds."
"Good idea," Hunk said.

The two worked in silence, each taking a side and gingerly working to first unwrap the bloodied bandages and then replace them with clean new ones and a healthy coverage of antiseptic. Lance stirred once or twice, particularly when Hunk was dabbing the paste around the worst of the wound in his left hand and trying very hard not to vomit, but Coran's soft tones had him sinking back under within seconds.

They bandaged a few new injuries too that Lance had given himself in his attempt to get away and Coran did what he could for the small puncture wounds Lance had inflicted on his scalp.

Bruises were starting to show more now and Coran estimated that the boy had a few cracked if not broken ribs, which only further hindered his breathing.

Still, he did what he could, propping Lance somewhat up on the pillows to relieve some of the strain. His back was relatively unscathed, minus any exit wounds, which led him to believe that most of the injuries had been inflicted while Lance was held down. It made his blood just boil that Lance had been kept so defenseless.

Hunk finished off their re-bandaging with a cold wash cloth that he placed over Lance's forehead in an attempt to control the fever that only seemed to be growing in intensity. On one hand it was good that his body was fighting the infection, but too much higher and it would become dangerous. And Hunk was loathe to have to place Lance in a bath given his current fear of water. He wouldn't do that to him again.

Allura and Pidge returned bearing steaming cups that smelled vaguely of strawberries and an assortment of what looked like rolls and some type of jerky that Hunk had been drying for the past few weeks.

The mice bore a cup over to Shiro, who very carefully accepted it from them. His hand was shaking slightly and a bit of hot liquid spilled over the edge, landing on his wrist. He hissed lightly, but shook his head as Coran made to come over. "It's fine. I'm fine. Just clumsy."

"You are exhausted," Allura countered. "Shiro, you must rest."

"No," he said firmly. "Not now. Not until Lance is all right." Both of their eyes flicked to Keith then – who should also be in bed resting – who had stirred as the mice pushed a roll against his mouth and nose.

As if sensing the stares, around the bread Keith mumbled, "I'm awake," and slowly pushed himself to some semblance of sitting.

"Both of you," Allura decided. "As soon as we all speak you are then to retire to sleep." She held up a hand against the incoming protests. "You may stay here, but you will sleep." She looked about the room, meeting each set of eyes. "That goes for everyone. Myself and Coran shall watch over Lance in the interim. It has been a long day and you must let your bodies rest."

"What about you?" Pidge countered. "You've been in the thick of things too."

"Alteans do not require as much sleep as humans," Allura explained. "Truly, I am all right for now. I promise I will rest later."

"We shall make this a quick discussion then," Coran said, swallowing down a bite of jerky. "As we all have seen, touch seems to be an issue. It is not due merely to the saliidda as I had thought earlier. Lance's head seems to be the source of the most distress" – Pidge lowered her eyes guiltily – "so I
would recommend we all avoid that area and in general as much contact as possible until Lance is ready. Without his sight he likely feels even more vulnerable to have hands coming out of nowhere."

"If it doesn't hurt him though, what is it?" Shiro asked, knowing some concept was floating just out of reach. His head pulsed and he pushed his hand to it to ward off the oncoming headache. "Lance loves – loved – things like that." Love. Touch. Shiro's stomach curled with a dread he could not quite explain and his head ached more.

Coran sighed, his voice sad. "I have an idea and it is one we may not like. Given that most of us have tuned in to one video feed or another" – Pidge ducked her head even further – "we have heard the… possessive… nature that Haggar speaks of Lance with, yes?" Nods all around the room.

"We have heard her address Number One on multiple occasions as well with such a possession – my Shiro," Coran said, throwing a sympathetic look at Shiro whose eyes were widening with realization and something tight was taking up residence in his chest. "I believe that Haggar may have used a similar address towards Lance, possibly calling him 'my Lance,' and given his reaction to any addresses even hinting at such I believe she did so many, many times."

"He's not yours," Keith and Shiro breathed as one, before startled eyes met each other in question.

"What did you say?" Shiro demanded before Keith could ask the same.

My Shiro, my champion, he could hear her whisper. He shook his head, trying to dislodge it and tune back into Keith who was speaking.

"Haggar said that when I ran into her in the hall. She asked where her Lance was," Keith said.
"That's what I told her. He's not yours."

"She said something similar to me," Shiro managed, feeling even more sick now and the pressure at his temples building. He tried to ignore it. "I said the same thing back."

He heard Haggar's whispers again and shuddered.

Not now.

"It is why he reacted so strongly to my own words," Coran said, moustache drooping. "And even to the Blue Lion's address."

"What are you saying, Coran?" Allura asked, voice sharp with worry. "What does this have to do with his fear of touch?"

"I do not think it is the violent wounds or torture that Lance underwent that made him have a negative reaction to touch," Coran said softly. "I believe it to be the opposite. That Haggar may have performed gestures, such as playing with his hair, as another form of torture. Coupled with her possessiveness I fear she may have treated Lance as an object or pet rather than a person and he in turn now associates any kindness or endearment with her actions."

Allura's hand had gone to her mouth in horror and Hunk and Pidge both looked ill, Pidge glancing at her hands again as if they were the cause of the pain. Keith's lips drawn thin, a tremble to his body that had nothing to do with his injuries. Beads of sweat were dotting Shiro's forehead and he felt acid trying to creep up his throat.

He knew exactly what Coran was saying.

"So… so what you are saying," Hunk whispered, "is that we can't comfort him? Because… because
he associates it with Haggar?"

"That is just my observation," Coran said. "There could be other reasons."

"No," Shiro said, tongue thick. "I'm sure..." his head gave another pulse and he didn't manage to finish his words before what felt like starbursts flashed in his mind and he felt phantom hands card through his hair, words meant to be soothing but anything but echoing about his mind as he trembled on a table, fresh agony dripping from what used to be his arm. He sucked in a harsh breath, swallowing down acid, as reality came back, leaving him with another memory even as the pounding in his head lessened.

"Shiro?" Keith murmured. "Did—?" Had he remembered something?

"Yes, no... I don't want to..." he trailed off, clenching his fists so hard the metal of his prosthetic whined. "I don't want to talk about it," he finished quickly, air suddenly hard to come by. He knew and they knew now that Coran's observations were absolutely correct. And, Shiro thought with horror, he had no doubts Lance had undergone something even more than he had when it came to that side of Haggar. She had been possessive of her champion... from what little he'd seen she was obsessed with Lance.

Movement to his right had him lifting his head and he only startled a bit when Pidge wormed her way under his arm, snuggling up to his side, and ticks later all four mice were pressed against his leg.

"Shiro," Allura called gently, and it took all of his inner strength to look up and meet her intense gaze. But there was no judgment there or disappointment that someone like him was their leader. Just a tenderness and understanding that almost had Shiro ducking his head again. "We are here for you."

He managed a nod, speech locked up for the moment.

Coran fortunately saved him from any more introspection, gently clearing his throat to move back to their discussion about Lance.

"For now, given what we have observed, it is my recommendation we keep any contact to a minimum unless Lance requests it," he said. "Any touch should be announced beforehand so he knows to expect it. On that note, we do need to remove collar and the manacles as well, but I think it would be best if we were to do so either while he is conscious and mostly coherent or completely sedated. On that end though, I am not sure it is safe to continue to administer the sedative. I may even be pushing my luck now, but his body needs the rest. As loathe as I am to say, we will likely need to remove these items while Lance is awake."

"How exactly are we removing the collar?" Pidge asked, her tone darkening on the last word. "I didn't get a good look at it, but I didn't see a latch. And there is no give either."

"We will have to cut it off," Coran replied. "The manacles do not look to be too much of an issue and I think we may even be able to pull them free with a clamp. However, the collar is made of udium steel; it is a favored metal for crystal conduction, and is nearly indestructible. The only device that we have on hand right now to cut through would be Number One's arm."

Shiro's eyes widened and glanced down to the arm in question that was wrapped securely about Pidge. He remembered the fear when the same thought had crossed his mind and the way his hand had shaken even as he drilled through the chain links, which must have been made of the same material given the trouble he'd had.

*That* was the metal surrounding Lance's neck? His very vulnerable neck? He couldn't... he
couldn't... His vision tunneled in on the weapon that had become fused to him, that Haggar had forced upon him, everything else fading out. He couldn't do this. He'd kill Lance. He couldn't...

Memories of Lance's face, screwed up in horror and Keith's pleas for him to stop filled his mind, as metal shrieked and sparks flew and Lance whimpered and cried. No. He couldn't do this. He couldn't.

Not again. Not again not again not again not aga—

"Deep breaths, Shiro. That's it, there you go," Hunk's gentle tones broke through the spiraling thoughts and Shiro blinked, disoriented, as Hunk's face hovered above his. He'd fallen over?

Yes, it appeared he had, as Pidge and Keith's worried faces joined Hunk and he was aware his head was pillowed on something soft – a blanket upon further inspection. He felt a flush stain his cheeks. Had he fainted?

"You gave too much blood," Pidge told him matter-of-factly, although there was still a tremble in her voice. "I told you so," she added without any heat.

"That is enough for now," Coran said. "I am sorry for the distress, Shiro. Number Five is right and you need to rest. Do not think any further on such matters. We will discuss these things later."

"Everyone should find a spot to sleep. Shiro you are to remain there," Allura ordered, more shaken than she would admit. It was too much like the first transmission Haggar had sent, where Shiro had fallen to his memories and even her coaxing could not wake him. She had never seen him so vulnerable and she wished with all her heart that he never had to go through that again. Even now, months away from his Galran captivity, Shiro suffered. She hated to think of what that meant for Lance.

Pidge remained at Shiro's side, curling up so that her back was flush to his prosthetic and Hunk threw a large quilt over the both of them with a sad smile. Coran helped guide Keith, who was more than stumbling at this point, back to the overlarge chair and arranged him so he was lying as comfortably as possible.

Hunk returned to his chair by Lance's head and after a few seconds consideration placed one of his hands just next to Lance's shoulder. He'd promised he wouldn't leave his side and although Lance wasn't keen on touch, he didn't want him to wake and feel alone. The mice seemed to have the same idea and gathered themselves on a spare pillow on the bed.

Allura dimmed the lights in the room; still plenty bright enough for her and Coran to maneuver but a little more comfortable for those sleeping. She really needn't have bothered, as in under two dobashes everyone was sound asleep as exhaustion won the battle against everything else.

She slumped down next to Coran on a matching ottoman that had been dragged to the side of the bed opposite Hunk, and gratefully leaned into his embrace.

"And how are you, Allura?" he asked quietly, the use of her given name not going amiss by either. Despite their familiarity he normally referred to her as princess as both a sign of respect and a term of endearment, a flash to happier times where she had swung about his neck in wild hugs and he'd tucked her into bed after regaling her with stories. His little princess, who was his daughter in all but blood.

"I am tired," she admitted. "You?"

"The same," he responded and she could hear it in just those two syllables. "I should check the
crystals—"

"Stay," she commanded, gripping his sleeve before he could even think of getting up. "Just for a few more dobashes."

They lapsed into a companionable silence, broken only by the still harsh gasps and small coughs that still wracked Lance. Coran leaned forward and carefully re-wet the cloth, making sure to squeeze out all excess water. He left his hand gently resting on Lance's forehead atop the cloth, his own eyes closed in pain as the boy shuddered unconsciously under the touch.

"Oh, Coran," Allura whispered.

"He has been through so much," Coran said, sinking back onto the seat, his hands trembling. "I wish there was something more I could do."

Allura took one of his hands between her own, merely holding it. "You are giving all of yourself. There is no more any could ask for."

"I fear for him, Allura. Lance is strong, but he is still a child. What the Druid has done to him…" His eyes hardened. "She has taken his light and darkened it. I fear that much of this is beyond my expertise and…" he broke off. "I do not entirely know what to do. And that thought frightens me."

"He is still full of light," Allura said gently. "Underneath the fear he still reaches for us, he still holds to life. And we will be there in whatever capacity we can to help him. His will is strong and he will be all right."

Coran opened his mouth and then snapped it closed.

Allura raised an eyebrow at the action. "Something you wish to tell me?"

"No, Princess." Seeing her gaze narrow he added, "If it becomes of importance I shall keep you informed. But right now you need not concern yourself. As you said, Lance will be all right."

"Indeed I did," she murmured. "And I believe that with all my heart."

They remained silent again before Coran stood. "I will go check on the crystals now. And perhaps find a change of clothes." He had already removed his overcoat following his impromptu bath, but there were a few dark streaks that stained his shirt.

"Take your time. Perhaps a hot shower too?"

Coran chuckled without humor. "I should be saying the same to you, Princess. I was not even in the battle; you must be even more exhausted than myself."

She shook her head. "The hardest part of any battle falls on those forced to wait. Normally both of us remain on the ship while the Paladins fight. But you were here all alone and—" The rest of her words lodged in her throat as the too-recent memory of her near encounter with death struck her. Alone. He would have been alone for forever. The last Altean, the last of Team Voltron. Coran would have been here, waiting and waiting and never knowing what had happened to them.

"Allura, what is wrong?" Coran dropped in front of her, gently holding her by both upper arms, fear growing as a tear slipped down her cheek. "Allura?"

"I thought I was going to die," she cried softly, no longer able to hold back the fear, the memory. She trembled. "Zarkon he… and then you'd have been left all alone. I tried to send a message, but…"
She shook her head, recalling the systems going dark around her and the realization that she was not going to be able to say goodbye.

"What?" Coran breathed, fear morphing to horror. Allura had said nothing of the sort in the debriefing. But then again… she wouldn't have. She was too much like Shiro at times, he thought sadly. Too willing to take on the world's burdens and share none of that weight. And although he could never blame Alfor for how things had turned out, he cursed that someone as young as Allura had to bear all of their mistakes.

"I am so sorry. It was beyond selfish of me to leave you here by yourself. I did not… I did not think it would…" she swallowed thickly. "I am so sorry, Coran. If Blue had not… had not… he would have k-killed me." The stutter felt foreign on her tongue and Allura hiccuped back her next sob.

"Shh," Coran soothed, pulling her into a hug, one hand going to rub her back. "No need for apologies, Allura. I am just glad you're safe."

"But Coran… you would have been all alone." And that thought hurt her more than anything else, even over the fear of death.

"There, there," he comforted. "It's all right."

He honestly was not sure what his course of action would have been had all of the Paladins and his princess been taken out. Perhaps he'd have tried to unite those he could opposed to Zarkon, join with the elusive Blades of Marmora, and bided his time.

But more than likely he'd have taken the castle and committed one final attack. He had been a soldier long before he was an advisor. Even if he could not save the universe as was Alfor's goal, he would be sure to take Zarkon out with him and avenge his fallen comrades. Yes, he thought, heart clenching. That would have been his recourse. And then... then he would not have been alone for very long at all.

Allura's hiccuped sobs gave way to shuddering breaths and Coran released her from the embrace, hands going back to her shoulders and searching crystal-lined eyes for answers. "You are all right?" he asked.

She managed a nod. "I am not hurt."

"That isn't what I asked," he chided gently.

She sniffled. "I know. I…" she trailed off.

"It is all right to be scared. If you were not you would not make such a good leader. It is only natural to fear death. And the fact that you were scared not only for yourself, but for your team and even the fate of myself… You have a strong, beautiful, courageous heart, Allura. Do not ever think otherwise."

A watery smiled turned up her lips. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

Coran chuckled. "I haven't the faintest clue. Why, I should have thrust you back into your father's arms as soon as he insisted I hold you because you repaid my kindness by yanking so hard on my moustache that half of it came right out."

Allura's eyes widened and she let out a sound between a sob and a laugh. "That is not true!" Her gaze narrowed playfully. "As I recall I ripped the whole thing out."
"A true hellion."

Her face sobered, although it still remained fond. "I am serious, Coran. I could not have even attempted this without you."

He took both of her hands in his. "I am with you until the end, Princess. Whatever that may be." His eyes crinkled into a smile. "So let us look for a happy one, hmm?"

She smiled and Coran was pleased to see that there was a twinkle back in her eyes that had been absent of late. "Perhaps you should look for the shower first?"

"So cruel." Still he rose. "You will be all right while I'm gone? I should be back in under thirty dobashes."

"Please, take your time. I shall awaken Hunk if necessary."

"Then I will see you soon."

Allura rose to her feet after her fellow Altean left, glancing around the room full of sleeping Paladins. A small smile tugged her lips upward as in the course of their slumber Pidge had wrapped all of her arms and legs about Shiro's right arm like some type of slothie-bear. Allura crossed to readjust the blankets over them and then continued on to her dresser on the far wall.

She removed one of her belted tunics and equally soft leggings. She rarely wore such casual outfits these days, but her armor was much too constricting and her flowing dresses would do no good if she needed to respond to Lance in an emergency.

Stepping behind the screen by her closet, Allura made quick work of shedding her battlesuit, massaging her neck as the high collar came off, and pulled on her new outfit. She shook her hair out of the pins, a cascade of white flowing down her back.

The entire process took under two dobashes and she silently made her way back to the available chair. Lance had not so much as shifted, although as she settled Plachu pulled himself away from his siblings and darted over to scurry up her arm to nuzzle her cheek.

"Thank you, my friend," she whispered, placing a soft kiss on the velvety head. "You will keep me company?"

Plachu chirped and nestled into the hair on her shoulder.

Speaking with Coran had helped her more than she had thought. The fear that had been trembling in the back of her mind since she faced her own death had receded, allowing her to fully focus on what was most important: healing her family.

She knew it was not going to be easy. The wounds Haggar had inflicted ran deep and they had just barely scratched the surface. And although she was not sure she could claim to know Lance as she had previously thought, she did know that he was as kind and loyal and strong as her original assessment had been, if not even moreso.

He would get through this. They all would. And knowing her family was safe and whole and loved… that would be more than enough for her happy ending.

Chapter End Notes
I've had a number of questions about Haggar and Theodek and as you can see they are not out of our story yet. I do so hate loose ends and leaving our main villains unaccounted for would be the height of poor writing xD So it's not yet over for Lance. Watch out, sweetie!

Some more lovely bonding moments between our Voltron family while Lance is (once again) unconscious. He needs the rest though and they need to sort out some stuff. Like, no more head touching, Pidge! Poor thing she just wants to comfort him and Haggar's ruined that for all of them. Boooo! Also, as y'all know, I'm a sucker for Coran so he and Allura get a nice moment together. All the Coran love. ♥

Also! After all the fun I had at the last one I've opted to do another Q&A session! (disclaimer; I'm also being forced into a few 12-hour shifts for the next few Saturdays and need something to keep me happy xD) It will be set for Saturday, Sept 30 at 1130 CST to 1330/1400 CST. This time around though I'm also actually looking for some assistance (for research purposes for the fic) so there are a few questions on the document. If you'd like to answer those and post your answers on the google doc I'd appreciate it! Also space for you to leave questions ahead of time if you can't make the chat. Link here:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oCLRihNGMFTj4Hi6y_nIzSydriELdnKftjorzRD-Bg0/edit

Last but not least, the hugest of thanks to the amazing reviewers. If you are are a reviewer go ahead and give yourself a hug and then multiply that by 10,000 because you deserve all of the hugs. All my love and hugs to: glitteringconstellations, Catching_Rivers, Ahhuya, WolfFire, EverlastingCookie, soldmysoultofandoms, PuppetMaster55, koalaoshiz, QueenMcawesome, starrymellie, TabbiCC, Brohaikyuu, Grace, Fey_79, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Proxy_17, Person, burple12345, Marsetta, maychorian, cipheredsong, saababa, RimaPichi, heyheroics, and Brie Cheese!

As always, if you've got a tick please do drop a comment below and make the authoress beyond happy! Muchas gracias! See y'all next chapter!
Was that… was that cinnamon?

Lance's nose tickled at the scent. Not quite, he realized after taking another soft inhalation. But it was close. It was nice.

Where was he? The unknown had him stiffening, body protesting the movement and a sharp pain stabbing his chest as his breath caught. So much had happened. Was it a dream? He recalled Hunk holding him tight and the gentle tones of Coran. And Blue. He could almost feel a purr echoing through him, soothing away the hurt for just a moment.

That was real, right?

He shivered, the action setting off flares of pain. He was so cold. It was… it was just like with the Galrans. Another shiver. Why was it so cold? If he'd been rescued, why did everything still hurt? He went to speak, but chapped lips grated upon one another and he swallowed back his words.

He opened his eyes to figure out where he was, but only more darkness greeted him. Panic hitched in his chest until he recalled that Haggar had cursed him again. It was a hard thought to come by as everything seemed hazy. Fever. He remembered that from last time. Unless this was still that time. He was still in phase one and locked in his cell and everything else he'd endured had just been a living nightmare.

It couldn't be though? Could it?

_Dios_, please no.

He couldn't go through that again.

He tentatively stretched a hand out gut clenching as he expected to feel cold metal under his fingertips. But only the sensation of some type of cloth – sheets? – and then fresh pain, dulled though from what he remembered, arced up his entire arm.

He took another breath of the not-quite-cinnamon smell. It reminded him of home. Of his Mamá. Of safety.

He was safe.

This was real.

His chest hitched again, not with pain and fear but a sob of relief.

He was safe.

"Hey," a voice said and Lance startled, even though the tone was soft. The voice lowered even further. "It's all right, _hermano_. _Estás bien_. It's Hunk."

Hunk. Just repeating the name in his head made that feeling of safety grow and he relaxed ever so slightly again. But then another shiver disrupted the peace he'd found and he could almost hear his teeth clacking in his head.
"H-hunk?" he whispered, wincing at both the sound of his own voice and the way speaking grated his throat.

"Yeah, it's me. Can… can I put my hand on your shoulder? Just a finger, I promise."

Lance nodded. And seconds later warmth – Oh Dios, warmth – lighted like a candle on that very spot. If he'd been able to Lance would have rolled right over to soak up all of it, but even shifting slightly reawakened sleeping wounds.

"C-cold," he managed, wincing as another shudder tore through him.

"I know, I know," Hunk said, his voice just dripping with apology. "You've got a really bad fever. I… I have a Glornack seed if you're up to taking it."

Take it…? Oh. Unseeing widened. He'd have to swallow it. The memory of what happened the last time he'd tried to drink water had his cheeks heating in embarrassment but his insides freezing with dread.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Hunk said, a second finger joining to give Lance's shoulder a small squeeze. "We don't have to do that right now. You're still just waking up and I'm sure everything is pretty scary, yeah? You're cold, right? How about I get you a light blanket?"

And although his entire body screamed at him, Lance managed to reach up with his left hand and wrap his fingers about Hunk's. "D-don't…" Don't go. He needed Hunk. He was all alone without him.

"I'll stay right here. Can Allura get you a blanket instead?"

Allura? The princess was here, watching him? Seeing him panic at the thought of Hunk stepping a few feet away? Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic. And although he knew it was Haggar, he could still hear the cruel words echoing in Allura's voice: Anyone who would fall so far is no Paladin of Voltron.

"Lance." Her voice was lilting in the same way as Coran's, but filled also with a sense of regality that made him feel so insignificant. He flinched. "Lance," she repeated, and she sounded so sad and worried. About him? "It is just I and Hunk. Please, may I fetch you a blanket?"

He gave a tiny nod. She didn't sound upset with him but he didn't know what he could trust anymore. Everything was still sort of hazy.

"All right," she said a few ticks later. "It is just a light blanket. I am going to place it over you now."

And then something not quite warm but soft and silks gently touched down on his shoulder and fell across his body. He drew his feet up, whimpering at the movement, but wanting to make sure they made it underneath too.

"That a little better?" Hunk asked.

Lance just curled up as best he could under the blanket, body wracked with a new wave of shivers and coupled with a painful cough.

Hunk ached to just scoop him into his arms. He looked so small and scared. His fever had climbed higher, prompting Allura to wake Hunk after not even an hour of rest. Coran was already down in the medical bay, trying to convert the Glornack seed into a liquid so he could add it to the vein valve, as he and Hunk had both come to the conclusion that getting Lance to swallow it was not going to happen in the near future.
In addition to the fever, which was about one hundred and two degrees from Hunk's rough calculations of Altean, he was wracked with chills and those were ultimately what had woken him up. And as much as Hunk wanted to just bundle him in blankets until he was warm he knew that was not a good idea. They needed the fever to come down and it needed to break before he went into a cryo-pod. Lance could not delay the healing needed for his injuries, but placing him in one while he was sick – pneumonia, definitely, Hunk had concluded – could be just as life-threatening.

Everyone else was still passed out around the room and Hunk was grateful. Lance would not want an audience when he was feeling this vulnerable. Even saying that Allura was present had made him flinch and Allura had looked stricken at the reaction, no doubt thinking back to her and Hunk's earlier discussion.

"Everyone else is sleeping," he told Lance gently. "If you can manage it, you should too. You've got a bad case of pneumonia and you need the rest."

"I'm sorry," Lance mumbled.

"What are you apologizing for?" Hunk chided. "You're sick and really hurt, Lance. That's nothing to be sorry about."

Lance just ducked his head.

He wanted to sleep. He did. And although he knew he was in the castle and surrounded by friends, it didn't stop the inkling of doubt that when he woke next he'd be back in his cell. Wishing for water – and he shuddered – and nearly delusional.

He was safe now.

He knew he wouldn't be safe in his dreams.

Hunk started humming then, the vibrations traveling down and warming Lance from the inside. He leaned into the light touch on his shoulder, desperate for more but at the same time scared of too much. Hunk understood though. Somehow Hunk always understood.

Lance wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve him.

Guided by the soft humming and the comforting scent of almost-cinnamon, Lance found himself relaxing further and further until at last he slipped into slumber.

Hunk looked up to Allura once he was certain Lance was asleep, his own eyes rimmed with exhaustion although he gave her a sincere smile. "That was a good idea with the carmodian leaves," he said. "I think it helped."

Allura matched his smile hesitantly. "You do?"

"Mm. Even I feel relaxed."

While Allura had been sitting alone in her vigil, the princess had been brainstorming ways to help soothe Lance that did not involve touch. Smells could be very powerful she'd realized, and even more so to someone who had no vision. She hadn't had much of an idea of what scent Lance might find comforting though.

She'd posed the idea to Coran when he had returned, with an update that the crystal was progressing well and should be ready in just about two varga. She hoped Lance was ready by then.
Her advisor had tapped his chin in thought and suggested oil as Lance did enjoy hanging around Hunk while his friend tinkered with projects. Allura had wrinkled her nose though at the thought of that scent invading the room and Coran had decided perhaps it was not the best for such an enclosed space.

Then he'd mentioned that Lance liked the scent of something called cinnamon. Supposedly the carmodian leaves that Coran sometimes used to flavor tea had a similar scent and Allura had run down to the kitchen to retrieve all that they had left.

She'd brewed several in water and left it simmering on a hot plate on her nightstand table. The scent was pleasant and permeated the room. She had been heartened when upon waking Lance had seemed to smell it and had relaxed ever so slightly.

"How long do these fevers take to heal?" she asked quietly, re-wetting the towel as she had seen Coran and Hunk do and placing it against Lance's brow.

"It depends. Lance has got it really bad though. He really needs to be on antibiotics, but none of us know enough about biology to even start working on a medicine. The Glornack seed would be helpful, but unless Coran can figure out a way to liquidize it… he can't swallow anything right now and I would never force him to."

"Hunk…" Allura's voice was grim. "If this fever is not healed by the time the cryo-pod is ready…"

"I know." A weary hand scrubbed at his face. "I don't know what's worse at this point; the illness or his wounds. We seem to have stabilized him for now, but Shiro's blood is already almost out and we can't take anymore from him for a while."

Both turned their gazes to the man in question. He was still paler than normal and so deeply unconscious that Hunk knew he was suffering the aftereffects of blood loss from his transfusion. Shiro was normally a pretty light sleeper and he should have woken up several times by now even with the minimal noise, but he was still completely out.

"Lance is still losing blood," Allura observed. She had not dared change the bandages herself, but had already had to wrap another layer around Lance's hands, feet and wrists and she had padded his side with more pieces. It was much slower than it had been before, likely due to the antiseptic, but it was still not fully clotting.

"And he will unless we stitch him up or heal him in the cryo-pod." Hunk hung his head. "I don't know what to do, Allura. Logic tells me we should do whatever we have to to save his life; seal his wounds and force him to take the medicine. But he would never, ever, trust us again if we did that. I can't do that to him."

"I agree," she said, placing a hand on Hunk's shoulder. "We must believe in him. He will pull through." Hunk gave a hum of agreement. "And now, back to bed for you as well. You are exhausted," she said heading off as Hunk opened his mouth in protest. "I will awaken you if needed, but you must sleep."

Hunk sighed, but knew her words were true. "Can't ignore an order from a princess," Hunk finally said with a small smile that Allura matched. He slowly made his way back to his designated chair, sinking down into it with a sigh. "G'night, Allura."

"Good night, Hunk."

He was out like a light, leaving Allura once more on her own. She didn't have to wait long though as
Coran came bustling through, a grin splitting his face. That could only mean his endeavor had been successful and Allura beamed back.

"It took a few seeds, but I've got a nice dosage here," her advisor grinned, holding up a vial of a creamy light-brown substance. "I'm just going to add it to the fluid pouch and see if we can't bring his body temperature down."

"You outdid yourself," she praised.

He tweaked his moustache, pleased. But his expression sobered as he rejoined her. "I was unable to find anything we have onboard the ship to use to free Lance from the collar though. The only other option I can think of is the Lion's phasers, but they would never be able to concentrate on such a small space."

"So Shiro's arm..."

"Looks to be the only way," Coran said grimly. "The poor lad. I never wished to place such a burden on him."

"He will not fail," Allura said. No matter his earlier reaction she knew that Shiro would rise to the task. He would always come through for his team.

"That he will not. And now, Princess, I must insist you get some rest as well. I shall take a spell once Lance is in the cryo-pod," he said to her narrowing gaze. "I will be fine until then."

She nodded. As if pointing out she should sleep as well her body suddenly felt incredibly heavy. Perhaps a nap would do her some good.

Vacating the chair and ignoring Coran's protests, she grabbed a blanket and settled herself on the floor behind Hunk's seat. And taking in a deep breath of the carmodian leaves she drifted off as well.

xxx

When Lance awoke the next time it was to the sound of murmuring voices and the still pleasant not-cinnamon smell. And although he was still cold and still hurting, there was something else. It took longer than it should have, but he finally identified the feeling. Safe. Hunk was here. Blue, Shiro, his family... they were all here. He was safe.

He liked it. It reminded him of being wrapped in a warm blanket on a cold winter day. That though made him realize how cold he still was and he shivered again.

Trying to ignore the tremor, he strained instead to hear what was being said over the hoarse sound of his own breathing. Whoever was watching him – and he hated the fear that flared up at not knowing – either hadn't noticed or was letting him come to on his own. He was grateful. It gave him a chance to try and put his thoughts in some semblance of order.

The voices were a little clearer now and he recognized them as Pidge – her voice a high-pitched breathy whisper – and that stubborn sounding voice could be none other than Keith.

"Hold still," he heard Pidge mutter. "I'm almost done."

Keith hissed in apparent pain and Pidge's voice rose. "I'm sorry, sorry, just a second. Coran made this look so easy."

"Yeah well," Keith broke off. "Can you not pull so tight?" he continued, voice tight.
Lance frowned as he tried to piece together what was happening. Was Keith… was Keith hurt?

"Allura's not going to be happy when she sees you bled all over her blankets," Pidge said. She sounded upset, but not for that reason. "I thought you said it wasn't bad."

"It isn't," came the curt reply.

"We have very different definitions of that word."

"Shiro said the same thing."

"And that's why Shiro is the leader. He knows basic vocabulary."

The room went quiet then before there was the sound of a sniffle. "Sorry," Pidge mumbled. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know. It's all right."

A deep sigh. "I'm just worried. I don't like seeing you hurt."

"It really isn't that bad," Keith offered up after a moment even if he sounded absolutely exhausted and his voice was tight with pain. "Honest. And your bandaging skills aren't terrible either."

"Gee, thanks," but there was a smile to her voice.

Then there was the sound of feet making double time and a quietly exuberant, "Oh, that looks excellent, Number Five. Jolly well done on enforcing those bandages." Coran. Lance could almost picture the Altean's eyes crinkling in joy. "And Number Four, another Glornack seed for you and one of my patented energy bars. No faces, my boy, you need it."

And then was the sound of water being poured, no doubt for Keith to take the medicine. But that sound… Lance had been almost relaxed, listening to the two and not being the center of attention (and that was such a far cry from normal that it just made his stomach curl with what it meant) and had felt a flicker of something – peace, maybe? – hearing Pidge's smile and Keith's attempt to cheer her up.

But it was all gone. He knew that the water was nowhere near him. He knew that his head wasn't going to be thrust under and he wouldn't be held down as it filled his lungs and he choked. He knew that and it didn't seem to matter as his entire body had frozen and air, already hard to come by, seemed to have been stolen away.

He must have made some noise other than the rasping and coughs he had almost become accustomed to hearing, because there was suddenly a flurry of activity and the sound of movement coming towards him, which only made his chest seize more.

"Easy, easy lad," Coran's voice soothed. "What's wrong?"

Lance just gasped, unable to form words even if he'd wanted to. He couldn't breathe. There was no water but he was still somehow drowning. Air, his body begged. Please. And he couldn't.

He couldn't find air.

Coran was saying something, but Lance couldn't hear him now. A different kind of darkness was encroaching across his vision and he panicked more. Not again. He couldn't go back into the memories again. And then there were hands and Lance flailed as much as he could against them, but
they were unrelenting, grasping his shoulders and he could hear a laugh and a voice ask, "Where shall we begin?"

Then there were more hands and more voices and Lance flinched away, desperately seeking an escape. There were words and sounds but he couldn't make them out over the pounding in his head.

And then something slammed against his back and if he'd had the ability he'd have screamed as the hit set every nerve alight. But air. Suddenly there was air and he gulped greedily at it. The hand on his back remained, no longer causing pain but rubbing almost soothing circles on his skin.

"There, there, just breathe," a voice said, sounding right next to his ear. He started at that, pulling away as he felt hot breath ghost over his cheek and could feel Haggar's nails digging into his shoulder.

"You're okay, Lance. Estás bien."

Hunk. And Coran. He recognized them now.

Lance sucked in another harsh breath, chest rattling with the force and it took all he had to swallow back the resulting cough.

"Just breathe," Hunk's voice said, sounding further away than he wanted it to. That meant it wasn't Hunk touching him. He stiffened, but then Coran's accented tones came again and Lance realized it was his hands that were on his back and shoulders.

Coran. Not Haggar. Coran. He trusted Coran. He forced himself to take another shuddering breath, each one easier and yet harder; the icy stab morphing to something colder and fiercer.

"There you go," Coran said. "Excellent job, lad." And then he was moving, the hands gently lowering him back against what felt like a throne of pillows, leaving him in a seated position and no hands touching him.

"You with us?" Hunk murmured.

Lance managed an exhausted nod, tilting his face into the softness of the pillow. "Wh-what... happened?" he rasped.

"A bit of a panic attack, lad," Coran said gently. "and likely some additional breathing difficulties as a result of your injuries and illness. You're propped up a bit more now to assist. How do you feel?"

"Hurts," he answered simply, too tired to say more. A shiver wracked him and he tacked on, "C-cold," as well.

"I know, lad," Coran said sympathetically. "Can we put your blanket back on? I know it is not much, but perhaps it will help."

He nodded. Seconds later the not-quite-warm blanket floated over him, but he appreciated it regardless. Even amongst friends he felt so...exposed. That brought back the memory of a cold table and soft laughter as warm blood tickled his fingertips and shame burned his cheeks.

He winced at the recollection and tried to focus on something else, anything else. Anything to keep him from falling back.

"Keith?" he managed after a tick, recalling his and Pidge's discussion. Keith was hurt. Hurt because of him.
There was the sound of shuffling and the Keith was pushed (very, very gently) to Lance's beside, looking decidedly uncomfortable but still concerned. He raised a hand in greeting, before it fell awkwardly as he realized Lance couldn't see him. "Uh, Keith here."

"You're... You're h-hurt?"

"Um, just a bit. It's not that bad."

Lance didn't believe him. He'd heard Keith's pained voice, he knew it was more than he was letting on. Keith had gotten hurt because of him.

"Lo siento," he managed, guilt roiling in his stomach. "I—"

"Don't you dare apologize," Keith snapped and Lance couldn't help the recoil at the harsh tone. Keith took a deep breath, voice gentling into a less harsh tone. "Sorry. I didn't mean to yell. It's just..." And Lance could almost picture him grabbing a the back of his mullet like he did when he was frustrated. "You don't get to apologize. For anything. None of this is your fault."

Not his fault? The words repeated in his head and Lance managed the tiniest shake of disbelief. Everything was his fault.

"Number Four is right," Coran said, voice unusually firm as he saw the doubt flicker across Lance's face, the resignation and guilt swimming in those too-dark eyes. Still, he saw the exhaustion and knew that right now nothing they said to alleviate those fears was going to work. Lance needed to have a clearer head and coupled with the intense pain he was still in and the mugginess of his fever and illness this was a discussion to be had at a later date. "For now though, we just want you to concentrate on resting. Is that acceptable?"

Lance did not answer, but seemed to slump more against the pillows.

The three Paladins and Altean exchanged looks where they were clustered around the bed. It had been just shy of two varga now since Lance had first slept and about an hour since Allura had awoken Hunk due to Lance's spike in fever. It had still not gone down and the dark flush to Lance's cheeks was worrisome. At this rate they may have no choice but to forcefully cool him down via water or ice. Hopefully the Glornack seed would start fighting back soon, but they could not rely on it entirely and Coran hated to think about how Lance would react to the other option.

Pidge had stirred not long ago, used to thriving on little sleep due to her late nights, and had offered to keep vigil for Coran, but while the Altean had appreciated the offer he couldn't rest himself. Not yet. Keith had awoken not long after Pidge, a soft moan of pain breaking the near silence that had Coran scurrying over. As the sleep cleared from the amethyst eyes the Altean had watched with growing sorrow as an impassive mask had replaced the pain and he wondered what had happened to the Red Paladin that such was his reaction.

Coran realized with a pang he really didn't know much about these young humans who had been drafted into their war at all.

And although Keith had denied being in any pain, both Coran and Pidge knew it was a lie, especially as a number of the badges had blotches of red and Allura's blanket had not fared so well either. Coran had said a change of bandages was required and after carefully removing them and putting on a base layer against the horrific looking burns he had demonstrated for Pidge how to re-wrap the wounds.

The littlest Paladin had taken on the task with a grim determination after her initial shock at seeing
the severity of the wounds that covered nearly all of Keith's back.

After making sure that Lance was still asleep for the time being – as well as all of the other occupants strewn about the room – Coran had hurried down to the infirmary to retrieve a few necessities and then a stop to the kitchens for more energy bars. He'd arrived back just as Pidge was finishing and then insisted upon Keith taking some medicine and eating something.

Then all hell had broken loose as Lance's regular small gasps and coughs had morphed into a near full on seizure – and Coran had a terribly sinking sensation that the water he'd poured for Keith to drink had something to do with it – that had him struggling to draw any breath and only panicking further as Coran moved to help him sit up.

Hunk had awoken in the commotion and between the two of them they managed to calm Lance down from the throes of some terrible memory while Pidge shrank to the side, clearly remembering all too well the last time she had reached out to Lance, while Keith had sat back down upon his chair at Coran's insistence. Allura and Shiro continued somehow to sleep through it.

The collar needed to go, Coran realized. The broken ribs and water-filled lungs due to the illness and repeated drownings were a good portion of the problem, but the collar was restricting Lance from breathing as well and was no doubt beyond painful; burned into his flesh and pressing constantly on un-healing wounds. Not only that, but it was clearly a source of terrible memories and no doubt was a constant trigger, given Lance's first reaction to realizing it was there.

Coran's eyes flicked to Shiro, still slumbering away. Some color had returned to his cheeks and he no longer looked as exhausted as he had. Was it too soon though to ask him to perform such a delicate task? He would need to be fully committed. One slip and Lance's life would be forfeit.

As if summoned by the stare, Shiro stirred and a moment later blinked open one dark gray eye. Coran made his way over as the leader wearily pushed himself up to sitting, a yawn cracking his jaw. Behind him the three Paladins remained at Lance's bedside, quiet as Lance seemed to take Coran's advice and had closed his eyes, already in a light doze once more. His body could not take much more. He needed that cryo-pod and soon.

"How are you feeling, Number One?" Coran asked gently, holding out a cup of water that he'd carefully poured with nary a sound.

"Like I got hit by a truck."

Coran raised an eyebrow, not familiar with that expression.

"Human vehicle," Shiro clarified, although without any real enthusiasm as he normally did when the humans got to explain their odd terms. "Headache," he continued. "Just need some water and…" Coran held up the coveted aspirin seed. "That. Perfect. Thank you, Coran."

His expression turned more serious then. "Has Lance woken up?"

"A few times," Coran said. "His fever is growing worse and his breathing too. We need to get the collar off of him."

Shiro glanced down at his arm, stomach clenching. It didn't take a genius to figure out based on Coran's tone there still only seemed to be one option for it. He'd used it for all sorts of things in battle; slicing through sentries, repelling blasts, extra strength. But for something as delicate as Coran had suggested? Where he could so, so easily kill Lance? Hurt him, like he unintentionally had back in the cell?
But what other choice did they have? He couldn't back down from this. It needed to come off and he was the only one who could do it.

He concentrated as hard as he could on just turning on a single finger, sweat beading on his forehead at the action. His whole hand thrummed with purple light and he grit his teeth. No. Focus.

His whole hand flickered again, but the glow condensed itself to his index finger and he panted, staring at it. It was taking more concentration than using the prosthetic ever had before, but he'd done it. He started at it, his back slowly unfurling from where he'd hunched over and his breathing evened out as his hold became steadier.

"Okay," he whispered, looking up to meet Coran's eyes, purple light washing over them both. "Let's do this."

Because they hadn't a moment more to lose.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm, Cinnamon. I figure that since Lance's sight is compromised that smell is going to be pretty important (and even once he gets it back there's nothing like a comforting scent to set your mind at ease). Looks like we're moving in for the big guns now though. Everyone ready?

Since I've had a few comments about Haggar having Lance's quintessence, I shall clarify: No one on Team Voltron is aware Haggar has it and they will not because it is undetectable that Lance even lost it. I have the idea of quintessence being able to be restored with rest (hence why Haggar wanted to keep Lance and keep feeding off of him) so Lance will regain that missing drop no problem. The only real problem is that Haggar can track him with it. May as well hang out the big welcome mat now!

And before y'all question me, yes, I do know today is Friday :p I decided to update a day early because of the Q&A planned for Saturday and I wanted to make sure everyone had time to read the chapter if they were coming to hang out. Link for the doc is again: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oCLRihNGMFTj4Hi6y_nIzSydriELdnKftjorzRD-Bg0/edit?usp=sharing and we're kicking off at 1130 CST. There's also a few questions for you guys this time around if you have a few ticks to answer. Thanks!

As always big hugs to the lovely reviewers. I've missed seeing some of your lovely faces, er, pennames? icons?, lately so if you're still here do say hello! I miss you! ♥

Shout outs this time go to: heyheroics, BATICATT, WolfFire, Marsetta, QueenMcawesome, starrymellie, Brohaikyyu, Person, HonestlyCasualTaco, Fey_79, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Grace, EverlastingCookie, ImmortalTefy, burple12345, maychorian, soldmysoutofandoms, Abigail, Jasmine Joseph, glitteringconstellations, BrieCheese and Redwizardfox! Thank you all so much for the support!

Please do drop a comment down below if you've got a tick. Thank you very much!
Despite Shiro's readiness they weren't able to proceed right away.

Coran insisted that he eat something and fully wake up before they tried anything of such a delicate nature, especially after the amount of blood he'd lost. That interim also gave them time to prepare Lance for what was about to happen.

It hadn't taken much to rouse Lance, as the sleep he'd fallen into was fitful at best as the sedative was all but out of his system. Fortunately, Hunk gently calling out to him had brought him almost peacefully back into consciousness and he'd even allowed Hunk to place a pair of fingers again on his shoulder, but over the blanket. He was shivering badly – chills, Hunk had told the Altean – despite the fact his internal body temperature said he should be anything but cold.

Pidge had awoken Allura, who even after just about an hour of rest felt refreshed enough, and all of them were gathered about the bed now, although remaining quiet as Coran had asked. The only sound was Hunk's soft humming that Lance had almost relaxed to and crunching and gagging sounds as Shiro mechanically plowed through a round of energy bars.

Coran hated to break that peace, but time was of the essence. Although Lance had stabilized for the time being, every tick that passed was another that Coran worried over the fate of the boy's hands and feet. He still was not sure if the pods would be able to heal such extensive damage, but the sooner he was in one the better chance the limbs would have.

"Lance, lad," he called quietly, sitting at Hunk's shoulder and drawing a pair of tired, pitch-black eyes to him. "Are you with us?"

"I'm here," came the reply.

"We're going to have a healing pod ready in just about a varga," Coran said. "Before you can go into one though we must remove the collar and manacles from you. Number One is able to cut through them, but you will need to remain absolutely still."

And that is what had Coran concerned. He knew without a doubt there was no way Lance – anyone really – would be able to make no movement with a live, hot blade coming towards them and in these circumstances that doubly applied to Lance. The only way for certain would be to restrain him and dear Alaraan he could not do that to the boy.

Lance seemed to be thinking the same thing, as his breath hitched and his entire body stiffened. Just thinking of what Coran had barely described, even knowing that he knew it was Shiro, had him shaking. Already he could so easily picture Theodek, hot knife at the ready, and the cold, choking grasp of metal encircling him and dragging him back to the ground.

As if summoned by his thoughts, he felt the hot burn against his feet and sharp claws digging into his shoulder, overshadowed by Haggar's soft laugh as Theodek chuckled. "I will enjoy this," the Galran whispered and stabbing heat engulfed his arm.

"N-no," he cried, trying to pull away from Theodek, but the claws followed, sending more fire down
his shoulder. "No más."

"Lance, it's just us," pleaded a voice over the sound of Theodek's amusement. "It's okay. You're not there anymore."

He let the voice lead him out of the inferno, realizing moments later that it was Hunk speaking and reality crashed back down again. Pathetic, he could almost hear Haggar sneer. Scared of nothing. Scared of everything.

"Lo siento," he murmured, voice catching. "I'm sorry, I'm sor—"

"Hey, hey, we talked about this," Hunk interrupted kindly, "There's no need to apologize. I know it's scary. But we'll all be here with you, okay?"

"Lance," Shiro's voice sounded and Lance hunched further over, feeling his face flame. Losing it in front of his leader. His hero. Again. He couldn't do anything right. "Lance," Shiro called again, commanding and tender at the same time. "Look at me."

Lance tentatively raised his head, staring sightlessly in Shiro's direction. He was almost glad he could not see. He couldn't bear to see the disappointment in Shiro's eyes.

"I would never, ever, hurt you," Shiro said. "And I will do everything in my power to keep you from ever feeling hurt or scared or in pain again. I am the one who is sorry, Lance. I…" and his own voice broke. "I would have done anything to take your place. You should have never had to suffer as you did. I am so sorry."

Lance's eyes widened. Shiro was apologizing? To him? That wasn't right. Shiro hadn't done anything wrong. He was the one who had messed up. The one who had failed. Failed so, so many times.

He was failing now. Couldn't even keep it together for a minute. What they all must think. He lowered his head again, the weight of the stares too much to bear.

"Lance," Shiro called again, voice rough. "Look at me, buddy."

Lance weakly shook his head.

"It's okay," Shiro sighed, and Lance felt a stab of shame. "It's okay," he repeated, hands aching to just pull Lance into a hug, but he resisted the urge, knowing it wouldn't help at all. "Right now," Shiro continued, "You do whatever makes you feel better, okay? We all just want you to feel safe. And I… I know you're scared. We all are. But we're going to get through it together, all right?"

Shiro was scared? Everyone else too? But why would they be…? Hunk's hand, which had remained steady on Lance's shoulder, gave the tiniest of squeezes. And despite at first stiffening, Lance relaxed back against it, the warmth comforting this time around. Not fires and burns, but steady and safe. He let out a breath.

"We're all here for you," Hunk murmured. "And we all want to help. Will you let us?"

Lance gave a small nod and he could almost hear Hunk's smile behind him. He wished he could return it, but his lips wouldn't even twitch up. He honestly wasn't sure he could smile anymore. He fought back against the wave of despair that brought, the feeling of cold rain dotting his skin and the crash of thunder crying out with him. He couldn't stop the shiver though, the action leaving him exhausted and reminding him that he was still cold. He leaned more into Hunk's hand, trying to leech what little heat he could.
"Lance," Coran said gently. "I would like to pose one more question before we carry on any further. I know thinking on this is difficult, but if you prefer we can try to solve the dilemma of your vision before we begin. Perhaps it would be easier if you could see us as we worked."

Lance swallowed thickly. His vision? He wanted his sight again, more than anything. To be able to see them, reassure himself that they really were there and he wasn't there.

But...

This is my gift to you because I love you.

He shuddered.

He'd already tried once to undo it. He'd whispered out please against the bloodied floor, knowing it was his last chance and he had failed. He knew there was a second part to it but he didn't know it and...

What if never realized what it was? What if he was blind forever? He would be absolutely useless than, more so than he'd already proven to be. He drew a sharp, ragged breath at the thought.

"Lance, lad, it's all right," Coran murmured, his voice jolting Lance from Haggar's whispers. "We don't have to—"

"Spell," Lance interrupted. "It's... it's from a spell."

"A spell," Coran repeated. "And... do you happen to know of the counter?"

Lance jerked his head in the affirmative. "Words," he whispered. "She said... she said I just have to say them."

"And these words, do you know them?" Coran asked, trying not to hope too much. For if Lance knew them he was certain by this point the boy would have uttered them.

"One," Lance said. He ducked his head down, the word coming out a mere whisper. "Pl-please."

And it hadn't been enough.

"Please," Shiro repeated, and his voice was hard. Lance tried not to flinch but Shiro must have seen, because his tone softened immediately. "Sorry, buddy. I didn't mean to upset you. Good job."

Inside Shiro was boiling and the faces of his family reflected the same. Please. It wasn't a word that was being used for politeness. It was meant to demean Lance, to make him plead for something that should have never been taken in the first place. It was one of Haggar's ways of maintaining power and control.

His mind flashed to the transmission, Haggar demanding that he ask her the same. Ask nicely. He'd had Allura's support, Coran's anger and disgust, to back him. Lance... Lance would have only had Haggar and her sick smile and cruel touch and her desire to hear him beg.

"And you are unaware of the other words?" Coran clarified.

Lance gave a small shake of his head, leaning it tiredly against the pillow throne, stomach rolling. "Just... just there's one more. And..."
You know of it, I assure you, but it has yet to grace your lips.

"I know it," Lance finished. "But I... I never said it."

Quiet echoed for all of a moment before Pidge spoke, and despite the fact she kept her voice low Lance still startled.

"It has to be a word with some meaning then," she mused quietly. "Maybe a Galran word?" She turned warm eyes towards Lance, although he stared blankly past her. "Is there... is there any word the Galrans used, maybe, around you?"

It was a good suggestion. But thanks to their weird translating abilities Lance was never certain what language was actually being spoken around them. And any Galran, save perhaps slang or a formal name like the Kri Za Kri, would likely be translated to English.

So he shook his head, which pulsed anew at the additional movement.

"Perhaps it is a name?" Allura suggested quietly. "Or a title? That would make some sense, yes, with the other word?"

A name? Lance couldn't quite understand the sudden sick feeling that filled him at Allura's suggestion, his stomach twisting in unease. That couldn't be...

Hadn't he...

Hadn't he said it? Even once?

"Lance?" Hunk's voice sounded distant through the sudden sick haze that was clouding him. That had to be it. It had to be. But the word wouldn't come, getting stuck in his throat and threatening to choke him. And he was choking, he realized in growing horror as his chest seized and he failed to draw a breath.

Worried voices were washing over him and he was aware there was a hand on his back again – Hunk, he registered through the fog, safety, warmth, Hunk – rubbing hard circles and gradually he felt that terrible tightness lessening and air return to him.

"¿Estás bien?" Hunk murmured. And Lance found himself shaking his head, too exhausted to care what they made of his admission of weakness.

"You know the other word," Shiro said, voice heavy. He had a sinking suspicion himself given Lance's reaction. His hands clenched into fists. Damn her.

Lance nodded. "Yes. I... I..."

He didn't seem to be able to get it out. Understanding was dawning in the other's eyes along with a rising fury.

"Haggar," Coran said softly, bracing for it but still wincing as Lance recoiled at the name. "The words to end the spell are those, aren't they? 'Please, Haggar.'"

Lance swallowed a sob, feeling tears stinging his eyes for reasons he wasn't able to fully determine. He just knew if he said it... if he said it...

He could hear her, echoing in his mind. My Lance. The words pounded in his heart. A hand touched his cheek, a pair of cold lips pressed on his forehead. My sweet Lance.
He trembled and suddenly even Hunk's presence was too much. He shifted slightly and Hunk understood – he always understood – and the hand disappeared, but Lance felt it settle on the bed next to him. Close, but not touching. There, but not invasive. He felt a tear trickle down his cheek.

Haggar closed in, fingertip tracing his face and lighting on the brimming tears. *So pretty. Such beautiful eyes, my Lance.* A hand tightened in his hair and he whimpered. *You are mine.*

"No," he whispered, trying to turn his head but found it locked in place, rough stone and crashing waves making him shudder even more. "I'm n-not…"

*I am right here,* she crooned. *Oh my sweet Lance.* Sharp nails carded through his hair. *All is as it should be.*

"Lance." Shiro's tone was gentle but firm even though inside he felt like screaming and crying himself as Lance waged a mental war right in front of him and he couldn't even reach out a hand to ground him, to comfort him. "I need you to listen to me, all right?"

Lance didn't react to Shiro's voice, curling in on himself even more.

"Lance," Shiro repeated, voice cracking despite his efforts to stay in control. Watching Lance though, lost again in memories that they had unwittingly called up, that were forcing him to remember his own, were breaking his resolve.

His head ached.

"Lance," Hunk's voice cut in, shooting an understanding look in Shiro's direction, which gave him time to draw in a shuddering breath and Allura's hand descended on his shoulder in a measure of comfort. *"Lance it's us. Ella no está aquí. Estás seguro."*

Lance was turning his head slightly in the sound of the voice and Hunk continued his litany, praying it was enough to drag Lance from whatever horrors he was seeing. *"Estás bien. Estás seguro. Estamos aquí. Estamos aquí para ti, Lance. Vuelve. Por favor."*

And to everyone's relief Lance blinked open dark eyes highlighted by tears and looked towards Hunk. *"Estoy aquí,"* he murmured. *"Lo siento."*

"Lance, can you hear me now?" Shiro asked.

He received the barest hint of a nod, hidden in another sob.

"Then listen very closely to me," he paused, knowing that this was either going to work or backfire horribly, both for himself and for Lance. They had to get through to him. "Lance… You are not hers.*

Lance's breath caught and Shiro hurried on, needing to speak this piece. He needed Lance to understand.

He needed to hear it too.

"No matter what Haggar's said you are not hers. You are not her property or possession or pet or child or whatever she might have claimed." His voice shook, his hands moreso.

His head ached even more.

He pushed past it.
"You are you, Lance. You are strong and brave and compassionate." He could see Lance's doubt and he plowed on, refusing to let Lance say anything against his own words. "And Haggar? Haggar is the one that is weak and pathetic and has to bring others down to make herself feel powerful. Her words are poison. They are not the truth."

Shiro swallowed as Allura's hand tightened on his shoulder in support. "And... and this spell of hers? The words she's making you say? They don't mean anything, Lance. They don't define you. They're just syllables. An incantation. Do... do you understand?"

He sat back with a deep breath, chest tight and loose all at the same time.

Lance meanwhile felt his own throat closing up with more tears, although these ones were not the shame and despair but...

If Haggar's words were darkness than Shiro's were light. Warmth. Safety. They chased away some of Haggar's lingering cold, her presence. It didn't eliminate it, he could feel her even then lingering and waiting and her cruel words digging into him.

He didn't understand how Shiro could say such things about him, believe them, but he believed in Shiro.

That... that had to mean something. Right?

He managed a tiny nod.

He would try.

"Good," Shiro said, releasing a breath. "Then I think it's about time you got to see us all again, huh?"

Lance nodded again, even as his stomach clenched. They were just words but... but still...

"I have a suggestion," Pidge said. Shiro gave her an encouraging smile. "What... what if we all said the words?"

"I think that is an excellent idea, Number Five," Coran said without even having to force the note of joviality.

"Is that okay with you, Lance?" Shiro asked.

Lance swallowed thickly, tears pricking again but this time at the sheer relief he felt. He didn't have to do this alone.

He wasn't alone. "S-sí."

"We'll go in a circle then," Shiro said, trying not to let his own nerves show. They were just words, just as he'd said. "Pidge, would you start us off?"

"Gladly." Her gaze narrowed although she kept her voice clear of any inflection, making sure to say the phrase as not the sentence they were intended but just two words that were unfortunately placed next to one another. "Please Haggar."

Keith wasn't so successful. "Please, Haggar," he growled, silently adding 'fuck you.'

"Please Haggar," Allura said softly, her voice clear and bright.

Shiro was up then and he kept it as steady as he could, fingers curling into his palm. "Please
"Please Haggar," Coran murmured, mentally tacking on a series of Altean swears that would make even a seasoned soldier blush.

"Please Haggar," Hunk said, praying that this worked.

And then it was Lance's turn. He took a breath, his chest tightening but the action calming him despite the pain.

This was it. He could do this. They were just words. He could say them. He could. And these words…

They weren't for Haggar. She wasn't here, not really. They were for him. For his family. He could do it.

_He_ was restoring his vision for him. Not for her.

Lance could feel them all waiting patiently, the weight of Hunk's hand still pressing down the mattress and proving that last bit of _real_ that he needed. He licked chapped lips and summoned his last reserves of courage.

"Please," he whispered, "Haggar."

And just like the previous time, his vision was returned immediately.

He let out a soft cry though, as the lights in the room were too bright after so long in darkness and he heard through the spots of pain dancing in his vision Coran utter an apology and race to turn them down. He kept his eyes squinted closed, afraid now that when he opened them that somehow, despite everything, it would prove to be an illusion. He'd see that he was still in his cell and all of this was one cruel, beautiful dream.

"Lance, open your eyes," Hunk coaxed. "The lights are low now. It's all right. _Mirame._"

He cracked them open, not open enough to see anything but enough to test the light. It was dimmer, no resulting pain. He took one last breath and then opened them all the way.

Color. That was the best way to describe this new world.

The colors were so vibrant, even in the low lighting. His breath caught as he took them all in. The darkness had been there for so long he had nearly forgotten just how many colors made up the universe. And the colors burned brightest in the circle of his friends – his family – that were crowded about the bed.

Hunk was right next to him, his own eyes filled with tears as their gazes met. "There you are," Hunk murmured, reaching up a trembling hand before he lowered it. But as it settled on the bed Lance surprised even himself as he forced his own leaden right hand to move, managing to settle a few fingers on top of Hunk's open palm. Hunk sobbed and wrapped his own about them, in as much of a hug as he could right now.

Grounded now with Hunk's safety and warmth, Lance traced every face. Coran was there, tears running down his cheeks while Shiro met his gaze head on with a soft, "welcome back, buddy." Allura smiled at him, such joy radiating from her that Lance nearly had to look away.

Keith was next, a rare smile on his face that wavered dangerously as their eyes met. And then Pidge.
She was crying silently, eyes magnified by her tears, but she had never looked happier. Lance gingerly moved his left hand in her direction, guilt still filling him as he dimly recalled how he had scared her – scared all of them – when she had tried to touch him last time. "Por favor," he whispered.

She needed no second urging. Hauling herself onto the bed she sat next to the hand, still loathe to encroach on his immediate space, and carefully placed one of her smaller hands on the very fingertips of his. He forced himself to not draw back, staring at her hand, peach and small. Not purple and long. He drew a breath. Not Haggar. She wasn't Haggar. She was Pidge.

A chorus of squeaks sounded and the mice appeared from where they'd been resting on one of the pillows, lining up right next to Pidge's leg. Platt leaned forward and very gently nuzzled his nose against Lance's index finger and stepped back, each of his siblings repeating the motion. Lance remained completely still the entire time, the soft velvet of their noses invoking none of the terrible feelings that other contact seemed to have. He felt himself relax as Plachu gave the last nuzzle, his normally narrowed eyes crinkled with happiness.

He looked around the circle again, half-expecting that if he blinked it would disappear. But they remained, pillars of reassurance and strength and love.

He had so much he wanted –needed— to say. To apologize for. He had no idea where to even begin. But he had to start. And with his vision returned he felt… not stronger, but more in control. Ready to face them. To face whatever it was they wanted to say to someone like him who had almost cost the universe there one chance at peace. Who had tried to... to...

What were they going to think?

"I…" he started. But before he could figure out what came next he was seized with a cough. It was deep and painful, wracking his entire body and he felt his contact with Pidge disappear as he hunched over, struggling to draw air again. And despite the pain, he made himself stay with it, refusing to go back to any memories.

Not now. Not when he'd just escaped.

"Easy, easy," Coran soothed over the pounding in his head. "There you go, lad. Just take a small breath, that's it."

He took a shuddering one, leaning back on the pillows in exhaustion. Everything was aching and burning all at once in a pain he hadn't felt in a while and his stomach twisted ominously. He felt too hot and too cold all at once.

He felt a pass of air and then a sharp beep.

"Lance, lad." Lance pried open heavy eyes to look at the Altean, whose face was drawn with worry and a scanner in hand. "Your fever is rising. One hundred and three point two in your Earth measurements. We need to get you cooled down."

And Lance realized within a few ticks what that meant. "No," he rasped, panic flaring. "No." Just because he could see it did not make it all right. He'd learned that in the mindscape all too clearly.

"Would some ice be okay?" Hunk suggested, giving his fingers a tiny squeeze of reassurance. "No water. I promise. Just some of those ice packs from the kitchen."

Ice? Ice would be okay. He gave a tiny nod.
"The body's best cooling points are the neck and wrists," Pidge said. "But…"

"We need to get the collar off," Shiro said. He met Lance's gaze. "It and the manacles. You'll feel better and be able to breathe easier. But I won't do anything until you're ready."

"You'll… you'll do it?" he asked softly. Shiro nodded. "And…" he looked about the room. "You'll stay?"

"Of course," Pidge said vehemently, having reclaimed her light touch on his hand.

"We're not going anywhere," Keith added fiercely. Allura inclined her head and Coran met his gaze head on with a pride that had Lance ducking his down. The mice squeaked out their input on the matter as well.

"Okay," he agreed quietly.

If they were all there, lending him their courage and strength… he could do this. It'd be okay.

He trusted them. And if he knew anything… he knew they would not let him down.

It would be okay.

xxx

Somewhere else in the universe a pair of yellow eyes widened as a ripple of familiar magic passed through the air, swirling up around the figure before dying down.

"Oh my Lance," Haggar whispered. She pulled the vial of quintessence free from under her robes, holding the glowing blue droplet in front of her, all that she had left of her precious Blue Paladin. A sharp grin tugged up her face as she stared at that pulsing drop. He had said her name. It had rolled of his tongue, releasing her spell. It had probably sounded so beautiful.

"I will be there soon," she murmured, caressing the vial lovingly. "And then soon you will be mine once more."

Chapter End Notes

I have been looking so forward to Lance getting his vision back. I loved writing that scene and hope it resonated with all of you as it did for me. I will say I had one person guess the correct phrase and another reader get right up in its business, so major kudos! Did anyone else realize that Lance never once actually said Haggar's name in all these many chapters? Crazy, right?

For those who didn't get the reference last chapter, it was from Avatar the Last Airbender when Zuko goes to approach the Gaang in season three to join them. He practiced first with the frog/rabbit thing and then repeated it on the actual Gaang and got a water wave from Katara for his efforts. Keith's greeting went over much more smoothly, if still adorably awkward.

Huge thanks to the amazing reviewers: Ahhuya, Marsetta, dean_winchester_has_fallen,
Brohaikyu, QueenMcawesome, Grace, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Immortalfey, TabbiCC, Mooniepie, BubbleGumi, heyheroics, koalaoshiz, Trost, burple12345, maychorian, BrieCheese, EverlastingCookie, RimaPichi, PhantomCastiel (Official_Night_Valian), and Redsparrow12!

Also, thanks to those who came out to the Q&A chat. We had an awesome group and I dropped way more spoilers than I should have :p You can see the chat link on the previous chapter if you want a little more insight into Color. I may host a third one (we're turning into a little book discussion group! :D) and will post details if such a thing does happen.

I'd love to get your reactions to this chapter if you have a second to spare. It's definitely been one of my favorite moments to share ♥ Thanks so much for the support, everyone!
After Lance's approval to begin, there was a flurry of movement for preparations.

Hunk remained at his side and Pidge on the bed next to him, but Keith was forced to sit back in his chair by Allura. Lance didn't miss the way Keith practically sank into the cushion without protest and felt another pang of guilt that Keith been hurt.

Hurt because of his failures.

Allura gently settled the light blanket over Lance's torso and although it did little to warm him – because his body had decided to settle on freezing – he appreciated the gesture even as he couldn't help but stare at how... strange it was to see Allura in casual clothes, to see her hovering almost nervously about the bed because that was not the Allura he remembered. He... he wasn't sure how to feel but he felt comforted as she smoothed the blanket down on the corner, meeting his eyes with a small smile.

Coran and Shiro had disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a few small towels and what looked like some sort of pliers that had drawn Lance's attention.

Dios.

He shuddered. He'd seen a pair of pliers on Haggar's tray that first time, but... but he didn't think she'd used them. He didn't think she had but she had hurt him with so many other—

"Are you ready, Lance?" Coran asked gently. "We'll go over every step so you know what is happening, all right?"

Lance didn't trust himself to speak so he just nodded, eyes wide and he tried to get his trembling under control.

They weren't going to torture him. They were going to help him.

But as Coran settled his supplies atop the bed Lance found his attention dragged down towards his feet, taking in the bloodied bandages that he'd curled up at some point towards him.

The blood was so, so red against the white bandages.

He could almost feel the first slice and the loud cheering of the crowd and he flinched.

"First, we need to bring your legs down to us," Coran said, drawing his attention. "It isn't good to have them tucked up like that. Can you maneuver them yourself or would you like some assistance?"

Lance tried to shift, knowing that in his panic he'd brought them up into a curl in the first place. But the movement sent a sharp stab through his chest and he gasped, hunching over instead. Pathetic, he heard Haggar scoff.

She was right. How could he not even manage this?

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Hunk said. "Don't push yourself, hermano. Would you be okay if I lifted you up, just a little? It'll be easier to straighten them that way."
If it were anyone else Lance would have said no. The thought of any arms, any extra touch, made him stiffen. But this was Hunk. And Hunk's arms were safe. He inclined his head the smallest bit.

"Okay, here we go then." One of Hunk's arms slid behind his back while the other managed to slide right under the base of his spine. With almost no effort Hunk raised him just slightly from the bed, freeing Lance's legs from where he'd pinned them. He tried to stretch them out, hissing in pain, but then Coran was there, his touch feather-light, guiding his legs in the correct direction.

When all was done he was left panting, his face half-buried in the pillow while Hunk kept his one hand on his back and was tracing soft circles with his thumb.

"Very good," Coran smiled. "We're going to start with removing the two on your ankles first, all right? Number One is going to remove the first using his hand." Unsaid was that Shiro really needed the practice before he tried on the much harder and deadlier operation.

"It might be a little warm," Coran continued, "but we've got some towels here to keep the worst of the heat away." Saying so he carefully tucked one between the manacle and the bandages and placed others above and below before he looked up to Lance's face, which he'd rotated out of the pillow so he could breathe easier. "How are we doing so far?"

"F-fine."

"While Shiro is cutting you must remain perfectly still. Would you be all right if I held your leg, right here?" Coran pointed to just below Lance's calf.

Lance really didn't want anyone else touching him, but he recognized the reason. And if it had to be anyone other than Hunk… well, Coran was his next choice. He'd felt a pull to the older Altean from their first meeting because just like Lance, behind the jokes and quirkiness there was a kindred spirit whose sole mission was to protect.

So he nodded and moments later Coran's hand was there. It was just as light as before, but Lance knew well the strength of Alteans. If needed Coran would be able to hold down the limb with ease.

Lance hoped it didn't come to that. He could see them, see what they were doing. He was going to be fine. They were helping him. They weren't hurting him. He just needed to convince the rest of him of that logic, which seemed to continually escape him.

"I'm... I'm ready," he said voice small as Shiro moved into position.

"It'll be just a few ticks," Shiro comforted. "Here I go."

Shiro's face scrunched up as he worked to once more bring power to only a single finger. He was so focused on the task that he nearly missed the gasp of terror and the faint sounds of a struggle, but after all the time in the battlefield he was attuned to everything, and especially now with Lance after his last failure in the cell.

He powered down immediately to a scene of chaos as Lance had tried to propel himself away from Shiro, eyes blown wide, while Coran's grip was effectively holding his lower half down and Hunk was murmuring and trying to calm Lance, who was muttering something beneath his breath that none could catch.

He hadn't even touched him this time, nor gotten close enough for there to even be a wash of heat. Everyone else looked just as confused, save Keith who was watching the scene with calculating if exhausted eyes.
"Keith?" Shiro asked, leaving Lance to Hunk right now.

"It's purple," he said simply.

Shiro stared at his arm with horror. They had all gotten used to the enemy color when Shiro fought; the bright Altean teal of his uniform often offsetting any minor confusion. And despite the rate at which the Galrans employed the color, it had never been a source of fear.

But Shiro knew all too clearly what the inside of Galran ships looked like. And he recalled that every room they'd tracked Lance's blood too had been lit solely by purple-toned lights. It was likely the only color light Lance had seen during his entire time there and now an association for not just Galra but for the pain he endured.

"Shit," he cursed, drawing everyone's attention, too upset to even blush at the language he was all-too often scolding Pidge to watch. "Lance… I'm so sorry. I didn't even think…"

"'s not your fault," came the quiet reply. Not said but heard was "it's mine."

"And it's not yours either," Shiro countered.

Lance said nothing but dropped his head.

"I have a grand idea," Coran bobbed to his feet in the heavy silence that followed. "Be back in a tick."

Hunk rearranged the mused blanket in the meantime, his face growing even more concerned as Lance shivered violently and his eyes slipped closed. The flush of fever had grown even darker, staining mocha skin with its color and beads of sweat dotting Lance's forehead.

The Glornack seed did not seem to be reducing it as Coran had hoped and Hunk wondered if it were safe to give Lance a second dose. He eyed the fluids bag that was still feeding into Lance's body. The second bag was nearly empty. Hunk decided to let Coran be the judge when he came back.

And the advisor returned bearing what appeared to be a pair of glasses in a garish shade of orange.

"Lance, lad, I've got something for you." Coran held out the item. "These glasses are used when watching the Cryptan Nebula every twenty decaphoebs to save our eyes from the bright glare. They tint everything a glorious shade of orange." He stroked his moustache with his other hand. "If Number One's hand were to appear as a different color would that perhaps help?"

Lance tiredly peered at the glasses hovering in front of him. His insides were still roiling from his reaction to Shiro's hand – scared of a color? He could hear Theodek's laughter, this is a Paladin of Voltron? Pathetic.

He was pathetic.

He was also willing to try anything. He wanted them off.

So he whispered an, "okay," and allowed Coran to place the too-large glasses on the bridge of his nose, hating that he flinched from the Altean's hands encroaching near his face, but unable to stop the reaction. Coran gave him a soft, sad smile of understanding. But as soon as the glasses were placed everything was awash with shades or orange and umber and Lance let out a tiny breath.

That hadn't been so bad.
"All right," Shiro said, swallowing back his nerves. "Let's try again. I'll stop though if you need me to, okay?"

This time he kept his eyes on Lance's face, seeing the exact moment the fear returned to his eyes. But he held steady, only turning slightly more into Hunk's arm and Shiro was infinitely grateful that Lance had someone like Hunk by his side.

"Here I go," he repeated, having to tear his gaze from Lance so he could concentrate on the manacle in front of him. Coran was once more holding Lance's leg down.

Shiro's finger touched against the metal with a sharp whine and everyone collectively winced. Shiro took a steadying breath and pressed harder against the metal. Coran had confirmed that the manacles were not made of the near indestructible material of the collar and so Shiro knew that they were going to give quicker. He forced himself to go slow and steady even though he wished he could speed through it and spare Lance any more pain and fear.

He cut through the manacle a few ticks later, relieved beyond measure when he did not even come close to touching Lance's skin underneath. He repeated the process on the other side and deactivated his finger as the two halves freed themselves.

"All done," he muttered, retrieving both pieces and putting them out of sight on the floor. "How are you doing, Lance?"

"Oh-okay."

"Excellent job, lad," Coran said. "We've got three more to go. Number One can cut through them or I have a pair of sturdy plarnaks" – he held up the pliers –"that should be able to clip those off."

Lance stared at them, stomach rolling.

"Let's do the plarnaks," Hunk said quietly when Lance did not answer. "Assuming they won't hurt?"

"Not at all. Just a quick twist."

Lance tensed but did not voice an objection, sinking just a little more against Hunk and squeezing his eyes shut tight. Coran took charge then, the remaining ankle cuff off in a few short ticks.

Lance trembled the entire time but did not pull away.

For the wrists Coran opted to start with the left, which was significantly less injured. He instructed Pidge to keep her hand resting on top of Lance's fingers and Hunk moved to gently brace Lance's forearm, being very careful to not touch any of the inner arm where he knew a deep, ragged wound lay beneath the stained bandages.

That one came off with little trouble. But the right was trickier. Lance's wrist and arm had swollen around the broken limb and the manacle was practically flush with his flesh, making the pliers useless. And it wasn't a normal wound hidden beneath swathes of bandages. The skin here had been cauterized – and clearly without any particular care – and would be especially sensitive to heat.

But they hadn't much choice. The pliers weren't going to work.

"Lance, are you okay with this?" Shiro asked as Coran quietly informed Lance they would need to cut through the manacle rather than twisting it free.

And those ocean blue eyes, so filled with fear and pain but still somehow held trust and hope,
focused on him.

"I… I trust you," Lance murmured. He meant it too even if he was still scared.

"I'll make it quick," Shiro promised. Hunk re-adjusted Lance's glasses and Shiro got to work, trying to ignore the way he heard a muffled cry behind him, the way Lance's arm tried to twist away but was held in place by Coran and then the trembling that echoed throughout the entire body.

"All done, I'm all done," Shiro said, powering down as soon as both pieces were sliced through. Unfortunately they were nearly embedded and it took a bit of prying to get them over the swollen limb. Lance just silently shook behind them and it pierced Shiro's heart to realize that such pain was not even worth crying out for anymore.

"There's just the collar left now," Coran sighed heavily. He could feel his own limbs starting to shake and he knew he was almost at his limit. But he'd made a promise that he would not rest until Lance was safely in a cryo-pod. He had to hold out until then.

"You're doing so good, buddy," Shiro said. "Think we can do this last one now?"

Lance raised a shaking hand to his neck, flinching as the metal brushed his fingers even though he knew it was there.

He wanted it off. He wanted it off so much.

But just the thought of anyone touching it and the pain that was sure to come left him quaking. It was going to hurt. No matter how gentle Shiro was it was going to hurt. He didn't want to go back to that hazy world of memory bleeding into reality, didn't want to forget that he was amongst his friends and not in some Galra cell. He knew he would. He just wasn't that strong.

Theodek was right when he called him weak. He was.

"We'll all be right here," Hunk assured. "I know you can do this, Lance. We believe in you."

Lance squeezed his eyes shut and nodded. He could try, right? He at least owed them all that.

"Okay, we're just going to lower you back down to the bed," Hunk said. "Are you ready for me and Coran to lift you?" He nodded again.

The world tilted alarmingly beneath closed eyelids and Lance hurriedly opened them. He was lying flat on the bed now and the change immediately had a new cough swarming his lungs. He gasped weakly as it exited.

"It's okay, you're okay," Hunk murmured above him. "Can you turn your head towards me? There you go. Perfect."

Lance felt oddly exposed like this, but Hunk's warm eyes calmed him and he stared into those bright orbs, trying to slow his chest from heaving. His head was angled on the pillow now while his back was flat on the mattress. The glasses were still firmly in place, keeping everything a warm, calming orange.

"I'm going to need to make two cuts," Shiro explained gently, his face appearing right next to Hunk's. He looked confident and Lance felt the knot inside him release slightly. This was Shiro. Shiro was not going to hurt him. Or, well… as little as he could. "One on this side and then we'll have you turn your head and I'll make the second one."
Shiro's voice grew lower, softer. "I know it's scary, buddy. But we're going to get through it, together. Just bear with me for a little longer, all right?" He longed to reach up a hand, brush away the new tears trying to free themselves from Lance's eyes and offer him what little comfort he could.

But he couldn't.

Because Haggar had turned that comfort into a cruelty.

He would never forgive her.

At Lance's barely whispered affirmative, Shiro straightened. "Hunk?"

"Lance, I'm going to put a hand on your head," Hunk said. "We just need to make sure you don't move while Shiro is cutting. Is... is that okay?"

Lance swallowed. He didn't want any hands on or near his head, already feeling Haggar's hand descending in her distorted pets, Theodek's twisting in his hair.

But he knew there was no other choice. They had to do that, to make sure he didn't hurt himself more. It was for his own good. And so he shuddered out a sí and Hunk's hand descended. It did not card or caress or do anything except press gently down. Lance still trembled.

"Here we go," Shiro said, as much to alert Lance as to encourage himself. He felt a hand descend on his shoulder and Coran gave him a quick squeeze. It was what he needed. A few ticks later he had his finger activated once again.

He lowered it as carefully as he could, not surprised when instead of the soft metal of the cuff the collar did not immediately accept the cut. Just like the chains. He pressed harder, small sparks flying off at the contact and he was grateful they'd placed a towel above and below the collar to protect Lance's skin. Still, the boy flinched and only Hunk's hand kept him from jerking away.

Shiro continued, sweat beading on his own forehead at the delicate process. It was slow going, much slower than he'd like. But he was chipping away.

Unfortunately as they'd predicted the metal had fused with Lance's flesh. And it was only Lance's shriek that alerted him that he'd made it through the band and had touched upon burnt flesh.

It had all felt the same to his metal finger.

Lance was crying and shuddering and trying without luck to pull away as Coran had descended somewhere during the time and had a hand pressed against Lance's chest to keep him from turning while Hunk still had his head pinned against the pillow.

Blood was trickling up between the metal chasm and Shiro felt sick. The boy was saying something in between his cries, Spanish again, Shiro recognized. Por Favor. No más. Lo siento.

His stomach heaved. He did this. He promised he wouldn't hurt him and he'd...

He'd...

More blood gushed, trickling down Lance's neck now and staining the towels a rich scarlet.

Shiro barely made it from the room to Allura's bathroom before he lost the contents of his stomach, energy bars tasting just as bad coming up as they had going in. Shame and regret warred in equal measure as he hunched over the toilet bowl, Lance's sharp cries and pleas sounding even here.
He vomited again.

Light footsteps echoed on the tile. Allura said nothing as she sank down beside him, but one of her hands went to rub his back while the other combed sweaty bangs from his forehead.

They remained there in silence, Lance's sobs growing softer in the other room until there were only hushed murmurs.

"I can't do this."

Shiro's whispered confession echoed about the chamber and Allura's hand stilled.

"I can't," he repeated. "I… I hurt him."

After he'd promised.

"Shiro…"

"I… I'm such a mess. I can't… I can't be the leader. I—"

"Shiro." Allura's voice was sharper now.

"He trusted me," Shiro said brokenly. He turned over bright eyes to Allura. "And I… I hurt him."

"Shiro," she repeated, tone still hard but underlying it was worry. He kept her gaze and for that she was grateful. "You have done nothing wrong."

"I—"

"We all knew there was a good chance removing the collar would hurt him," Allura continued, her own expression pained. "Lance knew that too. But it needs to come off, Shiro. And you are the only one who can do it."

Her hands moved to his face, cupping his jaw that in any other situation would likely have had Shiro blushing. All he did now was hiccup back another sob and lean into her touch, accepting the comfort that Allura was offering.

Her voice was soft as she spoke, but her words were firm. "You are the only one who can lead this team, Shiro. And Lance believes in you. We all do. You have not failed Lance. He understands. He knows that you would never willingly harm him. He knows it is an accident." She released him from her hold, brushing her hand one last time against his cheek. "Now go to him. He needs you."

"I…" Shiro swallowed thickly. "I… thank you."

Allura gave him a gentle smile.

Shiro paused only to flush the toilet and wash out his mouth and then headed back out to the bedroom portion, shoulders squared and more nervous than he wanted to let on. This was the second time now he'd had some type of retreat in the last few hours.

But his team was more than he deserved. There was no judgment in their eyes as he approached the bed. Just concern.

"You okay?" Pidge asked, still seated on the bed but her hands occupied with the mice instead of Lance.
"I'm good," he answered. "Sorry for the worry."

His eyes met Keith's who stared back with such open fear and concern and understanding that Shiro's heart ached. He said nothing but offered up a small smile and it gave Shiro the last boost of courage he needed to look to Lance.

Lance had not so much as looked in his direction. In fact, his eyes were shut tight and he was curled on his side towards Hunk, still trembling although it may have been more of shivering at this point. They hadn't been able to treat the newest injury, hidden beneath the collar still, but a towel had been jammed into the space to help the cut clot for now. Seeing it just made the guilt flare hotter.

"Talk to him," Hunk instructed gently, drawing Shiro's eyes from the injury he had made.

Shiro swallowed. "Hey, buddy. It's me. Shiro." No eyes cracked open but Lance tilted his head ever so slightly. "I'm... I'm really sorry. You trusted me and..."

Lance opened his eyes then and locked gazes with Shiro. He was still scared, Shiro could see. But there was a strength there too. "Shiro... I trust you."

Shiro's breath caught at how sincere Lance was, how brave. "I... I might hurt you again." He didn't want to. God, he didn't want to. But it was a rather realistic possibility.

"I know," came Lance's barely there whisper. "But... please. I... I want it off."

Lance was still terribly frightened. When Shiro had connected with abused flesh his mind had thrown him back without mercy to a small dark cell and husky laughter. I'm going to enjoy this Theodek had told him before there was even more pain, his neck alighting with pure agony. And the hands. So many hands holding him down and forcing him to endure the never-ending pain.

Over the noise of his own screams and pleas though he heard other voices - Hunk and Coran, Pidge and Keith - calling for him. Telling him he was safe. That it was okay. And he'd allowed them to lead him back to real pain, but nothing so bad as his memory could conjure.

Once he'd calmed down, Hunk humming and keeping a solid, warm hand on top of his own, he realized what had happened and he'd flushed hot with shame at his reaction. Pathetic.

And then Shiro was there, apologizing. And there was such sorrow, such guilt in his words that Lance ached to take it away. Shiro shouldn't be sorry. It wasn't his fault. He didn't do it on purpose. He needed to know that.

"Okay," Shiro agreed after a few ticks. "Let's... let's try again."

This time he had to turn his head the other direction, meaning Hunk disappeared from view. But Pidge was right there and she lied down so their heads were level.

"Hey," she whispered. "Just focus on me, okay?"

She wasn't Hunk. She wasn't Coran. But she was the one he considered as a little sister. The one who listened to his stories about his siblings and home with a soft smile and an always ready hug. The one who poured her heart out to him about her own family; her hopes and fears for their future. He trusted Pidge too.

"Kay," he whispered back.

He felt Hunk's hand settle gently on his head again and then the hiss as Shiro's hand charged up. He
couldn't help the tremble that that caused.

"Hey, eyes on me," Pidge coaxed and he realized he'd closed them again. He was just so tired. He struggled to open them though because Pidge had asked and the light was better than the dark.

"That's it. It's... It's almost over."

There was a whine of metal on metal and Lance flinched at the noise as much as the sudden heat that bathed his neck and cheek.

"It's almost over," Pidge repeated, blinking back her own tears as Lance tried his best to keep his eyes on her. "Almost done."

And this time there was no stab of pain. Shiro sat back, panting with a small smile of victory. He'd deactivated the prosthetic earlier than last and the thin layer of metal that was still there should be easy enough to break now. The whole thing was rather anti-climatic in a good way this time around.

"All right, time to sit up again," Coran said gently.

And Lance felt himself being carefully lifted back to sitting. The change was an immediate relief for his lungs and he took a careful, deep breath. Hunk reached forward and plucked the glasses off, returning his world to full color again.

The collar was still there though. It wasn't quite as tight, but it was still there. Why was it still there? Hadn't all of this been so they could remove it? Why was it... why was it...

"Lance, it's okay, Estás bien. Respira. Breathe. We still have to pull it off. It's going to come off. It's okay." Lance forced himself to take another breath as Hunk had asked of him, the words and the air quelling the newest panic.

It didn't look good though.

As they'd expected the collar had been used so much that it had burned itself into Lance's neck, fusing in places with skin. They were going to have to pull the two halves off from where they'd embedded themselves. It was going to hurt and Shiro was silently cursing that this still wasn't over.

How much more did he have to suffer?

"You're doing an excellent job, lad," Coran said. "We've just got to pull the confounded thing off. It's going to hurt a tad."

"Off," Lance insisted, closing his eyes again this time out of tiredness. Keeping them open was taking too much effort now. He dimly heard the beep of the scanner go off overhead and Coran mumble something under his breath.

"Then let's get it off," Coran agreed. "We'll remove the front first and then the back. Ready?"

Coran took on the task of pulling the collar free. He could see the tremors that were wracking Shiro and he would not force the young man to go through such a trial again. Even though he'd come back and had managed to make the second cut it was clear that he was still upset that he'd hurt Lance at all.

With a deep inhalation of his own, Coran gripped the collar on both ends and pulled. On the plus, the entire thing came off with a sick sounding squelch in just under a tick. Everything else was a negative. A terrible, terrible negative.
The grievous wound was now exposed to light. The flesh was darkened brown in places, red in others. Parts were raised in a ropy burn, others indented from where rivets had cut in. Fresh blood was starting to flow from the separation, making Lance's neck into a crimson waterfall.

And the smell. Oh, Alaraan. It was the scent of burnt flesh, the hot tang of blood and the sickness of infection all rolled into one and now freed.

It was awful.

Pidge barely managed to roll off the bed before she was emptying the contents of her stomach on the floor. Hunk's own weak stomach got the best of him and he was vomiting on the other side of the bed. Shiro had frozen, eyes wide, head pulsing and frozen in his own memories trying to press in as burnt flesh and this hurts me more than it hurts you wafted across his mind.

Keith and Allura were the ones who came to assist. Despite his own wounds and exhaustion, Keith practically threw himself forward even though he wasn't sure what he could do but he could not just sit there.

Lance's scream had died down to a soft keen that was almost worse. His eyes were scrunched closed although that didn't prevent tears from dripping down his cheeks.

Coran had both of his hands on Lance's head, trying to keep him from hunching forward and making it any worse, all the while murmuring nonsense to try and calm him. Allura made the decision for herself and Keith, handing him one of the towels and pressing her own to Lance's neck to stem the bloodflow.

"Allura," Coran said, voice tight. "Remove the other half."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"We can't do this again." Lance let out another soft cry as Keith dabbed at the wound, his own stomach roiling but under control and doing his best to ignore the dancing black spots that had popped into his vision as his back screamed at the sudden movement and posture. "It needs to go. Now."

Coran did not generally give orders, which only highlighted how serious he was about this. Allura pressed her lips into a thin line and gave a nod.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, even though Lance did not seem to be able to hear her. To Coran she instructed, "Turn his head slightly, please."

He did so, bringing more of Lance's back into her sights and the other half of the shock collar. It would be easier to grab, her hands able to lie on the rough edges Shiro had made now that it was separated. She hesitated for a moment, swallowing back her own nausea.

And before she could overthink it anymore she did as Coran had and pulled the entire piece of metal out in one fell swoop. Her eyes watered at the next wave of infection that resulted in her actions, but she held firm, even as Lance screamed anew and writhed beneath her hand. Scooping up her towel she pressed it to the back of Lance's neck while Keith kept his on the front.

Hunk had come back now and had his own hand on Lance's shoulder, keeping him from twisting as much while he murmured in Spanish, words garbled due to his own tears.

Shiro too had broken out of his memory, but he did not approach Lance although his heart ached. He knew that right now there was nothing he could do and any more people encroaching would only
lead to more panic. So he made his way to Pidge, who was pale and shaking, curled up on the floor. Effortlessly he scooped her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, voice heavy with tears. "I… I…"

"Shh, it's okay," he soothed, straightening up. He met Allura's eyes and inclined his head towards her bathroom and she managed a nod before she her attention returned to Lance.

He brought both himself and Pidge to the bathroom and closed the door. It didn't block the noise, but it muffled it significantly. He set her on the closed toilet seat and knelt in front of her. "You okay?"

"I'm such a coward. I—"

"Katie," Shiro said, drawing her gaze immediately at the tone and name. "You are many, many things but a coward is not one of them. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

He closed his eyes then, feeling that same shame hit him. He'd frozen like a deer in headlights. Again.

The smell had thrown him right back into a memory; curled up in the corner of a cell with a piece of foreign metal affixed to his arm fresh from surgery while the scent of burnt flesh, metal and infection filled the small space.

He'd let a memory override him. Again. When Lance needed him he'd been useless. What kind of leader was he?

A small hand gently touched his arm and Shiro's eyes flew open. "Are you okay?" Pidge asked gently.

Shiro choked back the sob that was trying to escape in the face of her concern and the still too fresh memory. He should say he was fine, deny any problems. He was the leader. He needed to lead. But his body apparently had other ideas because he found himself shaking his head before he could stop.

And then Pidge was leaning forward, wrapping both of her arms about his neck and burying her face in his shoulder. Her glasses pressed uncomfortably against him, but Shiro welcomed it. It was grounding.

He brought up his flesh arm to wrap about her while his prosthetic balanced them from the floor. They didn't say anything. There was no need for words. Shiro allowed the hot sting of tears to finally unleash and he felt Pidge's own soaking into his underarmour.

It was... cathartic.

Shiro couldn't recall the last time he'd allowed himself to cry. Even when he'd opened up to Keith he had tried his best to remain strong, to not give into that gut-wrenching fear and terror clawing at him because he did not want to fall back into that.

But he had needed this.

He let out another sob and clutched Pidge tighter.

Shiro's legs started cramping somewhere around five minutes in, but he refrained from moving, not sure he wanted this to end. It wasn't until Pidge sat back a minute after that, wiping her nose on her shoulder, that he shifted to relieve the pins and needles creeping up his calves.
"Thank you," Shiro said softly, rubbing at his own eyes. "I guess I... I needed that." It was the understatement of the century but it felt freeing, just as his tears had.

"Me too."

Pidge was straightening now and eyeing the bathroom door. "Can we… can we go back to Lance now?"

Shiro stood. "Let's go."

The bedroom was much quieter than when they'd left and Shiro was almost relieved to see that Lance had fallen unconscious. Coran was in the process of applying some type of salve - it looked almost like the same one Shiro had put on Keith's burns - to Lance's neck while Hunk was ready and waiting with a strip of bandages. Under the cream it was hard to even tell that Lance's neck was injured, but the bloodied towels still over his shoulders and chest told a different story.

Allura was murmuring something to Keith, who she was in the process of settling back into his chair. Even from here Shiro could make out a few faint red splotches on his bandages and he winced.

"Number One, Number Five," Coran turned to them, worry dancing in his eyes. "Are we all right?"

Shiro gave Pidge's shoulder a squeeze as she cast her gaze down. "We're all right, Coran, Thank you. Is… is there anything we can do?"

"Could you fetch the ice packs? There should be some in the cooling unit in the kitchen."

"I'll get them," Pidge said quickly. And she zipped from the room before anyone could blink.

Allura joined them, hands twisted together. "Is Pidge all right?"

"Yeah," Shiro said quietly. "She's just... tired." Mentally, physically... it was hard to watch a loved one continue to be in pain, to be the cause of some of it. Shiro just wanted to close his eyes and when he woke up for this nightmare to be over.

"We all are," Allura said, shooting a pointed look at Shiro and then Coran, the latter of who shook his head.

"I made a promise, Princess, and I intend to see it through. It shouldn't be much longer until the crystal is fully charged and once Lance's fever drops a little we can get him into a pod and get those injuries treated. Now that the collar is off he should be breathing easier and he is... unconscious now which may help as well." He cast a look over his shoulder to where Hunk was sitting at Lance's side. "Poor boy knocked himself out smashing his head against Number Two's, but I think it was for the best."

"Hunk?" Shiro turned to the larger boy who was now replacing the cool cloth on Lance's forehead. He knew Hunk could take a hit, but a force strong enough to knock Lance out was more than just a little bump.

"I'm okay, Shiro," Hunk said quietly.

Shiro hummed and made a note to make sure Hunk got one of the ice packs when Pidge came back.

"I'm going to pop down to the crystal and take a quick looksie," Coran said in the ensuing silence. "I'll be back with a status update in just a few dobashes."
Shiro took it upon himself to clean up the mess that Pidge and Hunk had left while Allura settled herself next to Hunk and to Shiro's surprise rested her head upon his shoulder. Hunk managed a real smile at that although he kept his eyes trained solely on Lance.

After he'd disposed of the mess, Shiro made his way over to Keith who was fighting a losing battle with his eyelids but forced them open when Shiro approached. "Hey," Shiro greeted softly, kneeling down next to the chair.

"Hey," came the mumbled response.

"You did really good back there."

Purple eyes widened while a light blush formed on each cheek. "Really?"

"Really." Shiro adjusted the blanket covering Keith, giving his shoulder a squeeze, careful to avoid the burns. "Lance is lucky to have you." The pink darkened and Keith ducked his head.

Shiro chuckled. "Now get some rest. I'll wake you when it's time for you to go in a cryo-pod."

"I'm not tired."

Shiro's eyebrow quirked. "Is that so? You do a very good impression then of a tired person."

Keith managed a tired sort of glare that had all the strength of a baby duckling. His face was serious though and Shiro's smirk turned into a frown. "What is it?"

"What if..." his eyes darted between Shiro's face and the bed where Lance was.

"Lance is going to be fine," Shiro assured. "He's in the best hands possible." Keith still did not look convinced.

"I'll wake you if anything drastic changes," Shiro promised. "Okay? But he's going to be all right."

"Okay," Keith finally sighed, slumping down under his blanket.

But he still looked upset.

"Hey," Shiro called gently and Keith lifted tired eyes up.

Shiro bent over and pressed a kiss atop the dark head. It was a familiar gesture once upon a time, a reassurance that everything was all right, that Keith was safe, that Shiro loved him and he would always be there for him.

The last time Shiro had done so... had been right before he boarded the ship for Kerberos.

They may have been reunited for several months now but there had been a distance, a chasm, between them that had ever so slowly begun to close in the past week. Shiro had been taking small steps back towards this, not wanting to overwhelm Keith who had reverted back to the more touch-shy version of himself Shiro had not seen since he was fourteen-years-old and sitting huddled in the gymnasium awaiting a meeting neither had any idea was going to change their lives forever.

Keith's eyes widened, cheeks darkening even as a small smile graced his lips.

"I love you," Shiro murmured.

Keith let out a wet sounding sob. "I love you too."
Shiro pressed a second kiss to the dark locks and then stepped back. "Sleep," Shiro said gently.

Keith gave a little hum of acknowledgement and within the dobash his breathing had deepened. Shiro stayed for another minute, making sure he was well and fully asleep, before he rejoined the others.

Allura had seen the entire thing and her eyes were soft. She had known since the humans had arrived that Shiro would make an excellent leader. He was strong and kind and had a deep sense of justice that they needed to complete their objective. And it was not that she had not previously observed his bonds with his teammates, but watching the way he had been interacting with not just Keith, but Pidge and Lance just made her heart swell with something she could not quite describe.

She knew that Lance had jokingly coined the term "Space Dad" to describe Shiro, but it was not until now that she realized how much of a father figure he had actually become to them. Brother, yes, but they looked to him for a guidance that no one else could give, for reassurance that only he could provide. They were all truly blessed to have Shiro as a part of their family. She reached out and placed a slender hand against Shiro's arm as he sat down on one of the ottomans by her and he returned the smile.

Pidge arrived a moment later, a satchel of ice packs in hand and looking a little winded from her trip. "I grabbed as many as I could," she said, holding up the pack.

"Good job, Pidge," Shiro said, accepting the bag. "Where did you say the best places were again?"

Pidge and Shiro ended up wrapping the packs in towels while Hunk carefully placed them around Lance; one on each side of his neck, a set on his inner elbows and one very gently up against his left wrist. He didn't dare put any extra pressure on the right. The final one was forced upon the Hunk and he gingerly pressed it to his forehead where Lance had solidly collided with it while he tried to thrash free.

Hunk was grateful that it had happened, despite the ache that was throbbing in his head now. Seeing Lance the first time so panicked and scared when he tried to lower him into the water had broke his heart. This… this shattered it. Lance had been in so much pain and absolutely terrified, eyes blown wide but seeing nothing that they could see and there was nothing he could do to help. He hated it. He hated it so much.

All he could do was try and calm Lance with words, distorted due to his own tears, and hold him still so he didn't hurt himself more. He'd witnessed Lance recoil as his hands rested on his shoulders and all of the minor progress they'd made was thrown out. He prayed it was temporary, that Lance was so lost to the agony and memories that when he came back to them he'd remember them and that he was safe.

It would be better once his injuries were at least healed. He might still be a little confused with the fever, but if he wasn't in such anguish and he could breathe that would help so much.

As if summoned, Coran strode back into the room, moustache twitching with excitement. "The crystal is just about ready to go," he announced. "No more than twenty dobashes and we should be at full power."

"That is excellent news, Coran," Allura beamed.

"Indeed. We'll get Lance and Keith moved into cryo-pods shortly thereafter. So long as this fever of Lance's has come down some, of course. How's it looking, Number Two?"
Hunk activated the Altean medical scanner with a beep. Downcast eyes brightened at the number. "It's gone down almost a whole degree," he grinned. "Just above one hundred and two."

"The Glornack seed and ice must be working," the Altean advisor smiled. "Let's give it a little more time, hmm? For the best pod result we'll want his temperature no higher than one hundred point six, according to my calculations. That is still high I know for humans, but it should be enough for the cryo-pod to work without delay."

"Almost there," Hunk murmured, adjusting the cold cloth on his head. "Come on Lance, you can do it."

"So we shall wait?" Allura clarified.

"We wait," Coran said, sinking down onto the ottoman puff and Shiro joined him on the matching one and Pidge and the mice curled up on the far side of the bed.

And with all eyes trained on Lance, they waited.

Chapter End Notes

And chapter thirty-five steals the title of longest chapter yet in this fic by nearly 1,000 words to its predecessor, chapter twenty-five. And to think, this was originally all one chapter with thirty-four. Yikes!

All major obstacles have been overcome! Now it's time to pop Lance in a pod and get him all fixed up. And because I can, a little h/c for some other characters too. Shiro especially. I keep torturing the poor thing with memories. So sorry, sweetie (but not really xd)

All the love to lovely reviewers of: Prettysicknasty, keepascretstrawberry, Catching Rivers, koalaoshiz, KethriHolmes, nocturnalspork, soldmysoultodfandoms, Ahhuya, PuppetMaster55, Grace, QueenMcawesome, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Marsetta, Brohaikyyu, Proxy_17, BubbleGumi, TabbiCC, burple12345, ladykristianna, heyheroics, Redwizardfox, FandomHuntress, cipheredsong, and EverlastingCookie!

I know this was a bit of a long chapter to get through (so sorry, no good place to chop it xD) but if you're still with me I'd love hear your reactions to it, even if it's just a line or two. I know this was a pretty big moment that's been building for a while and I'm curious how you all felt it went. Thanks so much everyone for the support and encouragement!
His throat was on fire. That was the first thing Lance realized upon waking. The second was the absolute pounding in his head and he let out a soft moan that only made the flames stretch higher.

What had happened?

He remembered… he remembered pain. There had been so much pain. And hands. Holding him down, restraining him. His breath hitched and the flames turned into lava encircling his throat and the moan turned into a keen. He tried to reach up, as if he could soothe the heat away, but his arms wouldn't move.

His arms would not move. Restraints. His mind flashed to straps and metal bars and a sickly sweet voice offering him a reward if he answered her questions. Someone was talking now, the tone hushed and he frantically struggled to loosen his hands; his feet, anything. He had to get free.

The restraints only tightened in response and no amount of twisting or pushing was loosening them. He had to get out. He had to escape.

If only he could see. Could he see? He couldn't remember. His eyes flew open and he was temporarily blinded by light, pin pricks dancing and making his head ache even more.

But…

That light. It wasn't purple.

That meant something. His head pulsed, but this time not with pain but a memory. Something wasn't adding up. Something wasn't right.

The voice was still talking and he forced himself to listen, already cringing in anticipation of Haggar's tones. But it wasn't her. It was masculine, but not as rough and deep as Theodek.

Hunk.

Just thinking the name brought a startling clarity to him and the voice turned into words, murmuring and afraid but soothing all the same. "— okay, it's me. It's just Hunk. Tu hermano. You're safe. Estás bien. Okay? I've got you. You're okay."

"H-hunk," he whispered, wincing as his throat scratched out the word.

"Oh thank God. You're okay. It's okay," Hunk babbled, and Lance relaxed into it. Even the restraints – arms, he realized, he was being carried – weren't confining now. "Can you open your eyes for me? I promise the lights aren't too bright."

Lance peeked one open and followed up with the other when the flash of pain didn't happen. It was still much brighter than he was accustomed to, but the Altean lights in pale teal down the corridor weren't overpowering.

He carefully tilted his head back then and was greeted with the concerned but relieved face of Hunk.
above, confirming his theory that he was being carried somewhere. Lance blinked up at him, too
tired to do anything else after his attempted escape.

"Hey there," Hunk said hoarsely. "You okay?"

Lance managed a tiny nod, tucking his face up against Hunk's chest. The movement sent hot streaks
of agony racing through him and his resulting moan wasn't quite swallowed back. But the burn was
almost welcome. He was still so cold and now that the panic had subsided he was realizing just how
much. He pressed more against Hunk, a veritable furnace.

"What… h-happened?" he rasped.

"We're heading down to the infirmary," Hunk told him, starting to walk again. "We got the collar
off" – Lance's eyes widened and he felt a flicker of relief at the news, even though he couldn't
confirm it for himself with his arms pinned in by Hunk – "and your fever came down enough so
we're going to get you into a pod. Coran and Pidge already went ahead to get them prepped and
Shiro is getting Keith. Allura's at the bridge making sure all of our defenses turned back on now that
the crystal is charged."

Hunk sensed the question and answered before Lance had to talk past the magma still boiling in his
throat. "Keith is going to be okay. I promise. You just worry about yourself, all right?"

He knew Keith was going to be all right. Keith was strong after all. But the fact that he'd been hurt
enough to need a pod made guilt roll in his stomach. Keith had said… he'd said that it wasn't Lance's
fault. But he'd been angry too.

Lance let out a tiny sigh and buried his head even more against Hunk. He didn't want Keith to be
mad at him, but it seemed no matter what he did he always messed up. He needed to apologize
again. Properly. And maybe Keith could forgive him. He knew Keith really didn't like him all that
much, but like it or not Keith was still a part of Lance's family. And Lance wanted to make amends
so hopefully Keith wouldn't hate him for all of this. He had never wanted anyone to be hurt because of
him.

"Almost there," Hunk encouraged, interrupting Lance's train of thought. "You'll be feeling better in
no time, promise."

"You'll stay?" he whispered, hating how pathetic he sounded but needing to know. Ice was curling
in him at the thought of Hunk leaving.

"Of course," came the warm assurance and the icy rope lessened its hold ever so slightly so he could
breathe again, albeit painfully. Removing the shock collar had helped, but every breath still hurt. He
hoped Hunk was right and he'd feel better after the pod. He honestly wasn't sure what it was like to
not hurt anymore. Would he even be able to feel anything?

He concentrated then on just breathing, soaking up what comfort and heat he could from Hunk as
they traversed the hall. Hunk's gait was steady, but still every rise and fall sent little tremors racing
through him and he couldn't wait until they reached their destination.

But then he'd have to go into the cryo-pod. It was nothing, he tried to reassure himself. Absolutely
nothing to be scared of. He'd crawled through the vents all on his own, right?

Just thinking about the vents though made his lungs seize and the hallway narrowed, transforming
into dark metal and shafts of purple light. He had to be quiet. They'd hear him. They'd find him. And
then…Then…
"Lance, breathe, it's okay. You're safe. Come on, take a breath for me."

And Lance blinked, the encroaching vents fading to be replaced with the spacious hallway of the castle.

"There you go," Hunk said, voice dripping with relief. "Are you with me?"

Lance felt his face flame as he realized what had happened. "Sorry," he mumbled, ducking his face against Hunk's chest again.

"There's nothing to apologize for," Hunk chided gently.

Lance disagreed but was too tired to protest. No matter what they might say, he knew it wasn't really true. And once he was healed and still this terribly pathetic mess they'd know too. Shiro had called him brave. And strong. He so, so desperately wanted to believe that was true. But he hadn't been brave back there or strong. At the end… at the end he'd just wanted it all to be over.

He recalled following the transmission the gut-wrenching pain of actual defeat as his last hope was shattered to pieces. If Haggar had put forth any effort into tearing into him he didn't think he'd have been able to hold her back. Not for long enough. Not forever. He had failed them. He'd failed himself. What was brave and strong about that?

Haggar and Theodek were right. Hot tears pricked his eyes. He wasn't worthy of being a Paladin. He never had been. He was just a cargo pilot who didn't deserve to advance. Just a poor boy from Cuba that had tried to shoot for the stars but had crashed and burned instead. He should have stayed in the cargo division. He wasn't meant to be anything more.

He hoped… he hoped he could still stay on the castle. Not as a Paladin of course; Blue deserved better. The universe did. But maybe he could help Coran with keeping the castle afloat? He was good at cleaning. Or manning the shuttle to retrieve supplies as a cargo pilot should. Apparently he was much better at that than being a defender of the universe.

A traitorous tear slipped down his cheek. Hunk must have seen, because the arms about him tightened ever so slightly and Hunk murmured, "I've got you. It's going to be all right," and Lance appreciated it but Hunk had no idea that everything would never be all right again.

Still, he would take it. He knew at least Hunk would never leave him. That reassurance was enough to fight back any remaining tears. His best friend, his brother, had been with him through nearly everything. He knew who Lance was. And he accepted him, flaws and all. If he had nothing else, having Hunk by his side would be enough.

"We're here," Hunk said quietly. "You ready?"

Lance responded by pressing his face even more against Hunk. He wanted to feel better, but he didn't want to go in the pod. And as much as he hated the restraining nature of being carried, he felt safe in Hunk's arms. He just wanted to stay there.

But then Coran's voice was ringing out with, "Ah, there you two are. Right on time. Number Five and I have just about finished prepping the pods."

Footsteps approached and Lance had to remind himself that it was just Coran. And that he could see now and verify that for himself. Tentatively he pulled his face free of the blanket and cracked open an eye, still somehow expecting it not to be real.

But Coran was just a few paces away, orange moustache and hair unmistakable, and a smile on his
face that could not quite hide the absolute exhaustion etched into his skin. The guilt flared up again.
Had Coran gotten any sleep because of him?

"Hello there, Lance," Coran said gently. "How are we doing?"

Lance knew he should respond, but all he managed was a blink. It hurt too much for anything else.
Coran understood though and gave him another soft smile. Lance wished he could return it, but his
lips refused to curve upward. He closed his eyes instead, each lid feeling like leaden weights.

He was just so tired.

"We're going to forgo the cryo-suit," Coran told Lance as Hunk walked them both across the room
towards the pods. "That should make it a little easier for you, hm?"

"Uh, Coran?" Hunk asked as they neared the pods. The vertical, upright pods that required their
occupants to stand. Lance's feet were in tatters and even if they weren't Hunk knew that Lance
lacked the strength left to stand for any period of time, no matter how short.

The lines in Coran's face deepened and Pidge came to stand at his side, also looking upset.

"We tried to rig one to go horizontal, but the cryo system is too involved in the current arrangement,"
Pidge said apologetically, casting her gaze to Lance, who had his eyes closed but did appear to be
listening. "I did disassemble some of the gel-packs though used for the filtration since they contain
viscoelastic and combined it with some of the tecrea compound—"

"—and made memory foam!" Hunk exclaimed, eyes widening in excitement and Pidge shared his
grin. "Oh, that's brilliant!"

"Something close enough," Pidge said. "It should pad your feet, Lance, for the couple seconds
before the cryo kicks in and help support you. We've lined one of the whole pods with it all along the
base and sides so it ought to be pretty comfy."

Her gaze flicked to Hunk as Lance didn't make any move that he'd heard her, concern growing as
Lance's head seemed to almost loll against Hunk's arm.

Small was not a word she associated with Lance. It's what they often used to refer to her. And while
she thought Lance had appeared smaller in Allura's huge bed (anyone would, really, except maybe
Shiro or Hunk), draped in Hunk's arms he wasn't just small; he was lifeless.

His limbs were still long, legs dangling over Hunk's arm although a blanket kept them from moving
too much, and his body took up all the length and then some of Hunk's sizable torso. But he wasn't
moving. There was no animated motion that made up Lance, no mischievous tilt to his mouth or
sparkle to his eye.

He was so tired he couldn't even keep them open despite his earlier fear of not being able to see at
all. The only motion he seemed capable of making was a shiver or a shudder and even that tiny
shake seemed like it might blow him away. He was so thin. He'd always been lanky, but this was
beyond that. Gaunt. She wondered if he'd had anything to eat since he'd been captured. No.
Probably not. Her stomach twisted around the snacks she and Allura had brought up to the room.

Lance shouldn't be like this. He shouldn't be lifeless. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

But when had life ever been?

"Hey," Hunk gave Lance a barely discernible squeeze. "You with us?"
Ocean eyes cracked open and Pidge released a sigh of relief that he was still responding. She’d be even more relieved when he was in a pod and on his way to healing.

To her surprise, Lance actually jerked in Hunk's arms, his eyes flying wide and looking past her as if he'd seen a ghost.

"N-no," he whispered, voice sounding like he was talking around jagged glass and Pidge winced in sympathy. "I… no…"

"What's wrong?" Hunk murmured while Pidge and Coran both turned around, half-expecting to see something looming up behind them. But the only thing on that part of the room were the cabinets of supplies, a sink, a tucked away cot, screen for changing and… the metal examination table that had some bloodied bandages and what looked like a few pieces of Red and Black Paladin outer armor.

She’d seen enough movies to understand what such a sight might mean to someone who had been tortured.

"Shit," Pidge swore, racing for the table as Lance's desperate pleas sounded behind her, too loud in the quiet room.

"S-stop… I won't… I w-won't…"

"Lance, it's okay," Hunk soothed, turning them to face away from the table. "It's all right. Estás bien. I'm right here."

"Don't t-touch me…"

Pidge crashed against the table, realizing a tick too late that it was melded into the floor. Fuck!

"N-never… I'll… never…"

Coran though had a little more foresight and he arrived a few moments later behind her, arms laden with the screen that generally hung along with all of the bedding from the cot. The two of them made quick work of throwing it over the table and disguising the sheen of metal. Pidge felt like she was going to throw up as Lance continued to choke out protests, but swallowed back the acid bile. Not again.

Hunk's voice was the main one now, soothing sounds talking over the little whimpers and rasps that were emitting from Lance. He'd sunk down to the floor, pillowing Lance to him as the boy continued to struggle in his arms.

"You're not there anymore," Hunk whispered, a tear tracking down his cheek. "You're safe now. I'm here. I've got you."

He was aware of Coran and Pidge seating themselves carefully next to him, but kept his eyes trained on what he could see of Lance's face that wasn't pressed up against his chest. Fresh blood was dripping down Lance's neck and disappearing into the blankets wrapped about him for the trip to the infirmary and he had gone a shade paler beneath the still flush of fever.

That was the scene Shiro and Keith stumbled into.

"What happened?" Shiro asked, skipping all pleasantries, but keeping his gait steady as he supported Keith, the smaller Paladin only on his feet due to Shiro's assistance.

"The table," Pidge bit out, jutting her chin in its direction.
"The table?" Keith repeated, not quite following. It was a table…

Shiro though looked stricken. "Did… did I leave anything out?"

"Some armor and bandages," Coran replied, "although right now they're beneath the sheet. I believe it was the exam table itself though that caused such a negative reaction. I had not even thought about it in all of the pod preparation. That was my mistake."

Exam table…? And Keith finally got it, eyes widening. His gaze darted to Lance, who seemed to be awake if not quite responsive to Hunk's murmurs. "Is Lance…?" he managed, not sure what word to follow that up with. Okay? Definitely not. Awake? With them?

"Lance?" Hunk said gently in answer. "Can you hear me?"

He felt the tiniest of nods against his chest.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Castillo," came the whispered reply.

"Good," Hunk murmured.

But Lance shook his head. "Soy patético."

"No," Hunk protested vehemently, hating how Lance shrunk back at the higher tone but unable to take it back. He could feel the confused looks around him but he paid them no mind. Right now all of his attention was on Lance and making sure he understood. "No. You are not. This is…" Normal for what he'd been through? A sign of PTSD? "You went through a lot, Lance. It's okay. It's going to take some time to feel better. Just don't say that about yourself, okay?"

He received little sigh in return and Lance turned his face back into Hunk's chest, the movement sending another thin scarlet rivulet down his neck.

Hunk turned his troubled gaze to Coran and the advisor nodded, his own eyes tracking the fresh blood and new stains on the bandages.

As was Coran's earlier assessment, trying to change Lance's feelings about the situation wasn't likely to work while he was this exhausted and still in so much pain. Shiro's words had gotten through when they really needed them to, but they couldn't expect Lance to just completely accept them, even though Coran dearly wished he would. But no; between Haggar's poison and Lance's own self-doubt, of which this experience could only have made worse, he wasn't ready to believe them. Not yet.

And the best thing they could do right now was pop Lance in a pod and heal him. Once at least the physical injuries were taken care of – and Coran prayed with all his might that the boy's hands and feet could be saved – they could focus on his mental wellbeing. He had the feeling that would be the true challenge.

"Let's get those pods going," Coran said, rising to his feet. "Number Five, can you assist Number One and Number Four?"

"S-sure," she said, shooting one last worried look at Lance who had gone so still now from his frantic struggles just moments ago. She wasn't entirely certain what had freaked Hunk out so much, and she cursed her lack of knowledge of Spanish. They were really lucky that they had Hunk to act as a translator.
Keith looked ready to protest, but Shiro's weary, "let's go," silenced him and he allowed Shiro to guide him over to one of the prepared pods that Pidge gestured to.

"You shouldn't be in too long," Pidge said, "just about three hours according to Coran."

"And Lance?" Keith asked lowly, watching as Hunk very carefully stood up with Coran's assistance. Lance didn't react at all.

Pidge worried her lip. "Coran isn't sure. He said at least a quintant though. If it's any longer we may have to remove him prematurely due to his fever."

All three of them turned to watch as Hunk murmured something to Lance as Coran removed the vein valve from his arm.

"He's going to be fine," Shiro assured both of them and found himself with two pairs of worried eyes trained on him. "I promise," he said, placing a hand on Pidge's shoulder and giving Keith's a light squeeze. "The best thing we can do right now is take care of ourselves so we can better help Lance, okay? So Keith, you ready to go in the pod?"

In answer Keith took a careful step forward and Shiro released his hold. The back of the cryo-suit he'd changed into was clinging in places to his back and Shiro winced as that likely meant some of the burns were bleeding again.

Keith didn't complain once though, and with a strength he pulled from somewhere, hauled himself into the pod on his own and turned to face them. "Ready."

"I'm going to go ahead and initiate the sequence," Pidge said, hand hovering over the keyboard as Coran had shown her. She mustered up the best smile she could at Keith and then tapped the close code.

"We'll see you soon, buddy," Shiro said as the door came down.

Keith managed a pained half-smile at them before the cryo covered the glass and he was lost behind a wall of frost.

"We should go," Shiro said quietly. Seeing her stricken look he quickly added, "We'll say good bye, but we don't want to get in Coran's way. Come on."

Lance was still nestled in Hunk's arm while Coran finished the last bit of sequencing for the pod, needing to take into account the higher body temperature. He appeared at first to be asleep, but his shoulders were too tight with tension that the ease of unconsciousness should have brought.

"Lance, buddy," Shiro greeted softly. "You still awake?"

A pair of blue eyes peeked open, rimmed with exhaustion so deep he appeared to have bruises beneath them. Above them Hunk nodded encouragingly.

"Lance, buddy," Shiro greeted softly. "You still awake?"

A pair of blue eyes peeked open, rimmed with exhaustion so deep he appeared to have bruises beneath them. Above them Hunk nodded encouragingly.

"We're going to let Hunk and Coran help you right now," Shiro said. "But we'll be waiting for you once you're out of the pod."

"Lance?" Pidge whispered, her face nearly equal height with his. "Um…" What was she supposed to say? Feel better? That was lame. Um… "I think this is right," she finally said, wracking her memory for something that Lance might actually finding comforting in her very limited vocabulary. "Um… hasta luego."
He inclined his head – or it could have just been a shift, she wasn't sure – but she took it as the former. She managed a watery smile and then turned on her heel and left, Shiro right behind her.

That left Hunk and Coran with Lance.

"Are we ready, lad?"

The gentle tones had Lance prying open his eyes one more time, not even certain when they'd closed. Coran seemed to be waiting for an answer, but he had no more strength left to move his head where it was resting against Hunk's arm. So licking his lips he rasped out, "Sí."

He wasn't really ready. But he was tired of hurting and being cold and exhausted. If this could help… he should at least try. He could do that much.

"Alrighty then, here's what we're going to do," Coran said, his voice sounding as if far away and Lance forced himself to listen. "Number Two and I are going to maneuver you into the pod. You'll be standing for a few ticks, but Number Five's foam should assist in keeping you upright and ease the pain on your feet. It'll only be for… five ticks, I imagine, all right?"

"Mmm."

"Good lad. We'll be waiting right here for you once the pod finishes. You should be feeling much better then."

"H-hunk?"

"Yeah?"

"You'll…” he swallowed heavily. "You'll s-stay?"

"I promised, didn't I? I'll be right here."

"Kay."

"Okay then, on a count of three," Coran said, meeting Hunk's eye. "One… two… and three…"

In a movement so fluid it looked like they'd practiced it a million times before, Hunk released his hold on Lance's legs and Coran scooped them up as Hunk pivoted so he was slightly behind and diagonal to the cyro-pod.

Coran guided Lance's legs into the pod and Hunk eased his upper half in, Lance's shoulders near flush within the compartment thanks to all of the foam that lined it. The blue eyes remained tightly shut the entire time.

They opened wide though as his feet made contact with the ground and both sets of hands retracted, leaving him standing on his own weight for the first time in a long, long while. It didn't matter that there was foam. It hurt. A soft keen found its way out of his ravaged throat and he closed his eyes, as if that could stop the pain.

But the darkness made it worse. Now he could hear Theodek ordering him to stand and the feel the cold metal sliding beneath him as he was dragged from the table. It is time for your judgment came the hissed whisper and Lance's eyes flew open, the cold metal being replaced with the squishy, frigid, interior as reality doused him again. He clung to it, open eyes drinking in the worried looking faces of Coran and Hunk standing outside the pod.
He stared at them as long as he could, even as his chest hitched with renewed pain and his body screamed at the pressure of standing and the cold – oh, it was so cold – seemed to freeze him from the inside out.

The painful feeling of icicles burning into his skin was the last thought he had as frost crept across his vision and he knew no more.

Outside the pod, Hunk and Coran were silent as the glass finally turned dark, indicating that the cryo had gone into effect.

"That could have gone better," Coran stated.

Hunk snorted, although there was no amusement in it. He didn't know what else they could have done, but seeing the absolute panic on Lance's face – another memory, no doubt – and his soft cry had torn down the little resolve Hunk had managed to build back up.

"Come," Coran said, placing a guiding hand on Hunk's shoulder. "We are all meeting in the common room."

"I can't leave him. I promised."

Coran shook his head. "I admire that, my boy. But you need to eat and get some real sleep."

"But—"

"Just for a little bit," he insisted. "For me?"

Hunk took in the lines on Coran's face, the droop to his moustache and the absolute slump of his shoulders. He didn't want to cause Coran any trouble. The man had enough on his plate. He didn't need Hunk making this hard.

"He'll... he'll be okay?"

"He won't be out for a quintant. I would never keep you away that long, my boy, but let us rejoin the others for a bit. We'll decide where to go from then, hm?"

Hunk cast a concerned look at the pod.

"You're sure?"

"I have my tablet with me too," Coran assured, patting his belt where it hung. "I'll monitor the status of the pods the entire time we're away."

"Just for a little bit," Hunk finally acquiesced, feeling guilt knot his stomach. He had promised Lance he'd stay, and he was already leaving? What kind of friend was he?

"Lance will understand," Coran said gently. "You need to take care of yourself too, Hunk. He would not want you becoming ill worrying over him."

He sighed. "You're right." And he knew it too. If Lance were thinking clearly he would insist that Hunk get some rest. He'd be back though. As soon as he could.

He allowed Coran to steer him towards the exit and his feet plodded on auto-pilot to the common room. To his surprise the rest of the team was waiting there, Allura included. She was talking quietly with Shiro while Pidge was curled up on one of the couches, the mice perched on her shoulders.
"How is Lance?" Allura asked as soon as they entered.

"Settled," Coran said. "I'll be monitoring the pods the entire time and…" he trailed off as Allura shook her head. "What is it, Princess?"

"You will not be monitoring anything," she said firmly. "You promised you would rest once Lance was in a cryo-pod."

"But—"

Hunk blinked back the déjà vu as he settled himself next to Pidge, who straightened up and the mice went back to the princess.

"No buts. You need the rest, Coran. All of you do." Allura turned to look at all of those assembled, meeting each set of eyes. "By order of the Princess of Altea, all of you are to report to the kitchens and eat a full meal. You will then proceed to the showers, clean yourselves up, and then to bed for at least a solid six varga."

As was expected, there was immediate protest.

"Allura, that is a bit steep of an order," Shiro said, managing to sound above Pidge's profanity laced declarations that she couldn't command them to do that.

But Allura just raised her chin. "Myself and the mice will watch Lance in the meantime," she said, "and be there when Keith wakes, upon which he will receive the same set of instructions."

"Allura, I promised Lance," Hunk said weakly. "I can't just…"

Her eyes softened. "Complete the first two for me then, Hunk. Then you may take your rest on the cot in the infirmary, if that is agreeable."

He gratefully nodded.

"Princess," Shiro tried again.

"No," she interrupted. "I am firm on this. We may be safe for now, but there is no telling if the Galra or Haggar have a way of finding us. If an attack is mounted we must be at our own physical best to push it back, and right now none of us are prepared for such an occurrence."

"How would they find us?" Pidge protested. "I set up the magnetic interference myself and you said the planet we're next to blocks all transmission signals!"

Allura pursed her lips. "I find it is better to be safe than sorry. While we delivered a significant blow to Zarkon's forces, Haggar may not be so easily stopped. We all agreed, did we not, that she has more than an interest in Lance. How do we know she will not follow? The Druids may have ways of tracking that we know nothing about and she could very well find our location. Now would be the time to strike when we are hurt, exhausted and down Voltron."

Silence rang in the room and Shiro felt a shiver shudder through him. He hadn't even thought… they'd rescued Lance. It was supposed to be over now, until the next time Zarkon tried to go after the Black Lion. That's how it always went. Battle the Galrans, leave, and then repeat at the next encounter. They hunted down Galrans; the Galrans did not track them (at least they hadn't since Shiro had gained the upper hand in Zarkon's claim over Black).

Her observation seemed to stun the others too, save Coran who had been thinking along the same
lines. He had seen the possessiveness first hand, witnessed Haggar practically defy Zarkon's wishes to keep Lance. No, she would be coming. The only question was as to when.

"Lance can't know," Hunk whispered, stomach dropping. If Lance even suspected Haggar was coming for him, he would never heal. Hunk knew him. Lance would be so weighted down with fear of her and the guilt that they were in danger because of him that he wouldn't be able to move past it.

Allura nodded. "For now, yes. He is not currently in a state where knowing about this possibility will do him any good. I know it is a lot to ask, as honesty and trust will be large components of helping Lance to heal, but this knowledge will not help. We must keep it to ourselves until Lance is better equipped to handle such information. I believe he too will come to this conclusion, but there is no need for us to create undue stress and pain in the interim. Perhaps it will not even come to pass and we have nothing to fear."

Even as she spoke the words they tasted like ash. Now that the possibility had been thrust into the light, it was all too clear. Haggar would come. Maybe not for several days, maybe not for a month, but she would come.

"How do we stop her?" Shiro asked, voice heavy. They had no good plan on how to kill a Druid, especially one as powerful as Haggar. And if they didn't kill her she would just keep coming after Lance, and then possibly all of the Paladins for their quintessence. She was no longer just Zarkon's right hand. She was her own wild card with her own plans.

"I do not know," Allura murmured. "I... I do not know."

"I could have done it." Pidge's voice was small but the words echoed loudly in the room.

"Done it?" Shiro repeated, a new heaviness settling on his shoulders.

"Killed her," Pidge whispered. "I... I knocked her out. I was going to... I was going to..."

She shook like a leaf on the wind and Hunk, sitting next to her, was quick to pull her to his side.

"I knocked her out," Pidge said again. "And I thought... I thought if I killed her now then she couldn't hurt Lance anymore. Hurt anyone."

"I turned my bayard into a knife," she continued, eyes closed and leaning firmly into Hunk's embrace. Her voice still shook. "I... I should have stabbed her. But I... I couldn't. She was just lying there and it... it felt wrong."

Pidge looked up then, eyes brimming with tears. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Shiro. I should have done it. I should have killed her and—"

And then Shiro was there, kneeling in front of her and pulling both Pidge and Hunk into a hug.

"Katie, no," he whispered, "No."

"I should have killed her," Pidge sobbed, hands clutching Shiro's shirt like a lifeline.

"No," Shiro said again, firmer. "No. You... you shouldn't have to do anything like that."
"She deserved it," Pidge cried, voice muffled against Shiro's chest.

"She does," Shiro agreed, earning a harsh intake, "but Katie… that doesn't mean you have to do it. I don't want you to have to make that call."

"But—"

Shiro shushed her. Hunk was shaking now too and Shiro hugged both tighter, blinking back his own tears. Not now.

"Pidge," Allura said gently, and Shiro was aware of the princess kneeling down next to him while Coran came around and placed a comforting hand on both Hunk and Pidge's backs, his own expression seeming to have aged even more in a matter of minutes. "Pidge, please look at me."

Honey eyes peered up, magnified by tears.

"Pidge, it is I who should be apologizing to you," Allura murmured. "You should not have to be in such a situation where you are forced to make a decision of that nature. You are young… all of you are. I am not in any way implying that you are not deserving of the role of Paladin. All of you are beyond strong and courageous and you embody the true values of what it means to be a defender of the universe.

"But you are young. And I believe you made the right choice for your own self. Your soul was not meant to be darkened in such a way, Pidge."

"But if I'd killed her," Pidge whispered, "then we'd be safe. Lance would be safe. And now he's…"

"We will find another way," Allura said firmly. "We will not allow Haggar to hurt Lance ever again."

"But if I'd just… If I'd just…"

"Katie," Shiro interrupted gently. "You didn't do anything wrong. Okay? Please believe all of us when we say that."

And Pidge sighed. Her stomach was still swimming and her chest hurt, but the guilt that had been clinging to her was lessened, somewhat, with Shiro and Allura's words. She should have done it, she thought. If she was given a second chance she would be sure to correct her earlier course of action. Still… still she was selfishly grateful that she hadn't done it.

"Lance wouldn't have wanted you to kill for him," Hunk added quietly, his own voice thick with tears. "He wouldn't want that, Pidge. You… you did the right thing."

And the last piece of sickness melted away with Hunk's admission. He was right. Lance would have never wanted her to get her hands bloody in such a way. Lance, for all he had suffered under Haggar, probably wouldn't have killed in such a circumstance either.

"Okay," she agreed tiredly, sagging into Hunk and Shiro's shared embrace. "Okay."

"We are all tired," Coran cut into the thick silence after a few moments. "Let us do as the Princess ordered for now. No matter what Haggar's plans may be, she is not likely to leave Zarkon now while they have endured such a loss. We have some time. Focus on yourselves and we will tackle this problem after some rest."

"All of the Castle's defenses are on high alert," Allura added. "The particle barrier is active and
should anyone or any vessel attempt to come into our space we shall be well informed. No matter the circumstance, Haggar will not be boarding this ship without our knowing."

And that at least was a relief. It was as much as they were going to get right now in any case.

Shiro stood first, his knees cracking uncomfortably and earning a wince from Hunk. "Then I think it's time we all got some sleep. Food goo first and then everyone to bed. No electronics," he said, turning to Pidge who was rubbing her eyes. "You need the sleep."

Pidge just nodded but didn't deny the fact that she likely would have smuggled her tablet into bed to do some research on her own on how to stop Druids. She still needed to correct the situation. She needed to do something.

She frowned though soon after as Shiro's words sunk in. To bed. Her bed was all the way on the other side of the ship. She didn't want to be stranded down there if something were to happen.

And… she'd been bunking in Hunk's room the last few nights, but Hunk was going to be in the infirmary now and she doubted she'd sneak in under Allura's radar, nor did she want to cause the princess any extra anxiety. But she didn't want to be all alone. Not now.

"Hey," Shiro said, a hand descending upon her head and giving her hair an affectionate ruffle. "I can hear you thinking from here, kiddo. How about a sleep over? We can bring some blankets and pillows here to the common room."

"Yes, please," she choked out, hating how she could feel tears brimming with relief at the suggestion.

"An excellent idea, Number One," Coran said, a faint twinkle in his eye. "I have always wanted to experience these human 'sleep overs.'"

"Then it's settled," Shiro smiled, not even having to force it.

"Sustenance first," Allura reminded them. "Come, let us see what the kitchen has to offer."

"Food goo, I bet," Pidge muttered, but she gratefully accepted Hunk's hand as he pulled her to standing. She didn't let go of his hand either, dwarfing her own but bringing a comfort little else could.

Pidge's eyes wandered over everyone's faces as they made their way to the kitchen, each showing a bone-weary exhaustion and a fear that even Shiro couldn't quite hide despite his best attempts.

Everyone always said things looked better in the morning. Pidge wasn't really sure when morning ever was in space, but she hoped that sleeping for six varga was close enough to the expression.

Because they could all really use some 'better' right now.

xxx
Another long chapter, y'all. Blame Pidge. She really needed to get that off her chest. But given your response to last chapter, I highly doubt any of you mind the extended length :p And besides, we had quite a bit to accomplish. We've got Lance (and Keith) in cryo. Lance contemplating his future with the team and having some terrible flashbacks to torture tables and demands for information. And then the Paladins realizing that uh, yup, Haggar is going to be be coming. Time to get prepared, and that means rest and nourishment for all.

Also! For my non-Spanish speakers and why Hunk freaked. In very basic terms, in Spanish there are two verbs for the word "I am." Estar (estoy in first person present) and Ser (soy in first person present). Estar is used to describe how you feel and where you are (Estoy en la biblioteca (I am in the library), estoy feliz (I am happy)). Ser is used to describe set facts about yourself (Soy una gemela (I am a twin) or soy baja (I am short)). Lance went and used Ser to describe himself as pathetic. Not that he was feeling pathetic. That he *is* pathetic. And although Hunk isn't fluent, he knows the difference in the verbs and wanted to nip that right in the bud. Apologies for the super long paragraph; I don't tend to translate the Spanish (as most is generally self-explanatory) but this was sort of important.

Thank you as always to the lovely reviewers! Just to note; even if you've only got a second to leave a line or two I super appreciate it. Seriously. Your comments, big or small, really help me get through the day.

This chapter the thanks go out to: smol_lil_demon, BRICKbrick, dean_winchester_has_fallen, BubbleGumi, FandomHuntress, Marsetta, koalaoshiz, EverlastingCookie, KethriHolmes, WolfFire, QueenMcawesome, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Fey_79, TabbiCC, Brohaikyyu, cipheredsong, Person, heyheroics, Grace, keepasecretgetastrawberry, soldmysoultofandoms, alexries, maychorian, Sienna, RimaPichi, and BrieCheese!

And I know this is getting long, but I have to share this. Guys. I have more absolutely beautiful, stunning, wonderful fanart. You spoil me so. You can see all of it via the gallery link on my profile. Please do go take a look and check out this immense talent!

Given the fact that season four is coming out Friday(afdjafjklfjdk!) I will not be updating this weekend. Dios knows I can't compete with that :p So you get a nice long chapter to tide you over till next Wednesday. PLEASE do not post spoilers in comments until at least Sunday CST. I will not be watching the season until late Friday here and I will go Theodek-level of hatred on you if you spoil it. Just... yeah. Please don't spoil. I can't afford the lawyer for Theodek induced damages.

Please do go ahead and hit that little comment button down there and tell me what you thought! Thanks everyone and see you next Tuesday is a brand new post-season four world. I hope it's beautiful.
Hunk was in a hurry to get back to Lance. However, he had a few stops to make before that.

He'd eaten as much food goo as he could manage and washed it down with another cup of tea, before he'd retreated from the rest of the group and headed for his room to take a shower.

He had to admit, the shower was very nice. His under armor had been prickling uncomfortably for a while now as it dried to his skin, not to mention the blood that had soaked into the fibers from holding Lance to him for so long. Coran had instructed all of the Paladins to place their dirty clothes and armor outside their rooms in a hamper and he'd take care of it later.

The hot water had been just what he'd needed and although it couldn't wash away all of the stress, it did go a ways into easing it. Hunk felt much more refreshed after he was clean and dressed in a mixture of casual and sleep wear; his customary yellow shirt but paired with Altean sleep pants in forest green. He figured if he was going to sleep he may as well be comfortable. The customary orange headband went right back on though.

After that was taken care of, Hunk gathered up some bedding items and headed for his first stop: Lance's room.

He spent a quick moment watering the plants – the days were blurring together but he was pretty sure they were past due for some – and then he grabbed a few clothing items; a fresh pair of boxer shorts, sleep pants that matched his own just in navy and a tacky t-shirt Lance had spotted in the space mall that had a picture of Voltron drawn sort of Picasso style. Maybe it'd bring a smile to his face. Hunk hoped so.

After a moment's debate he grabbed Lance's shampoo and the coffee smelling soap bar that Lance had gotten from who knew where and his wash cloth and towel. He knew that taking a shower was probably very, very low on Lance's list of things he wanted to do, but walking around covered in dried blood couldn't be much better. Maybe he'd be okay with at least wiping it off.

He put his haul into a duffel Lance had in his closet and quietly exited the room, en route to his second stop.

He entered the great hall near silent, slippered feet making almost no sound on the polished floors, but Blue sensed him anyway and turned her large head towards him. Behind her the other Lions seemed to be in various stages of rest, but Hunk felt Yellow brush his mind with a ray of comfort and love and he sent back the same.

"My Paladin?" Blue intoned, and despite the severity of the situation Hunk could not help the feeling of awe from hearing a Lion actually speak. He could feel her worry though, so he didn't remain silent for long, even though it was much more intimidating this time around by himself, rather than with Lance in his arms and Shiro and Coran behind him. "He's… he's in a healing pod. Coran said he'd be in it for about a day… uh, quintant."

He felt her purr of contentment at that. But he felt concern poke at him. Yellow's Paladin still upset.
"Yeah," he said, ducking his head, unable to meet those large yellow eyes. "Lance is… he's really, hurt, Blue. The pod should fix his injuries, but… there's a lot more than physical wounds."

*Lion knows. Lion felt it.*

"Do you… do you know what it is they did?" Hunk asked, picking his head up. "You don't have to tell me," he added quickly. "But Lance… Lance has this really terrible habit of not wanting to burden others. I think – no, I know – that he isn't going to want to talk about it. Or as little as possible. But that won't help him and I'm really worried, Blue."

*Lion knows little* Blue admitted, thinking herself of the quick flashes she'd had of water and shame. *But not Lion's place.*

"I know," Hunk sighed, knowing what a breach of privacy that would be. And if the Blue Lion was Lance's chosen confidant he would never want to cast any shadow on that.

*Yellow's Paladin wise. And kind. Blue told him. Yellow's Paladin will help my Paladin.*

"Of course. I'd do anything for Lance."

He could almost feel her smile and a sudden warmth, similar to Yellow's but more playful in nature, swept through him. *Yellow's Paladin my Paladin's brother.* It was a statement, not a question, but Hunk felt he should answer it.

"Yes," Hunk whispered, tears pricking his eyes.

*Yellow's Paladin has great heart. He help my Paladin when Lion cannot. My Paladin is strong. Lion believes in him. Lion believes in Yellow's Paladin also.*

Hunk wiped his eyes and managed a watery smile. "Thank you, Blue. That… that means a lot. I won't let you down. You or Lance. I've gotta go now, but I'll keep you updated, okay?"

*Thank you* Blue rumbled.

Hunk gave a quick wave, sent a good bye to Yellow that was returned with a wave of sleepy contentment, and hurried to his final stop: the infirmary.

His feet were heavy as he approached, a weight in his stomach despite Blue's assurances. This wasn't something that could be so easily fixed with hugs and warm words and Hunk was no therapist. None of them were. The only thing he knew was what his mom always told him after he tried to hide the hurt from being bullied: "We can only bottle up our feelings for so long. Some day that bottle will crack and what we tried to keep in will explode and only create more harm."

So despite how weak it made him feel, Hunk spoke about his feelings and troubles. He didn't share everything, but he shared enough to ease that ache inside him.

Lance though… Lance was the opposite. He was the kind of person who would keep everything inside, suffer his hurts quietly because he would rather be in pain than harm those around him. Hunk wasn't sure when it had started; but before he'd even met Lance, surely.

He'd watched his friend take the blame for a sibling, seen the anguish in his eyes when he was scolded unfairly by a teacher or the hurt as fellow kids teased him over his butchered English when he was still learning. He would just paste on a sunny smile, assure Hunk (and himself) that he was fine. He never wanted to talk about it, would brush off concerns with a wave of his hand.
It had gotten worse at the Garrison. Constantly being told off by the instructors, compared to the other students and then especially to Keith… Through it all Lance had smiled, insisted he was fine, and made everyone believe so as well. He'd tell Hunk there was no point in dwelling on past mistakes; onwards and upwards!

But it wasn't so simple. The instructors could be cruel and the students worse. Hunk had found Lance curled up in bed on more than one occasion, tear tracks on his face and pillow clutched to his chest. He still insisted he was fine.

Hunk would just sit with him, rubbing his back, sometimes pulling him into a hug. Lance craved the physical affection and although Hunk knew it didn't make it all better, he knew it helped. Sometimes, when Lance was at his lowest, he'd get a whispered confession of what had happened, but more often than not Lance was silent as he cried.

Hunk knew that Lance's coping wasn't healthy, but there was little he could do about it. It was just embedded in Lance. And despite his worries, he couldn't change that. His concerns were only eased by the fact that Lance really was as optimistic as he portrayed himself. Even when he was down, he didn't stay there for long. He wanted to be happy. He wanted to laugh and have others laugh with him. And Hunk knew that if it ever got bad, really bad, Lance would come to him.

And then they got shot into space and everything changed again. Out in space Lance didn't need instructors to point out the differences between him and his teammates. He did that all on his own. Allura too, unknowingly, had been a harsh taskmaster and the first time in training that she'd yelled at Lance to "be more like Keith" Hunk had seen the sheen of hurt before it was hidden beneath a cheeky grin.

He should have said something to Allura sooner. She wasn't like the instructors. While she was a princess and was used to giving orders and being obeyed, she also sincerely did care and she didn't make the comparison to be cruel. She would have listened.

But he hadn't. And who knows if it would have really made a difference. Lance's harshest critic had always been himself. Which was why this whole situation sucked all the more. It didn't matter how much they told Lance that none of this was his fault, that he was strong and that he was a valued member of the team. None of it would make a difference if Lance did not believe it himself.

And Haggar, Hunk's fist clenched at his side, had preyed upon those fears. She'd made Lance feel weak, put him in scenarios where no matter what choice he made it was the wrong one, if he even got a choice at all. He thought of the cuts on Lance's wrists and felt such a fury that his vision blurred. Not at Lance. Never at Lance. But at Haggar and the Galrans that had forced Lance into making such a decision.

He wasn't blind. He'd head Lance's pleas in the infirmary when the table had been revealed. He knew that they'd tortured him for information and as they'd seen Lance had resisted. It was as Allura had feared; he would do anything to protect them. And at some point Lance had decided that their safety outweighed his own life.

He had no idea how to fix this. All he could do was provide what comfort Lance would allow him and let him know he was there for him. And hopefully, somewhere down the line, Lance would accept their words as truth and not whatever Haggar and his self-doubt fed him.

Hunk prayed that was sooner than later. He wanted his best friend back.

He entered the infirmary a moment later, surprised to find himself there already. Allura had done some re-arranging since he'd last been in; the cot was pulled off the wall and was resting just a few
feet from Lance's pod and she'd brought in a low table and couch that she'd placed directly in front of the disguised exam table.

She was sitting on the couch, a few books piled on the table and the space mice all curled up together on one large pillow. They perked up and chirped as Hunk entered and Allura turned her attention from the datapad she'd been looking at.

"You are looking refreshed," she commented.

"The shower helped," Hunk said, dumping his items on the cot before heading to Lance. The frost had cleared from the glass although the light was still low inside the pod so he could still not make out Lance's form all that clearly. As the healing process commenced the lights would glow brighter and the opaqueness would fade until they were that unique teal-green that indicated the subject was almost ready to come out.

Next pod over Keith's was already a brighter shade, although still rather dark. The timer indicated he still had about two varga to go.

Hunk placed a hand up against the glass, the shock of cold not enough to get him to pull away. His thumb traced around Lance's face, making a heart with the condensation. He finally pulled away when his hand began to burn from the cold.

Allura graced him with a small smile and patted the couch next to her.

"How are you holding up?" she asked gently as he sat back with a thump, the mice immediately skittering up his arms to rest on his shoulder and Plachu wrapped herself with his bandana tails.

"Been better," he admitted. "I just... I'm not sure how we're going to fix all of this, Allura. And I'm really worried now too about Haggar coming back. Lance can't go the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for her."

"I know," she said grimly. "I have been thinking about that. I have an idea, but I am not sure how plausible it is."

"To... to kill her?" His stomach clenched at the thought of how shaken Pidge had been. He didn't think he could have done it, had he been in her place. No, he knew he couldn't have. And he prayed that he was never in such a position where it came down to something like that.

She shook her head. "Although that course of action would solve many problems, I cannot fathom any real way to kill Haggar so easily and she will be on guard for any further holographic projections. Druids are tricky and her knowledge of quintessence and spells would outweigh any technology we have here. Perhaps if I or Coran were more skilled in alchemy, like my father, we may have something that could hold her, but as it stands now outside of surprising her and being able to cut her down immediately we do not have much chance. Believe me," and her voice grew dark, "If I had the means to kill Haggar I would do so. But magic is the best offense against a Druid and none of us have that skill."

"But you do," Hunk said. "Remember when you healed the Balmera? Wasn't that magic?"

"It was quintessence, a mutual transfer," she explained. "Which is my idea, actually. If we cannot physically stop Haggar, then we must make it so she cannot actually take Lance's quintessence. A shield, a barrier, of some sort."

"How?"
"I have not gotten that far," she said with a wry grin. "I am hoping Coran might have some ideas. But I admit I have not the faintest clue on how that would even be done or if it even can be."

"It's a good idea," Hunk said.

And it was the only one they had at this point. Hunk had no practical knowledge on how to stop a Druid or anything about quintessence other than what he'd learned from Coran and Allura.

"You did not come down here to think on such things," Allura reminded him. "Sleep, please. There will be plenty of time to strategize later."

At her words the exhaustion Hunk had been holding back came roaring to the front. The hour nap he'd squeezed in had done almost nothing for him and suddenly the narrow cot looked like the most comfortable thing in the world.

He spread out his blankets and pillow and clambered on, relieved when other than a slight creak the bed held. Allura got up from the couch as well and spread another blanket over him, smoothing it down in a way that strongly reminded Hunk of his mom and he blinked away the sudden homesickness.

"Sleep," Allura murmured, placing a chaste kiss on his forehead. "I'll be here when you wake."

He needed no second urging. Turning so he could look at Lance's pod he let his eyes droop closed. Moments later he was sound asleep.

Allura gave him a fond look and retreated back to the couch and picked up the datapad, scrolling though for the hundredth time to make sure all Castle defenses were operating at full capacity.

She was tired too, but Alteans did not require as much sleep. The hour she had gotten would be enough to sustain her until Coran could relieve her in six varga, although she had a feeling her advisor would be down sooner than that.

Her gaze drifted between Keith and Lance's pods. She had brought down several books to read to keep her entertained, but her heart was not in them. Sighing, she tucked her legs up underneath her in a way that would have scandalized the ladies of the court and invited the mice into her lap.

"Perhaps you can tell me a story?" she murmured, petting Chuchule's head with a finger. "I could use the distraction."

The mice all looked at one another and got into a huddle, little chirps and squeaks breaking the quiet of the infirmary. A dobash later they broke out of their circle with little grins. All of them save Platt scurried off of Allura's lap and the large mouse gave a little bow.

Allura leaned back against the couch and smiled in amusement as the performance began, allowing her mind to be whisked away to a happier place.

But still she kept the tablet running with the defense diagnostics. Just in case.

xxx

Upstairs, Shiro hauled in a second round of blankets after Pidge insisted they did not have enough. The girl had claimed one of the large round chairs and she had curled up in it with a nest of blankets surrounding her. All of the blankets, Shiro realized upon an inspection of the room.

He gave her a look, but she just snuggled deeper into her collection and he hadn't the heart to even
steal his own back. Instead he handed off one of the new ones to Coran and plopped a second on the
couch he was claiming.

The Altean excused himself a moment later, claiming he had forgotten his favorite pillow, and Shiro
gratefully recognized it for what it was. He scooted Pidge over a bit so he could sit on her blanket
throne.

She looked every bit the kid she was, he thought, her hair mused and slightly damp from her shower
and clothed in an over-large shirt that fit more like a dress in green and white stripes while a pair of
what looked like leggings went to her ankle. Her glasses were set safely on one of the tables along
with her tablet, which she had not tried to smuggle into her bed out of respect for Shiro's wishes and
because she honestly did want to sleep.

"Have enough blankets?" Shiro teased, pulling one up to cover her more fully.

"I still see some," she grinned back.

"Tough luck, kiddo. I'm not giving up another one so easily."

Her lips quirked up again but it did not reach her eyes.

Shiro sighed, his own smirk slipping. "You doing okay? I know a lot has happened in the last few
hours."

"I'm fine."

"And that's a Keith answer," Shiro retorted, earning a ghost of a smile. "How are you, Katie?"

"I'm… I'm okay," she whispered. "But..." She lifted her hands and pressed them against her chest.
"Right here. There's like an ache, Shiro. It won't go away."

"I know," he murmured. "My heart hurts too." He had always thought heartbroken was an
expression, but no, it was a real thing. And seeing his team, his family, so hurt was picking his own
apart. Yet being with them was also holding it together.

"How do you make it stop?"

"You don't," he said simply, and her face fell.

"Others do," he continued, "like this." And he lifted his own hand, placing it on her head, warm and
heavy, and carded it through her hair. "We just have to be there for each other," he said, continuing
the soothing gesture as her eyes closed in contentment and the frown eased from her face. "Loving
and caring for others is the greatest gift we can share. That's what gets us through times like these."

"Really?" And there was desperation there, a desire to believe that such a simple kindness was the
answer.

"Mmm. And Lance is going to need all of us. His heart is hurting the most. But I know we can all
help him heal. To do that though we first need to take care of ourselves. So get some sleep, all
right?"

Pidge gave a sleepy mumble, already near lulled to sleep. Shiro smiled and leaned forward, pressing
a kiss to the short locks before he rose to head back to his own bed. He applauded himself for not
starting when he saw Coran standing in the doorway, a rather fond expression on the Altean's face.
"That was beautiful, Shiro," he said, stepping fully into the common room with a gaudy orange and pink pillow in hand.

Shiro's hand went to the back of his head, embarrassed.

"Sit with me," Coran said, not quite an order although it was clear he wouldn't take no for an answer. Not that Shiro would refuse.

He joined Coran on the couch the Altean had claimed, hunching forward with his hands clasped between his knees and Coran mimicked him.

"How are you holding up, lad?"

"When I'm not having flashbacks? Peachy," Shiro sighed, knowing he sounded bitter but tired enough that he couldn't take it back.

"You went through a traumatic experience yourself at the hands of the Galrans," Coran said carefully, touching on the near taboo subject that was never brought up unless Shiro did it first. "It is not surprising that you would have such a reaction."

"I broke down on the Galra ship," Shiro admitted, giving voice to the recollection. "I saw a table with tools and blood and had a flashback. If Keith hadn't been there... well, the Galrans might have two Paladins in their custody."

"But Keith was there," Coran countered. "And he was able to assist you when you needed it."

"I'm the team leader," Shiro said bitterly. "I shouldn't have to put them in that position."

"Ah," Coran murmured, "the heart of the problem."

Shiro turned to look at him. "What?"

"Shiro, pardon my bluntness, but if you truly believe what you have just said then you are a terrible hypocrite."

Shiro gaped.

"You are focusing only upon one word in your role of Voltron," Coran said gently. "'Leader.' The word you should be focused on is 'team.' Voltron is a team effort, Shiro. The head, although in the top position, cannot exist without the arms and legs. It is the same with its Paladins. Yes, they need a leader to guide them, but the Paladins are a team; a point that I hear you stress near daily during training.

"I have worked with many Paladins over my years," Coran continued. "Each Paladin brings a different set of strengths and then on the opposite side, weaknesses to the team. Being the leader does not mean you must be immune to any sort of weakness, but rather have the strength to acknowledge them and rely on your team for support."

Shiro opened his mouth and then closed it with a sigh, guilt swirling with resignation. He knew Coran spoke the truth. It didn't make it any easier to swallow.

"You're right. I know you are. But..."

"You feel responsible for them."

Shiro huffed out a laugh that was anything but humorous. "Of course I do. They're kids, Coran."
They got caught up in all of this because of me. They should be safe at the Garrison, their biggest fear a test score. Instead they’re fighting in a war that isn’t even theirs. They’re getting hurt in ways that no one, and especially a child, should ever have to experience. I… I failed them. I failed Lance."

"You are being too hard on yourself. You forgot that you too are but a child." Coran held up a hand. "I know that you are several years older than them, but to us you are all younglings. You do not have to bear that responsibility on your own, Shiro. Both myself and Allura will share in that burden and will do all we can to keep both you and the other Paladins safe. We are a team, a family. We will overcome this challenge as we do all of them: together."

Coran settled an arm about Shiro’s shoulders, drawing him close in a way that no one had done since he’d been a child and undoing a knot that hadn’t been prodded since long before the failed Kerebos mission. "You do not have to be strong all the time," Coran whispered.

Shiro felt a tear trek down his face, followed quickly by another. He didn’t try to wipe them away either, merely leaning his head to rest on Coran’s shoulder. He didn’t cry like he had with Pidge, shoulders shaking. It was a slow, quiet drip while Coran held him secure.

"Better?" Coran asked softly as the stream came to a stop some minutes later. Shiro nodded and even the flush of embarrassment that normally heated his face from such an action was absent.

They remained in a comfortable silence before Shiro sat up, knowing from his own experience that Coran’s arm must be pins and needles at this point.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"Think nothing of it, my boy. Just know that we are all here for you whenever you need us. No one here will ever judge you."

It was what Allura had said after his fainting spell, but hearing it again really drove it home. He could almost hear Black’s exasperated sigh that that was what she had been trying to tell him all along.

"Coran?" he asked quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away."

"How are you holding up?"

"I have been better," the Altean said honestly. "I have seen many things in my years, but the cruelty of Haggar escapes even my understanding. What she has done to Lance is a sin that can never be forgiven." A fire burned in his jewel eyes and Shiro was reminded not for the first time that this had begun that Coran wasn’t just the light-hearted jokester that he portrayed. Like Lance. No wonder the two had clicked so well.

"But I believe in Lance," Coran continued. "I can see that despite all he has endured he still has hope. Trust. The ability to love. They could not take those from him no matter how hard they tried, and it is those things that give me hope that that precious, precious boy will come back to us. I can imagine no other alternative and so I will not."

He fixed his bright gaze on Shiro. "I am also incredibly tired, as I am sure you must be. Let us take the advice you gave Number Five and get some shut-eye, hmm?"

"Sounds like an excellent piece of advice," Shiro said, standing with some difficulty as his body protested getting up from the couch. "Good night, Coran."
"Good night, Number One. Pleasant dreams."

Shiro stumbled over to his own couch. He was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

xxx

Allura glanced up from her datapad as a soft beep echoed about the infirmary.

A soft smile graced her lips. Keith was just about done. She bit back the grin at how the Red Paladin would react to her sudden image of a plate of cookies beeping in the oven and its comparison to him emerging from the pod with a little ding.

It had been just about three varga now and when she had last checked twenty dobashes ago the pod had turned teal and Keith was clearly visible. The beep indicated she had a couple of dobashes to get over there so she could help lower him from the pod when it released.

She really ought to see if Coran could adjust that so the subjects didn't tip out. Perhaps they could lean back just slightly so gravity would not pull them forward? Something to be addressed later. Right now she was just grateful that one of her Paladins was healed.

She glanced to Lance's pod, still very dark. As she had been doing during her entire vigil, Allura sent another silent prayer to the Altean Gods that Lance would emerge fully healed and whole.

Hunk was still sound asleep, his deep snores a welcome sound to the otherwise quiet room. He slept like a rock, she thought, just as she imagined the Paladin of the Guardian of Land would. He needed it though. She had seen how Lance clung to him, drew strength from Hunk's own. He would need to be fully recuperated himself to handle the flood of emotions that Lance was bound to have, so she was glad he slept soundly. She hoped he may even make it past the six varga. She hoped they all did.

Gathering up a blanket, she approached Keith's pod, the counter indicating she had about thirty ticks now until it would open. She positioned herself in a stance she had seen Shiro take while retrieving the falling Paladins, feeling a bit foolish but knowing that they did not always tilt perfectly straight. Why, one time Pidge had gone near sideways and it was a near miss that she didn't crack her head on the floor thanks only to Hunk's lunge.

With a final beep the glass slid up and Keith tipped out, accompanied by a wave of frigid air. Allura caught him neatly, wrapping the blanket up about him in one motion. Keith came to within a tick of his feet touching the floor and he stumbled upright against Allura, even though a haze of confusion and sleepiness filled his eyes.

"Ilura?" he slurred, hands instinctively clutching the blanket tighter and Allura ran her palms up and down his arms to warm him. Alaaran, he was cold!

"Good to see you, Keith," she said, continuing her vigorous rub. "How are you feeling?"

Awareness was returning now and he blinked slowly at her, to her relief not retreating from her close presence as she had seen him do time and time before with the others. Instead he rolled one shoulder back and then the other, a tiny smile quirking his lips up. "No pain," he said softly. And then, quickly, "How's Lance?"

Allura inclined her chin towards the matching pod. "Still healing. The numbers are stable though, so that is a good sign."

Keith walked over to see for himself. He didn't touch the glass like Hunk, but his gaze was laser-focused on the figure inside, still only barely illuminated. "How much longer?"
"At least twenty varga," Allura answered. "In the interim though, we are all resting ourselves. I shall give you the same orders I have the others; eat something, take a shower and then to sleep. And do not say you are not tired," she said, raising a hand.

Keith ducked his head, a faint flush highlighting his cheeks at the easy way she had picked him apart.

Allura though knew from her own observations that most of Keith's reluctance to sleep was a fear of nightmares from all that had happened. She understood that all too well; if it wasn't for the mice she doubted she'd have gotten any sleep at all the last few quintants as Lance's screams and Haggar's grin surfaced all too easily in dreams.

"Everyone else is sleeping in the common room together. A sleep over, I believe it is referred to," she smiled. "Perhaps you would like to join them?"

He nodded and she could see the relief in the way his shoulders slumped. "Yeah. I'll go do that."

Before he could take a step towards the door, Keith found himself swept into a tight hug that had him stiffening at first, before he very slowly relaxed into the embrace, tentatively returning it.

"I am truly glad you are all right," Allura said, breath and long tresses tickling his ear. She gave him one last squeeze and released him. "Now go. Get some rest."

He nodded again, murmured a quiet "thanks" and left the infirmary.

The last year on his own in the desert had taught him the luxury of water, so Keith's shower was quick and efficient, as was the food goo he robotically shoveled in his mouth. Once he was certain he'd eaten as much as he could, he headed for the common room.

Coran was snoring loudly, sounding like he imagined a hibernating bear would, but it did not seem to be disturbing the other two occupants at all. Pidge looked like a little bird in her nest – and was that his blanket he spotted in there? – and Shiro was sprawled out on the other long couch, prosthetic hand tucked inside the cushions.

Sitting by Shiro's feet was a familiar pillow and Keith's entire demeanor softened as he realized Shiro had left the spot for him. The couches were long, certainly big enough for two people if he squeezed his feet up alongside Shiro's legs.

There was another blanket on his end of the couch too and he gratefully took it, still cold even with the one from the infirmary wrapped about him and dressed head to toe in long sleeves and sweats. He hated cryo-pods. He appreciated their healing properties, but loathed how cold he always felt for hours afterwards.

He maneuvered himself into the leftover space, having to shove Shiro's feet over a bit with a grunt, and settled in. Shiro, as light a sleeper as he was, did not even stir.

Coran's snores provided a backdrop to the otherwise dim and quiet room and Keith let the sound wash over him. It was soothing, after he got used to the jarringness of it.

And eyes drooping, Keith joined the rest of his family in the land of dreams.
This is probably the closest thing I imagine to a quiet chapter that Color should get, but hopefully you all still enjoyed it. I know I for one am actually rather sleepy now since everyone else is doing it. *yawn* Pardon me, think I'm going to go take a little lion nap now (after I go get my blood drawn, joy). The chapter turned a little more introspective to Lance than planned, but I think it was good in the end. Lance is just the type of person to think his own problems aren't as significant as anyone else's and therefore not worth talking about. It's something I wanted to show that he's bottled up his entire life.

Also, I've been wanting a Shiro and Coran chat for a while. I think outside of Black, Coran would be the person Shiro might actually open up some of his fears to. I mean, he was the advisor to a king; his opinion is pretty highly valued.

And for the inevitable season four talk. Here's my take while trying to remain vague because of spoilers. (still, possible spoiler alert! don't read this paragraph if you haven't seen season four!) Overall I was not impressed with this season. I am all for plot but NOT when it sacrifices character development and boy, did this season fail on that front. Outside of a few moments the characters were less characters for me and more of mouthpieces to move the plot along. I did not like it. Episode two was by far my favorite, but even that left a lot of holes and the reunion later with the team was severely lacking. There were some good moments, sure, but a lot of it felt rushed because of how much plot they tried to squeeze in in just six episodes. I'm also super disappointed that there wasn't a hint of clone theory and I'm still bothered by it now days later xD I'm hoping season five takes its time and tries to remember that we love this show so much because of its characters and not for the explosions and battles. Fingers crossed. And if all else fails... well, at least I've got fanfiction. :p

Love and hugs to the fabulous reviewers: Marsetta, Cynthia_of_the_Wallflowers, Brohaikyu, QueenMcawesome, BubbleGumi, EchoMoonstone, FandomHuntress, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, starrymellie, jack, Chrisiecub, BRICKbrick, Grace, spn_angels, TabbiCC, Fey_79, WolfFire, FluffyPapaya, heyheroics, glitteringconstellations, Ahhuya, cipheredsong, burple12345, soldmysoultofandoms, Space___Dad, StingingLikeABee, chewbacca_bear, Proxy_17, BrieCheese and TheWhitePaladin!

As always I love and appreciate your comments! If you're not sure what to say I love hearing what your favorite part of the chapter was or a quote or a line and what resonated with you. Thank you guys so much!
There was something to be said about waiting.

And if you polled the residents of the Castle of the Lions they would come to a unanimous conclusion regarding the act of waiting: they hated it.

The six varga of sleep Allura had required had come and gone, but Lance was still in the cryo-pod with over half a quintant still to go. Much to Allura's chagrin, the Paladins had decided to make the infirmary into their new waiting room and all of the blankets and pillows that had been dragged to the common room found a home on the cold tile floor.

It was not like she could blame them. None of them wanted to leave Lance alone. They were all worried and she wasn't about to order them out for the sake of maintaining an orderly infirmary when being in the room with Lance was as much reassurance as they could get at this point. She did have to enforce though that no, they could not camp out right in front of Lance's pod because in the event of an emergency it was not safe to be dodging around blankets and pillows.

Allura had replaced Hunk on the cot for a number of varga, somehow managing to sleep through the quiet chatter of the assembled group, and awoken to a rather delectable smell of some spice she could not identify that Keith had seasoned pieces of bread with and toasted on the stove. When she'd asked, he'd called it "garlic bread or close to it anyways" and said he used to make it all the time when he lived on his own.

Pidge had chimed in then that Lance was always waxing poetry about garlic knots and Keith had smiled softly and said he remembered that and although it wasn't quite the same, perhaps Lance would be up for trying a piece when he got out. Shiro's look of beaming pride had reddened Keith's ears and had him ducking his head.

It warmed Allura's own heart to see the changes in Keith. He and Lance had come a long way since she had first met them, but there had still always been a chasm between them. She realized now that a large part of that could be traced back to the constant comparisons Hunk had opened her eyes to that Lance felt he had to overcome and as such he pursued the rivalry to a sometimes reckless degree.

The other part was simply the personality differences. Lance was loud and brash outwardly, although she knew now that behind the laughter and grins there was actually a very empathetic, compassionate individual, but it was the former that Keith for the most part saw. And it conflicted with the Red Paladin's preference to be alone and withdraw from social situations, although hidden beneath that was a longing to belong that perhaps even Keith did not know how to act upon. They were literally fire and water and did not mix.

But now… Allura hated that it had taken this kind of tragedy to open Keith's eyes, but she was grateful for at least that one tiny silver lining to emerge. She only hoped that Lance would reciprocate the bond, and not just with Keith but with them all. She recalled Hunk's warning about pity and knew that if they were not careful that Lance could reject all attempts at reaching out.

Of the team, Hunk had been the only one who had refused to leave the infirmary while Lance was in
the pod, not even to visit his beloved kitchen. Instead he had left the food duties to Coran and Keith, who took to the task with more gusto than Allura would have thought, but she supposed it was a good way to keep busy. Hunk kept up a steady vigil outside of Lance's pod, as if staring at it could make the healing process go faster.

She had posed her idea to Coran about the quintessence and some way of changing it so that Haggar could not access it. Her advisor said he was not certain such a thing could be done, or at least he had never heard of it. But Coran was never one to give up and he had dashed off to their library, returning with several thick tomes on quintessence.

She, Coran and Pidge had taken it upon themselves to read up on it, but the texts were excessively dry. Allura kept finding her eyes closing until she finally handed the book off to Pidge with a rueful sigh. It was no good for her to read it if she wasn't even retaining the information.

She ended up joining Shiro on the couch, where he was constantly going over the castle's defenses and making notes for what should happen in the event Haggar did arrive. So far it looked like his best plan was to get Lance aboard Blue and have the two, along with another Paladin and Lion, wormhole away until the danger was over. It wasn't a plan they could enact long term, but for right now if it came to it that would be an acceptable course of action.

Throughout the wait Coran had been noting the cryo-pod's output and had reported, pleased, that so far everything was looking good. Despite the higher body temperature Lance had gone in with the pod was reporting no abnormalities and healing was going at a steady pace.

He had frowned though and said Lance's body was still severely malnourished and dehydrated. Once he emerged it was imperative they try to get him to take in something, although he hadn't looked all too convinced it was going to be that easy. He was already putting together more human-compatible fluid packs for the likely inevitable outcome.

One other thing was becoming abundantly clear though, to their horror.

Lance was developing scars.

As the pod brightened they were able to get a better view of Lance, and since his body was not hidden inside a cryo-suit they were able to make his skin beneath the bandages, which were breaking down in the cryo-process and revealing more and more with every passing varga. Fortunately for Lance's modesty his shorts were faring better and only fraying on the edges.

There was a thick line around his entire neck in a mottled looking reddish-brown, about two inches wide. A burn scar, Coran had said quietly, from the repeated crystal shocks. They had already known the pod could not heal scars – Shiro's prominent one had never faded despite his trips into the pods – but Coran had held onto the hope that Lance's injuries were fresh enough that they would be healed without a mark.

His heart broke that he had been wrong.

In addition to the ring about his throat there appeared to be another burn scar that ran the length of his inner right forearm from wrist to elbow. Hidden beneath that scar Coran knew was another injury, but its twin had fortunately faded from sight on the left.

But both impalement wounds on Lance's hands had not fared as well. They could only see the backs of Lance's hands, but there was a pinkish colored splotch in the center and there was no doubt it had a match on the palm.
The bottoms of his feet were hidden as well, but Coran was unfortunately certain that one or both had some mixture of burn and knife scar.

The final one was another pink scar just below Lance's ribcage, which was likely from the original attack that started it all. Otherwise at least from what they could see the other marks and burns had melted away, leaving unblemished mocha skin.

But one scar was one too many. Sometimes they might be worn as badges of honor. It was how Shiro got through his day, hoping beyond hope that he'd gained some of his in some combat situation he could be proud of; maybe taking down a Galran officer or defending another slave. Hunk had a small scar on his knee from where he'd tackled one of Lance's younger siblings out of the path of a car when they were little.

Other scars had a story that didn't come with any lasting hurt. Pidge had a faint chicken pox scar on her forehead she wasn't proud of but nor did she shirk from it, just laughed if it ever got brought up. Keith had a tiny one on his elbow from when he'd been learning to ride a bike and had fallen off, but it reminded him only of his dad and happier times, and the thin line on his back... it was barely noticeable and like its appearance he didn't allow himself to dwell on it.

Lance's scars though. They were a grim, permanent, very visible reminder of what he'd suffered. He should see them as a hero's mark; he had gotten them protecting his friends and the universe. But the uneasy consensus, as they had all shared looks upon the scars becoming visible, was that the scars were only going to be a source of pain. If a table or hallway could send Lance back into a memory, what chance did the scars of torture have?

Otherwise the readings looked good regarding a full body healing, but Coran knew that it wasn't as clear cut as that. Lance's right wrist looked normal again, but whether the muscles and tendons had been damaged so badly that they would be capable of performing the normal functions of a human limb remained to be seen.

All they could do was keep waiting.

Castle Standard Time rolled around to overnight hours and Allura insisted everyone sleep again. Lance was due to come out of the cryo-pod at about 0800 hours – and the fact that that was exactly seven quintants since this nightmare had begun was not lost on her – so they had time and they still needed the rest.

She, Coran and Shiro – who insisted he did not need any more sleep – traded turns in keeping watch. And somehow before they knew it it was nearing 0800.

As a group they had gone over multiple strategies depending on how Lance woke up out of the pod. He could be lost in a flashback, in which case Hunk and Coran were to take point and the rest would leave to give them space. He could be coherent and depending on his reaction to the group – either relief to see them or being completely overwhelmed – would dictate how that approach went.

They were prepared for anything. The only constant was that Hunk was going to be the one to catch Lance as he fell – the foam had also disintegrated so there was nothing keeping him locked in place – because as they had all witnessed Lance responded the best to Hunk if touch had to be applied.

So when the final beep sounded and the cryo-pod opened, Hunk caught Lance as he tumbled out, wrapping a thick blanket about his bare torso and holding him close, careful though in case Lance resisted.

But Lance did not react. He didn't do any of the things they had prepared for, because he seemed
determined to remain unconscious.

"Lance?" Hunk whispered, giving him a tight squeeze to get a reaction.

Nothing.

Lance's feet were on the floor, but his body was holding none of his weight and his head rested limply on Hunk's chest. Hunk bit back the fear that Lance had somehow died in the pod because of course the sensors would have done something, right? Right?

It wasn't until he felt a soft exhale on his neck that that tension bled away. Breathing. Breathing was good. And it wasn't that rattling hoarse gasp either. It was slow and steady and sounded normal. Hunk clung to Lance a little tighter in sheer relief.

"Why isn't he waking up?" Pidge asked, voice small. Everyone always awoke near instantly when they came out of the pods. What had gone wrong?

"Not to worry," Coran said, holding up his scanner. "All seems to be in order. His body is just exhausted – remember, the pods cannot replenish the sleep cycle – so he should wake up after he gets some more rest."

"Does he still have a fever?" Shiro asked, and Hunk shifted Lance ever so slightly so he could press the back of his palm to the unblemished forehead. His skin was still cold though from the cryo so it wasn't much of an estimate.

"Hard to say until he warms up some," Coran mused. "Although I must admit, this is perhaps the best course of action at this time. We'll get Lance settled and then I can check on his motor responses."

"Where should we take him?" Hunk asked. The infirmary was out; the still covered exam table lending credence to that decision. Lance's room would likely be the most comforting to him, but it was small and the bed hard to access except from one side, making it less than ideal until Lance was more in control.

"My room," Allura decided. "Lance can decide if he wishes to remain there or go to his own room or another location upon waking, but for now let us bring him there."

Hunk nodded and carefully adjusted Lance so he could scoop him into his arms. Lance didn't react at all to the handling and Hunk was still unsure if he should be relieved or worried.

"Number Two and I will get Lance settled in," Coran said, "and then the rest of you are welcome to join us after."

"That sounds good, Coran," Shiro said, heading off any protests from the other Paladins. "We'll be in the kitchen then."

He knew how much they all wanted to be there for Lance. But there was no need to crowd while Lance got cleaned up and Coran ran his tests. Shiro knew for certain he would not, if he were in Lance's place, want an audience. Pidge and Keith seemed to realize the same, as other than concerned looks being sent towards Lance, they made no move to follow.

Hunk walked slowly back to Allura's room, trying to jostle Lance as little as possible while Coran kept pace beside him, a small chest in his arms that contained a fluid and nutrient pack and some of his medical equipment for tests.
It was so different from their last trip down this hall, Hunk mused. This time Lance's breathing was soft and quiet, a welcome from the near death rattle that it had become, and no pained whimpers passed between chapped and bloodied lips. He was still shivering, but it was nowhere near the desperate shudders that had plagued him before.

Hunk tightened his arms about Lance, grateful that he could do so now without fear of accidentally hurting him. Still though, although Lance was no longer covered in injuries he was still much, much too thin. He didn't dare hug him as close as he wanted for the very real fear he might actually break him. He just wanted to stuff him with food, all of Lance's favorites, but he knew that one; eating that much rich food after having nothing for so long would not end well and two; Lance hadn't even been able to stomach water. It was possible food, being a completely different texture would be all right, but all of the foods that Lance should eat while recovering – soups and broths – were too watery. Maybe he could find some oatmeal substitute?

For now though he tried to take comfort in the positives. Lance was alive. He was in one piece. Other than the scars – Hunk's eye traced the visible dark ring on Lance's neck and winced – he didn't appear injured at all. They didn't know about the damage to his hands and feet, but they looked normal at least and Hunk hoped that was a good sign. He would go with that until Coran told him otherwise.

Allura's room had been tidied since their last time there; the bloodied blankets and sheets had made it to the laundry and now clean fresh ones adorned the large bed. As much as Hunk wanted to just lie Lance right down on the mattress, he still had plenty of dried blood clinging to his skin from the injuries that the cryo had not quite washed away. First stop was going to be a bath.

Or rather, Hunk corrected, a mimicry of one with nowhere near the amount of water. He and Coran ended up setting down with Lance on a low-backed chair near the sink. While Coran gently wet a washcloth and cleaned away the blood, revealing the scars even more vividly, Hunk took it upon himself to give Lance's hair some much needed attention.

When they had first cleaned him up he had gotten the worst of the blood and sweat out, but it was still nowhere near washed. He didn't dare use too much water, just in case Lance woke up, but he filled a small cup and worked it through the dark locks, massaging Lance's scalp ever so gently with his favorite shampoo.

Lance had stiffened a bit at the first contact, and a soft whimper echoed in the quiet room. Hunk had immediately frozen like a deer in headlights. Coran too had paused in his ministrations, pulling out one of his scanners and clicking it on, reporting quietly that Lance's breathing indicated he was still asleep, if shifting from deep to light. It was just his body's natural reaction to the intimate touch and Hunk had had to excuse himself for a moment to wash his hands of the shampoo so he could rub his brimming eyes.

"This isn't fair," Hunk muttered, being even more cautious now so he didn't make Lance think he was… was someone else should he wake. Previously Lance would unconsciously lean into touch and if he'd been a cat Hunk knew he'd have been purring. But now he did the opposite and Hunk hated it. He hated that just a few days of captivity had hurt Lance so much to the point where normal comforts were now just sources of more pain.

"It is not," Coran agreed softly.

They remained silent the rest of the time, blotting Lance dry and assisting him into the clothes Hunk had picked out earlier. The t-shirt, already slightly too large, now seemed to dwarf Lance, but Hunk figured at least it was comfortable. It also did little to hide any of the scars, save the one on his torso, which seemed to shine neon now that they'd been cleaned, but given his fever it wasn't a good idea
to dress him too warmly right now.

Coran hated that he had been right about Lance's feet. Bisecting the length of the bottom of his each was a thin, pink-white scar. His palms too also bore a matching mark to the back of his hand, although they were even larger there and looked like distorted stars due to how many different ways the knife had shifted while lodged inside.

Before he began any of his tests, Coran's first step was to hook Lance up to the vein valve once more with both the nutrients and fluids. They were a poor substitute for actual food, but for now they would have to do until Lance felt like eating. After a moment's consideration he placed the needle in Lance's left forearm and taped it down. To his relief Lance did not even react to the quick insertion and he moved onto checking Lance's vitals while Hunk hovered.

"His temperature remains higher than normal levels," Coran said, looking at his scanner output. "Just below a one hundred. Still, that is better than previous, hmm? And the water does appear to be removed from his lungs as well." He turned his scanner to show Hunk. "They are inflamed slightly, but nowhere near my previous reading. It seems although the pods cannot heal illnesses they recognized that no liquid was supposed to be there."

"That's great news," Hunk said, resisting the urge to smoothe Lance's hair back and instead placed a cold cloth on his forehead instead, hand only lighting down for the slightest of moments to shift the bangs away. It looked like they were just dealing with a slight fever now and he felt much, much more equipped to handle that than pneumonia. Hunk also had his suspicions that the Glornack seed had more healing properties on humans than the Alteans were aware; he still recalled when he'd had one for a headache it had also soothed the beginnings of a runny nose.

"Other than those, the rest of his vitals are operating in regular range for a human. Most excellent news, to be sure."

Coran pulled out a different scanner then and the smile that had turned his moustache up disappeared. "I am going to check on his muscular and nervous structure now," Coran explained quietly. "Number Two, I'll need your assistance."

"Of course," Hunk said, scrambling to his feet. "What should I do?"

"We'll start with his feet; hopefully some good news first," Coran decided. "I need you to move his foot and ankle as I instruct while I scan to see how the structure responds compared to the data I have for humans."

Hunk cast a concerned glance to Lance's face, as peaceful as he'd seen it in the last day, resting on the comfortable bed and no longer plagued by pain. "Will he wake up?"

"He has returned to a rather deep sleep, but I would not eliminate the possibility. We must be prepared to stop immediately if we cause him any discomfort." Coran frowned. "Given Lance's state when we put him into the cryo-pod, I would not be surprised if he comes to lost to a memory."

And that was what Hunk was afraid of. He knew that he could probably talk Lance out of it – as he'd already done several times now – but they were going to be messing around with his feet and hands, which seemed to be the most abused parts of him. If they were going to trigger something it would not doubt be from this handling.

Still, it was best that they could do this now while Lance was asleep. And maybe… maybe they'd have only good news to tell him. Hunk's roiling stomach though told him that likely wasn't the case. But hope was all he had to at this point so he clung to it against reality.
They started with Lance's right foot, Hunk flexing it carefully and moving it as Coran instructed, sometimes holding the scanner at a distance and other times pressing it right up against flesh.

"Everything reads as normal," Coran sighed with relief, indicating Hunk could place the limb back on the bed. "Thank Alaaran. Let's check the left now."

And just like the right, the left reacted as it should. "He should be able to walk with no problems after a bit of recuperation," Coran smiled. "The cryo-pod did an excellent job."

Bolstered by that announcement, they moved onto Lance's left arm and hand. Coran had Hunk do a variety of things; bending fingers back, holding the hand out by just the wrist, rotating the entire appendage, all while he moved the scanner in and out.

"It is weaker than it should be," Coran finally said. "The muscles are not at the same strength they were, but they and all nerve functions are responding accordingly. With some time I do not foresee any complications."

The true challenge was still ahead. But although Lance's right hand and wrist had suffered the worst, Coran had hope blooming in him. After all, his initial diagnosis had been that Lance may very well lose all four limbs. The fact that the first three were going to recover in full was a welcome surprise.

However, it became clear to the Altean within the first few tests that the right hand had not fared as well and he could feel Hunk's growing despair as he realized the same.

The limb looked all right, if one ignored the dark burn scar that ran the entire inner forearm and the pink scars on his hand and palm. It was straight now, no longer twisted in a clearly broken state. The flesh was whole and healed.

But it did not respond as it should. Lance's hand shook when Hunk held it out, the fine motor skills lost in that trembling. It flopped limply if let go, having no strength to support itself and Coran quietly reported that the nerves there, while connected again thanks to the pod, were not actually communicating. Most of the damage seemed to be centered at the wrist from what Coran assumed was the initial break.

All of the repeated mangling of the limb, from his entire body weight dragging on it during the Kri Za Kri, to the horrors and torture inflicted as punishment had furthered the decline. The only ray of hope that Coran had was that the nerves and muscles had reconnected to one another. There was nothing more the pods could do, as they viewed the problem as healed, but at least they were not splintered from one another. If that had been the case there was zero chance of a miracle.

Otherwise Lance had a barely functioning hand. It could still feel touch, evidenced by the way Lance's face had scrunched up when Hunk had first turned the wrist, and the responses that Coran saw on his screen when Hunk tapped each finger, but they were weaker than they should. It would likely not move much beyond what Lance could control with his arm, as despite the terrible burn scar Lance's arm did not seem to have any particular neural or muscular damage. There would be no strength to grip and barely dexterity to move. It would have little actual use in its current state.

They could fit him with a prosthetic; remove the limb at about the elbow and affix a new lower arm and hand. They had the technology and minds between Coran, Hunk and Pidge, along with a base model thanks to Shiro, that they could make a fully functioning limb to replace the practically dead flesh.

But the thought of such a thing made Coran's heart clench. While a prosthetic would be infinitely more useful than what Lance had... it wasn't Lance. And Alaaran help him, the scars were bad
enough but to have an entire limb removed and serving as a permanent reminder of his torture? No. That could not happen.

And yet, without the use of his right hand… Lance could learn to write and do tasks with his left, as Shiro was learning to do. But he could not shoot a gun without two working limbs. He could not go into the field with such a handicap that could get himself or his teammates hurt.

He could not be a Paladin.

And if they took such a thing from him… Coran had no doubts that the wide-eyed, passionate and kind boy would shutter in on himself, more so than he already did. Such a course was not allowed. Lance was their Blue Paladin. He embodied the role more than any individual Coran had ever seen, the connection he had to his Lion was breathtaking and something of legend. He would not – could not – allow this fate to happen.

"What do we do?" Hunk murmured, coming to the same conclusion Coran had. "Is there… is there some way we can fix it?"

"I don't know, my boy," Coran sighed. "But let us not be too hasty in our own fears. Lance is a very determined young man. He may very well surprise us."

That cracked a small smile for Hunk. "You're right. He… he won't give up so easily." Or, at least Hunk knew the old Lance wouldn't have. When he got knocked down he got right back up, determined to do it right and prove the others wrong.

But this also wasn't some test score or flight simulation. No matter his determination if Lance's hand could not be fixed it then it could not be fixed. Lance wouldn't see it that way though. He'd take it as a personal failure.

Why was it that no matter what happened Lance was going to be hurt?

It just wasn't fair.

Hunk sighed, thumb brushing the back of Lance's hand one final time before he went to lie it back on the bed. And whether it was that last touch or something else entirely, Lance's breath hitched and a second later he was jerking awake, eyes filled with panic and a groan of pain hissing out between clenched teeth.

"Lance?" Hunk called, uncertain, releasing his hold.

Lance did not seem to hear him. His eyes were wide open, blue firmly ringed by white, but they were staring beyond Hunk and Coran, beyond Allura's bedroom.


Lance gave no sign that he'd heard Hunk, just sucking in a harsh breath while his entire body trembled.

"Lance, lad," Coran tried. "It is Coran and Hunk. You are safe."

The wash cloth, which had been defying gravity and clinging to Lance's forehead, lost its battle and fell with a plop onto Lance's leg. He violently recoiled at the contact with a whimper.

"Lance," Hunk said, firmer but no less gentle. He waved a hand in front of Lance's unseeing eyes.

Lance took another painful sounding breath, but when it passed his eyes appeared focused, if still terrified. Hunk remained completely still as Lance's eyes traced his face.

"Hunk?" he rasped after a moment, as if verifying what he was seeing was real.

"It's me," Hunk answered just as quietly. "*Soy Hunk. Estás en el castillo. Do you remember?*

"I…" Lance's gaze slid from Hunk, darting about the room until they landed on Coran, sitting on his other side. "Coran?"

"Here, lad," he smiled.

"I…" Lance swallowed thickly. "What… what happened? I don't… I can't…"

"Easy, easy," Coran murmured. "You spent quite a period in the cryo-pod, it's natural you're a little disoriented."

"Cryo-pod?" Lance repeated, confused. "I… why was I…?"

And Hunk hated the moment where he physically saw Lance remember everything leading up to that. Underneath the light flush of fever he went pale and his breath hitched while his heartbeat audibly picked up tempo.

Lance's hands flew up to his neck, seeking the collar. No metal greeted him, but there was something else there. He traced it with trembling fingers, hardly even realizing that his right hand was barely following along. It was bumpy. Uneven. It didn't hurt but... he pressed down on it and the sound of his own screams echoed in his mind.

"Lance, breathe, it's okay," Hunk cut in over the sound of the crying that was only in his head. "You're okay. Come on, *mírame.*"

He searched out Hunk's gaze then, still trembling as the phantom screams receded. "What…W-what is…?" He gestured at his neck. "I… The collar…?"

"The collar is gone," Hunk said quietly. "That's…" He swallowed thickly. "That's a scar."

"Scar?" Lance repeated faintly. He touched it again, stomach rolling.

The taste of acid tickled the back of his throat and before he knew it he was leaning forward and retching into a bowl that Coran had pulled out of nowhere.

He had nothing to throw up, save the small bit of fluid his body had started to regain from the packs. It *burned* though and the feeling of anything inside his throat just made him choke more, terror flowing through his veins at the sensation.

Hands were on his back and although they should have been soothing they too seemed to burn.

He whimpered and hunched more over the bowl, still gagging.

The hands disappeared and Lance couldn't decide if he was relieved or missed the contact. That only made him feel worse and he scrunched his eyes closed, trying to regain control of his stomach.

Shame burned his cheeks and he ducked his head further.
The only sound in the room then was his harsh gasping, accompanied by the indistinct murmurs of Hunk. Lance clutched at those words, the shear comfort and safety that Hunk always made him feel. The murmurs turned into words – estás bien, you're okay, I'm here, breathe, it's all right – and Lance followed them back out of the panic that was seeping into his mind.

"Estoy bien," he managed, still not looking up, even though it was obviously he wasn't. "Gracias, Hunk."

"¿Mírame por favor?" Hunk pleaded. "Please?"

And that shouldn't be so hard. But looking at Hunk meant opening his eyes and facing everything again. Facing… His stomach twisted again, but he had nothing left to expel.

"Let's see those pretty blue eyes of yours," Coran encouraged to his left.

Lance stiffened. Pretty blue eyes?

You have beautiful eyes he could hear in her rasp and then feel her pointed nails grip his face about them. Tears? They make your eyes an even prettier blue.

"No," he gasped, squeezing them even tighter. "N-no."

"Lance?" And Hunk somehow sounded even more worried than before.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head and blinking back the tears that she loved so dearly. She couldn't have them.

He wasn't weak.

One slipped down his cheek anyway and a sob caught in his chest.

Who was he trying to fool?

Weak. He was weak.

"It's all right, lad," Coran comforted. "What is it? We're right here."

Another tear escaped.


Lance flinched at the last word and he could practically feel Hunk and Coran exchange glances.

"Your eyes?" Coran latched on. "Do they hurt, lad?"

Lance whimpered out a no.

He knew Haggar wasn't there. He knew that. It was just Coran and Hunk and yet he couldn't… he couldn't open his eyes.

Perhaps you'll even be able to see me. He could feel her smile on him and another sob shook him.

"Lance," and Coran's voice had changed. It was firm, like the tone Allura used when she expected to be obeyed, but it was softer than that; gentler. "Lance," Coran repeated. "Haggar is not here."

Lance choked on his next breath. How did he…?
"She is not here. It is just I and Hunk. You are safe."

And Coran said it with such conviction that Lance couldn't help but believe it was true. He was safe. She wasn't here. He knew that. He did. He just couldn't believe himself. But he did believe Coran.

Slowly, very slowly, he raised his head and peeked open tear-washed eyes. No hand caressed his face. No breath whispered behind his ear. He opened them more, revealing two very worried faces sitting opposite him; close but not too close.

"There you are," Hunk murmured.

"Lo siento," he managed past the lump in his throat. "Lo siento, lo siento—"

"Lance," and Coran was still using that gentle tone, "You have nothing to apologize for. I am the one who is sorry for causing you such a distress."

"It's… not your fault," Lance mumbled, feeling his cheeks redden again. "I just…"

"You don't need to talk about it right now," Coran said gently. "When you are ready."

Lance nodded, grateful. He had no idea how to explain his reaction without coming across as weak as Haggar said he was. Just thinking of her name sent a shudder racing through him and he swallowed, wincing at the sting to his throat and the acid taste left behind.

"How about something to soothe your throat?" Coran suggested. He hurried on before Lance could fully balk, "I have an Altean candy that I think you'd like. How about we all have one, hmm? I know the princess has quite a stash in her drawer."

Lance swallowed again as Coran got up to rummage through one of Allura's dressers. He honestly wasn't sure he could keep anything down. His throat seemed to constrict at the thought and he couldn't suppress the cough that bubbled up.

Hunk continued to hover worriedly as Lance expelled what felt like all the air in his lungs, eyes watering from the sheer force.

Coran came back a moment later, whisking away the bowl of bile and instead holding up a brightly wrapped yellow candy with a smile. "Let's try this, lad, if you're up for it. You don't eat it per se; you let it melt on your tongue."

Hunk had already opened his and popped it in his mouth. He sent a reassuring smile to Lance. "It sort of tastes like butterscotch."

Lance hesitantly went to hold open his hand to receive one from Coran. But to his surprise his hand didn't want to fully open and he stared at it, the limb trembling in the air between him and Coran.

From there he couldn't miss the giant burn scar – You will truly learn regret, Theodek hissed – and the scent of burnt flesh wafted about the room while all-consuming agony seemed to envelop him. A scream, that he realized was his own, tore at his throat and seared against his ears.

Hands were on him then, holding his shoulders and turning his head away from the gruesome sight that was his arm and he was crying out "no me toques" as hands turned to claws and no matter how hard he tried he could not escape.

"Lance, please, it's just us," Hunk's voice pleaded. "You're okay. You're okay, I promise."
Something was shoved under his nose then and Lance had no choice but to inhale. The scent of cinnamon overpowered him and the burnt flesh disappeared, as did the claws and the restraints. He took a shuddering breath and then another.

"You're okay," Hunk murmured, one of his hands resting on Lance's shoulder giving him a squeeze as Coran removed the bowl of scented leaves, grateful they'd left them here. "You're okay."

Lance took another shaky breath, leaning into Hunk's touch and trying to soak up the safety Hunk had always offered.

"Can I… can I give you a hug?" Hunk asked tentatively, his voice unsteady. "Por favor?"

And Lance nodded after a moment, both desperately wanting the touch and yet not at all. But as soon as Hunk's arms wrapped about him, secure and safe and warm, he knew he made the right decision.

A sob broke free and he didn't even try to hold it back. Tears stung his eyes and he let them, burying his face against Hunk's chest. He was aware of Coran settling onto the bed next to him and one of the Altean's own hands descended to land feather light on his shoulder.

"Is this all right?" Coran asked, and Lance could hear the tears in his voice. Tears for him. Over him. They just made his own come harder.

He managed a nod against Hunk while his left hand – he didn't dare think or look at his right – wormed its way free of the embrace and over to the Altean. Coran picked it up as gently as one would a baby bird. His hands were large, larger than Haggar's but smaller than Theodek's, and they cupped Lance's with all the tenderness in the world.

And absolutely surrounded by love and comfort and understanding, Lance sobbed.

xxx

Chapter End Notes

So Lance is awake, yay! Time for the real battle to begin. We've gotta build our blue boy back up and let him know how much he means to his family. Also, another trigger y'all might not have guessed is focusing on his eyes. They're just such a pretty blue though, how can we not?

As you can see, I settled on something sort of between the two outcomes of fully healed or prosthetic. It's actually based off my own experience of breaking (re: shattering) my wrist and having to undergo months and months of therapy to regain motion of it. Not fun, let me tell you, and it still acts up in the cold thanks to all the metal I've got piecing me together. :p But we've got two possible scenarios now: either Lance does manage to gain control over his limb again or he goes the route of a prosthetic on his own terms.

So many thanks to the reviewers who keep me going: RimaPichi, FandomHuntress, this_strangebewilderment, QueenMecawesome, Nerdqueen395, dean_winchester_has_fallen, Proxy_17, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting,
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Speaking of lovely people, I have more gorgeous fanart. You guys ♥~!
See it here: photobucket.com/user/IcyPanther/library/As%20Color%20Fades%20Away

A little self promotion to wrap this note up. I published a (super dark holy cow) fic called "A Broken Shield" if you'd like to see a taste of true darkness housed in my mind. There are plenty of warnings, but mainly it is a deathfic and it does not have a happy ending. At all. But if you do read it I'd love to get your reactions!
Read it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/12402537

And on that, until next time you lovely people you. Please do drop a review – a sentence, a paragraph, a short novel; whatever you're feeling like – on your way out; I appreciate it!
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How long they remained in their embrace was anyone's guess. A while, for sure, based on how Hunk's back was beginning to ache, but he was not going to let go until Lance was ready. Not that he wanted to ever let go. He'd needed this too, this assurance that Lance was alive and safe and here.

The boy's sobs had quieted after a few minutes, but Lance had made no indication to pull away or show that he was uncomfortable. His breathing was slowly but surely evening the longer they sat, but it was not deepening into the level of unconsciousness. Despite how exhausted Hunk knew Lance had to be, he could not sleep.

It just made Hunk hold him tighter.

Lance finally shifted slightly and that was the cue to move. Hunk reluctantly dropped his arms and Coran gave Lance's hand one last squeeze before he too retreated, but neither moved from their spot on the bed right next to Lance.

Lance's gaze darted to his right hand before hurriedly leaving it, tucking it and the left into his lap, and looked instead between Coran and Hunk. "My hand," he whispered, the fingers on it twitching ever so slightly. "What… is… is it… bad?"

"You sustained some terrible injuries," Coran said gently, holding the red-rimmed gaze with his own. "The cryo-pod healed many of them."

"But…” Lance's eye moved without his permission to his right hand. Although his breath hitched at the sight, he pushed down the original panic, observing it for himself. He remembered the burn. It was his punishment for… He shuddered at that. And the rest…

He could see a scar on the top of his hand, a matching one on his left. But his left didn't feel… off. He clenched his left hand, knuckles white against mocha skin. He did the same to his right, but his hand would not close. He felt his fingers quiver, they heard the command, but they did not move. His breath caught again.

"Your right hand and arm were severely damaged," Coran explained, his tone low. "The cryo-pod was able to make the limb whole, but it had been left in such a state for such a prolonged period that not all of the injuries could be fully healed. I am so sorry, lad."

Lance tried to make a fist once more. His fingers curled a little bit, but not the way they should.

He remembered thinking he might lose a hand. He'd contemplated not being able to shoot anymore if that happened.

But thinking about the possibility and now having it come true and in a fashion that didn't leave him with no hand, but a useless one… With this he no longer served any purpose for the team. If he couldn't even hold a gun then he couldn't be a Paladin. Plain and simple.

His chest constricted as the words sunk in.
He couldn't be a Paladin.

It's not like he deserved the role, he knew. He never had. He'd just happened to be in the right place at the right time to find Blue so he could bring everyone else up to the castle.

But still…

When he'd found Blue he'd felt for the first time that he could be something more than just a cargo pilot and the class clown. He'd felt a purpose.

But being out here in space, surrounded by the other members of his team and their amazing talents, he'd felt purpose dwindle. He tried to be a Paladin. He did whatever Shiro asked, pushed himself as hard as he could.

And he still wasn't good enough. Not at piloting Blue. Not at fighting. Not at following orders or coming up with ideas. He contributed nothing. Blue was the real star, shining so brightly that he couldn't believe he'd ever thought he'd deserved her.

He wasn't a Paladin. He was a child, just as Theodek had said. And this… all of this proved it. The only thing he'd ever actually been decent at was shooting, for all the good it did as normally Keith and Shiro picked off enemies before he could fire and there had never yet been a real need for sniping. But with his hand like this… even that had been taken from him.

He was worse than useless now.

Now he was a burden.

"Lance," Hunk's voice sounded and by the tone of it he may have been trying to get Lance's attention for a while. He jerked his head up, feeling the telltale darkening of his cheeks that seemed to be his default now.

But Hunk just gave him a relieved, worried smile. "You didn't let Coran finish," he said. "There's still hope for your hand."

Lance stared, not daring to believe it.

Coran cleared his throat. "Number Two is right," he said, keeping Lance's gaze. "Although the cryo-pod was not able to fully repair your hand and wrist, it did reconnect all of the pieces. It is possible through some conditioning and time it will improve."

Improve. Not heal. Just get better. Possibly just a poor choice of words on Coran's part, but Lance's mind centered on it. Improve. Improve how much?

Would it be enough to be useful again? Could he even do it? Lance glanced back at the limp appendage, feeling the fear of failure curdle in him. He failed at everything he tried. Why would this be any different?

"We'll help you," Hunk said, and Lance could feel the determination behind those words. "We all will, Lance." He took a deep breath, tone becoming more serious. "And I… I know it's going to be hard. And it's going to take time. So we'll take all the time we need, okay? Will you let us help you? Por favor?"

Lance felt those same warm embers stir inside of him that Shiro's words had conjured. They all cared that much? They wanted to help him?
The dark hiss of Haggar seemed to echo though. They were only offering to help because he was incapable of doing it on his own. And after they poured all their time and effort into assisting him and he still failed they'd be mad. And disappointed. Lance shivered. He couldn't bear to disappoint Shiro or Allura anymore. He didn't want them to waste their time on someone like him.

But would Shiro be even more disappointed if he didn't even try? Yes, he decided, suppressing a shiver. As Haggar said, Shiro had never given up, not in the way he had.

He could try, at least. He'd fail, most likely. But if he didn't have to see the look of sheer disappointment on Shiro's face yet – not until his hero found out what Lance had done – he'd try. So against his better judgment he nodded and Hunk's face lit up.

"Speaking of the others," Coran said, "they would all very much like to see you. Are you up for visitors?"

Was he? Lance shivered again, the motion reminding him that he was rather cold now that he wasn't enveloped in Hunk's arms. That action led him to look down at his hands, which brought his attention to the ugly scars and he blanched at them.

"Here." Hunk held out one of the thin blankets that felt like silk. "You're still running a fever, but I know how cold the cryo-pods are."

Lance tentatively took it with his left hand before he flipped it about his shoulders. He felt a bit better now with it draped over him. Less exposed. He shivered again, vividly remembering sitting on a lab table and feeling like some specimen as Haggar and Theodek laughed. He dragged his feet up to him, pointedly not looking at them, and hunched further over inside his blanket. Coran and Hunk exchanged a concerned look.

"It is all right if you are not," Coran said gently, taking in the miserable looking form. "You are still sick, Lance."

But Lance shook his head. He owed it to them. If they wanted to see him – and wording it like that even in his own mind made him blanch – who was he to stop them?

Coran pursed his lips as if he could sense Lance's train of thought. "No more than thirty dobashes," he allowed, stepping into the role of both parent and doctor and knowing he made the right call as a tiny bit of tension eased from Lance's shoulders. "It'll be straight to bed after that as your body needs rest. Is that acceptable?"

Lance nodded, pulling the blanket even tighter, having to grab the other half with his left hand as his right would not grasp it. It was trembling even more now and Lance tucked it up against himself and turning it so the burn was mostly hidden. He felt sick just looking at it.

His stomach gave another flip at the thought of what lied beneath it. He hurriedly looked to the left, feeling more bile tickle his throat. But the skin there was unblemished. It was like he hadn't… like he hadn't tried to…

But he had. He swallowed heavily against the acid rising up his throat. He had and that knowledge couldn't be so easily erased.

Tears stung at his eyes and he closed them to try and contain the traitorous liquid, knowing he really couldn't lose any more. Not when he couldn't replace it because he was so pathetic that drinking water scared him.

Did he do it to protect them? He thought he had. He'd wanted to keep them safe. But Haggar was
right too. He did want to escape. He had wanted an end.

And actions spoke louder than words ever could.

Would they listen if he tried to explain? Understand? Did he even understand?

"Lance?" Hunk was looking worriedly at him again and Lance hated that he kept putting such an expression on his friend's face. Hunk shouldn't be that worried about him. None of them should be. He wasn't worth it.

Worthless he heard Haggar sneer. They see you for what you are: a disgrace.

"We don't have to get the others," Hunk told him quietly. "They'll understand. Maybe some peace and quiet—"

"No," Lance interrupted, surprising himself at the sudden desperation he felt. He couldn't be left alone right now. Not with Haggar peppering into his thoughts again, her words a darkness that even now left a shadow. "No," he repeated, quieter. "I... I want to see them."

Hunk's smile didn't quite reach his eyes, but he nodded. "All right then."

"Before that," Coran interjected, "Lance, lad, if you are up for it we really ought to get some nutrients in you. They'll go a ways to helping you feel better and recover from this fever."

Lance could feel himself pale at the thought. He knew he needed to eat something, even if the thought of food made his stomach twist, but he didn't know if he could. Throwing up had been terrifying enough.

"Perhaps we could try the candy again for now?" Hunk suggested. "And if that's okay, maybe we try something else a little later?" He was already wracking his brain trying to remember if they had any type of oat-like item he could work with. It had been a while since they'd landed anywhere for supplies, but he thought maybe they had that weird looking barley plant... maybe?

"Okay," Lance agreed after a moment.

This time when Coran held out the candy, already unwrapped, Lance cautiously took it in a slightly shaky left hand.

He could feel hopeful eyes on him as he brought it to his mouth. He didn't have to swallow it, he reminded himself. Just... just let it melt like a real butterscotch candy. That... that wouldn't be bad, right? That wouldn't turn him into a shaking mess, or at least he hoped.

Summoning his courage – and really, courage to eat candy? – he popped it in his mouth.

The subtle taste of butterscotch mixed with – vanilla, maybe? – coated his tongue and Lance's eyes widened, but for the first time in a long while not out of fear but out of pleasant surprise. He had nearly forgotten what things other than the acid of bile and the copper of blood tasted like.

This... this was heaven. He tentatively rolled it on his tongue, clacking the candy against his teeth. Nothing bad happened. No flashback. No urge to throw up or choke. No feeling of not being able to breathe.

"Do you like it?" Coran asked pleasantly, eyes crinkling that showed he already knew the answer. But it was hard not to smile. Lance had, for the first time since the rescue, not looked scared or upset or despondent. He was not smiling himself yet, but in that moment he appeared almost content.
Lance nodded. "Gracias," he murmured carefully around the candy. "It's… it's really good."

"The princess has an abnormally large stash that we shall be sure to take full advantage of then."

Lance gave the tiniest hum of acknowledgement and this time when Coran and Hunk caught each other's eyes it was with shared delight. It was a small step, minuscule even. But it was a step forward.

"I shall go fetch the others," Coran said, rising to his feet. "If you are still certain you're up for visitors, Lance."

"I am," Lance said quietly. "But…" He trailed off, uncertain.

"What is it, lad?"

Lance gave the barest of inclinations to his right arm, still tucked up against his stomach. "Can I… can I…?" He shivered again, a combination of cold and fear.

Coran understood immediately, heart clenching. "I'm afraid I can't let you put on anything heavier right now due to your body temperature. But if you are not opposed I can place a bandage wrap?"

"Por favor," Lance whispered.

Coran scooped one of the many bandage rolls still about the room and tenderly wrapped them from Lance's right elbow to the base of his hand, covering the entirety of the burn while Lance kept his gaze entirely averted. "Is that all right? Would you like me to wrap your hands as well?" Lance nodded.

"They don't hurt, do they?" Hunk asked as Coran just as carefully covered Lance's hands to hide the scars from view.

"No," Lance shook his head. "I just…" Couldn't bear to see them. Didn't want anyone else looking either. He wanted to cover them up and pretend just for a moment that these physical signs of his weakness weren't visible.

Coran patted his left hand when he was done. "Shall I wrap the one on your neck too, lad?"

Another nod.

Lance flinched as Coran carefully covered this one up, ending up squeezing his eyes shut so he didn't see the hands pass in front of his him as Coran handed the bandage off to himself. The hands weren't purple. They weren't furry. But they were still, much, much too close to his face.

"Do I… do I have any more?" Lance summoned up the nerve to ask. His arms and hands were really the only visible part of himself that he could see; the rest covered up with sweat pants and the t-shirt. He'd tucked his feet up and away without looking, too afraid of what he'd find.

Coran looked pained. "Yes, lad," he sighed, knowing that keeping them silent would only hurt Lance more later when he found them. "You have one on the bottom of each of your feet and one below your ribs on your front. But I am pleased to say that your feet suffered no lasting damage that the pod could not fix and once you're feeling up to it you can move about the castle."

"Oh."

He was honestly surprised there weren't more. And yet, why did there have to be any at all? Each one just served as a reminder of what they'd done to him… No. What he'd allowed them to do. A
"Lance," Coran said and he sounded serious. More serious than Lance had ever heard him. Lance slowly brought his eyes to meet Coran's jeweled ones. "Listen to me very carefully. These scars do not define you, nor should you feel ashamed of them."

Lance dropped his gaze. How could he not feel ashamed? They were permanent marks inflicted because of his own failures. Dios, he had panicked upon seeing one and feeling another. He couldn't even bear to look at them now; each sweep making his stomach turn and tears sting.

"They are marks of your courage and bravery," Coran continued, resisting very strongly to tilt Lance's chin back up. "I know that right now you may not think of them as that, but know that we all do. They are not showing a weakness; they show strength. And Lance, you are stronger than any individual I have had the honor to know."

The sincerity in Coran's voice made more tears spring to Lance's eyes. How could Coran say such nice things to him? About him? Shiro too, back when he'd regained his vision. They all sounded so sure, so confident that Lance wasn't weak or worthless.

He wanted to believe them. He wanted to soak in those words and let them warm him from the inside and chase away the still present and gnawing darkness. But something was stopping him. Something told him that they might believe those things now, but they wouldn't later once they saw him for the failure that he knew he was.

If he was as strong as they said… if he truly was then he would have escaped. He wouldn't have been captured in the first place. He would never have fallen so far that taking his own life was the only option left. He'd have fought and resisted until the end.

He had, for a while. He could acknowledge that. He'd tried really hard to be a Paladin and he had almost escaped. But after they drowned him, and he shuddered, he had been ready to give up. He had given up, right there in his mindscape. He was going to let Haggar have his quintessence, have whatever information she desired.

It was only when she actually tried to take it that he had fought back with the desperate, instinctive desire to protect his friends for as long as he could. They hadn't beaten him yet.

But then they had. When Haggar had made him believe that his friends had come and gone he'd fallen. Surrendered. Failed.

And if he hadn't been rescued then... If Haggar hadn't been distracted by the actual arrival of Team Voltron then... then he'd truly have failed them. She would have taken everything and he couldn't have stopped her. He was too gone to fight back.

He was weak. He had been about to give in, to give up. And once they found out – and he knew they would, somehow, stomach curdling – they would want nothing to do with him. Paladins didn't give up. A real Paladin wouldn't quit.

But he had. He had and he knew it and soon they would too.

Lance realized a moment later he'd gotten lost in his own thoughts again when Hunk's worried voice cut through the fog.

"Lo siento," he apologized, voice a mere whisper. "Estoy aquí."

"We can postpone the others coming up," Hunk suggested cautiously.
Lance shook his head though. "No… please I… I do want to see them."

Coran and Hunk exchanged a look that had Lance darting his eyes back down.

"Sit tight then," Coran finally said, getting to his feet. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

The advisor hurried as quick as he could through the hall to the kitchen, knowing the others were likely beyond worried given the long absence.

He found them just as he imagined; Keith pacing the kitchen, Pidge with one of the books on quintessence in front of her although she didn't seem to actually be reading it, and Allura and Shiro sitting at the other end of the table with a tablet detailing the castle's defense systems and current output.

He attracted every eye in the room as he stepped over the threshold and only her royal upbringing and subsequent decorum kept Allura from launching herself at her advisor and demanding answers. She still hurried over though with a look that demanded answers and despite the seriousness of the situation Coran felt his moustache curl up with a smile.

"Lance has awoken," he said, holding up both hands to ward off the questions everyone looked to answer at once. "He would like to see everyone, but he is very tired. His body is exhausted from the ordeal and needs rest. I am therefore putting a cap of thirty dobashes on the visit. Once he has gotten some quality sleep and hopefully some food then you may all visit again."

"You know best," Shiro nodded. "How… how is he?"

"Tired," Coran said quietly. "Scared. A little confused. He continues to waver between this reality and memories, which are expounded upon triggers, like his scars. They are covered per his request right now and I ask that, as much as you can, to avoid looking at them."

Heads nodded about the room.

"It should go without saying, but please do not ask anything of him right now," Coran continued. "If Lance brings it up or wishes to speak on events we will all of course listen and respond accordingly. But he is in a very fragile state."

"What happened?" Allura asked, eyes narrowing. She sensed more to this story.

Coran sighed. "I had wished to postpone my discovery, but Lance has found that his right hand was not fully healed by the cryo-pod."

"What?" Pidge whispered.

"But it looked fine," Keith protested.

"It does indeed appear to be healed," Coran said. "But the short version is that the nerves and muscles were badly damaged. The cryo-pod did reattach all of the endings, but they are mostly unresponsive. Number Two has volunteered our services to assisting in its possible recovery, but as of right now I cannot say for certain whether such a recovery is attainable."

A horrified silence followed Coran's announcement.

Shiro was the first to shake it off, his prosthetic whining as he clenched his fist. He tried not to imagine Lance with a matching one and instead kept his voice even. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Right now we should be grateful that Lance is okay and otherwise going to make a full
recovery." He looked to Coran for confirmation of that, relieved at the nod. "That's what's most important. All right?"

"One more thing," Coran said, although he looked less worried and more contrite. "Princess, I may or may not have unearthed your stash of dagiko candies."

Her eye twitched. "What?" Dagiko candies weren't all that easy to come by and she had been sure to stock up at the last stop at the space mall, spending a small fortune.

"Lance is still adverse to consuming any substance or liquid," Coran said, voice dropping. "I believed a candy may be a step in the right direction and both he and Number Two have expressed their pleasure with them."

A smile turned up her lips then. "If it is for Lance, he is welcome to them. I am glad he has found them pleasing." Her eyes narrowed then. "But how exactly did you know about them, Coran? And where to find them?"

"Come, come, Lance is waiting for us," Coran said instead, ushering Pidge off her seat.

"Coran…"

He had the gall to give her a cheeky smile. "Nothing escapes these eyes, Princess. Not to mention you have some rather furry informants."

She turned her glare on the four mice, who were helping themselves to a plate of food goo. Plachu had the good grace to look remorseful, but the other three grinned at her. She sighed, shaking her head with a rueful smile.

"Enough talk," Keith said, having already jumped to his feet, worry and nerves making his tone sharp. "Let's go."

That was all the urging everyone needed as they gathered up items and headed over to Allura's room. They were quiet in their urgency, as despite how much they desired to see Lance up and about, what exactly did one say under these circumstances?

It reminded Keith too much of going to a hospital. He felt a shiver make its way through him, recalling the too white walls and sterile scent of disinfectant as strongly now as twelve years ago.

Lance wasn't dying, he knew that. Not like his dad, propped up in that narrow bed, skin sagging and eyes hollow as the drugs that worked to save his life killed him slowly instead. He hadn't known what to say then – feel better? Please don't leave me? I need you? – and certainly didn't know what to say now.

Did Lance even want to see him? He had asked about him, seemed worried. But then Keith had sort of yelled at him – again – and why, he wondered, did he always get so angry at Lance? Even when he was trying to show that he cared he found himself raising his voice. Was his default just to be the angry jerk that Lance teased him about?

He needed to make things right. He wanted to be Lance's friend. He wanted to be a part of his family. And to do that he needed to keep a level head. He needed to express himself in a way that wouldn't earn him a sorrowful look from Shiro.

He took a deep breath. What would Shiro do? Shiro would be honest, but sincere. He'd maybe give Lance a hug – although whether Lance wanted a hug right now and if Keith felt comfortable enough to initiate one was another set of questions – and assure him that they were all there for him.
A hand bumped against his own and Keith looked down, surprised to see Pidge holding her palm open. He tentatively took it and she squeezed his hand tightly.

"Quit worrying. Just be yourself," she murmured, targeting in on his problems with stunning accuracy. "And not the angry jerk persona," and his breath caught, hearing Lance's laughter behind her words. "Be you."

"What if he doesn't forgive me?" Keith whispered, giving voice to his biggest fear. Because the Lance he'd seen since the rescue had been confused and scared and fevered and wasn't always in the right mindset. This time though... This Lance would remember Keith's short words and parting shot.

He closed his eyes in memory. He could hear himself saying it over the comms. Focus on the mission. Are you sure you can handle your assignment? You're taking an awfully long time.

God. He was such a jerk. How had he ever thought those were things a leader would say? Well, he would allow himself the focus comment. Lance and Blue really shouldn't have been goofing off while they'd been fighting overhead. But the rest? And the tone?

Why did Shiro think he would make a good leader again? He had been cruel. There was no other word for it. He thought he had been leading when he said things like that, but he hadn't been. He'd only been breaking the team instead of making it stronger.

Strength, he was learning, was not always something that could be measured or quantified and it didn't mean physical strength either. Strength came in all forms. And he wished he'd realized that sooner. He could have spared Lance pain. He could have been building a friendship rather than knocking it down.

"You're an idiot," Pidge told him, although there was a fondness behind her words. "Lance isn't going to forgive you because there's nothing to forgive. Haven't you realized that?"

"But—"

"Keith," Pidge cut in. "Listen. You made some mistakes, yes. You're not a very tactful person. Or good at expressing your feelings." Keith wasn't sure if he should bristle at the observation or sigh with the resignation that she was right. He was pretty awful on that front. "But Lance knows that," Pidge continued. "Why do you think he tries so hard to include you? He wants you to feel more comfortable with us. So apologize if you need to, but just be there for him. Show him that you care."

"How?" he asked desperately. Almost every attempt he'd made had backfired.

And Pidge snorted softly, drawing him up short. "Be you," she said. "Be the Keith we've been getting to know the last few days. He's rather shy, socially awkward, and he cares so much about his family even though he doesn't always know how to show it. Be him. We love that Keith and Lance will too."

"Really?"

"Really." She gave his hand another squeeze.

And heart lighter and head clearer, Keith determined to do just that.

Chapter End Notes
These author's notes are going to be a little long today. Apologies. But do try to read all of them as we've got some important stuff here!

Biggest announcement is that Color is going to go back to once a week updates on Saturdays. I know. But I've gotten a lot of comments about how readers don't have the time to, well, read. And given that fanfiction is supposed to be fun and not something to rush to read and catch up on, it makes the most sense to give you all more time between chapters. Plus, it gives me a little breathing room too. :)

BUT for those of you grabbing pitchforks I offer up something else. Next week Wednesday I'll be publishing a new Voltron fic starring Lance and Keith in an epic, bromantic and hurt/comfort adventure titled The Purity of Sin. It will update bi-weekly to weekly. Estimating that one though to only be about 20 chapters instead of this behemoth. I do hope you check it out!

Also, I'm excited to say that Color has moved into my second longest chaptered fic ever! We're nearly at 200k words (going to hit that next chapter!), over 300 bookmarks and 450 subscriptions. You guys!!! ♥

Love and hugs to the fabulous reviewers: QueenMcawesome, Fey_79, FandomHuntress, spn_angels, BRICKbrick, WolfFire, soldmysoultofandoms, maychorian, KethriHolmes, keepasecretgetastrawberry, smol_lil_demon, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Grace, TheWhitePaladin, TabbiCC, Brohaikyuu, glitteringconstellations, Proxy_17, Marsetta, heyherosics, Immortalfey, bestlance, BrieCheese, GummyW0rm, and Guns_Of_Gamora! I love and appreciate you guys so much, thank you for taking the time to leave a comment!

And since I've been getting these questions all across the board, here's a little tiny FAQ for your convenience regarding Color. Enjoy!

Q: When is Haggar coming? My, my you really want her to get her claws on Lance again, don't you? Haggar will not be coming for a while and I promise, I will touch base with her again BEFORE she makes her move. Let's give our boy some time to recuperate, huh?

Q: What are you doing with Lance's hand? Patience, young padawans! Lance has barely had time to process it all for himself yet, let's not rush. It's a big decision no matter what happens and we ought to give him some time to sort through it.

Q: When are going to get more of (Character here)(particularly Keith? xD)? I am doing my best to form a well-balanced story in Color and that means that not every character (except Lance :p) gets to be front and center at all times. Some characters, like Keith, had larger roles in the first half and others now, like Hunk and Coran, are getting some more because of who they are to Lance in this particular setting. Everyone is going to get screen time. Everyone is going to get to bond with Lance. Everyone is going to have bonding moments with everyone. I promise, whoever your favorite is they will get cute moments and angsty moments and bonding moments. It's going to be okay.

And as always, I really really do appreciate your comments. Don't be just a pageview, review too! :p
Chapter Forty

The walk from the kitchen to Allura's chambers was not overly long and before they knew it they were entering the room, still in that hushed, respectful silence, and making their way to the bed.

Lance was sitting up, leaning somewhat on a large stack of pillows, but his eyes were closed. Even from here they could see the dark circles. Hunk looked up at them as they entered, seated on the bed himself and leaning up against the headboard a few paces from Lance.

It made hope bloom in Shiro that Lance was allowing for such close proximity. Perhaps now that he wasn't in pain and could see that initial fear was diminishing.

"Hey, buddy," Shiro greeted warmly, smile widening as Lance cracked open ocean eyes that focused on him before drifting to the other occupants who were pulling up chairs. Pidge after a moment's hesitation eased herself onto the foot of the bed given the lack of seats, but keeping herself well outside of Lance's personal bubble.

"Hola," Lance murmured, straightening somewhat. A thin blanket that had been wrapped about his shoulders slipped slightly and Lance almost desperately tugged it back into place, using the folds to hide bandaged hands. Shiro's heart ached at how painfully young Lance looked in that moment.

"How are you feeling?" Allura asked, lowering her hands to the bed and allowing the mice to scamper off, all of them racing to one of the pillows near Lance and perching themselves atop it with little squeaks of their own greeting.

"Okay," he said softly, not meeting her eyes and instead looking down at the mice. "A little tired."

He did glance up then, frown tugging at his lips. "Are... are all of you all right?" Everyone save Coran and Keith were sporting an assortment of bruises or little bandages. His eyes flicked to Keith, remembering that Keith had been hurt enough to be bleeding and actually sounding like he was in pain, a near first for the normally stoic Red Paladin.

"Perfectly peachy," Allura assured him. "We are all doing much better seeing you up and about." The others nodded around, murmuring similar assessments.

"And... and Blue? And Black? And the other Lions?" Because although no one had yet told him about the process for rescuing him – and he only remembered flashes of pain and heat and gunfire – he knew from Blue that the Lions were involved somehow.

"They're all in the main hall," Hunk said. "Tired too, but not in too bad of shape." He looked at Coran and Pidge, knowing that the less direct attention on Lance right now was the best. "We'll look over them soon, yeah?"

"Indeed," Coran stroked his moustache. "It would do well to have them return to their hangars as well. Goodness knows those floors are going to need a nice polishing after all of their scuffing."

A flash of guilt filled Lance's face. He knew why the Lions must have all landed there. "I'm—"
"Granted, they've been needing a thorough cleaning for quite a while now," Coran cut him off before he could utter his apology. "Perhaps we can make it a team exercise, hm? The whole castle could use a good scrubbing actually." He looked positively delighted at the idea while the looks of resignation from everyone save Lance weren't even exaggerated.

"How about it, Lance?" Coran asked, shooting him a smile. "You can assist me in delegating the tasks. Shall we mark Number Four down for toilet scrubbing now?"

"Hey!" Keith protested, but more out of habit than actual ire. He instead was watching Lance's face, looking for a twitch of a smile or amusement at the suggestion. Nothing. Coran too seemed to have been hoping for some such reaction as his smile faltered a bit when Lance didn't respond at all.

"Lance, hey," Hunk said, not touching him but pushing on the mattress between them to jostle it slightly.

Dark eyes blinked, and then a flush not related to the fever spread across his cheeks as he realized he'd zoned out again. "Lo siento. Estoy aquí." He cleared his throat, trying again. "Sorry. I'm here."

"You don't have to apologize," Shiro chided gently. "You're tired. We can come back after you've had some rest."

"Espera," Lance said quickly, jerking his head up. "Wait. Por favor. Please. I… I need to say something."

He seemed to shrink back a bit as every eye focused on him, but he carried on. "I just… I realized I never said thank you. For… for rescuing me. I… I didn't think…" he trailed off, lowering his eyes.

"What, you thought we wouldn't come?" Pidge asked incredulously.

Lance hunched over a little more and Pidge's expression morphed to horror.

"You thought we wouldn't come," she repeated, aghast. "Why… why would you…?"

The others seemed to be caught in the same stunned silence, and surprisingly Lance was the one who broke it.

"I just… it was me for Black and… and… the universe needs Voltron." His breath hitched. "It doesn't need me."

"Lance," breathed Allura, hands trembling in her lap.

"And Blue… she deserves a better Paladin than me." His voice cracked upon voicing that thought finally aloud. "I'm w-weak. And… And I'm…" he closed his eyes then, a tear trying to sneak out. "I'm just me." He swallowed thickly. "It… made sense. I'm… I'm expendable. Black isn't."

He could hear Haggar laugh then, felt her touch even this far away caress against his soul. The little ember that his team had been trying to reignite sputtered and he choked back a sob against all of it.

Because of course it made sense. He was the weak link of the team, the useless goof-off. They'd be better off with someone stronger, more dependable and capable of fighting the Galra than him. Especially now. His right hand twitched at his side.

He'd come to terms with it. He'd made the choice that the universe and all its inhabitants were much more important than he could ever be, and his family even more so. Stepping down was in the best interests of everyone. He understood that. Now he just needed them to as well.
"What the hell?" demanded Keith instead, leaping to his feet. "Bullshit, Lance!"

The sudden anger had him cringing back, even though he knew Keith wouldn't actually hurt him.

"Keith—" Shiro cautioned, but Keith shrugged off Shiro's hand.

"No! He needs to listen." And suddenly Keith was right next to him, not touching but flashing purple eyes seeming to strike all the same. "Where do you get off saying stuff like that?" he growled, looking, praying, for some spark to light Lance's eyes. Keith just wanted him to feel something other than the fear and sadness that covered Lance as surely as the blanket did.

But Lance only looked at him with frightened eyes and Keith cursed again. He hated himself for jumping to the anger he wanted so badly to tamp down but he couldn't because Lance was scaring him with this line of talk. "I thought we were rivals," he snarled. "You—"

"We're not rivals."

The quiet declaration brought Keith up short, feeling like a punch to the gut. He barely breathed out a "what?" as all air seemed to leave him.

Lance seemed to hunch over more, although his voice was clear. "We… we were never rivals, Keith. A… a rival is someone who challenges you. And I… I," his voice dropped even lower. "I was never even in your shadow."

Keith felt frozen, words beyond him as he stared at this… this shade of the Lance he knew. "What did they do to you?" he whispered, horror swirling through him.

And Lance let out a sound between a laugh and a sob that sounded so wrong it made the hair at the back of Keith's neck prickle. "Nothing," he managed after a moment, feeling both the truth and the lie of that statement. "Just…" and Haggar was there, whispering in his ear and he could do nothing against her, "just showed me how… how worthless I really am."

"Enough," Shiro snapped, regretting the tone as both Lance and Keith flinched, but not taking it back, his own heart beating much too loudly in his ears at what he'd just heard for anything less sharp. "Lance, that's enough. I don't want to hear you saying things like that about yourself. They are not true."

Lance shook his head though and there was a desperation shining behind his tears now.

Shiro realized with a sickening dismay that Lance wanted them to agree with him. Lance truly, truly believed that his life was not important. Believed himself expendable. Believed they wouldn't come for him. And Shiro's heart burned with true hatred at Haggar for twisting Lance's perceptions so, so terribly.

"Lance, what are you saying?" Pidge cried softly, hands fisting in the comforter although her cinnamon eyes were fierce behind the tears. "None of that is true. You're our friend. Part of our family." Her voice broke on the last word.

Lance shook his head again. "I'm not," he whispered, the darkness greedily wrapping around the last spark. "I don't belong here. I'm nothing compared to all of you. I've… I've known it for a while. This just… just proved it."

He was just a child. Not a Paladin. Despite his efforts he'd failed to protect them. They'd gotten hurt because of him. He'd put them in danger.
He'd failed them.

"Lance," and Allura's voice was torn between regal authority and true heartbreak. "The Blue Lion chose you. You. She found you worthy of being her Paladin."

"She made a mistake." Blue was perfect in every possible way. Just not in her choice of a pilot.

That was her only fault.

"Lance," Shiro tried, but Lance cut him off, desperate to make them understand, as with each protest they made a dagger seemed to twist deeper into his heart. They'd get hurt because of him. Again. He couldn't let them do that. He couldn't… he couldn't pretend anymore. He couldn't keep trying to be something that he was not.

"I'm not a Paladin. Not a real one. It's time I stop playing that I'm a hero." A sob caught in his throat. "I'm not. I'm just a cargo pilot."

"Lance, no," Hunk pleaded. "Don't say that. You *are* a Paladin. You *are* a hero."

"I am *not,*" and it was the closest to anger, to any other emotion that they had heard yet. But worse yet it was said with such conviction, such belief.

Why wouldn't they believe him? Lance wondered. Why wouldn't they just let him say his piece and quietly excuse himself from the team? He knew he didn't belong. He knew he didn't deserve the title. He knew all of that but still…

Why did it hurt so much?

Because he didn't want to leave, he realized. As terrible as a Paladin he was, being one had been the closest he'd ever felt to having a purpose. He wanted to stay.

But all he'd ever done was put his family in danger. They would be safer if he stepped aside, found a more competent Paladin. He'd stay on in the castle, if they'd let him. But he couldn't be a Paladin anymore.

Hunk, who almost never raised his voice, never gave in to rage, felt his own emotions start to simmer. Not at Lance. But at himself. For not seeing how far deep this went, for thinking that everything was mostly all right and that a few hugs and comforting words could have ever healed his friend's broken image.

He knew Lance bottled things up. He knew Lance measured himself against others and too often found himself wanting. But this? This? This wasn't just disappointment or frustration. This was self-loathing and self-hatred and the idea that Lance had been immersed in this much darkness, had been suffering quietly for so long just made him so, so *angry.*

And Haggar. A low growl worked its way out of Hunk's throat, jerking Lance's head up in surprise and drawing the other's attentions. She had found that crack beneath Lance's bravado and hopes, had wormed her way in and pulled all of that doubt to the surface. She'd made him believe it was true. Whatever horrors she had subjected him to had made him think he wasn't worth saving. That he wasn't worth their love.

And Hunk would, never, ever, forgive her. But more than that, he wasn't sure he could ever forgive himself.

"You *are,*" Hunk growled, staring straight into the ocean blue eyes of his best friend. "Damn it
"Listen to us. Por favor. You're meant to be here. You're meant to be a Paladin. Whatever Haggar told you was a lie, Lance. She wanted to hurt you. She wanted you to break. She. Is. A. Liar."

"Hunk," Lance whispered, but Hunk wasn't done.

"We are telling you the truth Lance. Have I ever lied to you?" When Lance didn't answer Hunk placed one of his larger hands atop Lance's left, still clutching at the blanket and squeezed it, relieved beyond measure when Lance did not pull away. "Have I?" Lance mutely shook his head, tears frozen in the corners of his eyes.

"Then believe me when I say that you are a hero. You are a part of this team. This family. I've known you for forever, Lance. And you know what? I have never met a more selfless, compassionate, wonderful, loving person in my entire life. Without you, I'd still be that kid sitting alone under a tree reading a book and wishing for a friend. So don't you dare tell me you are not worthy of being a Paladin. Don't you dare say you're weak. You are so, so strong Lance. You just need to see it."

Hunk sat back then although he didn't loosen his hold on Lance's hand, breathing hard. "So," he finished, "you better believe it. And I'll keep saying it until you do."

A tear broke free and trekked down Lance's face as fear was replaced with disbelief, with a shaky hope.

He didn't know what to think. His heart ached hearing what Hunk had to say, feeling like a hundred shattered pieces had just been forced back together. They really all thought that? About him?

But they wouldn't think that if they knew what he'd done. His eyes flicked to his wrists, the sign of his sin hidden beneath a burn and unblemished skin. If they knew that he had given up, had lost the will to fight… they wouldn't still think that, would they?

He didn't have the courage to find out. The darkness festered on it, but he couldn't bring himself to shove it out into the light. Because if he did and they rejected him he didn't think he could take it. And the risk was still too great to relieve himself of that burden in the hopes they might accept him, failures and all.

"Lance," Allura said quietly, interrupting his train of thought, "there is something I need to tell you."

And his stomach clenched, certain now that the axe would fall. Allura wasn't like Hunk. She had a war to fight. She needed real heroes at her side, people capable of defeating the Galra. Despite what Hunk had proclaimed he still wasn't sure he was suited to be a Paladin. The only thing he ever had been good at was shooting and well… his right hand trembled at his side. Now he was useless on that front.

"When we launched our rescue for you I piloted the Blue Lion," Allura said and Lance felt his heart sink. This was it. She would be an amazing pilot for Blue. She was everything Blue deserved. It didn't matter that Blue had chosen him first; he was just the stepping stone for her to find Allura again.

"Lance," Allura called as his head drooped in front of her.

He looked up, more tears making their way down his cheeks. "You… You and Blue will be great together," he managed, meaning every word of it.

"You did not let me finish," she chided. "There is more to this story. Por favor," she sounded out the
word, "allow me to continue." She smiled to soften any potential harshness of her words. Only when Lance was looking at her fully did she go on.

"I asked Blue to allow myself to pilot her to assist in the mission. During the mission both myself, Hunk and the Yellow Lion and the Black Lion were engaged in a rather large scale firefight.

"We were greatly outnumbered," she continued, well aware that the others were listening intently and she felt Coran's hand descend comfortingly on her shoulder as he knew where her story went. "We fought as best we could, but there were too many. At one point, Zarkon himself attacked Blue."

Lance's breath hitched and she gave him a sad smile. "We are all right now. But at that time, Lance, you must know what happened." She looked around the room. "You all deserve to know. The Blue Lion had used up all of her power in the fight and her systems went offline. I was left alone to face down Zarkon."

She paused, recalling all too clearly the stark terror that had seized her then. "I believed I was about to die," she murmured. "I had no way to defend myself or escape. I had lost communications with everyone. I tried to leave behind a final message, but the recording software shut down before I could finish."

"Allura," Shiro murmured, and she gratefully accepted his flesh hand in her own, intertwining their fingers while Pidge took her other, honey eyes magnified with tears.

Lance's stomach clenched with guilt. Allura had almost died? To rescue him? She was the Princess of Altea. The universe needed her. It was wrong. It was all wrong.

"I said my goodbyes," she continued, "as best I could. I felt so terrible, knowing that all of you were still fighting. It was the worst kind of feeling to not know what had happened; if Lance had been recovered, if everyone was safe. All I knew was that I had failed all of you."

Lance sucked in a sharp breath at that. Allura, a failure? No. No, she wasn't. She had tried, hadn't she? She'd done all she could for the sake of the universe. That made her a hero.

But not him, and the thought was surrounded by Haggar's chuckles. It was different. He had royally screwed up and had almost cost his teammates their lives. There was nothing heroic about that.

"But just as Zarkon was about to fire his cannon something happened. All around me the Blue Lion's systems turned back on. And you know what she said?" Her eyes, surrounded by tears, bore down on Lance's and he found he could not look away.

"My Paladin," Allura whispered. "She felt you, Lance. Against all odds she powered on despite having completely exhausted herself because she felt you. You gave her life again. She maneuvered us away from Zarkon's attack and returned one of her own that she should never have been able to do in her current state. Because of you, Lance."

"But—" Lance protested weakly, not even sure what he was trying to deny.

"I may have been the Blue Lion's pilot for a short time," Allura said, "but you, Lance, are her Paladin. She will have no other and I fully agree with her. It matters not about your hand" – Lance felt it twinge at the reminder – "because you are the Blue Paladin and the Blue Paladin you shall remain. That is my final statement on the matter and I will not accept any further discord."

All Lance could do was stare at her. This couldn't be real. There was no way Allura, no possible way everyone would say such things to him. About him.
Was… was the problem with him? Was something inside him broken that kept trying to reject this acceptance? It was all he had ever wanted after all. To be a part of something greater than himself. To be wanted. Needed.

Hunk had said he'd keep saying those things until Lance believed them too. Could he believe them? Was that the truth and everything Lance had held inside the real lie?

But if they were wrong… If they were wrong and he took that chance he would just fall farther. He'd fall and never stop. Was it worth it to step off the narrow ledge he'd built for himself and leap into the unknown?

He'd have to tell them, he realized. He had to. That secret was killing him from within, feeding the darkness that Haggar had opened wide.

But not yet. It may be the coward's way, but he couldn't say anything yet. He wasn't strong enough. Not as strong as they thought him. He needed to build up his courage, find the right way to admit his insurmountable failure. And to do that he needed to accept their love and kindness and their words as truth. For now.

And hopefully… hopefully when he did finally find the words to tell his own truth they would accept it. And him.

"Lance," Shiro said gently. "We all fully support Allura's decision in this. You are the Blue Paladin and we will not accept a replacement. I know this is a lot to absorb, but we are behind you, every step. You haven't let us down, Lance. And we won't let you down now."

Lance slowly looked about the room, seeing the same determination and acceptance on everyone's face. Even Keith, who almost seemed to be trying to glare it into Lance. The spark inside him grew a bit more, settling into a warmth that chased away some of the chill.

They all cared. They actually did.

And if they cared so much about him, thought so highly of who he was… maybe he ought to give himself a chance too.

"Okay," he whispered.

"Okay, what?" Hunk said, giving his hand an encouraging squeeze.

"I'm the… the Blue Paladin," Lance breathed. He heard Theodek's dark laughter then, the word child spat mockingly while Haggar called him worthless and weak. But above their taunts he heard Shiro call him strong. Coran call him brave. Keith identify him as a true rival. Pidge include him as family. Hunk term him a hero. And Allura declare him the Blue Paladin.

Their voices were sunlight, bursting forth and making the darkness retreat. He heard them. He heard them and he listened.

"I'm the Blue Paladin," he repeated, stronger.

And this time… this time he believed it too.

Chapter End Notes
For real, I almost debated just ending it here. Nevermind all the loose ends I have created and all the bonding moments we all want. This was perfect and beautiful and I love it. But, alas, I am a perfectionist and so the story will continue because I really do have so much more planned. Just really, really liked how this ended up flowing here xD

Who else is weeping with pride for our blue boy? That was an intense little discussion, but by golly did it all end well. While Lance still is not being completely forthcoming (and he needs time to process and really figure out what happened now that Haggar isn't there to influence him) he is definitely moving in the right direction and he's got the whole team behind him. Aren't they all just precious? *snuggles them all*

This weekend I'm hanging out in Detroit at Youmacon, table D10 in the artist alley. Do come by and say hello if you're here!

Love as always to the fabulous reviewers. Seriously, you guys make my day so much better with your lovely comments. Having some computer issues today so not risking clicking off this page to grab names, but you beautiful people know who you are. Thank you!

Please do drop a comment before you leave the page! I love to hear your reactions and this chapter was quite a doozy. Your favorite line, scene, character moment... please ply me with love and comments to get through the long weekend! Thanks so much!
Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of course, the beautiful moment was over as quickly as it began as a low cough started in Lance's throat until it was wracking him from head to toe.

Hunk did what he could, rubbing soothing circles on Lance's back and holding him against him to try and calm the tremors. He may have been out of the wood for pneumonia, thanks to the pods retrieving most of the water from his lungs and whatever bacteria had lingered with it, but he was still quite sick and the fever was high enough.

When it was finally over, Lance lay limp against Hunk, breathing uneven and raspy and sounding too much like his attempts following the rescue, and his eyes were closed, accentuating the near bruises of exhaustion around them.

"Lance, lad," Coran called gently, prompting dark slits of blue to pry themselves open. "We're going to let you get some sleep now, all right?"

Lance tried to straighten a bit at that, but it was clear he was running on the last of his reserves. "Lo siento," he managed. "I didn't…" he coughed weakly. "Didn't mean to…"

"None of that," Coran chided. "You need to let your body rest. We are at the thirty dobashes after all and that was the limit I instated, was it not?"

Lance nodded, feeling both relieved and sad.

"We'll come back in a couple varga, if that's all right," Shiro said, earning a small nod. His smile grew larger. "And Lance? I'm really proud of you."

Shiro knew what it had taken Lance to come to that conclusion, had seen him war between his own doubts and the team's beliefs. He knew that it wasn't over yet – Lance had too much self-doubt and years of enforcing it to wash it all away with one discussion – but the fact Lance had recognized his role as a Paladin was something to smile about indeed.

So this time when a pink flush stole across Lance's cheeks, it was for all the right reasons. He ducked his head, pressing it up against Hunk's arm. The action only made Shiro grin wider as Lance instigated the need for contact. It might only really be with Hunk right now, but any forward progress was still progress.

"We'll see you soon, Lance," Pidge said and Keith echoed her. The Red Paladin felt like he needed to say something more, apologize for yelling just then and for everything before. He wanted to get this weight off his chest. But Lance looked so tired and Keith didn't want to burden him anymore than he already was.

Pidge seemed to understand his lingering and nudged him with her elbow. "Later," she whispered, inclining her head towards the door.

And later would be better. Once Lance was feeling better and maybe not in front of an audience. Keith returned her nod and the two of them exited, knowing not to crowd.
Allura hovered, wanting to do something more but knowing she wasn’t in the same place as Hunk where Lance would likely appreciate her touch although she knew how much he loved – or, he did – that element of closeness.

A light went off above her head and she grinned. Scurrying over to her closet she flung the door open wide and disappeared into the interior stocked to the brim with dresses and gowns.

"Princess?" Coran asked, concerned, as all those remaining in the room heard the sounds of scuffing and a crash. Lance too had peeked his head over Hunk’s arm, more curious than scared at the noises and the muttered curses stemming from inside the closet.

"Allura? Do you need help?" Shiro asked. The mice though did not seem perturbed and were actually squeaking excitedly, their quivering bodies looking expectantly towards the closet and Shiro relaxed slightly. If the mice weren’t worried, then Allura was fine.

"What on earth is she doing?" Hunk asked Coran, who looked just as baffled as the Yellow Paladin.

"No idea, my boy," he said, missing as Lance stiffened ever so slightly even though the comment was not addressed to him. Hunk gave Lance a little tighter of a squeeze, cuddling him to his side.

"I found it!" exclaimed Allura, emerging from the closet with a rather ornate chest cradled in her arms and looking positively giddy.

Coran recognized it immediately as Allura tenderly put it on the foot of the bed. "Your toy chest," he observed.

Allura was already digging into it, discarding what appeared to be a few puzzles and games before her breath caught and she emerged with what she had been seeking.

In her hands was a plush toy of the Altean species the talefann. It was canine in design but with overly large round ears and a body that tapered off into an elegant fin. Its body was soft, even after years of wear and tear, and the bright beaded eyes still gleamed.

"This is Flafie," she said, gazing down at the treasured toy. "He is very dear to me and has always provided me a great comfort." She looked up. "Perhaps… he might keep your company?"

She held the plush out. Allura thought being able to hold something close might be comforting – more so than the blanket, which Lance seemed to be using as almost a shield against the outside – but was now realized that in her excitement perhaps the gesture was too childish.

She felt the tips of her ears redden as Lance did not take the toy, although his eyes were wide and focused entirely on it. Just as she was about to try and apologize for the mistake – humans, maybe did not partake in such things – Lance moved his hand tentatively from where it clutched the blanket and towards Flafie.

Allura's heart leapt into her throat as his fingers gently wrapped around it. She could feel the tremors through her part of the toy as he combated both the cold and his body's own weakness, and she leaned forward, pressing the plush more fully into his grip.

Their eyes met then, his swimming with tears and a softness Allura was not sure she had ever seen.

He took the plush and held it against his chest, bandaged right hand tentatively descending on the large ears and settling against the fabric.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Allura… I…"
"He is an excellent listener," she cut in, her own voice choked. "And especially loves to get pets behind his ears. Just… just hold him close if you get scared and he will make it better." She brought her hand across her eyes, wiping at her tears. "All right? Right. I am going to go now. I shall see you later."

And with one last watery smile, Allura practically retreated with the mice following her. Coran watched her go, heart swelling. He knew well how much the plush meant to her. It had been the last gift from her late mother, who had told Allura that although she may be leaving Flafie would comfort her in her stead. He prayed the toy could provide some measure of the same comfort it had brought to a grieving little girl all those years ago.

"I'll get going too," Shiro said. "We'll see you later, buddy. Sweet dreams." And with a little wave Shiro headed out after the distraught princess.

Coran repacked the toy chest and moved it to the ground before turning his attention to Lance, who had more firmly snuggled the toy to him while one of Hunk's arms was still wrapped about the thin shoulders and holding him close.

"I'm going to replace your nutrient and fluid bags," Coran told Lance, already pulling out replacements, "and give you another dose of the Glornack seed. I'll get you a cold cloth as well once you're lying down again."

Lance yawned with a tiny nod.

That was Hunk's cue. "Come on," he murmured, gently removing his arm from around Lance and immediately feeling a pang of loss, "let's get you settled."

"You'll stay?" Lance asked, voice small as with Hunk's assistance he sunk down to less of an incline. He didn't relinquish his hold on the stuffed animal or the blanket, which ended up rolled beneath him and probably not the most comfortable but he didn't seem keen on moving.

"Of course," Hunk said, selecting another light blanket from the freshly laundered stack and spreading it out atop Lance. "As long as you want me to." Some of the fear that that had flitted across Lance's face vanished at the reassurance.

They were going to have to ask him what had happened, Hunk realized. He didn't want to make Lance relieve those memories, but they were grasping at straws and being reactive instead of proactive to any triggers or new fears.

Lance clearly didn't want to be alone and Hunk had no idea if that was because of something as simple as needing a reassurance that this was still real, or if stemmed from something deeper.

They'd need to find out everything. Especially if… if Lance had told Haggar anything or if she'd managed to skim his thoughts. They wouldn't blame him, of course. Lance did nothing wrong and it was clear that he'd fought tooth and nail to keep them from finding out information, if that was indeed what had happened. Again, all of their insight was from assumptions that the Galrans wanted information and Haggar his quintessence.

What if they were wrong? Hunk felt something cold creeping inside him then. What if this was the plan all along? What if the Galrans had wanted them to retrieve Lance because they'd done something to him?

Maybe it was some type of mind control. Or they implanted him with some weapon or virus that the scans hadn't picked up and he could turn it on them at any moment.
No, no, Hunk calmed himself. That wasn't the logical answer. The cryo-pod would have caught it. Coran would have. Lance surely would have said something if he knew about such a weapon hidden inside him (if he even knew about it, Hunk's mind whispered).

But given Keith and Shiro's brief accounts with how Haggar had asked after Lance… she had not planned to let him leave. Maybe it wasn't the quintessence per se – Hunk's mind flashed to where Coran had quietly observed that Haggar may have treated Lance as a pet and he shuddered at the double meaning of the shock collar now – but Haggar definitely wanted something from Lance.

Hunk's eyes narrowed. Like hell would he let her get it. He looked at Lance, curled onto his side with the plush clutched to him, hair askew and cheeks still warm with fever. He looked so young. And small. And Hunk had the sudden, desperate urge to sweep him into his arms where he knew for sure he'd be safe.

He resisted that, knowing that although Lance was certainly more comfortable with touch now (at least from him and Coran, it seemed) he wouldn't react well to something so out of the blue and forceful. No, he would do as he had and let Lance continue to come to him and reciprocate in kind.

And then… then they'd have to discuss what he and Coran had found on Lance's wrists. His own stomach twisted at the thought. As much as he tried to tell himself that the Galra had done it, he had a sinking feeling that Lance had inflicted those injuries on himself. He was scared to know the why, but knew that he and Coran would be the best confidants for now and he had to steel himself for whatever Lance said. Because no matter what the answer was, supporting Lance and making sure he knew he was safe and loved were of the utmost importance.

"All right lad, I've got the cold compress right here," Coran said, returning from the bathroom where he'd thoroughly soaked and then rinsed the cloth. "Are you all right if I place it on your forehead now?"

"O-okay," he whispered, eyes opening to track the movement. Lance knew full well it was Coran and he was only helping. He knew they had squeezed every drop of moisture out too to prevent him from panicking again. He knew all of that and yet as Coran slowly descended towards his face he couldn't help but flinch back.

"Sorry," he choked out as Coran withdrew.

"I know it's a little scary," Coran said with a sad smile. "Would you be more comfortable if you placed it instead?"

That… that would help. Lance nodded weakly, clutching Flafie tighter. He forced himself to release his grip from the plush, keeping it still pinned to his chest with his right forearm and gingerly took the cold cloth from Coran's hands.

He shivered at the temperature. He knew logically his fever needed to come down, but he was just so cold. He'd been trying to ignore as best he could and pressed up against Hunk, a veritable furnace, he'd almost felt comfortable. But now, underneath just a thin blanket and no Hunk he was beginning to shiver again.

Still though, he took his time placing the compress, even his own hand bringing it up past his eyes had him closing them out of habit. There was nothing to be scared of though. It was fine. He just had to keep telling himself that.

He pressed it against his forehead, doing his best to comb his bangs out of the way – and even his own hands were too reminiscent of Haggar's and he shuddered, nearly dropping it.
"You've got this," Hunk encouraged from the side, blinking back his own tears at seeing Lance struggle and knowing he could not help.

Finally, finally, Lance got it mostly centered and he sunk back fully into the pillows, retreating his left hand back under the blankets to more fully clutch at the plush. It reminded him of his own stuffed animal, a great white shark he'd had since birth, aptly named "Tiburónčito." Tíburoncéitó should still be sitting on his bed at the Garrison, unless they'd packed up all of his things because… because they thought he was dead and wasn't coming back.

He felt tears prick his eyes at the thought of home. The thought of his mamá getting a box delivered by the post full of his belongings, the last things he'd touched before he'd disappeared off the face of the earth. He hoped she at least had Tíburónčito now to comfort her.

"Hey, hey," Hunk murmured, sinking down on the bed next to Lance as he noticed the sudden bout of tears. "What's wrong?"


"I know," Hunk soothed, placing a gentle hand on Lance's blanketed shoulder. "I know. I do too."

"I m-miss them."

Hunk thought of his own parents. He hadn't allowed himself to really dwell on home because he knew he couldn't go back. Not yet. Not until he'd fulfilled his purpose as a Paladin and made sure that earth was safe. He missed them. A lot. He missed his dad's hugs and his mom's singing voice as she danced around the house.

He missed family dinners and board games and enjoying each other's company sitting on their back patio as the sun set. He missed a lot of things. Going to the Garrison was a big step for him as the furthest he'd stayed away from home had been Lance's house.

But to his surprise he'd settled in quick. It was Lance who had been plagued by homesickness that not even video chats and writing letters could erase. Hunk loved his parents, he did. But their relationship was completely different than Lance and his parents and siblings. Lance thrived in his large family and being away from them had made him physically sick the first couple weeks away at school.

And space? Space was so, so much further away than they could have ever imagined. Hunk and Pidge had tried to rig a communication device to reach earth, but the distance was just too great. He wished they could return to Earth, even just for a few minutes, so Lance could be reunited with his family. But Allura had said they needed to keep far, far away from their home planet lest the Galra Empire realize its importance and hold it hostage. And Hunk could never forgive himself if a few minutes of homesickness condemned their entire world.

But right now, he would be willing to risk it. If he could pop over, retrieve Lance's mom, and just let Lance have that piece of home even for a little bit he'd do it. But he knew he couldn't.

It didn't make him stop wishing.

"I know," Hunk murmured. "We'll see them again. I'm sure of it. And everyone is going to be so proud of you."

Lance just sniffled.
"Get some sleep," Hunk said, settling himself more comfortably against the headboard next to Lance. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

Lance shuddered out a sigh and curled up more underneath his blanket, still shivering. Coran came by with the temperature scanner and a soft beep echoed in the room. He frowned and showed it to Hunk. Still nearly one hundred. Hunk frowned. Why wouldn't this fever just break?

"Hunk? Coran?" Lance mumbled, likely disturbed by the beep.

"Yes, lad?" Coran asked gently.

"Thank you," he whispered. That did not even begin to cover it, what he knew they'd done for him. But it was all he could say right now.

"No thanks are needed, but you are more than welcome," Coran replied and Hunk gave his shoulder another squeeze. "Get some sleep now, hmm? You'll feel better when you wake up."

"'s so cold."

"I know, but only for a little longer," Coran assured. He hoped, at least.

Lance coughed weakly but nodded.

Coran crossed to the nightstand and heated up another batch of the camoddian leaves. Within the dobash the flavorful scent was permeating the room and Lance relaxed even further. Fortunately this time around his exhaustion won out against everything else and a few minutes later his breathing had evened into that of sleep.

"He likely won't sleep too long," Coran said sadly, "but I'd like to try and keep him down for about four hours and I'll be back then to check on him. If we are lucky this fever of his may even dissipate."

"I hope so too," Hunk said, carefully removing his hand so as not to rouse Lance and settling them in his own lap. "It'd go a long way to helping him feel better. And then we really do need to get him to eat something."

"I was going to go to the kitchen to whip up something my dear old grandmamma used to make for when anyone was feeling unwell," Coran said. Seeing the dubious look on Hunk's face, Coran let out a laugh. "Oh, my boy, it is not a Paladin surprise, I promise."

"What is it?" Hunk pressed. He knew Coran meant well, but given his track record with food… well…

"Remember those large purple fruits we picked up on Dalaran?" Hunk frowned. He did remember those. They were absolutely bland (he'd tried one) and still hadn't a clue why Coran had been so insistent they get them. "They mash incredibly well and with a little cali (which Hunk had learned was the universal equivalent of sugar) and some cooking they develop into a delicious porridge."

Here Coran sobered. "My hope is that it is thick enough to not emulate any type of water, and the fruit does contain enough that Lance will still get a good dose of fluids, which his body very much needs."

He looked to the nutrient and fluid packs. "These are doing for now, but if we wish for Lance to gain back any strength he will need to eat something of substance. You too, Number Two. You have not eaten much these last couple varga. I will send the mice up with something for you as well."
At that observation Hunk's stomach let out a gurgle. He patted it absentmindedly. He hadn't felt much like eating these last few days and had only stomached what was brought because he knew he needed it. But now that Lance was resting as comfortably as possible and out of the woods, his appetite was returning.

"Thanks Coran, that'd be great. Just… not a Paladin surprise?"

Coran chuckled. "I'll send up something of your own creation or Number Four's. He's shown to be quite a decent cook himself."

"He has," Hunk smiled. He wondered if Keith would like to spend some more time in the kitchen. He'd sort of taken over it and the quiet boy had never expressed any interest in cooking, but this could be a good opportunity for him to get to know Keith a little better. Yes, he decided. Keith was going to be joining him in the kitchen from now on at least once a week. He already knew it was going to be a lot of fun.

"Righty-o then, I'll be off. I'll send the mice up with perhaps your tablet as well, hm?"

Hunk's smile widened to a grin. "If it's not too much trouble."

"Those little furry beans need to earn their keep somehow." With a last jaunty wave Coran headed out.

True to his word, within a half varga the mice arrived, stumbling slightly underneath a large plate piled with a combination of food goo, garlic bread and some type of fruit or vegetable; it was rather hard to tell. Chulatt dragged in Hunk's tablet on her own as there was no way for her to help balance the plate with Platt's height.

Hunk gingerly got off the bed, grateful when Lance didn't stir at all, and accepted the plate and tablet. "You guys are the best," he told them as they collapsed on the floor. "I can't believe you carried this all the way!"

Pleased squeaks sounded, growing in intensity when Hunk broke one of the fruit/vegetable slices into fourths and set it in the mile of mice. They dug into it immediately while Hunk sampled it himself, the flavor something between cucumber and honeydew. Interesting, but not bad.

Once they finished their snack, the mice gave little salutes and neatly tiptoed out of the room. Hunk grinned at the behavior. As if their footsteps would wake Lance, but it was adorable all the same. He finished his own meal rather quickly, washing it down with a gulp of water from Allura's sink, and then clambered back into the bed with his tablet. He wasn't really up to doing anything on it, but he loaded up some of the programming schematics he'd been working on for one of Pidge's projects for Rover 2.0.

He was more content though to watch Lance sleep, the sight setting him far more at ease than anything else could. He still couldn't believe all that had happened in the last week. Part of it still seemed like a really bad dream and he wished it was.

Sometimes he wished all of this was a dream. That he'd wake up back in his Garrison bed and Lance would be sleeping across the room from him and this was just some Alice in Wonderland hallucination and Hunk would wonder what they'd put in the cafeteria food. Because magic space lions? Aliens? It was so surreal that when they'd first come here Hunk had pinched himself more times than he could count to assure himself he was in fact quite awake.

Lance whimpered softly in his sleep, face scrunching up as if in pain, and Hunk leaned over, putting
a large hand on Lance's shoulder. It was the wrong move, he realized a tick later, as Lance cringed
further away. Touch might be okay when Lance was prepared, but in his dreamworld Hunk was just
another piece of the nightmare.

"Lo siento," Hunk apologized, removing the offending hand immediately. "Estás bien, Lance." He
repeated the phrase several times until Lance's brow smoothed.

Lance did remain mostly asleep for the duration of Hunk's vigil, sometimes whispering something
unintelligible or crying softly, but returning to slumber without ever fully being aware of his
surroundings. Each time Hunk had to soothe him back with just words it broke his heart a little more.

He re-wet the compress a couple of times, although each time he applied it Lance had pulled back
even while unconscious as though he expected something worse to happen. Hunk had apologized
sincerely each time.

But it was doing some good. Coran had left the temperature scanner behind (it did a gazillion other
things but Hunk was most interested in that one) and between the Glornack seed and the cold cloths,
Lance's fever was dropping. It was hovering just above ninety-nine now, which by all accounts to
Hunk meant it had broken. The ever-persistent flush to Lance's face had practically receded and the
shivering had stopped as well.

It was a little over three hours later when Lance stirred, a soft groan issuing between his lips.

"Lance?" Hunk inquired softly.

The groan turned into a whimper and Lance's left hand twitched, as though he was trying to find
something to grab on to. His breathing picked up tempo and his eyelids fluttered.

"Lance, hey, it's okay," Hunk murmured. "C'mon, wake up now."

And with a gasp Lance did just that, shooting up in bed and nearly collapsing a moment later as his
right arm buckled beneath his weight.

"Easy, easy," Hunk said as Lance's eyes darted madly about the room, chest heaving. "It's
okay. Estás bien. Estás en el castillo."

"Hunk?" Lance breathed as his eyes settled on his best friend.

"Right here, hermano," Hunk said, more than surprised when Lance pushed himself forward to
weakly grip Hunk's shirt, his tremors racing through both of them. Hunk tentatively brought one arm
about the shaking form, relieved beyond measure when Lance didn't push him away.

Lance took in a deep breath – honeysuckle and engine grease – and felt his heartbeat slow. This was
Hunk. This was real.

"Pensé que era un sueño," he mumbled against Hunk. "Pensé...que era un truco otra vez."

"It's all right," Hunk soothed, not quite catching the muffled words but reassuring Lance all the same.
"I'm here. You're safe."

Lance clung to him for a few minutes longer, feeling safe and secure in Hunk's arms and the fear
from his dreams fading away. Nothing could ever compare, except perhaps Blue's quintessence
wrapping about him. He wanted to see her again. He needed to.

He pulled himself out of the embrace, but wasn't quite willing to lose the safety of Hunk yet. So he
pressed himself against Hunk's side, beyond grateful when all Hunk did was shift to better hold him there. Hunk was different. Hunk's touch made him feel safe and loved and secure.

Nothing like Haggar's. He shuddered at the thought of her. But Hunk's hands didn't morph into her bony ones. He sighed in relief, pressing himself even closer to this eternal fountain of warmth and letting out another soft sigh as Hunk's arm wrapped about his shoulders, allowing him to rest his head against Hunk's.

"Is this okay?" Hunk asked gently.

"Mhm." He wasn't sure he'd ever been more comfortable in his life.

"Your fever is just about gone," Hunk said. "Are you feeling any better?"

Was he? Well, he was thinking clearer, he could tell. The fact that he hadn't succumbed to a panic attack yet from Hunk's proximity spoke volumes to that. His throat still hurt and he swallowed thickly, knowing a cup of tea and honey would do the trick but unable to stop the shiver of fear thinking about it brought on.

He was still cold, but not as cold. And Hunk was warm. He soaked up more of that delicious heat as he tested out the rest of him. His right hand still didn't respond much and he tucked it up against him, but the rest of him was okay. His toes were tingling at the chill now that they'd escape from the blanket and he drew them up closer.

"I'm okay," he decided. But something was still wrong. He felt an ache inside him that had nothing to do with the cold or sickness or his own fears. Blue. He needed to see her. He had to make sure she was all right with his own eyes. Black too. It had been his fault she'd almost been lost.

"What is it?" Hunk was old-hat now at picking out Lance's breathing patterns. And while it hadn't hitched it had just increased slightly, his heartbeat thudding out against Hunk's arm.

"Blue," Lance whispered. "Can I… can I see her?"

"Of course. Oh, she'd love to see you too, Lance. She's been so worried."

He caught the flash of guilt and mentally palmed his head. "That's not your fault," he quickly said. "And besides, I promised her I'd give her an update and it's been a while." He paused then, eyes lighting up at the next bit. "Did you know Blue talks?"

"Talks?" Lance repeated. "Y-yeah. Is… is she not supposed to?" Had he screwed something else up? Had he hurt Blue's programming?

"Lance," and the tone was both exasperation and fondness, "all of the Lions speak to us in different ways. Coran and Allura just noted that they've never heard a Lion speak in their chosen Paladin's language, and especially out loud. It gave us all quite the shock the first time. You know what Allura told me?"

Lance shook his head, beyond confused. Didn't everyone's Lions talk? Then again, he supposed Blue hadn't always spoken to him. She had used feelings before and he honestly couldn't recall at what point those had transformed into first words inside his head and then actual physical sounds that reverberated in the cockpit with him.

"She said you and Blue have the strongest bond she's ever seen or heard of between a Lion and Paladin," Hunk continued. "Isn't that something?"
"Really?" He wasn't sure he believed it. That didn't make sense. Just because he accepted what the others said, accepted that he was the Blue Paladin, that didn't make him any stronger. He was still the weakest link on the team and no one could deny that.

"Really," Hunk assured. "And she meant what she said, Lance. Blue let her pilot to help you. She's your Lion and you are her Paladin."

A warmth spread through Lance's chest then. It may not be the great skills the rest of his team had but the fact that his bond with Blue was something noteworthy made him feel that maybe, maybe, he wasn't as awful a Paladin as he thought. Their connection had to mean something.

"Let's go see her now," Hunk said, getting excited by the idea. This way Blue got an update and both Lion and Paladin were properly reunited. He knew how comforting it was when Yellow wrapped him in her quintessence, no doubt Blue would provide the same. And if he were lucky it might be enough to bring a smile to Lance's face. His lips had still barely twitched upwards and Hunk was beginning to grow concerned.

And no smile still, but a spark lighted in the ocean eyes. "Blue," Lance whispered, feeling a surge of strength with just the word. He allowed that strength to propel him to the edge of the bed, which Hunk had already swung off, but he stopped there, legs dangling over the edge.

The last time… the last time he'd tried to walk had been right before… right before everything really bad had happened. His hands tightened on the bedcover, trying to keep the material from morphing into a hard metal table and the room into darkness.

Hunk didn't rush him. He had to have had no clue what was going on in Lance's head, as he fought with his own mind about what was real and what was memory, but he hovered, clearly worried.

Lance grit his teeth. If he had done this, injured and blind with only Theodek's chains for encouragement, there was no reason he couldn't do this now. Coran had said his feet worked. They'd been healed. There shouldn't be any pain now. He could do this. Just one step.

He took a deep breath, sliding forward more on the bed until both feet gingerly touched down on the carpeted floor. No shock. No cold bite of metal floors under his bare feet.

Stand. He shuddered as his own command took on Theodek's voice. "S-stand," he whispered aloud. His own voice sounded awful and raspy but it wasn't the Galran commander. He clung to it.

Go, he told himself. Stand. And he stood, pushing off the bed.

He took in the room from this new vantage, legs shaking after having been immobile for so long. He had just a second to comprehend Hunk's face going from a smile to a look of alarm as the entire room tilted dangerously.

Pain pounded up the back of his head and Lance gasped at the sudden agony and blackness that stole across his vision.

He had the sudden, terrible feeling of falling – retracting metal, a torture chamber of water below and a cold laugh – and then everything faded to darkness.
I am a sucker for stuffed animals. There is something so comforting and innocent about being able to hold something soft nice and close and whisper out your fears. I know whenever I'm upset I love nothing more than curling up with either my puppy and if she's not in the mood for an over-cuddly mom then hugging a stuffed animal until I feel better. *hugs one now*

Also, for those of you who have been asking... Lance did just touch on Haggar's little trick with the fake rescue, although Hunk did not pick it up. He said in Spanish he thought it had been a dream and a trick again. Poor baby. As I said last chapter we still have a lot to sort through. But... we're off to (maybe) see Blue! Whoot whoot!

Extra big hugs to those who took a dobash to review last chapter. I really appreciate it! ♥ Hugs to: Fey_79, QueenMcawesome, spn_angels, keepasecretgetastrawberry, FandomHuntress, dean_winchester_has_fallen, Grace, EverlastingCookie, BubbleGumi, someonewhosebelowaverageatcommenting, justaboynfromcuba, ladykristianna, ALPineDreamer623, Yato_The_King, Brohaikyuu, WindyOccamy, heyheroics, Clawbreeze, BRICKbrick, alexries, glitteringconstellations, maychorian, Redwizardfox, BrieCheese, and Proxy_17!

I've gotten a few comments about missing the double update. Sorry guys! But if you are missing your double-dose of weekly Langst, I do encourage you to check out my other fic, The Purity of Sin. Things are starting to get a little... hot. *laughs at joke, shot by outraged readers*

As always, please do take a moment to drop a comment on your way out! Anything from your favorite line or scene of the chapter to a character interaction to an overall feeling. Reviews this week shall act as cough drops and tissues so my cold and I thank you very much in advance.
"—so stupid. I'm such an idiot."

Lance blinked back to awareness with a pounding headache and the sounds of Hunk muttering to himself. What had happened? He tried to think past the ache. He'd been talking to Hunk. About Blue.

They were going to see her, he remembered that. And he'd tried stand up. And then… Then he'd fallen.

The sensation swept through him and he trembled at it, even as he realized he wasn't actually still falling and there was nothing bad happening either. In fact, he was pretty comfortable minus the boulder pounding into his head.

"Lance?" came the distraught voice of Hunk from above him. Lance tilted his head up, getting a tear splashing onto his cheek for the effort. He flinched back slightly, but into the arms that he realized were cradling around him and holding him in a half-reclined position. "Lance? Are you okay? Are you waking up? Oh God, I'm so sorry."

"H-Hunk?"

"I'm right here. I'm so sorry, hermano. Lo siento mucho. I wasn't thinking. I'm such an idiot."

"What…" he licked dry lips. "What happened?"

Hunk chuckled, although he didn't sound amused and hugged Lance a little tighter. "Nasty case of vertigo. I should have seen that. I'm such an idiot. Of course you'd get light-headed after lying down for so long. And nothing in you to boot. I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

"I'm—" he went to say fine, but the rock changed to a sledgehammer and his stomach gave a little wobble and he winced instead.

"Oh God, you don't look good. I'm going to pick you up, okay? And put you back in bed. I'm so stupid. I can't believe I thought that was a good idea."

"'s not your fault," Lance mumbled, brooking no protest as Hunk carefully slid his other arm under Lance's legs and lifted him up, although he did close his eyes as the sudden change had his stomach roaring.

Hunk deposited him safely back into the bed, propping up him on pillows and realizing his second folly; Lance was still connected to the near-empty fluid and nutrient packs. Fortunately the tugging on the valve didn't seem to have caused any adverse effects. Hunk disconnected the two empty packs but left the valve, hoping that Coran had another Glornack dose ready to go.

"I'm going to call Coran real quick," Hunk said, pulling Flafie free of the bedding and setting it on Lance's lap, where a tan, bandaged hand descended upon the soft ears, the rest of his head tipped back and eyes closed. "Hang tight."
Hunk paged the kitchen and was relieved when Coran picked up. He kept it brief; Lance had woken up and really, really needed to eat something and if possible another dose of the Glornack seed for the pain. Coran had no doubt sensed the urgency in Hunk's call though and he was entering the room not even five dobashes later, three covered plates balanced gracefully on his arm.

"How are we feeling?" Coran asked, setting down his plates on the foot of the bed. "You are looking much less flushed."

"Headache," Lance admitted quietly, eyes still closed as demons with pickaxes took turns slamming into his head.

"I've got just the ticket for that," Coran said, pulling out a corked bottle of a shimmery light brown substance and attaching it to an empty valve bag. "I've also got my grandmama's specialty recipe of gamibolap that I think you might like. Up for trying a taste?"

Saying so he took the lid off of one of the plates, and immediately a sort of sweet, hearty scent wafted up. Hunk took an appreciative whiff. That certainly smelled nothing like what he had imagined!

"I'm… I'm not sure," Lance hedged as Coran handed a plate off to Hunk and then brought one to him, setting it on the bed next to him. His stomach was turning again, but at this point he wasn't sure if it was from nausea or hunger. His throat definitely felt like it was constricting though.

"Just a bite," Coran encouraged. "It's a nice thick mash. If you don't like it or can't get it down, that's all right too."

Lance eyed it warily, but tentatively went to pick up the spoon Coran had included. He realized his error a tick later, as his right hand brushed against it but didn't want to actually pick it up. He tried once more, flexing his fingers as far as he could, but they barely twitched.

"It's going to take time," Coran said softly, watching the despair slide over Lance's face. "I promise, lad, we will do all we can. But it will be a process."

Lance swallowed back the sob that had formed upon the reminder of how useless his hand was now, and managed a nod instead. He couldn't break down again. He couldn't. They'd called him strong. He had to try and be that now. Not weak like Haggar and Theodek said.

He picked up the spoon with his left hand, hating how even now it trembled, and eyed the plate with trepidation.

"Lance," gasped Hunk, having gone ahead and sampled it himself, "it tastes like fried plantains!" One of Lance's absolute favorite foods, he knew. "Come on, just a bite."

Lance took a breath to steady himself and sunk the spoon into the quivering lavender goop. It didn't smell bad, he conceded, compare to most of Coran's concoctions. And Hunk was enjoying it, if the act of licking his own plate clean and eyeing Coran's still untouched one was any indication.

It wasn't water, he told himself, lifting the spoon up. It wasn't going to bite him or try to drown him. And if he couldn't do it Coran had said that was all right. But he wanted to. If he did do this… it was an accomplishment, no matter how pathetic it really was.

To their credit both Coran and Hunk didn't stare at him as they had with the candy, Hunk enthusiastically asking Coran about the properties of the fruit while the Altean twirled his moustache, beyond pleased that his dish had gone over so well. It helped to not have all the attention on him, even though he knew they only did it out of concern.
Okay, one bite. He could do this. The spoon pressed against his lips and he hesitantly opened his mouth to allow it in.

The gamibolap was warm, he first registered. It was making his tongue tingle happily and while it was sweeter than fried plantains, it certainly came close. It was goopy too, kind of like oatmeal mixed with jell-o and didn't really even require chewing. The real test though was going to be swallowing it. Unlike the candy he couldn't let it sit on his tongue forever.

It won't hurt you, he chanted at himself. Just... just do it. And so he did.

In hindsight, he may have tried to inhale it just a bit too fast, as he choked shortly thereafter. But it wasn't the same as when he'd expelled the water out of terror. This one had honestly just gone down the wrong hole as his mamá would say.

That didn't stop Hunk and Coran from immediately abandoning their conversation as he coughed and gasped and he found Hunk's large hands on his back patting gently while Coran whisked the offending plate away.

"I'm... I'm okay," he rasped once he finally was able to stop coughing. "R-really."

And best yet, he hadn't spat back up what he had literally choked down.

They seemed to be coming to the same conclusion; that the choking hadn't been an act to expel any foreign substance. Coran beamed and pulled the plate back. "Would you like to try another bite then?"

Lance nodded.

"First though," Coran said, even as he gently deposited the warm plate into Lance's lap. "What did you think of the taste?"

"Sweet," he said after a moment. "It... it was good, Coran." The Altean practically swelled with pride and such an action should have had him smiling in shared pleasure.

But despite how much he wanted to his lips refused to turn up. Lance ducked his head down towards the plate to hide the fresh tears that had cropped up at that. At least... at least in his mindscape he had been able to smile, even if it had felt fake. Now he couldn't even manage that.

What was wrong with him? The question echoed just as it had on the beach, and he looked desperately for something to distract him from the memory that was being conjured.

He picked up another small spoonful, aware that this time Coran and Hunk were keeping more of an eye on him, so he blinked back the tears and concentrated on this task for now. Maybe he could do it without nearly killing himself this time.

The thought was idle, but as soon as it sunk in he dropped the spoon in surprise, breath hitching. How could he... how could he even think that? He ignored the concerned calls of "Lance" and "lad" and glanced at his arms. The right was still covered in bandages to hide the burn, but the left remained smooth skin without a line to be seen.

He still felt it though. Searing pain that he inflicted on himself and then darkness, only to wake up drowning in a turbulent ocean with despair and guilt raining down. He whimpered, leaning forward to clutch each arm with the opposite hand, trying to push the pain and memory away.

"Lance, mírame, c'mon, mírame por favor. ¿Estás bien? What's wrong?"
He was crying, he realized. One of the drops touched his lips and he could taste the salt. Taste the ocean as it thrust him back under, spinning and flailing and so, so lost. Hands became waves and voices became the howl of the rain and crash of the ocean and he struggled against them, desperately trying to breach the surface.

And then the smell of the ocean was gone and replacing it was one of home and Lance was wrenched back to the present, cinnamon tickling his nose and warm hands gripping his shoulders.

"Lo siento," he sobbed, recognizing Hunk and Coran once again. "Lo siento. I'm s-sorry. I… I didn't want t-to… I'm so sorry."

"Lance, it's okay," Hunk soothed, rubbing his back. "Just breathe for me, okay? In and out. You're safe. Nothing is going to hurt you."

Hunk was wrong, Lance thought, even as he tried to get his shudders under control. He was here. He hurt himself. He… he tried to kill himself. He hiccupped a sob then, squeezing his eyes tight and focusing entirely on the feeling of Hunk's hands on his back and Coran's on his shoulders.

Eventually he felt at least strong enough to crack open his eyes and sit back up, the hands removing themselves as he shifted.

"You all right?" Hunk asked gently. Lance nodded, not meeting his eyes. "Want to talk about it?"

At that Lance vehemently shook his head. He couldn't. Not now. Not when he felt so… so raw with everything churning just beneath the surface.

"Okay," Hunk murmured, and Lance couldn't tell if Hunk was disappointed in him. He didn't dare look up and see for himself.

Hunk wasn't disappointed though. Hunk was scared. He and Coran looked at each other, the same expression mirrored on each other's faces. Lance had seemed fine, even willing to try again after a horrible first attempt. It spoke volumes as to how far he'd come from the initial rescue.

But something had happened, something that neither Coran or Hunk had been able to discern. Hunk couldn't think of any logical flashback that would have happened with the food and Lance hadn't even actually been attempting to eat it yet.

It had something to do with the marks he and Coran had found, that Hunk was certain. Lance had gripped both forearms, near white with fear, and hadn't come out of it until Coran had grabbed the carmodian leaves. Even then, when he came back to them, he had apologized and… Hunk blanched. Lance had said he "didn't want to."

Didn't want to what? Die? Live? His stomach clenched at the latter. The selfish part of him wanted to demand Lance talk to them, tell him what was wrong so he could fix it and spare him this pain. But he couldn't force Lance to talk. Not yet. If he picked up a knife or something and tried to… tried to… Hunk skipped over the thought, but knew that if Lance actually tried to hurt himself then he would get answers.

But Lance hadn't shown any desire to harm himself. He hadn't expressed any feelings that they'd be better off with him dead (and being better without him as a Paladin was something completely different, Hunk decided firmly) or how things would be if he wasn't there. Hunk clung to those. Those little details meant that Lance was looking forward. He believed that. And that was the only reason he wasn't completely losing it and insisting Lance talk to them.

Even knowing that didn't make him less scared though. At this point he wasn't sure if he'd ever fully
relax again until Lance was running around the castle and filling it with laughter and smiles, and he had no idea when (or if) that was going to become true once more. And every time Lance suffered a flashback or memory just made a new crack in Hunk's heart.

None of them could keep on like this. The team had united on the front to support Lance, but Hunk knew they were all hurting. Pidge, despite their talk, was still struggling with the guilt from not killing Haggar when she had the chance. Allura had been hiding her near death experience that had left Hunk more shaken than he'd thought – if Allura was gone, where did they all go from there? How did they go on?

None of them had planned to die during that mission. It hadn't even been a passing thought. And yet Allura almost had and from what Hunk had learned from Coran of the debriefing, if Pidge hadn't shown up when she had Keith could have been dead and Shiro possibly in Galran hands. He owed Pidge a giant cake, he decided. The biggest one he could make full of pecans. They all owed her so much.

Shiro was teetering, Hunk could see, on his desire to be a good leader and his own fears and hurts that all of this had brought up. Hunk decided next chance he got he was going to make Shiro a cup of whatever passed for hot chocolate here and give him a big hug. And then Keith. Hunk would have had to be blind to miss how guilty the smaller boy appeared whenever he looked in Lance's direction. The two of them really need to talk, but it would be best done when Lance was in full control of himself.

And looking at him now, Hunk had no idea when that would be. Just when they made a step of forward progress they seemed to take one back.

"Lance, lad, are you up for trying to eat something again?" Coran asked quietly. "I think it'll make you feel better."

Lance gave the barest of nods, but made no move to pick up the spoon that had fallen by his knee. Instead he took a deep breath, relieved when no coughing fit followed. It steadied him instead, as it was supposed to.

He could do this. Take a bite. Don't think about it. And then… then when he finished he could see Blue. A warmth caressed inside him at the thought of the Lion. Yes. He could do this. He could do this and then he could see Blue.

Taking another breath, he picked up the spoon as though it was going to bite him. He was fully aware of Coran and Hunk watching him – and he couldn't blame them; he couldn't be left alone two seconds without panicking – but ignored them as best he could, instead focusing on digging the spoon into the Altean concoction and bringing it to his lips.

Somehow it was still warm, and he was grateful. Hot food always tasted better than cold and he… he really didn't like the cold anymore.

Don't choke, he told himself. Don't rush. Nice and steady.

This time he felt it slide down his throat and he swallowed a second time to hurry it along because the sensation of anything there was still alarming. But to his immense relief the gamibolap finished its journey to his stomach without incident.

He could feel his mouth trying to twitch upward, proud of his achievement. But something still stopped him smiling. He took another quick bite to avoid thinking on it. And then another.
And to his surprise, in a matter of minutes the spoon was scraping against just the plate. His stomach grumbled for more, as the small helping was only reminding it that he hadn't eaten in nearly a week, but he tried to ignore it.

"Excellent job," Coran congratulated, taking the empty plate and setting it on the nightstand. "How's your stomach feeling?"

"Hungry," Lance admitted quietly, pressing his left hand to it as if that could make it stop growling. Coran sighed. "I know, lad. But we've got to take it nice and slow. If you can keep that down though I'll get you another plate for dinner, all right?"

And Lance knew Coran didn't mean anything by it. His mamá would say the same thing when he or his siblings were sick and they wanted more than crackers and soup.

But right now it struck too close to Haggar's conditions as she dangled either reward or punishment for his actions. He swallowed thickly, as despite his best attempts he could hear her offer: Provide me information on the paladins and you will be rewarded. Failure to do so will result in punishment.

He had never once allowed himself to take the reward, although he admitted with shame that for a moment while drow—with Theodek he had contemplated it. But he had held out. Now though… it was backwards, even if what Coran was offering wasn't really even a reward at all.

It still felt wrong. It felt so wrong to agree and even though Coran wasn't asking anything out of the normal and even asking Lance really for anything (just for his stomach to behave) it was sending alarm bells ringing full code.

"What is it, lad?" Coran queried softly, seeing the distress wash over Lance's features.

"Nothing," he managed. Because it was. It was stupid, that's what it boiled down to. He knew neither Hunk or Coran would laugh if he tried to explain, but he'd already embarrassed himself so many times and he was certain he'd continue to do so. This was something he could handle.

Or, he hoped so. He wasn't really sure he could do much of anything anymore.

Coran inclined his head, letting it pass for now. "Then if you are up for it, perhaps you would like to visit the Blue Lion now?"

That jerked Lance's head up, sending a new wave of agony through it, but he overpowered that with the stirrings of excitement. "Really?"

"Mhm. I daresay she would love to see you as well."

"Yes," Lance breathed. The need to see her was almost painful now and he could hardly believe it was just within reach.

"How's a piggy back ride sound?" Hunk chimed in and even as out of sorts as he was, Lance could not miss the guilt masked behind the cheery sound.

Lance nodded and tried to muster up a smile— he hated to see Hunk upset— but again his facial muscles seemed determined to fall flat. "I'd like that," he said instead, softly.

Hunk grinned. "Then let's get to it!"

He knelt down next to the bed, back turned so Lance could easily slide onto it. Lance hesitated,
remembering all too clearly the last time he'd tried to leave the bed. But Coran gave him a nod and encouraging smile and so Lance very carefully shifted himself across the mattress, Flafie back in his left hand. Although it hindered his movements, having something to hold on to made him feel just a little better.

Reaching Hunk, Lance brought trembling arms around Hunk's large neck, having to tuck the plush under his right arm so his left could grip both. His chest lay flush against the broad back and he let the warmth soak into him, trying to assure himself this was okay.

"Ready?" Hunk asked. Lance nodded against his back.

In one fluid motion Hunk rose, his strong arms going to encircle each of Lance's calves and pulling him even more against him. Lance buried his face into Hunk's shoulder as his stomach swooped unpleasantly at the motion. Hunk remained stationary though, allowing Lance to get his bearings.

Lance tentatively picked his head up, surveying the room from his new vantage point and letting out a small breath when no unforeseen panic overtook him and Haggar and Theodek's voices remained quiet.

"Dinner will be ready in about four hours," Coran addressed them both. "Lance, if you are feeling up for the company we would love to see you at the kitchen, but if you are not that too is more than all right and we'll bring your meal here."

"Is... is this Allura's room?" Lance asked as from this new perch he could make out more than he'd allowed himself to from the bed.

"It is indeed," Coran said, stroking her moustache. "She was insistent we use it due to the sheer size." He shook his head. "Why Alfur thought a little girl needed this much space was beyond me, but I will say she has indeed filled up the place with more gadgets and frills than I thought possible."

Lance glanced back at the gigantic bed he'd been occupying for however long he'd been back in the castle; his sense of time was incredibly skewed these days, and felt a flash of guilt.

"Now, none of that," Coran said, seeing where this thought was headed. "The Princess is more than happy to offer. But if you wish to return to your own quarters we will arrange it post-haste."

"Please," Lance whispered. "If it's not too much trouble." Allura's room was nice. But what he really wanted was to curl up in his own bed with its abundance of pillows and be surrounded by his plants and knick-knacks and out of sight of well meaning but always watching eyes. He shivered at that. He hadn't had a moment to himself since everything began; as even with the Galrans someone was always watching and he just wanted to get away from that constant feeling even as the thought of being alone filled him with dread.

"Then I shall see it done," Coran said. "Now go and say hello to Blue. If you aren't up for the group dinner I'll bring it to your quarters, all right?"

"Thank you," he murmured, resting his cheek back on Hunk's shoulder. Coran gave them a parting wave and then they were off. Hunk kept the pace slow, which Lance appreciated as his stomach was still giving odd little lurches.

The halls were empty and this time Lance kept his eyes wide, determined to not let them morph into anything but what they were. Before they even reached the main foyer Lance could feel Blue's quintessence brushing his own, full of worry and love and fierce protectiveness, and he let out a soft sigh as it enveloped his own. Hunk smiled below, also feeling the warm tendrils of both Yellow and
And then they were stepping into the hall and Blue was alert and on all fours, tail swishing behind her in pure joy. *Cub* she purred, heavy footsteps clanking on the floor as she lied down in front of them.

"Blue," Lance murmured, staring into her bright yellow eyes as the world around him faded save for the pure love he could feel emanating from her.

She opened her mouth so they could enter and Hunk made his way up the ramp. He realized only as they neared the cockpit that this might not be the best idea. He had finally gotten over what the interior had looked like at one time, but Lance had not seen it since his abduction. Granted, it was all cleaned up now and he, Pidge and Coran had fixed all of the damaged systems, but Hunk knew that he would never forget the sight of the dead Galran or the blood splatters that coated the room.

But it was too late to turn around now as he was already stepping over the threshold. Lance seemed to realize the same thing as Hunk fully entered the cockpit, his breath hitching and his arms tightening about Hunk's neck.

"It's all right," Hunk said quietly, squeezing both calves in his hands. "It's just us and Blue." He opted to wait for a moment, see if maybe his own fears were exaggerating how Lance would take in the scene. Maybe it would all be okay.

Lance licked suddenly dry lips as his eyes circled about the space. There, that was where he'd been stabbed. He could picture it all so clearly and his chest throbbed in remembered agony.

And there… he focused on a spot behind the chair. That's where he'd fallen. Where he'd… he'd taken the shot. Where he killed a Galran.

Killed Theodek's brother.

He'd killed someone. His stomach rolled and he desperately swallowed back the hint of acid creeping up his throat. He'd almost forgotten. He'd almost forgotten he'd killed someone.

He could hear his hand click the trigger, the terrible sizzle as the blast went through the Galran's head. The thump as the body struck the floor.

"Easy, easy," Hunk murmured, lowering Lance to the floor of the cockpit while Blue's worry and comfort were near tangible and he realized with growing guilt that no, things were not going to be okay.

*Cub* she whispered, caressing his trembling form with her own. *Focus on Lion. Lion here.*

"I killed him," Lance gasped, shaking as Hunk settled down himself and pulled Lance flush against his side. "I… I…"

At least he had been prepared, Hunk thought sadly as he pulled a waste basket he'd left in Blue and put it in front of Lance as the boy expelled the contents of his stomach.

This had been a terrible mistake. He should never have brought Lance inside. Seeing Blue was one thing but this was too much. Hunk bit back his own sob, focusing on rubbing Lance's back. He could feel Blue's quintessence wrapping about him then too, apology and worry and the desperate desire to comfort him.

*Lion sorry* she apologized, voice thrumming from all around and despair bleeding from each
And how could she, Hunk realized himself. Blue had been offline for the duration of the exchange. She had the recording but she could not really understand the magnitude of what had happened or how it affected her newest Paladin. Lance had never killed anyone before. Not like this.

"I killed him," Lance repeated, looking horrified. "I killed him."

"Lance…"

"His brother," he gasped. "He… he…" Words trailed off into a shaky inhale.

"Estás bien, Lance," Hunk murmured, focusing on Lance rather than the words and the first piece of something about what had happened, but knowing it really wasn't. It was not okay and this was beyond him. This was something that he was not prepared to handle or discuss and any attempts to assure Lance right now he knew would not get through to him.

Shiro.

He needed Shiro.

"Blue," Hunk whispered, not really sure what he was asking. Part of him said he should pick Lance up and haul out of there until he stumbled across Shiro. The other part said Blue was the best thing right now and he should leave Lance there while he went and found their team leader Go she ordered, making up his mind for him. Lion watch Cub.

Lance had curled in on himself at this point, shuddering with such force that Hunk was afraid he'd hurt himself. But his words were no longer getting through and he didn't have the carmodian leaves handy to act as smelling salts.

"I'll be right back," Hunk promised, struggling to his feet and heart breaking as Lance whimpered.

The Yellow Paladin was not much of a sprinter. He could lift beyond heavy things and take a hit and keep coming, but running was not a strong suit by far. Yet in this instance he found himself practically flying down the halls, screaming for Shiro with all the additional air he had to spare.

Shiro met him in the hall from the direction of the common room, Keith hot on his heels, and face beyond panicked.

"Lance!" Hunk wheezed, pointing a trembling finger in the direction of the hall. "He… Blue… K-killed… Cockpit… P-panic…"

Shiro's charcoal eyes widened with horror as he managed to piece together what Hunk was saying. "Stay here," Shiro commanded both younger Paladins and took off at a dead run.

When he reached the hall he could feel the anxiety and guilt swirling from the Blue Lion. He charged right up the ramp and entered the cockpit, nearly tripping over Lance who was tucked up against the pilot's chair.

Shiro dropped to his knees immediately, hands hovering as he realized he wasn't sure if touch would be a good thing right now. The boy was shaking, but his breaths were deepening and Shiro had no doubt it was due to the Blue Lion's presence swirling about the cabin.

"Lance, hey buddy," he murmured, opting to forgo the contact for right now and instead angled his
body so he was lying lengthwise to Lance and putting their faces on the same plain, but far enough back where hopefully Lance didn't feel crowded.


And Shiro had never felt so relieved when Lance gingerly lifted his face from where he'd buried it in his arm and dark eyes stared at him. "Sh-Shiro?"

"Right here, buddy. It's okay. Can you take a few breaths for me? That's it… nice and slow." Lance did so, gradually sitting up and Shiro mimicked him, still keeping his distance.

A flush was staining Lance's cheeks now and he shifted his gaze from Shiro to the floor. Caught freaking out again by Shiro. He just couldn't do anything right.

*No* and the rebuttal came swift as Blue picked up on his thoughts. *Lion's fault. Lion hurt Cub. Lion sorry.*

"Blue, no," Lance protested weakly. She hadn't… hadn't done anything. He had though. He'd killed someone here. His breath hitched again and her presence wrapped about him, comforting him in the best way she could but it was not enough for the ice settling in him.

He'd killed someone.

"I…" he whispered. "I k-killed…"

"You killed a Galran soldier," Shiro finished for him softly, feeling his heart twist at the way Lance's face crumpled.

Lance bit back another taste of bile even though he had nothing left to lose.

"Lance, look at me," Shiro commanded gently. Scared ocean orbs met his own dark gray and Shiro tried not to let his own fears claw forward. This was important. Just like with the collar and the talk about Haggar he had to choose his words carefully. Something told him if he didn't get through to Lance here and now...

That he wouldn't have a chance to later.

"Tell me," he said, keeping his voice soft. "Why did you kill that Galran?"

"Wh-why?"

Shiro nodded. "Was he defenseless?"

Lance mutely shook his head.

"Did you invite him onto Blue?"

Another shake.

"Did he hurt you?"

A tentative nod.

"Did you feel threatened?"
Another nod.

"That's called self defense, Lance," Shiro ended with quietly. "You were protecting yourself."

Because he hadn't been there to do so. Because Lance had been alone and scared and hurt and he'd had no one else there. He'd done what he'd had to. Even if...

Even if in the end it hadn't mattered because he'd still wound up captured and tortured and Haggar and—

Shiro shoved that thought away. Not now. Focus.

Lance shook his head. "I… I didn't have to…to…"

He swallowed thickly and shook his head again, the word lodged in his throat.

"Kill him?" Shiro filled in once more.

Lance weakly nodded. He could have, should have, incapacitated him. He could have shot his arm so he couldn't wield his own gun, or stunned him or, or—

"Lance," and Shiro's gentle voice cut into the what ifs. "You did nothing wrong."

"But I—"

"You made the best decision you could for your own safety. There is nothing wrong with protecting yourself."

Shiro sighed then, looking suddenly much older and Lance felt guilt pool hot and heavy for putting that expression there. "I never wanted any of you to have to kill," Shiro said softly. "Not like that. I... I hoped, somehow, that I could shield you from that part of this war, but..." He let out another, tired sigh.

His head hurt.

His heart ached more.

Lance was so young. They all were.

"I… I know how much it hurts to kill someone," Shiro continued softly, prosthetic landing gently over his heart. Lance's eyes tracked to it.

"It's not something I know I'll ever fully get over," Shiro admitted softly. "I... I don't remember a lot of my time there, but... But I know I killed people in the arena. Probably... probably a lot. Some were bad, I'm sure but... but most were probably just like me." Shiro found his eyes closing and his flesh hand moving to his head, pressing against the building ache.

He didn't remember.

He wasn't sure he wanted to.

The memories hurt.

Shiro started when something brushed against his prosthetic hand, lying now in his lap, and he realized that Lance had tentatively moved his own hand atop of his. Shiro carefully wrapped his own fingers about it and despite the fresh sorrow and guilt swimming in his chest he felt a burst of joy as
Lance squeezed back.

"I'm... I'm so sorry, Shiro," Lance whispered.

Shiro felt his heart stutter.

Lance was...

Despite all that had happened, despite the fact that Shiro was trying to comfort Lance, it was instead Lance reaching out and comforting him. The boy's compassion truly knew no bounds. Shiro squeezed their joined hands again.

"Thanks, buddy," he said roughly. "The... the point I'm trying to make is that I... I know how it feels. But more than that, I want you to know that you did nothing wrong. The Galran you killed," and Lance flinched at the reminder, "was done in self defense. And in any case the most important thing is..." Shiro swallowed, squeezing Lance's hand. "Killing someone does not make you a killer. You are not a killer, Lance."

The words echoed in the quiet space.

"Then you aren't either," came the soft reply. Lance had picked up on the emphasis. He recognized it as it was something he did too; not believing that such words could ever apply back to him. And as messed up as he knew himself to be, he had not missed the pain in Shiro's words. Their circumstances had been very, very different.

But they were still the same.

Shiro had been defending himself too.

"Lance—"

"You aren't," Lance insisted, and there was something stronger in his voice now, something that really made Shiro listen. "You... you were protecting yourself. And... and..." it was Lance's turn to squeeze their hands. His next words came out a breath. "I'm... glad you're... you're here now."

Shiro felt his heart stutter again at the sincerity and belief and how his own words had been turned back onto him.

He'd been a murderer. The arena had made him into one, forced him to take on the title if he wanted to survive. He knew that even if he didn't remember it. He felt it inside him, knew that the hand that was so tenderly Lance's had killed again and again. Up until this moment he had believed it, believed that that was what he was now. He may also be a leader and a Paladin but he was a killer too. He'd tried to shield them, shield himself, from that darker part of his life because if they knew what a monster he had been....

Would they believe he could be a leader with the blood of innocents staining his hands? Would they follow him? Trust him?

Would... would they still be able to see him, see Takashi Shirogane and not Champion?

Because he was Champion. And Champion was a killer, a murderer, and the label had hung over him like an executioner's axe as he waited for the blade to fall.

He had been too afraid to find out. But talking with Lance, hearing his own words turned back after he had finally found the courage to admit those dark thoughts and horrors locked deep inside...
He finally realized that he too was no killer. He had killed, yes. He would likely do so again if it meant protecting his team, his... his family. But he was not a killer.

He never had been.

He felt like he could breathe again.

The ache in his head receded.

Lance meanwhile had inched closer to Shiro, limbs trembling. Shiro was hurting, just like him. And although the idea of initiating contact beyond the light hand-holding was still terrifying because he didn't want it to morph, to distort into Haggar's caress, into Theodek's claws and grabs...

Shiro looked like he needed a hug.

"Shiro?" he whispered, swallowing thickly. "Um..."

His shoulders shook more as Shiro’s gaze turned fully on him, widening as Lance moved another inch, bumping his knee against Shiro's outstretched leg.

Shiro slowly, slowly, opened his arms wide. His heart was trying to beat out of his chest for very different reasons now as Lance shifted forward, still holding onto his prosthetic.

Lance was initiating contact. For him.

"Come here, buddy," Shiro mumbled, carefully pulling Lance forward and adjusting his legs so Lance was brought up against his chest, dark head pillowing against it with a tiny sigh and another tremble. Shiro didn't rush him, didn't box him in, but squeezed their hands again as he brought his flesh arm to gently wrap about Lance's shoulders. Lance stiffened, a short gasp torn from him, but before Shiro could pull away the boy's right hand bumped up against his chest and hovered there.

Right above his heart.

Lance let out a soft sigh and closed his eyes and Shiro bit back the sob at the peace that had finally, finally found a home on Lance's face and Shiro could feel the purrs of the Blue Lion rumbling their way through the cockpit as she soothed them both.

For the first time since this entire nightmare began, Shiro felt a peace, a lightness, settle in his heart and the ache in his head had faded completely away. He hugged Lance just a little tighter, a little closer.

Things were going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter jumped off the train tracks, dove down a canyon and is still running rampant through the fields. I don't know what it is with me lately; I have an idea (a good idea!) for where I want it to go and then some other thought pops in and then we go nuts. For reference; Shiro was not in this chapter at all. That whole scene did not happen. And yet it feels so right and that's why it's here now and my other good idea is going to have to find a new home xD
Thank you so much to the lovely reviewers for the support and love: Brohaikyuu, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, heyheroics, KethriHolmes, Fey_79, Grace, Moontheory, Pokimoko, old_pens, QueenMcawesome, FandomHuntress, BRICKbrick, glitteringconstellations, EverlastingCookie, maychorian and BrieCheese!

I have missed seeing some of y'all lately, so if you are enjoying the fic please do drop a comment - it doesn't have to be long. Just let me know you're here and what you're liking about the story!

I do have a sort of sad announcement for y'all. My stories will be going on hiatus next week for a little holiday break (and so the craziness begins) so I will see y'all in two weeks time. For all of my fellow Americans, I hope you all have a lovely Thanksgiving and wonderful time with your families. To everyone else, I hope the week is relaxing and kind to you. Sin may still update this coming Monday, but otherwise will be the following Monday for just a 1.5 week break.

In the spirit of Thanksgiving, thank you all so, so much for your support and love for this fic. I truly can't say how much reading your uplifting and sweet comments makes my day better and inspires me to keep on writing. Muchas gracias you amazing people you.

Given all the stuff that happened this chapter (and Dios, a lot happened) I'd love to hear which part (or parts) really resonated with you because I'm having an awful hard time of picking a favorite :p Please do drop a comment below and I'll see you all in two weeks.
Shiro wasn't sure how long he held Lance. Time didn't matter here in this safe space and Shiro honestly would have been happy to remain right there for however long forever was.

But he knew he'd left Hunk in quite a state and word had likely traveled to the other occupants of the ship. It wasn't fair for him to be so peacefully content while they were likely worrying themselves sick.

So despite what he really wanted, Shiro shifted sleeping limbs ever so slightly and Lance stirred where he'd fallen into not quite sleep but a very restful state bundled against Shiro's chest as Blue's quintessence continued to envelop both of them with feelings of love and safety.

"Hey, buddy," Shiro whispered as dark ocean eyes blinked open. "I've gotta go check on the others. Do you want to stay here with Blue or come to the common room with me?"

"Blue," Lance mumbled, although made no effort to move from his spot and cuddled the plush toy Allura had found for him closer.

Shiro grinned at how adorable it was.

He relented and let Lance have another minute, but now that he was awake his legs were trying to do the same and the pins and needles racing up them were anything but comfortable. He really did have to get up.

"Can I move you to the pilot chair?" Shiro asked.

"Mhm."

That was close enough to a yes. Shiro still wasn't quite sure how, but he got his feet underneath himself under and pulled Lance more firmly into his arms and awkwardly stood, Lance leaning against him.

Sort of swaying over to the front of the chair, he shifted Lance into it and the boy brooked no protest. Shiro then tucked Lance's bare feet up next to his body on the chair, the boy's head pillowed on one of the arm rests. He caught the briefest glimpse of long pink scars on the bottoms of the feet and forced down the sudden burn of anger at the sight, instead focusing on making sure Lance was comfortable.

Shiro was honestly surprised at how complacent Lance had become, knowing that just a couple hours before any extra touch had been unwelcome and he'd practically just manhandled him into the chair.

Safe Blue murmured to him, Black's Paladin safe. Shiro could actually feel her nuzzle the both of them and Lance gave a tiny hum of appreciation, still nearly asleep. Black's Paladin protect Cub. Cub safe.

Shiro felt the warmth grow in his chest at the Lion's declaration. Perhaps… perhaps Lance being able
to share his own kindness and love, which he had done so to comfort Shiro, was another way to help him heal from Haggar's distorted version of comfort. Shiro dearly hoped so.

Still though, the ex-slave knew well that there were limits and he would be progressing at whatever pace Lance allowed. Right now though if that meant gentle hugs and light contact he would do it. He would do whatever he could to make sure Lance knew he was loved and safe.

"Alright buddy, I'm going to go. I'll send Hunk over in a little bit, okay?"

Lance gave another sleepy hum and with one last smile, Shiro exited the Blue Lion in much less of a hurry than he had arrived.

He half-expected to find the whole group hovering outside the hall doors, but the way was clear. Shiro turned towards the kitchens, knowing that that was where Hunk would go when he was upset. His hunch was rewarded as Hunk was indeed cooking, swirling up a batter with such vigor that Keith, standing a few paces away, was actually looking a little concerned.

Everyone was there actually; Pidge at the bar counter with one of the quintessence books and Chuchule keeping her company while Coran and Allura sat at the kitchen table heads bent over a diagram that Coran was moving around while Allura nodded.

Shiro rapped on the door frame with his prosthetic and every head shot up and Hunk nearly dropped the batter bowl.

"Lance is fine," he got in before anyone could ask. Hunk wilted with relief. "Blue's with him now and I told him I'd send Hunk by in a little bit." He turned his attention to Hunk then. "How are you doing, buddy?"

"Me?" Guilt crossed Hunk's face. "I screwed up bad, Shiro. I'm so sorry. We went to see Blue and I didn't even think about the cockpit until we were already there and then I kind of hoped it would still be okay since Blue was there but then Lance had a relapse and he started freaking out and—"

"Breathe, big guy," Keith cut him off as Hunk started turn a light shade of purple with his ramble. "We already told you. It's not your fault."

Shiro's chest was going to burst open from pride if this kept up. "Keith is right," he added in. "It might not have been the best idea in execution, but the intention was good. That's what matters. And…” he trailed off. "It might have been good actually, in the end."

"Good?" sputtered Hunk. "Lance had been scared. And in pain. How was that good?"

Hunk was going to give Shiro a piece of his mind, but the clear expression on their leader's face gave him pause. Something had changed. Shiro didn't look any different, but at the same time he seemed to be standing just a little taller, his eyes lighter.

Shiro huffed out a soft laugh. "I went there to comfort Lance and he… he ended up comforting me."

Understanding dawned around the room.

"He is the Blue Paladin," Allura murmured, a soft smile playing on her face. "I should not have expected anything but."

"Are you okay?" Keith asked more bluntly.

"I'm all right," Shiro said honestly. He knew he still had plenty of inner demons and nightmares and
horrors that he had not yet had the courage to remember and face. Haggar still sent chills down his spine. But somehow… somehow talking with Lance and hearing that reassurance that he had not realized he needed had made things better. Bearable.

Shiro wasn't an idiot. He was well aware that he'd likely get lost in memories or break down again, especially with how closely Lance's situation paralleled his own horrors. He might do so for the rest of his life. But he'd come to the realization that his history did not change the way his team, his family, saw him. They would support him and love him and look still to him for guidance. They would not hold what he had been forced to do to survive against him.

They had told him so multiple times and he had believed. But a simple insistence and a hug, which he knew had taken a lot of courage on Lance's part, had made it real.

"You're crying," Pidge pointed out and Shiro blinked, surprised to indeed feel a tear trekking down his cheek.

"I am," he acknowledged, wiping it away although his smile did not waver and Pidge it with a small one of her own.

"I'd better get back to the hall then," Hunk said, passing off his batter bowl to Keith, who gave the mixture an odd look. Were there chunks of sausage in there?

"Wait," Coran said as Hunk shrugged off his apron. "Before that the Princess and I have something we'd like to share." He looked about the group, expression serious. "Between myself and Number Five's research into quintessence and the Princess' abilities to channel it we believe we may have a solution to stopping Haggar from obtaining it from Lance."

"Really?" Shiro and Keith asked at the same time, while Hunk uttered out a "wow" and Pidge beamed, adjusting her glasses and hopping off the stool.

"Coran and I found multiple various rituals for quintessence gathering," Pidge explained. "There were ones for obtaining crystals from the Balmera, for sort of a transfusion to a fellow Alteans if they used up too much, and a bunch of other purposes too."

"Our alchemy texts provided the most insight," Coran picked up. "Granted, neither myself nor the Princess are gifted in such a form and given our deadline it is not logical to study it to the degree we would require for such a delicate process. That said, we found in the texts an experiment performed by some of our greatest Altean alchemists that went to creating a barrier if you will that they adhered to a crystal. The barrier essentially prevented any tampering and was made entirely up of donated quintessence."

"What we think," Pidge hurried on, "is that if all of us were to give some of our own quintessence – which Coran said we can replenish naturally with sleep – and follow the outline with some minor changes, since Lance is living and not an object," – and Keith snorted out "minor" with a shake of his head – "that we could make a barrier around Lance."

"The barrier would be able to repel any attempts at taking quintessence permanently," Coran added. "His quintessence would be lost to Haggar and she will no longer be a threat in this regard."

Hunk frowned though. "How does that work though for bonding with the Lions? And forming Voltron? Don't we do that by combining ourselves and our quintessence?"

"We're not sure," Pidge admitted. "We're thinking that because the crystal's energy in the alchemist's
version was still able to be used through the barrier that it would function the same way."

"It seems like an awfully big gamble," Keith frowned. "If it doesn't work and you cut Lance off from being able to bond with Blue..." He paused, thinking back to those moments where Lance had still been blind and had awoken thinking he was being tricked. Only Blue - not even Hunk - had been able to calm him down and make him believe. Allura had even said that the bond the two shared was greater than anything the Alteans had witnessed in history. Lance's connection with Blue meant so much to Lance, that Keith knew. And if they were to remove that, to cut that tie and leave Lance alone without his Lion... "We may as well just kill him ourselves," Keith finished.

"Keith!" Allura admonished but Keith held her stare without flinching. He would not take back what he said. Their bonds with their Lions meant too much. Lance had suffered unimaginable horrors to protect them. He would not allow them to now take away the one thing that brought Lance peace and happiness.

"No, he's right," Coran said, tugging at his moustache. "We're playing with fire, Princess. There are risks and we do not know entirely how it will work." He looked more solemn. "I too would never wish to do anything that could sever Lance's connection with the Blue Lion and Voltron."

"I spoke with Green," Pidge added. "She couldn't really give an exact answer, but based on our calculations she said we had about an eighty percent chance of complete success."

"And twenty percent of failure," Keith countered.

"I'm with Keith," Hunk said. "It's too dangerous. Lance needs to be able to reach out to Blue. If it went wrong and he couldn't..."

"It's his life though," Pidge argued. "If we don't do this and Haggar comes after him... She'll take it by force and that will kill Lance." Tears cropped up in her eyes. "I can't just stand by and let her do that!"

"So you'd cripple him instead?" Keith snarled. "That's what would happen, Pidge. Forget his hand, you'd be ripping out his heart!"

"I—"

"Enough," Shiro cut in, inserting himself between the Red and Green Paladins. "That's enough," he repeated, quieter. "Yelling at one another is helping no one."

Keith turned his head to the side and Pidge looked down, hands trembling at her sides.

"I understand where you're both coming from," Shiro said quietly. "I get it. I want to protect Lance from Haggar too. The idea of sealing his quintessence is a good one for his safety. But there are risks, life-altering risks, that come with such a decision. And I'll be frank; it's not our life and therefore not our decision. It is up to Lance."

"Shiro," Hunk pleaded, "if Lance thinks it'll protect us from Haggar he'll do it. You know he will."

"There is one thing we have not yet remarked upon," Coran interjected quietly. "And that is if Haggar is indeed after Lance's quintessence. We have made many assumptions but that is all they are. Before we proceed with any such plan we must speak with Lance first. Then, and only then, can we determine if this is a course to be discussed."

Silence reigned at Coran's observation as they realized for the first time, save Hunk who had been mulling it over, that they knew practically nothing of Lance's imprisonment save the glimpses they'd
caught from the transmissions and the inflicted wounds they had seen. Everything else was pure conjecture.

"That's fair," Pidge eventually said, quietly.

Keith nodded. "Yeah." He turned his attention to Pidge. "I'm... I'm sorry for yelling."

She mustered up a smile. "It's okay. I know you're just worried. I am too."

Keith rubbed the back of his head. It felt weird, this urge to protect others. It had been just him for so long but now any threat, even one from within, had his hackles rising and the desire to take it out burned within him. But in this case there was no enemy to attack and Pidge was suggesting what she thought was best for Lance. There was no enemy here.

"If... If Lance is feeling up to it maybe we can ask something small to start him off," Hunk said. "Maybe about the brother he mentioned."

"Brother?" Pidge perked up, pushing away thoughts of Matt at the word. Not right now.

"Yeah. I... I think the Galran he killed," and Hunk winced at the word, "was the brother of someone he met there."

"Yanden?" Shiro wondered aloud. The sharpshooting lieutenant hadn't said anything, but it's not like there had been much time.

Hunk shrugged. "I dunno. Although..." he thought back to how panicked Lance had been about the memory. "Maybe that's not the best thing to ask. He was pretty upset."

"Is there any easy topic?" Keith asked wryly.

"What if we treat it like a Garrison debrief?" Pidge hedged. "Would that work?"

Following all flight simulations the cadets were made to go through a debrief session with an instructor. They gave a summary of their mission and then reported what had actually occurred during it. Pidge had always found them very informative to see what mistakes she had made or other ways she could have approached a situation. They were neutral enough too that if Lance approached it as an outside party it might not be so bad.

Hunk though vehemently shook his head. "Lance hated those. Iverson... Iverson would always oversee Lance's and you know how much he liked him. Or rather, disliked him."

"Iverson didn't like anyone," Keith pointed out, scowling. Iverson had been responsible for getting him kicked out even when the other instructors had disagreed.

"True," Hunk acknowledged, "but he really didn't like Lance." Far too many of those nights where Lance had laid awake crying himself to sleep while Hunk could do nothing except hold him close and assure him it was going to be okay had been a result of Iverson's "teaching" methods. Iverson may have been a skilled pilot Hunk could admit, but he was not cut out to be a teacher. Lance thrived on positive reinforcement, not negative, and Iverson's style of yelling until he was near blue in the face and berating Lance and shining a spotlight on his mistakes had been anything but positive.

"Okay, no debriefs then," Shiro said. "Allura? Coran? Any ideas?" Because he could think of nothing that wouldn't set Lance back. Scars? Eyes? Haggar? And heaven forbid he mentioned water and Lance's new aversion to it. They wanted to get answers, not to trigger him.
"What about a more scientific approach?" Coran suggested. "If we want to know about the quintessence aspect, which is really I think all we should focus on for now, let us ask Lance about quintessence in general. We can try and lead the conversation back to his own and any potential mentions Haggar may have made as it progresses. It is not without its own risks of a flashback, but I think it may be better than a direct approach."

"I like it," Pidge inputted. Other heads nodded about the room and even Keith inclined his.

"We'll play it by ear," Shiro decided. "We may not be able to approach this until tomorrow, depending on how everything else goes tonight. On that, Hunk, if you want to get headed to the hall."

"I'll go too," Pidge said. "Maybe we can work on some repairs?" she directed her question to Hunk. "Give Lance some more time with just Blue and she can let us know when he's ready?"

Hunk smiled. "Sounds good. I'll go stop by Yellow's hangar and grab some of my tools then. Meet you there?"

"I guess I'll… finish this?" Keith said, staring at the bowl that Hunk had earlier thrust upon him.

Hunk clapped him on the shoulder on his way out. "You're the best, man."

"I have no idea what this is," Keith admitted after the two technology lovers had left. "How do I cook it?"

Coran peered over his shoulder. "It looks like a nice thick bread batter."

"With sausages?"

"Maybe it's a breakfast muffin?" Shiro volunteered.

Keith shrugged. "Works for me."

"Oh, but if it a breakfast dish it requires spockenheim!" Coran said, stroking his moustache sagely. "I have a shredded variety already prepared that will go well."

And with that the three males went in search of whatever spockenheim was and muffin pans.

Allura though gathered up the diagrams she and Coran had been looking at for the quintessence barrier, heart heavy. She would admit she was hesitant about this endeavor. She could never forgive herself if Lance was cut off from Blue or from his ability to mind-meld with his teammates.

She needed to do more research. As dry as it was, she was not going to leave Lance's well-being to percentages. For her it was going to be all or nothing.

She sighed, already feeling the headache coming on at the thought of the scholar's textbooks. But her gaze hardened with determination. For Lance.

And ignoring the ruckus going on beyond her, as an entire tray of baking sheets clattered out from Hunk's unique storage system and repeatedly struck Shiro on the head one after the other while Coran and Keith laughed uproariously, she got to work.

xxx

A small shiver pulled Lance out of the near-sleep state he'd found himself in since he'd crawled into Shiro's arms. Another one had him jerking a bit in the pilot's chair and his carefully arranged bare
feet sliding off the slick seat and hitting the floor.

And now he was awake, the frigid metal stealing the warmth away from his flesh. Shiro was gone, he realized, breath coming faster. He knew that. Shiro had said something about leaving. But where was Hunk? Was he alone? Was—his gaze flickered over to the spot where he knew a body had once lain.

*Cub* and *Blue's* tones came with a warm caress that drove away the cold. *Lion is here. Cub is safe.*

"Blue," he murmured, feeling the panic recede.

*Lion not leave Cub. Lion not fail Cub again.*

And mixed in with the warmth and love he could feel her guilt.

"Blue, no," he protested. "You… you've never failed me, girl."

*Failed* she insisted. *Hurt Cub. Cub taken from Lion.*

And now there was anger and Lance shuddered at the foreign emotion of his Lion. *Blue* had gotten upset on his behalf before but this was nothing like those tiny flares.

*Lion sorry* she apologized, blanketing the anger. *Lion hurting Cub.*

But Lance wasn't hurt. He was scared. For *Blue." Are you okay?"* he asked, voice small, his worries clear through their link.

*Blue* was touched, sending her sentiments to him and wrapping her Paladin in them. *Lion is scared* she admitted. *Lion not protect Cub. Lion scared Lion fail again.*

"Blue…"

*Lion angry too* she continued. *Lion angry Cub hurt. Angry at those who hurt Cub.*

She nuzzled him then, the anger fading to be replaced with concern. *Lion worried for Cub. Cub not all right.*

And Lance made a sound that might have once been a laugh but there was no humor in it and instead he felt tears pricking his eyes. "That… that's a bit of an understatement, Blue."

*Lion want help* she purred, pouring more of her own spirit around him and drawing him close. *How Lion help?*

"I don't know," he whispered. "I… don't know." A sob shuddered through him. "I… there's something wrong with me, Blue. I…"

And *Blue* could feel it. Where her Paladin's quintessence had burned bright, like the beautiful stars that lit the sky, there were dark patches now that thrummed like a black hole. They were surrounded by the blue of his being, contained, but she could see that they had the ability to spread. Some had, bleeding over the edges and looking to spread even more.

She had seen these dark pieces before, but they had always been small. She had been able to soothe most of them away by wrapping him with her own self, but doing so now did not have the same effect. She did not sense any foreign quintessence though, and that thought calmed her somewhat. There was no Druid magic here.
But her Paladin was in pain. His very being was in pain and slowly being chipped away. And she did not know how to make it all better. She nosed one of the dark patches experimentally, trying to push the darkness away.

Instead Blue jerked back as water struck her– and she loved water – but this water was wrong and it scared her, but what scared her more was the sudden gasp of her Paladin and the whimper of fear.

*My Paladin!* she called out in alarm, realizing her error as the boy flinched back at her words. *Cub* she whispered, pushing more of her warmth and love onto him, wanting to stop the shivering. *Lion sorry. Lion… Lion not know. Lion so sorry.*

"It's not your fault," he managed, curled into a tight ball on the chair and despite feeling Blue's essence wrapping about him he still felt cold, could still feel freezing water crash over his head and the desperation from then threatened to drown him all over again. He let out another whimper at the thought.

*Lion here. Lion protect Cub.*

She could feel him cling to her words and one of the patches of darkness shrunk the tiniest bit. She gave it a disdainful sniff and curled more firmly about her Paladin's being. *Lion here* she repeated. *Lion protect Cub.*

Gradually she felt his heartbeat slow and his breathing even, though he remained shuddering in the chair. He was cold. She could feel it, feel the fear that such a state brought him. She could fix it. Sort of.

*Blanket* she told him. *Under console.* It was part of the emergency kit installed in all of the Lions. If her Paladin wrapped himself in the blanket he would be warmer and less scared, she knew it.

Lance cast a despairing glance at the main console, so close but still so far. He didn't know if he could make it there. He wasn't sure he could honestly walk, the thought sending a bolt of fear through him as despite his best efforts he could hear Theodek order him to do so as he stumbled along.

But Blue pressed down on the memory, chasing it away with sheer love and courage. *Cub can do it* she encouraged.

"I don't think I can."

*Lion believe in Cub. Cub can.* And she gave him as gentle a nudge with her mind as she could while she tried to hide her own growing fear that such a small thing was giving him such doubt. It would do no good to scare her Paladin again with her own fears.

Lance eyed the distance. He'd have to get out of the chair and make it a few steps and then still open the panel. He glanced down at his hands, the left holding tight still to Flafie while his right was tucked up against his stomach and even now trembling slightly.

*Cub can do this.* Blue's words were embedded with belief and Lance let that little surge fill him up. If… if she thought he could then he could. He could try at least. His body gave another shiver, reminding him he was cold, which reminded him of dark waters and sharp spikes and -

No! He cut the thought off, squeezing his eyes tight. He couldn't think about it. Not now. Blanket. Get to the blanket.

Buoyed by Blue's ever present love flowing down their link, Lance tentatively shifted to place both
feet back on the floor, biting back the hiss at the freezing metal. He braced both feet and before he
could over think it again, pushed himself to standing, his right hand nearly slipping off as fingers
refused to grip the chair arm and the plush nearly falling to the floor as Lance shifted it to under his
arm.

He held himself awkwardly as his legs trembled beneath him and spots danced across his vision and
the headache that had finally faded came back with a dull pounding.

He could do this. He could. It was just walking. One foot in front of the other. Just... just let go of
the chair and move.

He took a single halting step and then a second, shuffling like an old man. The third step though
tripped him up and Lance landed hard on the ground, barely managing to catch himself on his hands.

And then he was no longer in Blue. He was stumbling and falling on a metal grate, lightning flashing
up his limbs and Theodek was laughing and the ground was moving and no, please no, he couldn't
fall again-

Cub! Blue roared in his mind and her voice broke him free of the memory with a sharp gasp, tears
streaming down his cheeks. Cub she repeated softer, worry nearly overwhelming Lance but he
would take that to the stark terror he had just emerged from.

"I'm... I'm okay," he choked out even though he wasn't really at all. It was pointless to try and fool
Blue because she could sense everything but he hated worrying her and guilt flowed fresh in him that
all he seemed capable of was hurting others with his own failures and fears.

She responded by sending more love, warm and strong, to wrap about him. Cub almost there she
encouraged, trying to push him to the door he was just arm's length from. She knew her Paladin
could do this, she saw the strength even though it was overshadowed by fear. He needed this, she
could see. He needed to accomplish something, even something like this. And she would help him
achieve it.

Walk like Lion she advised. Four legs were better than two for balance after all.

And she felt a small bubble of actual amusement in his mind at the thought, before it disappeared
with a pop and taking its place was the sensation of her Paladin being dragged forward by chains,
stumbling and helpless as he crashed to the floor and then the terrible of pain of being hauled, body
scraping over the ground while loud jeers filled the air.

Blue snapped her jaws at the image, snarling at the black spot that had grown in her Paladin's
quintessence. No! She promised to protect him, even if that meant from himself. The darkness
retreated at her own flare and she curled up more around her Paladin, daring it to come back.

Lion get Yellow's Paladin? she asked, failure burning in her as he Paladin continued to shudder. She
had thought she could soothe her Paladin but she only seemed to be making it worse. She could feel
guilt rise up again at her own and he sent out his own small wave of comfort. To help her. Her
Paladin's selflessness knew no bounds.

"N-no. I'm... I'm f-fine, Blue," he tried to reassure her along with his projected comfort. "I just... just
need a t-tick."

She let him have many, her purrs rising in time with his breaths as he calmed down once more. She
could sense the feelings of inadequacy rising up though as he regained himself, the word 'pathetic'
looming large and she glared it into submission, pushing forth her own idea of 'brave.'
She still did not know what her Paladin had gone through, as he seemed determined to shield her against the few horrors she had already glimpsed. What she did know was that her Paladin was beyond strong to have endured it. He was brave and courageous and kind and she loved him and she just wished for him to be happy and safe and feel all the love in the universe.

"You… you really think that?" And he sounded so small, so unsure and Blue hated that whatever had happened to her Paladin made him question even her love.


"But... " And his mind flashed through what he could not voice. She saw images of his fellow Paladins, felt his awe and envy and admiration for them and their talents. Their strengths and smarts and bravery and how could she want someone like him as her Paladin when compared to them he was nothing?

Not nothing she countered. Cub is Lion's everything.

And Lance felt it. Blue meant her words with every fiber of her being. Still, he hesitated. She may have seen him at his highs and lows but she had not yet seen how far he had actually fallen.

"And if… if I did something… something…bad," he whispered and Blue caught the dark images of water and glimmering spikes and the terrible tang of blood as they passed through her Paladin's memory.

Lion always love Cub. Paladins always love Cub.

"Even if I…" he swallowed thickly. "If I…"

And he did not have to say it. Blue could see it now, feel the agony of her Paladin's heart beat in tandem with the lifeblood flowing from his veins and staining his very essence as much as the water around him. His guilt was overwhelmed by pain and exhaustion and the overarching through of protect before that was in turn was taken over once again by the guilt and fear and disgust at himself.

Oh, Cub and Blue's heart wept. Her Paladin had been through so much. He had sacrificed himself to protect his family. But that sacrifice, that decision of pure love, had been darkened and twisted to the point where he only felt shame and fear for his actions. Fear still for the fact he had even considered such an act and despite his attempt he had still failed to protect them.

He shuddered and she could see his thoughts, feel his desperate fear that she would leave him; that she would abandon him now that she knew the truth because he was pathetic and undeserving of anyone's love.

Blue did the only thing she could. She pushed all of herself that she had, projecting warmth and acceptance and love and pushing it into the dark holes that tore away at her Paladin's very being.

Lion is sorry she murmured. Sorry Cub went through that. Sorry Lion not there protect Cub. Lion here now. Lion will never leave Cub. Lion loves Cub. Cub protected Lion. Cub protected Paladins. Now Lion protect Cub.

"But I…" he cried and she hugged him even tighter.

Cub protected family she insisted.

"Did I?" he whispered. "I… I failed them, Blue. I gave up. I… I was going to let her…"
He was going to let Haggar take his quintessence. Let her pry into his very mind and take whatever knowledge and thoughts she wanted. Blue caught a glimpse of that surrender, masked in darkness and overwhelming pain and an echoing thought of please don't leave me and heartbreak that he was truly, truly alone now.


And she needed him to understand that. Her Paladin had not *let* the Druid do anything. Her Cub had fought, she had seen it, and did all he could to protect his family. He had been willing to given up his own life for theirs. He had been through horrible things; things she, could not believe he had survived. Just because the Druid had eventually overpowered him did not mean he had failed. He had fought and resisted and endured more than any one soul should ever have to.

He could never fail them. He could never fail her.

*Lion loves Cub* she murmured. *No matter what.*

And at last, *at last,* she felt the final barrier that her Paladin had been holding between the two of them fall and she even more tightly wove about him then, purrs thrumming and making his body vibrate.

She could feel him nestle his own body deeper into her quintessence, clinging to it as sobs wracked his thin frame. There were still so many black holes, too many, but the blue of his quintessence was brightening again, allowing light to fill it as the words had filled his chest with warmth.

"I love you too," he sobbed, curling up against the console he had shifted over to, pressing up against her main panels of blinking controls. "Oh, B-blue…"

She knew. Someone knew. The crushing weight of guilt had lessened, the shame of failure dimmed. Blue knew. She knew and she still loved him. She still wanted him to be her Paladin.

But Blue had always accepted him. The others though…

"I'm still scared, Blue," he confessed. "What if they…"

*Cub need talk to Paladins* she advised.

He shook his head fervently, ice filling his heart. He couldn't.

*Paladins love Cub. Cub not fail Paladins. Paladins understand.*

"I c-can't."

How could they understand? He hadn't told them *anything* yet. The closest he'd gotten was the darkness spell Haggar had placed on him and even then he'd omitted so, so much. They deserved an explanation for what they had risked their lives for.

*Small start* Blue suggested. *Paladins want help. Paladins love Cub.*

What was even considered small? Everything always snowballed into something else and then he panicked and that made it worse and—

He cut himself off with a harsh breath, trying to not go back to the darkness and instead sought out Blue's lightness as she twined about him.
Paladins understand she repeated. Paladins wait.

And they had waited. They hadn't demanded answers, not even Keith or Allura who were by far the most impatient. They only asked how he was feeling, if what they were doing was all right, if he was okay… How did someone like him deserve friends like them?


Lance raised a trembling left hand and pressed it against his heart. He was the heart? What did that even mean?

Blue rumbled an assurance, flooding him with contentment and laughter and love. Cub brings Paladins together.

"But I'm nothing special," he whispered. "I'm just… me."

Lion loves 'me' Blue tested out the word, earning a ping of amusement from her Paladin. She soaked it up, delighting in his small bit of joy.

"That's a little narcissistic," Lance told her, although a trace of humor colored his words and Blue's heart soared even though she did not entirely understand. "But… Gracias, Blue. I… I love you too, girl. I… I don't know what I'd do without you."

They lapsed into a content silence as Blue focused on surrounding her Paladin with all of herself and he slowly relaxed into it, the memories that had been creeping up fading back in the light of her quintessence. Still though, he was cold and a shiver broke through.

Cub get blanket Blue said and Lance realized that the console he was curled up against was indeed the one he had been aiming for.

After a moment of despair as he once more tried to use his right hand out of instinct and it brushed uselessly against the metal latch, he got it open with his left. The blanket wasn't anything like Allura's silk ones or even the cozy knitted ones Lance had strewn about his room. It was coarse and it tickled his arms as he hauled it around him, but it was warm. He snuggled into it, tucking freezing feet into the folds.

"Can I stay here? Just for a little longer?"

Cub stay long as Cub wants. Lion watch over Cub.

He would have to face them all, Lance was coming to realize, the normal fear of thinking on such things blanketed by Blue's soothing presence and allowing him to sort through them carefully. He'd have to talk about it. He could start small though. They wouldn't rush him.

If Blue was right… they would forgive him for what he'd done. For what he'd tried to do to save them.

And then maybe, maybe he could forgive himself too.

Chapter End Notes
And here we are, the part that got a little waylaid last chapter. Now Lance isn't holding such a dark secret all to himself and Blue's acceptance and acknowledgement that this was for his family and that she and they will love him no matter what may help him get the courage to actually talk about it. I know I have a lot of favorite scenes I've written, but writing Blue always fills me with joy and this whole section especially.

I also love that everyone this chapter has realized that nope, Lance really hasn't talked about anything and all of their thought process is conjecture (although they are damn well good at their detective skills!). Granted, Lance has really only been conscious and out of the pods for about a grand total of two hours. Not too much time to do much of anything yet, but it does look like it's time to start getting some answers on all sides. Won't that be a fun conversation?

As always, extra special thanks to those who take the time to leave a comment, however long or short. If I could, I'd wrap y'all up in my quintessence (which I picture as blush pink and very bubbly) and share it with: xxxshino, KethriHolmes, Lanceylangst, Ookamisouleaper, WolfFire, Brohaikyuu, glitteringconstellations, FandomHuntress, heyheroics, HonestlyCasualTaco, QueenMcawesome, someonewhoisbel owaverageatcommenting, Lilhonk, EverlastingCookie, Grace, Cynthia_of_the_Wallflowers, dean_winchester_has_fallen, justaboyfromcuba, BRICKbrick, Corralfur, Chrisiecub, Fey_79, ALPineDreamer623, Ahhuya, maychorian, Jack, GummyW0rm, CJ_Summers, aiisss, ZarkonsReplacement, maynarmi, BrieCheese, and FanOfAlmostEverything!

Quick self-promotion before I skedaddle. I wrote a (mostly) compliant to Color and Sin origin story of how Keith and Shiro meet, as it's my headcanon titled Burning Bright. You do not have to read it at all for this story or Sin, but it's a little extra bit for my worlds here if you are interested.

Please do drop a review before you head out if you can. It's been a very, very long week and reading your comments would make it infinitely better.
Hunk was a worrier. He freely admitted it and acknowledged that he tended to panic over the little things. He had gotten much better after being launched into space because there was so much out here that he couldn't control that it was either spend the rest of his life so worried he was comatose or adopt a more laid-back approach.

That said, when he re-entered the hall with tools and had found Blue curled up on the floor and the very faintest hints of distress coming from her he'd panicked.

His supplies had hit the ground with a terrible clang and he'd sprinted (which was twice in one day and his legs were going to get him back for that later) over to the Blue Lion, babbling nonsense as he tried to get in and see Lance.

Pidge had been the voice of reason, arriving moments later and breaking through his worried haze with the point that if something bad were happening and Lance needed them then Blue would let them know. But right now Lance needed Blue and this was good for both of them and to let them be.

So Hunk had reluctantly stopped trying to break in and had gone with Pidge over to Yellow to begin cleaning up and repairing some of the damaged outer panels from the firefight. Yellow had sent a wave of calm reassurance that all was well and Hunk had finally allowed himself to relax.

The two of them worked in near silence, which was their norm as they moved tools around one another and focused on their individual tasks. Still, Pidge found herself frowning because while she never minded the quiet Hunk would normally have made a few random comments by now just to break it up. He was too quiet.

She studied him, taking in the light bruise that took up a portion of his forehead, to the lines under his eyes that did not belong on their ever cheerful engineer. And, she realized with a pang of guilt, that she hadn't once inquired over Hunk's well-being through all of this.

He'd stepped into the role of Lance's main support immediately and although he had said nothing, Pidge couldn't even imagine how difficult it must be to see someone you loved in so much pain. He had never complained once though, never shied away from doing all he could to comfort Lance.

He'd been there for her too, when she wanted to watch the video against Allura's permission, comforting her when she had triggered such a reaction from Lance and then again when she had broken down about killing Haggar. And Pidge had never asked once if he was doing all right. Well, her gaze narrowed, there was only one way to fix that.

Setting aside the circuit board she had been recalibrating, Pidge got up, sidled over to Hunk who was sitting in front of the panels he'd taken to buffing to restore to their original shine, and plopped herself next to him.
"Pidge?" he asked, breaking off as her small arms wrapped about him as best she could and she pressed her face into his arm. She felt one of his large hands descend upon her head, giving it an affectionate rub.

"Are you okay?" she mumbled.

"Well, my calves sort of hurt," he said. "And I jammed my thumb on one of Yellow's panels so I really should go get some ice when we're done."

"Hunk," she sighed, exasperated and he chuckled.

"I'm all right," he said, more sincerely. "It's... it's been hard, you know? I mean, Lance has had his down moments before, but I just always hugged him and... and it got better. And I don't really know what I'm doing now and I'm worried I'm going to mess him up more."

"Lance is lucky to have you," Pidge said quietly, shifting so that she was tucked up more against Hunk's side and he looped an arm about her shoulders. "You're amazing, Hunk. You just... You need to take care of yourself too."

He squeezed her. "I know. If Allura and Coran weren't so insistent I don't think I've have gotten even half of the sleep I have. I can't relax though. Not until Lance is better and..." his voice dropped. "I don't know how long it's going to take, Pidge."

And this is why Pidge realized she hadn't approached Hunk. She was rubbish at this comforting thing. Where it came so easily to Hunk and Shiro, it was like pulling teeth for her. Keith's brand of worry was something she could deal with because Keith was even more socially stunted than her and trying to help Shiro in the bathroom had felt so natural and she had let it come.

But Hunk wasn't crying but trying not to like Shiro or wound so tight that he might break like Keith. Hunk was an open book not afraid to show the most vulnerable parts of himself, and that openness scared her in a way.

She felt a tear slip down her cheek as she couldn't find the words to say. Reassuring Hunk they had time was a lie because Haggar was coming. Anything she said felt false and Hunk was too smart.

"Aww, Pidge," Hunk hugged her tighter. "It's okay. Everything is going to be all right."

And when Hunk said it she could tell he meant it from the bottom of his heart, that it wasn't a statement meant to offer useless comfort. "It's going to be hard, for sure. But we'll get through all of it together."

"I was supposed to be comforting you," she sniffled, wiping a hand across her eyes. He chuckled and Pidge loved the way his entire body moved with that bubbling warmth. No wonder Lance had always sought Hunk out for hugs. "I appreciate it," he said gently. "Thank you."

"I'm doing a terrible job."

She felt him shake his head. "I don't think that at all. Thank you, Pidge. Really. I feel better."

And she did not sense any lie in his words. Still, that had been the craggiest attempt at comforting she had ever borne witness to and she resolved to get better at it. Somehow.

For now though she remained where she was, snuggled up to Hunk and feeling Green purring in the back of her mind with a lazy contentment from the knowledge that for the moment everything was
peaceful.

A sharp groaning of gears disturbed the silence and both of their heads turned nearly comically fast in the direction of the Blue Lion, who was uncurling and stretching her legs out.

Yellow's Paladin she called and Hunk straightened. My Paladin ready now.

"Be right back," Hunk said, pulling his arm free of Pidge with one last squeeze and lumbering to his feet.

"Should I go?" Pidge asked, trying not to show any disappointment. She wanted to see Lance, talk to him and reassure herself that he was there and he was all right, but she didn't want to crowd him. Because the boy that had been sitting in Allura's room was not the Lance she had once known and instinct told her that this version of Lance did not want to be the center of attention.

The thought was like an icy stab through her heart at just how wrong that was. She wanted her Lance back; the one that reminded her so much of Matt with his terrible jokes and no sense of personal space and the way he'd ruffle her hair and just make her feel like she belonged.

And she knew he was still in there. Just as she knew this Lance, this scared and tentative one that looked so down upon himself, wasn't new. He'd been there all along, but he'd been hidden. Haggar had dragged him to the surface and forced Lance to see himself as only that.

But the witch was wrong and Pidge's fists trembled at her side. She may have done that to Lance, but even while she could see his fear she saw more his courage and his compassion and his love and concern. It was all still there, those core pieces that made Lance who he was. Made him the Blue Paladin.

Made him her brother.

He just needed to see that for himself. And Pidge didn't know how, just as lost as Hunk had admitted feeling, but they were going to make sure he saw all the good that they saw in him and then... then she would see him smile again. She missed his smile and the way it warmed her from the inside out. She would do anything to put it back on his face where it belonged.

Hunk looked torn at her question, no doubt weighing the odds of each scenario. She felt Green press on her mind, numbers and calculations. And, she realized with a heavy sigh, her Lion was right.

"I'll see you guys at dinner," she said, clambering to her feet.

"Pidge-"

"It's okay. I... I don't want to crowd and make him uncomfortable."

Hunk sighed but nodded. He looked at her then, warm brown eyes serious. "'He's still Lance. You know that, right?"

She nodded, a lump suddenly in her throat as Hunk's words brought up her own internal monologue. "I know," she managed. "I just..."

Pidge didn't know what to say, she was realizing. Did she go forward as if all were normal? She'd done that once, sarcastically asking him if he really thought they'd have left him there and when she'd seen the truth in his eyes... She had felt her insides freeze with the realization that he honestly thought they were not coming for him. That they would leave him, knowing he was being tortured, because he wasn't as "important" to the universe as the Black Lion.
She had held back the tears then, horror more than anything taking precedence. Because if it were any of them she knew Lance would be front and center doing all he could to bring them home. He would never even consider leaving one of them behind for the good of the universe and yet he couldn't even fathom the possibility regarding himself.

So if she didn't pretend all was normal, what was left? She failed mightily at comforting, Hunk exhibit A, and she wasn't one to walk on eggshells and honestly? She didn't think Lance would appreciate that, even as worn down as he was and she didn't like the idea of treating him like a porcelain doll. That wasn't going to help him get back on his feet and Hunk had already cautioned them all about turning sympathy and kindness to pity.

She just needed some time to collect herself. That was all. And honestly, if she were Lance, she'd want some space. It'd be better to let him just see Hunk when that was likely all was expecting. There'd be plenty of time, like dinner, hopefully, to talk to him.

Hunk's hand descended on her shoulder and he pulled her into a tight hug. "All right then," he murmured. "We'll see you at dinner."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak anymore.

Hunk watched her go, knowing that this was the best call. He didn't know what kind of state he'd find Lance in and throwing in extra variables would just complicate matters. The last he'd seen Lance had been lost in a memory and unresponsive and although he knew between Shiro and Blue Lance had come back to the present, it was better for now this way.

Blue opened her mouth and Hunk made his way up the ramp, trying to keep his footsteps soft on the metal. At his first glance into the cockpit he did not see Lance, but Blue soothed his mind before the panic could even begin and he followed her urges around the pilot's chair.

There he found Lance, curled up on the floor against the front console with a thick blanket wrapped clumsily about him and not yet aware of Hunk's presence, eyes closed and head tilted down.

"Lance?" Hunk called gently.

Tired ocean eyes blinked open. "Hunk," came a murmur.

"¿Estás bien?" Hunk asked gently, sitting down against the console; close but not quite touching.

To his great surprise and delight, Lance leaned tentatively to the side and Hunk scooched over the few inches, allowing Lance to press up against his arm.

Lance paused then, as if thinking about the question. Hunk felt again in that instance the warm comfort of Blue and Lance gave a tiny nod. "Bien. Estoy bien."

And Hunk could feel the truth, as much as Lance could honestly offer at this point. He still wasn't really okay, but in this moment Hunk could feel the fragile peace that Lance had found. He sent a silent wave of gratitude to Blue for it.

"I'm glad to hear it. You do look a little cold though," Hunk observed, noting how even within the blanket there was a tremble and the way Lance's barely visible fingertips were shaking.

"A little," Lance admitted, casting his eyes to the side.

"How about we go get you some warmer clothes then?" Hunk suggested.
After a moment Lance nodded and Hunk beamed. "All right. We'll head back to your room then, okay?"

"I… I don't think I can walk," Lance whispered, a blush dusting his cheeks. "I…" He'd fallen twice now after all and he didn't want a repeat experience of relieving any of those memories. That, and his legs shook and his head ached even thinking about it.

"Hey, no problem," Hunk said cheerfully. "Vertigo isn't being very kind to you right now. Up for a piggyback ride?"

Another nod.

"Hop aboard then."

Hunk shifted to the right so his broad back was facing Lance and he pulled himself onto his knees for easier lift off. A second later he felt a hand snake about his neck, followed by a second and something press uncomfortably into his neck. Allura's plush doll he realized a second later, and one of its beaded eyes.

"All good?" he asked, receiving a quiet yes.

In one swift movement, Hunk got to his feet, hands moving to first support Lance's weight and then to wrapping about thin legs to hold him on. He looked back over his shoulder, making sure that Lance was well and secure, blanket managing to hold on too, squashed as it was between their two bodies.

"Okay, off we go then," Hunk announced. "We'll see you later, Blue."

"Bye, Blue," Lance said quietly. And then, almost too quiet even with his lips just inches from Hunk's head he added, "Gracias," and both Paladins felt the purr of contentment and love.

"I owe you an apology," Hunk said softly as they exited the hall and made their way to the residential quarters. He felt Lance stiffen in surprise. "I'm sorry I brought you into the cockpit like that," he continued. "I wasn't thinking about… things."

Lance let out a soft little sigh, breath ghosting past Hunk's ear. "'s okay. I'm… I'm okay now." He couldn't be mad at Hunk for not realizing what he himself had not thought of until they'd arrived. And it wasn't Hunk's fault he had had a complete mental breakdown upon realizing said thing. "I'm… I'm sorry too," Lance said. "For… for panicking like that."

"Don't apologize for that, Lance," Hunk cut in, and while his voice was not sharp it was firm. "You…" he licked his lips. "Bad stuff happened in there. You… You got hurt and…"

"I killed someone," and the admission spoken so freely nearly made Hunk trip over his own feet. "I've… I've never killed someone before, Hunk."

"I know," he replied gently, slowing their pace. Part of him wanted to stop completely so he could set Lance down so he could see him. But the other part realized that maybe this was for the best, given how Lance had been having trouble making eye contact. So Hunk kept up a very slow, steady walk, waiting to see if Lance would say more.

"But Shiro…" and he trailed off and Hunk felt a cold cheek rest itself on the bare skin hollow between his shirt and neck. "He said… He said it was self defense."

"And what do you think?" Hunk asked, sensing the slight hesitation.
"I wish I hadn't killed him," came the reply. "But I... I understand why. And Shiro..." a sigh. "He was right. I was just trying to... to protect myself."

"And he's right. Still though... I'm sorry you had to go through that," Hunk said, after swallowing past the lump that had formed. "Lance, I... I'm so sorry."

"'s not your fault."

"I'm still sorry though," Hunk said, squeezing Lance's legs. "You were scared and alone and the Galrans had hurt you and Blue. And when you got stabbed..." He couldn't suppress the shudder, recalling the sound of the blade being pulled out of Lance and the Galrans cruel laughter.

Lance though had stiffened ever so slightly, but Hunk felt it.

"How... how do you know about that?" Lance asked and there was a new tremor to his voice.

Hunk's mind screeched to a halt. Fudge. Oh, fudge.

"H-Hunk?" and Lance was trembling now.

Well, the cat was out of the bag now and lying and deflecting would only make things worse. So Hunk let out a sigh of his own. "There was an audio recording," he said lowly. "It started once Blue powered down."

"Oh," Lance managed, the word seeming to echo in the hall.

So they'd heard. They'd heard everything that had happened. His cries for help, his panic, his failure. They must have heard then too him kill Theodek's brother, although Lance didn't remember much past that as the other Galran had knocked him out.

"It was all to leave us a message," Hunk continued, giving Lance's leg another squeeze. "That the Galrans had taken you and to await further instructions. They wanted to scare us and God, Lance, they did. I have never been more scared in my entire life."

"Lo siento," Lance apologized, hating that he'd caused Hunk that pain.

Hunk choked out a laugh that sounded more like a sob. "Why are you apologizing? Lance, you got stabbed and... and... We didn't even know anything was really wrong until Blue managed to come back to the surface. You were down there for almost thirty minutes and we were all useless."

The words were bitter on his tongue but Hunk couldn't stop them. They hadn't been able to do anything until Blue had reappeared and even then they'd spent nearly two days waiting for Galra to contact them. Two days of not knowing what had happened, wondering if Lance was alive, if he was in pain... And then to receive that awful transmission, to watch Lance strapped down and tortured for his refusal to speak.

"Hunk," Lance whispered, tightening his arms about the large neck in some form of a hug. He didn't know what else really to say. He felt like he should apologize again for making them feel that way, but that wasn't what Hunk wanted to hear.

Hunk squeezed his leg again and a shuddering breath rocked them both. "It's... you're here now. That's what matters."

"Mhm," Lance mumbled into Hunk’s back and Hunk let it drop. Shiro had helped Lance to get to this point, to recognize that in this instance that the act of killing another had not been malicious or
unwarranted. He felt a swell of gratitude to their leader for being able to help Lance like that and knowing just what to say.

"We're here," Hunk announced as they entered the residential hall and they stopped in front of Lance's door.

Lance felt a sudden surge of fear at the thought of going inside. This was the last place untouched by all that had happened. The last time he had been in his room he'd been… not happy, per se, but he had been determined. He had been assigned a mission specially designed for him and Blue and he was going to do it right.

He was going to make his parents proud and show the team that he was a Paladin of Voltron and they could count on him.

But then he'd been attacked and captured and all thoughts of proving himself competent had been crushed beneath Haggar's touch. And now, here he was, afraid to go into his own bedroom.

Some Paladin he was.

Hunk though had already awkwardly managed to raise a hand to the panel and the doors swished open and before he could even try to protest they were stepping inside.

It was dark as Hunk fumbled for the lightswitch, eventually casting the room into a soft lit glow. "How about you sit down?" Hunk suggested, already maneuvering them over to the bed, where a familiar jacket was folded neatly on his pillow.

Lance slowly unhooked his arms as he felt himself settle on the bed, feeling a chill as Hunk's comforting warmth vanished. But it was back a second later, the larger boy sinking onto the mattress next to Lance and Lance immediately pressed up against him.

"So," Hunk said, giving a sweeping gesture of the room, "here we are."

It looked exactly as Lance had left it; dirty clothes in a pile by the door where he'd yet to throw them into the hamper for Coran, quilts haphazardly piled on the foot of the bed and his plants sitting atop his dresser looking… rather alive, actually.

Hunk noticed his gaze and gave a chuckle. "I tried to keep them up for you. Gave them some water but Carlos is wilting a bit."

"He likes food goo," Lance murmured. He turned to Hunk then, chest tight with gratitude. "Gracias, Hunk. For taking care of them."

"Anytime," and Hunk's arm, carefully wrapped about Lance's shoulders, gave a tiny squeeze and Lance leaned into it gratefully.

They stayed like that for a few moments, looking at the array of plants across the room, before Lance gave a small shiver.

"Right, clothes," Hunk jumped up. "Let's see what we've got."

He pulled open Lance's dresser drawer, frown pursing his lips. For all that stared back at him were a few more tacky tee shirts that would go nowhere to helping Lance warm up and one more pair of sweatpants, but Lance already had a set of those on.

The other drawer only revealed a few pairs of socks, which Hunk did grab a pair, and more boxer
shorts. The closet revealed an extra underarmour suit, and while warm it was not what Lance really needed right now, but it did have a few long-sleeved shirts and Hunk plucked one at random; a solid dark gray.

He didn't see Lance's favorite blue robe though or the matching slippers. He tracked back to the pile of dirty laundry and yup, there they were. The slippers wouldn't have been much use anyway, as they'd slip off if Lance had to be carried and for a little while at least Hunk thought that would be the safer option, but the robe would have been nice. He'd have to get some laundry going first chance.

"Here we go," he said, bringing the shirt and socks back to the bed where Lance was hunched over in the emergency blanket. "How about socks first? Your feet have got to be cold."

Hunk held them out and Lance took the offered rolled up bundle in his left hand, keeping his shoulders hunched so the blanket didn't fall off.

Both Paladins realized a tick later though the problem as Lance's right hand moved to assist and the shaking limb could not get a firm enough hold to pull the entangled socks apart.

Lance felt the all too familiar tears of frustration and shame sting his eyes and he flexed his right hand with no further luck, the thumb slightly twitching but that was all.

"Hey, hey, it's all right," Hunk comforted, putting one of his own hands over Lance's shaking right.

"It's n-not…"

He couldn't stop the tremble. He knew it was going to take time. He'd only been awake for a couple varga now and they hadn't even tried any exercises or tests so he shouldn't be expecting it to work. But every time he was bluntly reminded of the fact that it did not respond started the horror over anew.

And despite all they'd said, despite the fact Allura had very specifically told him that working hand or not he was the Blue Paladin, part of him still couldn't believe it. What good was he if he couldn't fight after all? He wasn't like Pidge and Hunk, able to contribute to the team with their genius and tech or Keith and Shiro with tactical planning and piloting skills. He had no discernible talents outside of being able to accurately shoot a gun.

And he didn't want to be kept on the team out of pity. Being a Paladin of Voltron was an honor, not a handout. He needed to earn his keep, show them he could contribute too to saving the universe. He wanted to help too. He wanted to help save people and liberate planets and give hope.

But he had no idea how to do that, not with a useless hand. He tried to reassure himself that it was good he still had a hand after all that, rather than a… a…

He choked on his next breath, dizzy with the idea.

"What is it?" Hunk asked, worry clear as his grip tightened over Lance's hand. "What's wrong?"

"My hand," he whispered. "I… I can fix it."

"That's the spirit," Hunk smiled at him, the worry disappearing. "We'll all help. You just need to give it time, Lance."

"No," Lance shook his head. "No, that's not what I meant. I…" He looked up, eyes shining with a fervor that made Hunk's unease return. "A prosthetic, Hunk. I could… like Shiro's… and my hand…"
His hand wouldn't be useless anymore. He could fight with it again, pull the trigger on a gun. He could do everything that he'd been rendered incapable of.

Except… and his left hand tightened into a fist. He wouldn't be able to feel things with it, not really. It'd be a piece of cold metal. Inhuman. An even more permanent reminder than the scars that already made his heart race. A thought of Haggar every time he glanced down, just as surely as Shiro must think when he saw his own arm.

And the pain. He'd have to have been blind to miss how Shiro's arm hurt him, even though he tried so hard to hide it. After battle especially it seemed to drag on him, but Lance had also seen Shiro try to hide it when they were on colder planets or even super hot ones. Not only that, but there had to be the residual pain from having a limb removed like that, and although Lance knew if his had to go it would be done much more gently than Shiro's it would still leave behind that phantom feeling.

But if it was for the team… for the universe… He could do it.

"Oh, Lance," and Hunk's voice broke. "No…"

"But then I'll be useful again," Lance explained, urgently. "I... I won't be a burden and—"

He was cut off as Hunk suddenly lunged forward, pulling Lance into a near bone-crushing hug. Panic welled up at first at the sensation of arms squeezing his own to his side and the helplessness that he was trapped, and he couldn't get free and he was going to get hurt.

But it gave way almost immediately as Hunk's shoulders heaved in a sob and ice settled in Lance's stomach instead. "Hunk?" he whispered, unable to do much else as his arms were pinned and Hunk's face was pressed into his shirt. "H-Hunk?"

Slowly Hunk released him from his grip, but his hands moved to Lance's shoulders, holding him firmly but still gentle.

"Lance," Hunk choked out, honey eyes brimming with tears. "You are not a burden. And you are so much more than just the team's sharpshooter. Your hand… give it a chance, por favor."

"I just..." and Lance's lip trembled. "I just want to help."

"I know," Hunk soothed, "I know, hermano. But a prosthetic..." his hands tightened on Lance's shoulders. "It's a big change, Lance. It's permanent. There's no need to rush into any decision right now. Let's see how therapy goes, okay? Can we do that first?" And Hunk sounded so upset that agreeing was the only thing Lance could do, to ease that pain from his friend.

"Okay," Lance managed, a tear slipping down his cheek. He could wait. For now. Maybe talk to Shiro too. Shiro would know what to do. He always did.

"Okay," Hunk breathed, slowly sitting up and giving Lance back his space. "Good. Let's get those socks on then, huh? My feet are cold just looking at yours."

"I don't think I can," Lance murmured, trying to swallow back the feeling of inadequacy.

"I'll help you then," Hunk said, picking up the socks from where they had fallen. "Is that okay?"

Lance nodded.

"All right then."
Lance's feet were still dangling over the mattress, so Hunk maneuvered himself to the floor. He was waiting for Lance to make some witty comment about Cinderella and her slipper as he made to ease one sock on, but Lance was staring straight ahead, unblinkingly although tears still clung to the corners of his eyes.

Hunk repressed the sigh. They had a long way to go until Lance was cracking jokes again. And as he pulled the item up over Lance's foot, which despite his efforts was trembling mightily, he was vividly reminded why.

A long pink scar ran the full length of Lance's foot from his heel to his toes. He hadn't seen that part of the transmission, but he'd learned enough. The Galra had taken a knife and nearly cleaved each of his feet in two.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?" Hunk asked gently as he carefully lowered the left foot and moved to the right.

"No," Lance whispered, offering up nothing else.

Hunk could see the tenseness in the shoulders though and the way Lance kept blinking made him think he was trying very, very hard not to fall back into some memory. Hunk hurriedly pulled on the second sock, but was no less gentle in his haste.

"All right, toes are all snuggly now," he said, straightening up. "How about we swap out shirts? And we've got your jacket right here to put over it."

Lance looked at his favorite jacket. He'd had it for almost three years now and it had survived everything from pick-up futbol games to camping trips and even space. It reminded him of home and his family and all the good times. It somehow still smelled of cinnamon too and the rain detergent his mamá bought special for him even after all the numerous washings Coran had put it through.

But as he looked at it, he realized that wasn't what he wanted right now. Just thinking of home again was making his chest ache and his throat tight and he didn't want to break down crying again.

"Hunk?" he asked, hoping it didn't sound as needy as it came out. "Can I… can I borrow one of your jackets?"

"Of course," Hunk said, rolling with the request. He snapped his fingers. "You know, I think I have just the one. It's a little snug on me and it'll still be big on you, but it's nice and comfy and it has a hood. That work?"

"If you don't mind," Lance said, turning his gaze to the ground.

"Absolutely not. I'll go get it real quick. You'll be okay for a few minutes?"

Lance liked to think he would be and so he managed a tiny nod.

"Be right back then," Hunk said.

The door closed with a swoosh behind him and Lance let out a breath, realizing that for the first time since this all began he was alone. No cameras. No people. Not even Blue's presence touching his mind.

Just him. And his thoughts.

And he tried to ignore those as best he could, because in his thoughts there were memories and
darkness and he didn't want to get lost to them again.

So instead he decided to focus on something else. Like his plants.

He picked Flafie up from his lap and set the plush reverently atop his jacket and pillow, stroking his fingers against the soft ears.

"Be right back," he told it, voice breaking the silence of the room.

Then he managed to push himself to standing, bracing one hand against the wall by the headboard as black spots flashed in his vision at the elevation change. He stood for a few seconds and when his legs had mostly stopped shaking and the room had returned to focus he took a hesitant step forward.

Nothing bad happened.

He let out a soft breath and took another, keeping his gaze firmly focused on the greenery. He was nearly there when a flash of something out of the corner of his eye had him whirling, the action sending him stumbling and he only barely managed to catch himself against the dresser he had been aiming for.

A mirror greeted him, perched on the low desk he'd transformed into his beauty salon. There was something in the mirror though and he took a hesitant step towards it, heart racing. Because it couldn't be…

He drew nearer and blinked. The reflection staring back blinked too.

"No," he whispered, watching as the figure in the mirror did the same.

He all but collapsed on the stool he'd put before the desk, staring uncomprehendingly at the mirror. Because that couldn't be him.

No wonder the others kept giving him such pitying looks, treating him so gently. The figure looking in the glass looked like one touch would shatter him into pieces.

His face was thin, highlighting already stark cheekbones. There were near bruises of exhaustion below dull looking eyes, and his skin had an unhealthy pallor. But more than that was the utter lifelessness to it, the way his mouth drooped down and his dead eyes barely blinked.

And then the bandages. White and thick they wrapped around his entire neck in a macabre necklace. But they were covering something far, far worse.

Lance reached a tentative hand up to his neck, watching his mirror image do the same.

He had to see. The sudden urge nearly bowled him over in its intensity and his hand scrambled at the bandages, digging unresponsive fingers into the folds and ripping them away, clawing at his own throat like a rabid animal.

Seconds later the bandages were floating to the ground in pieces and his neck was laid bare, save for the ugly ring all around it.

He reached back up to it, flinching at even his own fingers. They lighted upon the scar; bumpy and distorted and wrong. He felt his stomach heave and he choked back the acid taste of whatever fluids he still had left in him.

He heard laughter. Cold and dark. Amused by his pain. And suddenly he was not so alone in the
mirror, a pair of gleaming yellow eyes meeting his.

He gasped, jerking his head over his shoulder but no one was there. Pulse pounding in his ears he turned forward again, but she was there. In the mirror.

"No," he whimpered. She wasn't here. She wasn't.

*You did this to yourself*, Haggar hissed.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Y-you're not h-here."

She was just a memory. Just his mind playing a cruel trick on him.

*You were weak. You are weak. You allowed this to happen.*

"No," he whispered again. "G-get out." They'd told him he was strong. That she was a liar. She was *lying*. And she wasn't here.

*You cannot fool yourself*, she laughed, sound grating and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to dispel it. *You cannot hide, my Lance. Not from me*. She laughed again. *Now, why don't you open those pretty blue eyes?*

"No!" he shrieked, stumbling away from the mirror and collapsing on the ground, eyes still scrunched closed.

"You're not here. You're not here, you're not here, you're not here."

His harsh breaths permeated the air, but otherwise all was silent. After a few moments he released his hands from where he'd pressed them into his skull, feeling a slight stinging on his left where his nails had dug in.

Still no Haggar. No laugh, no whisper. He tentatively cracked open his eyes, half-expecting to see the hem of her robe.

Nothing. Just a few bottles of face creams he'd apparently knocked down with him in his panicked flail away.

He let out a breathy sob. It was okay. It was just in his head. Haggar wasn't here, she had never been. Just his screwed up mind mixing reality with memory.

Would it ever get better? Would every touch of a scar, every side glance the wrong way trigger him into a pathetic mess?

"Estoy bien," he whispered, trying to convince himself. "Estoy bien."

He had to get up. He couldn't be like this, curled up like a scared child, when Hunk came back. Even if that's all he felt like right now.

But Blue believed in him. She believed in him with all of her being and if an ancient magical space Lion thought he was worth something then he had to believe he was. And he could do this small thing.

So he struggled to sitting, even that action leaving him dizzy. He needed to get up though, back on his feet. To the bed.

And yet even as he pulled himself up to standing using the stool, he found himself drawn back to the
mirror. Haggar wasn't there anymore, but the sad, weak looking boy still was.

Lance thumped back down onto the stool, staring at the caricature of himself.

"You're okay," he told it. "You're. You're not weak. You're st..." the word froze on his tongue, as if even his own body was trying to tell him no, he wasn't.

He brought his hand up once more to his neck, pressing on the dark scar.

Nothing happened, other than the sensation of the pressure.

"You're okay," he repeated, wishing to believe it. He wanted to be okay. He wanted to smile again. He hadn't... hadn't been able to in so long now and if he could just manage that... somehow, somehow things would be better.

At least, that's what he told himself.

He tried then, to smile, but his lips only twitched and then fell down.

"Come on," he pleaded with himself. "Please."

His mouth remained a thin line.

"P-please."

His reflection only looked impassively back at him.

"Please," he begged it.

He needed this. He needed to be able to smile again. Every time he failed to do so it felt like a tiny piece of him shattered. Smiling and laughter had made him who he was. It was him.

And not being able to do something as simple as that... he felt the despair grow. It was what Haggar and Theodek had wanted and he hated that even now he couldn't help but give into them.

He really was weak, wasn't he?

He looked back at his reflection, tracing the dim eyes and the lifeless expression. "Por favor," he whispered. "Just..."

He tried again, forcing frozen muscles upwards. The result looked more like a pained grimace than anything and he let it fall away.

"What's wrong with me?" he whispered, the words echoing in his head the same as he'd asked in the mindscape.

But this time no storm clouds rumbled in reply and no rain wept down. The silence pressed in instead and a tear made its way down his cheek. He traced its descent in the mirror, unable to stop as more and more came.

Who was this broken boy staring back at him? It wasn't a Paladin of Voltron. It wasn't a hero. It certainly wasn't anyone he could be proud of.

He tried one last time, summoning up the warmth and love he'd felt, the care and support everyone was pouring into him. He pictured Blue, felt her wrap about him and purr reverberate through his chest. Hunk's warm arms securing him in a hug. Keith's fiery eyes and Pidge's gentle hands. Shiro's
beaming pride. Coran's protectiveness and Allura's compassion.

He focused on all of those, feeling the light pulse at the darkness that was dragging him down.

But it wasn't enough.

It couldn't be enough.

The images shattered, leaving behind only a boy with sad eyes and tears painted on his face. Lance reached a trembling hand out, touching the image in the mirror that was him.

It hadn't worked because despite their love and assurance, Lance still didn't fully believe it himself. He wanted to. He wanted to so much but there was still something wrong, something broken inside him that told him he didn't deserve it, and Haggar whispered in agreement.

He never had.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to his mirror image. He buried his face in his arms so he didn't have to see the failure he had become.

And he cried.

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter was fun, yeah? Started off all fluffy and cute and then okay, a little angst there with the recording reveal, back to lighter and hopeful with the plants, then to angst again as Lance touches upon the idea of the prosthetic (did anyone realize Lance himself has never mentioned it yet? :p), a little lighter again with Hunk once more (thank you, you ray of sunshine you) and then nope, back to angst with Haggar and the mirror and the smile. I really did want to actually end this chapter on a happy note, but Lance wants to wallow some and who am I to deny him anything? (except happiness; apparently I will not allow him to have that xD) I know from the Q&A a number of you were looking forward to the mirror scene. Hope you enjoyed!

But hey, even if I'm denying Lance happiness I have something fun for you guys! A CONTEST in honor of my favorite time of the year; Christmas and all it's cheer! Yup! The premise is easy: in your comment on this chapter guess my favorite Christmas song (one guess per person). If you are the first person to guess correctly you win! And what do you win? A Voltron one-shot by me from 3k-6k words (although knowing me it could be longer :p). Anything goes, so long as it's gen (no pairings or romance here, folks). It could be a sick!fic, smol!fic, AU idea... anything! However: Reviews submitted that only relate to the contest will be disqualified and deleted. You've gotta still leave a normal review, guys! I shall provide two hints as to my song: 1; it is not Sleigh Ride ( dear God no no no no) and 2; think of what you know of what I like given my writing and go from there :p All entries must be submitted by Thursday, Dec. 14 2359 hours (11:59 pm) CST and the results will be announced on the chapter on Saturday. Good luck! May the odds be ever in your favor.

Love and hugs to the fabulous reviewers from last chapter: spn_angels,
Ookamisouleaper, maynarmi, DayOfTheBethan, FandomHuntress, Lanceylangst, glitteringconstellations, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, cipheredsong, soldmysoultofandoms, dean_winchester_has_fallen, PuppetMaster55, Faith, QueenMcawesome, justaboyfromcuba, Fey_79, heyheroics, rken42, maychorian, Alexa, keepasecretgetastrawberry, and EverlastingCookie!

Some of you may have noticed (or not, since no one seems to be on today xDD) I uploaded a Keith and Lance feature oneshot full of delicious langst and pain called **Detonate**. If that's your cup of tea do check it out (and please leave a comment if you enjoyed! ♥) #endselfpromo

Please do drop a comment below! I really would love to hear what you thought of the chapter. Thank you!
Chapter Forty-Five

Lance was so immersed in his own misery that he didn't even hear the door swish open or Hunk's cheerful greeting. He didn't realize the other boy was even there until hands were suddenly lighting about his shoulders and his head shot up so fast it collided backwards into Hunk's broad chest.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, it's just me," Hunk soothed as Lance let out a loud gasp and tried to pull away, going nowhere thanks to the desk. "It's just Hunk."

And Lance could see that thanks to the mirror, but he still had to make sure, craning his head around. But unlike Haggar, Hunk was real and solid and warm and the hands on his shoulders weren't restricting but solid. Comforting.

He looked back at their reflections, reassured when no yellow eyes intruded on the scene. His breaths were still coming too quickly and he couldn't seem to catch up to them.

"It's okay, estás bien, breathe with me, come on. In and out." He could feel Hunk's chest rising and falling with each exhale and he desperately tried to do the same.

"There we go," Hunk murmured as Lance gradually felt his heart begin to slow even though the rest of him was still trembling like a tree in a storm. "That's it. Good job. Just keep breathing in and out like that."

A minute turned into two and then five, but Hunk didn't do anything except murmur soft words and instruct Lance on breathing while his hands, still light on Lance's shoulders, gently rubbed in circles.

"There, you're looking better," Hunk said, meeting Lance's eyes in the reflection before Lance averted his gaze down. He didn't want to see himself anymore. "Breathing okay?"

"Sí," Lance whispered, the sign of his panic all but gone, save for the still damp trails of tears on his cheeks.

"How about we go back to the bed?" Hunk suggested, noticing how Lance had pointedly ignored the mirror nearly the entire time despite the fact it was taking up the entire space in front of them. He had a good guess why, spotting the ripped bandages on the floor and the ring of scar tissue on full display.

Hunk's heart broke just a little more as Lance raised his left hand and pressed it to his neck, flinching at the raised flesh.

"Come on," he said gently.

Lance nodded but upon attempting to stand his legs gave out under him and only Hunk's quick reflexes managed to keep him from smashing his face into the desk as he went down.

With no effort at all, Hunk scooped Lance into his arms and carried him the few paces over to the bed, gently settling him onto the comforter.
"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked as Lance tucked his feet up underneath him and mutely accepted the quilt Hunk pulled from the bed, draping it about him and letting the extra folds pool in his lap.

"I don't know," he managed, rubbing his face against the scratchy yarn in an attempt to wipe away the tear tracks, and even that extra touch making him flinch and stop immediately. "It's… it's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Hunk countered softly, retrieving Flafie from the pillow and offering the plush to Lance, who took it with his left hand and pressed it to his chest. Lance ducked his head.

Hunk patiently waited, watching as Lance rubbed his fingers up and over the cloth ears of the toy.

"I can't smile," Lance finally said, voice so soft Hunk barely caught it. He looked up then, new tears magnifying his ocean eyes. "I can't sm-smile, Hunk."

Hunk didn't know what to say, words getting lost in his throat. He'd observed Lance's lack of a smile, wondered what it was going to take to bring even a small one to his best friend's face, but he thought it had been because Lance was just tired and overwhelmed.

"There's something w-wrong with me," Lance choked out. "I c-can't…"

"Shhh," Hunk comforted, placing a gentle hand on Lance's shoulder and feeling the tiniest bit of relief when Lance leaned further into the touch rather than pulling away. He secured his arm then, wrapping it more firmly around the thin frame, and pulled Lance flush against him, allowing the other boy to pillow his head on Hunk's chest.

"What's wrong with me?" Lance whispered brokenly. "Why can't I…?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Hunk said firmly, finding his voice.

"But I—"

"You went through a lot, Lance," Hunk continued, rubbing his thumb in circles on Lance's shoulder and taking comfort in the newest sobs draining away. "Horrible, horrible things. It's… it's like your hand. It's going to take time to feel better.

"And I know things are hard right now," Hunk said gently. "You're scared. And sad. We are too." He hugged Lance a little tighter. "And it's okay if you can't smile. You smile when you're happy, Lance. And right now… right now you're not happy. And that's okay."

"It feels... broken," Lance whispered, trying to describe the jagged darkness that still filled him and pressed in on the light and warmth his family was trying to grow. No matter how hard they tried he felt like an endless chasm of black and cold that ate up all the good they put in.

"Then we'll fix it," Hunk said. "Together. You don't have to be scared all alone, Lance. Not anymore. We're here and we'll help. However we can and however you'd like us to."

Lance leaned up more against Hunk, feeling the steady heartbeat beneath his head and letting it calm his own. Haggar would say he wasn't worth their time, he thought. He was worthless and pathetic and weak. Her voice was the darkness and her words were a poison and no matter how hard he tried to ignore it he could feel it seeping into him.

But his friends didn't think that. Blue didn't. He'd felt their sincerity and love and he knew they only
wanted him to be happy.

But would they still think that after they found out what he'd done? When they found out he gave up?

He shivered despite Hunk's warmth. Blue seemed to think so. And he knew he'd feel better and the weight pressing down on all of the cracks would be lifted once he told.

Assuming that is that they weren't rightly horrified and disgusted by him. He swallowed down a sob, hiding his face against Hunk. Because then he'd lose them all and he didn't know what he'd do then.

"Hey, it's all right," Hunk murmured, voice warm and wrapping about him like a blanket. "It's okay. We're going to get through this. There's no rush, hermano. We'll take all the time we need."

Lance gave a small nod. He could do that. Small steps. Just like Blue had said. And maybe after a little bit of rest and time he'd be able to smile again. He had to let the light in so it could fill up the empty dark space inside him that Haggar and Theodek had tried to grow.

"You know what might make you feel a little better?" Hunk asked, continuing to rub Lance's shoulder through the quilt. "Some food. You up for trying some more of gamibolap?"

As if in answer Lance's stomach gave an odd sort of rumble and he pressed a hand to it, cheeks darkening even as the motion sent actual hunger pangs through him.

"That sounded like a yes," and he could feel Hunk's smile. "Would you prefer to have dinner in the kitchen or eat here? Either one is fine," he added quickly. "Whatever you'd like."

Honestly? Lance wasn't sure. Part of him wanted to stay right here, snuggled up against Hunk with his quilt and pretend that they were back in their dorm room at the Garrison and eating smuggled food from the kitchen. It was safe here. Not that the castle wasn't safe. Or his friends would hurt him. No. But he knew what to expect here. There were no surprises — so long as he didn't look at the mirror — and he felt completely at ease wrapped in Hunk's arms in a way that no one else save Blue could do.

Hunk's presence somehow pushed the most pressing fear away. His hands, while large, were nothing like Theodek's or Haggar's and somehow he always managed to smell of a mixture of honeysuckle and engine grease that made him feel at home.

Hunk was his rock. A comfortable, soft rock, but one nonetheless. He was everything Lance wished he himself was; strong and reliable and compassionate. He was safety and love and comfort all rolled into one and Lance didn't know what he would have done without him.

But that was the thing. He knew Hunk would accept and love him, no matter what. He was half-tempted to tell him, alleviate the sick feeling pressing then he'd spread that poison to Hunk and force Hunk to carry it until he got up the courage to confess to the others. He couldn't do that. It wasn't Hunk's burden to bear and he wouldn't make him suffer along with him.

And if he ever wanted to get the courage to tell the rest of the team he needed to see them, be with them. He couldn't hide away in his room. If he did that then he really would be nothing more than the child Theodek had told him he was.

He was a Paladin of Voltron, as he'd acknowledged just hours ago. And Paladins didn't run away. They were brave and faced their fears and conquered them.

It was just dinner. Dinner with people he loved and who he knew loved him.
There was nothing to be scared of.

"Kitchen," he said softly, feeling a lurch of both nausea and the tiniest bit of pride at his decision.

Hunk beamed at him and Lance swallowed back the pang of fear when his own lips failed to do the same. It was all right, he told himself, trying to project his thought louder than Haggar's sneer. It was okay.

"Want to put on the other shirt first?" Hunk asked. "And… maybe…" he gestured with his free hand in Lance's direction, looking a tad uneasy.

Oh. Right. He'd ripped off the bandages.

"Yes," he swallowed thickly. "Please."

With Hunk's help he got the current tee-shirt over his head, shivering violently as cold air touched bare skin. And despite all his efforts, he couldn't help but look towards the mirror.

It… wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be. He was thinner, certainly, but not gaunt. And the only scar was a pink splotch just above his rib cage because the hideous burn scar on his right arm was still covered. Still, he hurried to pull on the long-sleeved shirt and the yellow hoodie Hunk had brought for him. It was too big, as Hunk had predicted, but Lance appreciated the bagginess as it hid him. Best yet, it had a pocket perfect for putting Flafie in so he didn't drop the plush.

But it didn't hide his neck and its new macabre accessory. Lance fortunately kept a roll of bandages in his desk drawer for his face mask application — one time he'd gotten the goop on his robe and it nearly hadn't come out so he took no chances now when applying it, although he wondered with a bitter sigh if it really even mattered anymore. With the scar taking up his whole neck… he wasn't much to look at.

Hunk very, very carefully wound several strips about Lance's neck, well aware of the hyper-vigilant eyes tracking every pass around. It was over in under a minute and Lance let out the breath he had been holding during it.

Dressed in the too-big sweatshirt made Lance look even smaller, Hunk thought, heart clenching as Lance pulled the sleeves all the way down so that only his fingertips stuck out. But at least it was a cheerful yellow and the color seemed to warm Lance's mocha skin from the paler pallor it had been. Lance too looked a little more comfortable and his shivering had stopped and that was what was most important.

"Ready to go to dinner?" Hunk smiled, his own stomach growling. He couldn't even imagine how hungry Lance must be.

"Yeah," Lance said after a moment.

"How about you take a ride on the Hunk express one more time?" Hunk suggested. "And if you're feeling a little more sturdy after dinner we can try walking. Fair?"

Lance nodded and found himself in a becoming familiar spot on Hunk's back, arms looped about Hunk's neck and his cheek pressed against the broad shoulder. He'd like to try walking again, despite the fact every attempt thus far had him falling down.

But he hadn't fallen into a memory the last time, he acknowledged, when he'd collapsed in his room. Granted, he'd heard Haggar not long after that echoing in his head, but he hadn't been whisked away to the Kri Za Kri or stage three or anything like that.
That had to be an improvement, right?

Hunk paused them a few yards from the kitchen where the delectable smell of the gamibolap and something that smelled vaguely spicy was wafting out.

"Lance," he said, voice more serious than he intended and he felt Lance's grip tighten ever so slightly. "If... if it's too much just let me know, okay? I know you want to see everyone and everyone wants to see you, but if you feel overwhelmed or sick or anything we can leave. At any time. I... I don't want you to force yourself to do anything, all right? None of us want you to feel uncomfortable."

Lance felt tears prick his eyes. "Gracias," he whispered, throat tight. How did Hunk always know what he needed to hear? To say?

What did he ever do to deserve a friend like him?

"Okay then, ready?"

"Sí."

And Hunk stepped forward. It wasn't like entering Blue's cockpit where memories had begun pressing in on him from all side and he'd felt the panic creep up on him. No, the kitchen was free of any horrible things like dead bodies or any injury other than slight kitchen-drama from a slipping knife or a too hot of a pan.

It did have people though. A lot of them. And even though he knew these people and he loved them, as every eye turned to him and his name echoed on their lips Lance felt himself freeze. Elevated as he was on Hunk it was too much like the Kri Za Kri, looking out at the lower audience as every Galran stared in a mixture of delight at what was to come and hate for what Lance represented.

Lance's breath caught and he struggled to draw another one, even as these eyes were only wide with concern.

"Number Four, could you assist me please?" Coran called out, observant eyes seeing the moment Lance had stiffened amongst the greetings. "And Number Five, those plates are not going to set themselves. Hop to it, Paladins! Dinner is waiting!"

As if waiting for someone to break the silence, noise returned to the room as Pidge grabbed a stack of plates and Allura returned to dispensing food goo into a bowl for the mice while the oven dinged that it was done.

Hunk walked them further into the kitchen and towards Shiro, who had remained seated at the head of the table.

"Hey guys," Shiro greeted with a soft smile as Hunk carefully lowered Lance into a chair around the corner from Shiro. "How'd repairs go?" he asked, directing the question at Hunk and Hunk shot him a grateful smile over Lance's head, who was looking down uncomfortably from all of the immediate attention.

"Good," Hunk said, sliding into the chair right next to Lance. "Pidge and I made quite a bit of progress on repairing some of the circuit boards for Yellow's shielding. We should get them up and running by tomorrow."

"I'm glad to hear it, but I'm sure the Yellow Lion is even more so," Shiro grinned, earning a soft laugh and a nod from Hunk.
He turned warm charcoal eyes to Lance then, who was sitting hunched in his chair over folded arms and had yet to lift his head although Shiro could tell by the slight tilt of his chin that he was indeed listening. "How was your visit with Blue, Lance?"

Lance could feel Shiro's eyes on him, but they were patient. Waiting for him. He also felt Hunk's presence, warm and steady, next to him and he let out a small breath, forcing himself to pick his gaze up from the table and in Shiro's direction.

"Good," he said softly, mimicking Hunk, and Shiro's smile grew wider and Lance felt the vice loosen just a bit in his chest at the unfiltered happiness Shiro was projecting. His answer wasn't anything special, but it had been enough to put that expression on Shiro's face. He wasn't asking for details — not of his visit with Blue, not of his time with the Galra — and Lance felt himself relax even further.

"Glad to hear it, buddy."

The clattering of utensils announced Pidge and Lance couldn't help the slight flinch as the petite girl spilled all the silverware on the other end of the table, the rattling on the metal surface sounding too much like chains.

Pidge sent a guilty look in all of their direction, not singling Lance out although he was certain she'd seen him recoil and he appreciated it. "Sorry, sorry, the plate slipped," she said, doling out sets at empty seats.

"Maybe take two trips next time?" Shiro suggested, earning a scowl in return.

"It's more efficient to do it in one," she responded. "Besides, I managed."

"Not well," Keith chimed in, carrying a large pot in oven-mitted hands over to the table, a small smirk quirking up his mouth.

"I wasn't asking for your opinion," she sniffed.

"And yet I'm still giving it."

"No fighting at the dinner table," Shiro sighed as he saw Pidge's eyes narrow playfully. He appreciated their attempt to keep the mood somewhat light, but the last thing they needed right now was flying projectiles to startle Lance. And given the way Pidge was holding a ladle and eyeing the gambolap Keith had just set down he had a feeling where this was going.

Pidge huffed without any actual heat and took a seat opposite Lance while Keith settled himself next to her.

Lance could feel both of their gazes turn to him and without meaning to his dropped back to the table top, landing on the plate Pidge had skidded in his direction and that Hunk had more nicely placed. His own face, distorted by the rim but still showing that sad, gaunt figure the mirror had, looked back at him. A reminder of what he was and all that he would be if kept on like this.

Pidge and Keith were his friends, his family. He didn't have to be scared to look at them. Not like the reflection of himself.

And so he forced his face upright. There was nothing to fear as Pidge grinned at him and Keith nodded his head with a soft, hesitant smile.

"All right, dinner is served," Coran announced, coming over and bearing another large pot that had
the spicy scent. "Princess, if you'd like to join us so I can go over the menu?"

"I'm here, I'm here," Allura said, hurrying over and taking a seat next to Keith, the mice riding on her shoulders and a large bowl of food go in her hands that she set on the table. "Someone was being a little greedy on the food goo dispension." Platt squeaked without a hint of remorse, already scrambling down Allura's arm for the bowl.

"In our first pot we've got my grandmama's special gamibolap recipe," Coran said, stroking his moustache with pride. "Quite delicious, as Number Two and Lance can attest."

"It's like fried plantains with sugar," Hunk clarified as he saw Pidge eye it warily. "It's actually really good."

"And the second is something of mine and Number Four's design," Coran said, removing the lid and letting the smell waft. "Number Four, if you'd do the honors?"

Lance felt his nose tickling appreciatively even though his stomach gave a little pulse that said it wasn't sure if eating something that smelled spicy was a good plan.

"It's… sort of like chili," Keith said. "I think. Well, I tried. I'm not really very good at cooking like Hunk and—"

"It smells great, Keith," Shiro cut in and Keith ducked his head, embarrassed. "And I'm sure it tastes even better."

Everyone set about ladling the different concoctions onto plates and into bowls, although Lance was not surprised when Hunk only served him the lavender colored gamibolap. He hoped maybe, if his stomach was feeling up to and there were indeed leftovers of the space chili he could try some. He'd had no idea Keith could cook and found himself shooting a side glance at the other boy, who was tentatively poking at the gamibolap with a fork.

The table was quiet for the first moment as everyone settled in and Lance resisted the urge to hunch back over at the lack of sound, as he was no doubt the cause of it. He hated that. He wanted to burst into some funny story or observation — like how Pidge was frantically trying to keep the chili from running across the plate to her gamibolap because she couldn't seem to decide which to try first — but his tongue felt like it was tied in knots and the words were stuck in his throat.

It was finally broken when Allura let out a soft cry of surprise and nearly leaped back from the table, fanning at her mouth. "What is in this?" she asked. "It's so hot!"

"It's a kapibob root," Coran said, his moustache curling with delight at the taste. "Number Four said they are very similar to chili peppers on Earth, although this is a more mild flavor, yes?"

Keith nodded, slurping up a mouthful.

"Humans eat something even more than this?" Allura looked faint, still fanning at her mouth.

"It's a little hot for me too," Shiro said with a rueful grin, taking a large gulp of water and Allura copied him, looking relieved. "But it is really good."

"It's delicious, Keith," Hunk said, taking a second helping.

The dark haired boy blushed a light pink under the praise. Purple eyes turned to Lance and offered up a tentative smile. "I put some in the fridge for you. For later. If you want to try it."
Lance felt something warm fill his chest and he met Keith's gaze. "Thank you," he said softly. "I'd like that."

Conversation started up then, small little pockets of Hunk to Shiro and Pidge about some type of capacitor that Pidge was insisting the transport shuttle needed while Keith and Allura had a surprisingly animated discussion about what was considered 'hot' by Altean standards and Coran chimed in with examples.

It was… nice. Without all of the attention laser-focused on him, Lance was able to attempt eating at his own pace without feeling pressured to do so. He'd had to push the hoodie sleeve slightly back so he could actually hold the spoon properly, but now he had a scoop of gamibolap and was just trying to convince himself to actually eat it.

His stomach gave another painful twinge and spurred him into lifting the spoon. He'd done this once already before and he knew he could do it again.

The first bite had him near closing his eyes with pleasure, the warmth and taste delightfully tickling his tongue. He swallowed it down quickly, relief thrumming through him when there was no backlash to the action.

He took a second bite and then another, stomach grumbling appreciatively. He hoped he could keep this attempt down. He was so hungry and eating anything at all seemed to only make it worse. Before he knew it his spoon was scraping against the plate and a small frown pursed his lips that it was gone.

"How's your stomach feeling?" Hunk asked quietly, having been keeping an eye on Lance throughout his conversation.

"Hungry," Lance admitted just as quietly. A part of him just wanted to grab the pot of food and eat and eat and eat, but the other part told him that he needed to let Hunk and Coran make those decisions. He forced himself to listen to that part because otherwise he knew he'd likely just make himself sick.

"How about a little more?" Hunk suggested. "We'll let your stomach settle then and try again in the morning."

Lance nodded and tried not to inhale the small amount Hunk dished back onto his plate despite how much he wanted to to ease the ache in his stomach.

As he forced himself to eat slowly — only four spoonfuls, he had to savor them — he tuned back into the conversations happening around him. Pidge and Shiro had swapped seats somewhere so she could more easily speak with Hunk as they delved deeper into their earlier discussion and Shiro had begun to look a little lost.

Coran was talking now rather animatedly now and Lance cocked an ear, hoping it was some funny anecdote about the castle or one of Coran's stories and tales. They never failed to make him smile and — he winced at the thought. Well, he amended, they made him feel better.

"-are so many different kinds in the universe, but that particular quintessence bond is the most powerful that I myself have—"

Lance though had stopped listening, the rest of Coran's words fading into the background as his heart thumped loudly.

Quintessence?
"Your quintessence shines so brightly," he heard Haggar practically purr and he could almost feel an icy pair of lips press against his forehead. He dropped the spoon with a clatter.

"Lance?" he heard Hunk ask, but his voice sounded so far away, lost to the sound of crashing waves and spattered raindrops.

That's right. Haggar had said something about quintessence. His quintessence. She had wanted it. He had been… His heart raced faster. He had been her prize. That's what she called him.

But why? What was special about his quintessence?

"It is strong," came Haggar's voice, a cool hand caressing his face. "And I desire it."

He knew he'd seen it now, in whatever that dark intangible place had been. It had been the blue light that had pulsed with life and laughter and love that had exuded warmth and protection and made the otherwise black world bearable.

He remembered Haggar trying to take it, feeling its damaged self being pulled away and he had fought back then, desperate, some part of himself that he didn't understand knowing that he could not lose it to her.

But he'd forgotten about that. Because as soon as he had found that strength to fight back it had been wrenched from him again when he thought his team come and gone and taken the fake Lance with them and he realized he had doomed the entire universe.

Now though the word was echoing about his mind with a sick possessiveness and for the first time he wondered what, exactly, Haggar had wanted with his quintessence. With him.

He felt sick, nauseated for a reason he couldn't explain and he swallowed thickly to try and quell it.

"Lance, lad," Coran's voice sounded near and a warm hand, Hunk, pressed against his shoulder, grounding him once more in this reality and the nausea slipped away even more. Still though. He had to know.

What had Haggar truly wanted with him?

"Quintessence?" he repeated, the word heavy on his tongue as he picked his head up to meet Coran's jewel-bright eyes.

Coran gave a small nod, looking strangely guilty. "Yes, lad. We were discussing it just now."

That had been the angle they'd chosen to take after all. Lightly bring up the topic and see if Lance showed any interest in it, as if their hunch was correct he had likely heard the word used at least once during his captivity.

So under the guise of Shiro asking Coran and Allura about how the Lions functioned and chose a Paladin, they had slowly drifted their conversation to include the word several times. It hadn't been going over too well as Lance appeared to be instead listening more to the technical jargon Pidge and Hunk were exchanging and concentrating on eating.

They had decided to give it just another minute and then go for a different tactic later when Keith, who had been given the role of keeping an unassuming eye on Lance and where his attention lie, had kicked Shiro under the table when Lance and Hunk had spoken for a moment. That would be their best chance as Lance had come out of his near trance-like eating state.
Shiro had tapped his hand on the table to signify they may have an audience and Coran had gone back to the top of his semi-prepared spiel with the hope they might peak Lance's interest.

They had not expected the reaction they received. The vacant expression that took up residence in Lance's eyes, the too quick breaths and the way he had flinched back in his chair as though preparing to be struck.

Although, Coran had thought as his stomach dropped, it certainly answered their question. Haggar most definitely indeed had wanted Lance's quintessence.

Lance swallowed again, practically shivering in Hunk's light hold.

"W-what… about it?" Lance managed after a moment.

"Quintessence is a very complicated subject," Coran said, trying to keep his voice light. "Does it hold an interest to you?"

"I don't know," Lance whispered. "I just…"

He could feel it now, now that he was aware of it. It was the jagged blackness he had tried to describe to Hunk, mixed with the light and love that he realized now was not just from his friends but his own actual being.

That broken, twisted dark thing was inside him. It was him.

He felt his stomach roll again and it took all he had to keep it down, exertion leaving him weak and gasping. He could feel all of their eyes on him, concern practically vibrating off them, but it only made him feel more pathetic.

"That's enough," Shiro said, voice firm but concerned and looking rather uncomfortable. "Not now."

But Lance shook his head. There was something there, something they weren't telling him.

Something they were hiding.

A new tremble took hold of him as he considered the possibility, thoughts tinged with Haggar's whispers. Because if they were hiding something from him how could he trust them? Were they lying to him as well? Was all of this still one big lie and waking dream mixed with a nightmare?

No, he tried to calm himself, that wasn't right. He'd felt Blue, talked to Blue. She was real. Everything here was real.

But so then why…? Why did Shiro and Coran look guilty? Why did they want to know if he knew about quintessence?

What did they want with his quintessence? It wasn't like they could really use it, not like Haggar could—

His lungs seized and he couldn't draw a breath as dread filled him, pieces beginning to click into place. He heard Haggar chuckle over the sound of Hunk yelling. You are so much brighter than they give you credit for she laughed in his ear and long fingers trailed down his face. It's what I love about you. Another soft laugh. You are mine.

No. No. No.

She couldn't be. She couldn't… he was safe. He was here and she was not and he was safe.
But he wasn't. Not really. Because she was coming. For him. For his quintessence.

My Lance he heard her whisper, fingers ghosting through his hair. I've become so fond of you. The hand tightened painfully and he managed a choked gasp although still no air came to him, black spots dancing across sightless eyes as he was lost in the horror he’d uncovered. I can't bear to give you up.

Hands were on his back then and another tipping up his chin and he flinched back, soft keen somehow escaping. No. Please no. She couldn't be here yet. She couldn't—

The scent of cinnamon suddenly filled him and he choked on the smell, the action releasing the hold on his throat. And then he was gasping and coughing and large warm hands were rubbing his back while another pair were holding his shoulders and voices were talking in low murmurs. Hunk and Coran.

"Estoy b-bien," he managed to say, feeling shame burn his cheeks that he'd lost it. Again.

"Take another deep inhale for me, lad," Coran instructed and Lance hastened to follow the instruction, keeping his eyes tightly closed against the onslaught of concern. "And again, please."

His trembling began to cease and the fist around his lungs had released enough to where he could draw breath. But the horror, the fear, was still fresh and it kept trying to suffocate him despite Coran’s efforts.

"She's coming," he whispered, looking up to meet Coran's eyes, hovering above his own. "Isn't she?"

He wanted Coran to deny it, to laugh it off. He didn't want it to be true. But the Altean's face was sorrowful and the earlier guilt had been replaced with resignation.

"Yes, lad," he whispered back. "We think she is."

"For m-me?" He swallowed. "For my quintessence?"

Coran's gaze shifted over and Shiro shifted forward to crouch by Coran so his face was near level with Lance's, who was still sitting in the chair and only remaining upright thanks to Hunk's hands.

"We think so, buddy," Shiro said gently. "We were just trying to find out more information, but we messed up and made you uncomfortable. We can talk about it later, all right?"

Lance shook his head again, but without the sick feeling from earlier. He had been right. They were hiding something, but it hadn't been malicious in intent. They were trying to protect him. And really, what right did he have to be upset that they weren't telling him everything? He was hiding the biggest secret of them all and his stomach clenched painfully at the thought.

"No," he whispered. "She's…" and he couldn't even say her name aloud still. Coward.

If she came for him and she hurt them… he shuddered. He would be solely responsible. It would be his fault they got hurt or… or… he pushed the darker thought away. He was the one summoning her to them and he knew enough now that the team would not offer him up to save their own skins. They would fight and protect him until — he cut the thought off again.

He couldn't let them get hurt. Not for him. So if there was anything he could say that could help protect them he had to do it. Even if that meant talking about Haggar. About… about things. Not everything. Not yet.
Small steps, Blue had said. This was probably larger than she'd been expecting, but this was what his team, his family, needed from him right now. His gaze met Shiro's, warm and compassionate but still so worried, and drifted about the room to where everyone had gathered in around him, all looking the same.

He could do this. He had to do this because if anything happened to them because of him he would never forgive himself. This was for them. So they could prepare for her when she came.

"What..." he took a deep breath, steadying himself. "What do you want to know?"

Chapter End Notes

Umm, everything? xD

Lots happening this chapter. A little fluff for y'all and some good Hunk introspection (Hunk had his on Lance, seems fair to return the favor), Keith in the kitchen (I was so pleased so many of you liked that little bit!), some hard-hitting stuff right in the feels and now our first potential look of getting everyone on the same page. Haggar's still not here yet (gracias a Dios) but we haven't forgotten about her, promise! #HaggarisComing

There was some heavier stuff happening in this chapter but I really want to pull out Lance and Hunk's conversation about the ability to smile. I have had so, so many of you tell me how much you relate to Lance in this fic. Believe me, I do too. And I just want to dedicate this little section to y'all with two notes: 1; I hope you all have a Hunk in your life to support you and 2; It's okay if you don't feel happy all the time. We all go through periods like that and self-doubt and wonder what the heck we're doing, so just know that you're not alone and we're all rooting for you.

Contest results! Thanks to everyone for participating. We had some really amazing guesses including two in my top five; Christmas Shoes (I tear up every time omg) and Carol of the Bells (TSO hands down), but we did not get my favorite. That would be 2000 Decembers ago, most commonly sung by Joy Williams. Love it! BUT even though no one gets a chosen one-shot I did write another one called Detonate full of (what else?) Langst and whump. Check it out if you'd like and drop a comment if you enjoyed it! :)

Hugs to the lovely reviewers: smol_lil_demon, FandomHuntress, mrc2, Ahhuya, Lanceylangst, Ookamisouleaper, QueenMawesome, Grace, habell, SteamPunkFae, keepasecretgetastrawberry, Bunshin, Alexa Miranda, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Cuthalion, Anonymous, aishwarya, glitteringconstellations, maychorian, marzaally, justaboyfromcuba, Pokimoko and heyheroics!

And guys? It's my birthday :D I’m turning old(er); actually, I’m on my last year clinging to my twenties but then I hit that real be-an-adult age so going to enjoy these next 365 days :p. Reviews make amazing presents so if you've got a tick please do drop one below. I'd love to hear your favorite scene or moment or dialogue or what have you. Thanks everyone!
"Before we begin any such discussion," Coran interjected into the stunned silence of the kitchen, "perhaps we should move somewhere more comfortable?"

It was a good suggestion. As they were now they had near boxed Lance in between the kitchen table and the chair he was sitting on and they were all looming (save Pidge, who was at Lance's height at the moment) over.

"The lounge?" Hunk suggested. He gave Lance's shoulders a gentle squeeze. "That all right with you, hermano?"

He received the barest of nods in return, as Lance was beginning to look a little green again and had his lips firmly pressed together. Hunk knew what a big step this was, to be willing to talk about anything that had happened. He hoped the rest of the team could keep it to just this topic for now, unless Lance wanted to share more.

He had a feeling this was going to be hard enough already. For all of them.

They made a quiet procession down to the lounge, a mess of unwashed dinner dishes left behind. Lance had accepted another ride from Hunk and the larger boy could feel Lance trembling the entire walk, but he did not once ask to go back to his room or take back his offer. Hunk's heart swelled with pride at how brave Lance was being, while his stomach knotted in anticipation.

Upon reaching the room, Hunk gently lowered Lance to the three-person sofa, letting Lance box himself into one of the corners and he sat next to him. Pidge took Hunk's other side, small hands seeking out one of Hunk's own.

While Allura pulled over a second smaller couch with ease for herself and Keith across from them, Shiro took a chair by Pidge and Coran settled himself on one of the couch's ottomans just to the right of Lance.

Lance had pulled Flafie out of his hoodie pocket during all of the furniture arranging and had his gaze firmly fixed on the plush, his left hand smoothing the large ears over and over again. It was soothing, the soft down against his fingers and he concentrated solely on that and Hunk's arm wrapped very carefully about his back to lightly grip his right shoulder, warm and steady.

He didn't know where to start. He wasn't even sure he had anything useful to say. He didn't know, after all, why Haggar wanted his quintessence. He just knew she wanted it. That wasn't very helpful. Something tickled at the back of his mind, a why, but it wasn't coming yet and he was almost scared to find out.

He didn't want to fall back into a memory.

"How about," Shiro said, breaking the beginning to grow awkward silence, "we share what we know and you can fill in any holes we're missing, okay?"

That seemed fair and Lance nodded although he kept his eyes fixed on the plush.
"Coran?" Allura said, "perhaps a quick explanation of quintessence for Lance?"

"Righty-o," the advisor said, turning a gentle gaze to Lance. "The quickest explanation is as follows, some of which you may already know but a little refresher for us all. All living beings contain quintessence in them. It is our life force, if you will. However, some beings are capable of housing powerful quintessence within themselves, like those chosen as Paladins of Voltron. Are you following so far, lad?"

Lance nodded. So far this made sense from what he knew.

"The quintessence you and the other Paladins carry is something truly great and special," Coran continued. "Your quintessence must be compatible with the Lions of Voltron and given each Lion's unique properties and preferences, the quintessence that a Paladin has is very rare indeed. Yours, Lance," and Coran's voice turned more solemn, "you possess the quintessence of the Blue Lion. Do you know what this means?"

Lance shook his head, feeling something cold settle in his stomach. Because this had to be what Haggar had wanted.

Allura's voice sounded then, clear and regal, as though reciting from memory. "The Blue Lion favors a pilot who is able to have fun and think on their feet. She looks for someone who has a large heart and the capacity to care about everyone. She seeks someone who is loyal and trustworthy and always puts others first. That is the nature of the Blue quintessence."

Lance had found his head drifting up, the cold melting away at the warmth of Allura's words. His own ocean gaze caught her jeweled one and she smiled softly at him.

"That is you, Lance. And in all of our history I have never met someone who embodies the Blue Lion's quintessence the way you do."

"She speaks truly, lad," Coran said, and one of his hands descended lightly on Lance's knee. "I too have never seen a bond like you and the Blue Lion share, nor have I met someone with your compassion and desire to protect and help others. Your quintessence is beyond measure, Lance."

Lance felt his cheeks flushing at the observation and he ducked his head back down, still not sure what to make of it. Caring about people didn't make him all that special, did it? The others all cared too. It's why they were the Defenders of the Universe.

But still… they all apparently thought it was a big deal. And Blue, she thought so too. She was all of those things that Allura had said herself, and she had picked him, him, to pilot her. The warmth blossomed even more.

"However," and Coran sounded serious again, "we believe that is what Haggar is after. Your quintessence, Lance… it is powerful. It is in incredible force. All quintessence is; that is why we have seen the Druids harvesting it from planets and containing it for their own use. But that is quintessence of ordinary creatures. Yours… yours is something extraordinary. Because of the nature of your quintessence, its compassion and protection, it would only continue to grow even more powerful if you were using it to protect and save others."

"Both traits of which I am certain you utilized while a prisoner of the Galra."

And there was something knowing in Coran's eyes and Lance shivered. He wasn't ready to talk about that yet. About what they'd done. About what he'd done.

So instead he focused on the first part. "How?" Lance whispered, voice tight. "How would she…?"
He swallowed. "Harvest it? All those planets… they… they die."

Because they had seen the devastation the Druids spread across the universe. Husks of planets, corpses of people. They had been drained of their quintessence, their life force. And Haggar hadn't wanted him dead. At least… he didn't think she had. Theodek though. He couldn't suppress the shiver that time and Hunk's arm tightened about him in comfort.

Coran looked pained then and he could feel Pidge and Hunk shifting uncomfortably.

"Quintessence can be taken two ways," Coran said, his eyes steady on Lance and Lance found he could not look away. "Forcefully through the physical body, which is what you have witnessed. Or forcefully through the mind, leaving the body intact and with the ability to create more quintessence, if it was capable of doing so. Which," Coran's voice lowered again, "we believe yours would do."

Lance blanched and flinched back into the couch, mind churning.

It all made sense. It made horrible, horrible sense. She hadn't been trying to break him down so he'd release information on the Paladins. She had been trying to break his mind. To take his quintessence. Over and over and over again.

And she had.

She'd broken him, there in the mindscape with her words of hopelessness and poison.

He had fallen into her hands, into the blackness.

Dios, she had almost taken his quintessence.

And he had almost let her.

And… and… she would have hurt them. It was coming back now.

"Lance?" he heard Hunk say and the hand moved from his shoulder to his back.

"She… she…" he choked out, feeling sick with horror as the tickle on his mind morphed into something harder, something painful in its intensity. "Dios, I…"

You will be our new weapon, he heard her whisper, nails digging into his cheek. Your power alongside mine… we will bring down the Paladins.

"I…” he tried again, trying to ignore Haggar's ghosting words. "I…”

"Lance, it's okay, estás bien," Hunk comforted. "Just breathe, hermano, it's okay. You're safe. It's okay."

"Oh, Dios," he whimpered, trying desperately not to be sick again. "She…” She had wanted to use him as a weapon. To hurt his family. She had planned to… to… feed off of his quintessence and he had been about to let her.

She would have hurt them. Killed them with his quintessence.

And he had almost let her. He'd given up the fight and surrendered and even a varga longer and she'd have had it and he would have his family's blood on his hands.

He choked back acid bile.
"Lance, it's okay," Shiro was there then, his presence hovering but not touching but still managing to project safety. "It's all right. Just breathe for us now, okay? Concentrate on that."

"In and out," Hunk coached. "Come on, nice deep inhale with me."

Lance wasn't sure how much time passed as he gasped out breaths alongside Hunk, trying to concentrate only on the way his chest expanded and contracted and the warmth of Hunk and Coran's hands that grounded him from the cold of his memories and Haggar's touch.

But finally he had enough of a grasp on himself again, stomach still churning but the sick terror no longer overwhelming.

"I'm sorry," he managed once he was certain he wasn't going to puke.

"None of that," Coran chided gently. "There is nothing to apologize for, lad. We can stop here."

And Coran was wrong. He was so, so wrong. He had everything to apologize for and even that would never be enough. He had almost as sure as killed them with his surrender.

So he had to make this right. Somehow. And that meant telling them… telling them at least about what Haggar wanted his quintessence for. He could manage that at the very least.

"No, no, I'm okay," he finally whispered although he couldn't meet anyone's eyes again, fresh shame burning his heart.

Coran hummed an acknowledgement but said, "We can stop at any time, Lance. Just say the word."

Lance nodded and sank more against Hunk, trying to draw strength from him. He could do this. It was over now. For now. At least until Haggar came back.

Could he fight her again? He'd pushed her away in his mindscape before after she had nearly won. That had to count for something. And now that his family was here with him and he had something to protect again, something to stand for and give him courage, he felt that maybe, maybe he could do it. He could push her back from his mind and his quintessence.

Unless of course… More of her dark words came to him then, her threat that she would take it from him by whatever means necessary. Perhaps she did not want to kill him, but if that was the only way then… then she would.

And he would die. And she'd have his quintessence in some form. And then she'd hurt his family with it.

But if he could find the courage to speak and tell them what he knew, maybe, maybe they could prepare. Maybe there would be a way to fight Haggar off. Something that he wasn't seeing to stop her.

Or, his mind whispered, there was a way to make certain she didn't ever take it. His wrists throbbed and he gripped the plush tighter in an effort to not make a grab at his forearms. It would be easy. This time he just had to make sure to finish it properly. Then, and only then, could he guarantee their safety.

He shook his head, trying to rid it of the dark despair. No. Not again. He had to believe they would find a way that didn't… that didn't involve that. He wasn't alone now. Wasn't so hopeless and in so much pain that that was his only answer. He was with his family and they were here to help, just like they'd all said. He believed in them. They would find a way.
And that meant he had to tell them.

"Ha—," and his voice stalled on the word. Pathetic he heard her hiss. "She," he enunciated instead and Hunk's arm tightened about him, "tried to take it. From me."

He looked up then, afraid he'd find disappointment but all he found was concern and Shiro gave him an encouraging nod, still kneeling just a pace away.

"Through your mind?" Coran inquired gently.

Lance nodded. "She..." he put a hand against his head. "We... we were in my... my mind. And my quintessence... it was there.

"It was dark," he continued. "I... I couldn't really feel anything, but... I could? I don't know how to explain it."


"The Astral Plane?" Shiro repeated, turning to look at the advisor.

"Yes. It's both a physical and metaphysical world where we exist and yet do not. When you form Voltron and feel each other through the mind link you are accessing a small part of it as your quintessence melds." Coran looked to Lance. "You were there, lad?"

"Yes. And... I think she was too. My quintessence... It was there too, this blue light. I... I thought it was Blue," he said, voice dropping.

"It is certainly very similar," Coran smiled softly. "I could see why you would come to that conclusion."


"Hurt?" Coran repeated. "Your quintessence hurt you?"

"I guess?" Lance's knuckles whitened around the toy as he recalled the sharp pain he'd felt when he'd tried. "It... it wasn't all blue. It was black too. I think that part is what hurt me. The blue... the blue felt nice." Like a blanket of comfort that had given him the strength to even try.

Coran's lips thinned and he felt Allura's inquiring gaze fall on him for an explanation.

"This black you saw," Coran said carefully. "Was it a light like the quintessence?" His fears were confirmed when Lance shook his head.

"Is that bad?" Lance barely whispered, fear filling his eyes as he looked to Coran.

"It is a wound," Coran said softly. "Your quintessence was wounded."

"How is that even possible?" Pidge interjected.

"Quintessence, while not physical, still has form," Coran said. "A spiritual one, if you will." His gaze softened as he met Lance's frightened one. "You were hurt," he said and after a second Lance gave the barest of nods, both knowing that it was not so simple.

"Can it be fixed?" Because Lance knew it was still broken and twisted inside him. That was why he couldn't smile. Couldn't laugh.
Couldn't be happy.

Because his quintessence, his being, that was all love and laughter and compassion was damaged. And despite what they thought of Haggar, he knew who had dealt it the near fatal blow. His wrists throbbed again.

"Of course, lad," Coran said firmly and Lance felt the knot in his stomach release the tiniest bit. "It will take time, but all quintessence can be healed."

"Why didn't the pod fix it then?" Keith asked, glancing between Coran and Lance's slightly trembling form. "If it was injured?"

"The cryo-pods are remarkable, but they can only heal physical wounds," Coran explained. "Both quintessence depletion and injury can only be healed through time and care. I would recommend extra sleep for now, Lance, to help that process along. Your body needs the rest just as much too."

"Okay," Lance whispered. He certainly felt tired enough but he wasn't sure if he was going to be able to sleep. That was for later though. Right now he needed to focus on this discussion and help however he could.

"You said you grabbed onto your quintessence," Shiro said, directing the conversation back as well. "What happened then?"

"Light," Lance said after a moment. "There was this light and then… then I woke up." Sort of. Because was waking up in a mindscape really waking up?

It was on the tip of his tongue to say as such but he swallowed it back. Because if he mentioned the mindscape then he was opening himself up for even more questions that then led to answers he couldn't think about right now.

Not yet. Small steps. Just focus on the quintessence.

"And did the witch take any?" Coran asked.

"I don't know," Lance replied, voice small. "She was," his eyes closed, "…angry." Remembered agony swept through him in a burst of purple light as Haggar hissed You will surrender to me but he also remembered the surge of warmth and strength he had wielded, throwing her back from him. He had done that. "I… I told her no though. She couldn't have it," and he sounded stronger than too, reopening his eyes.

"That was very brave of you," Shiro said, charcoal eyes warm and Lance felt his cheeks heat. "It sounds like you fought her off."

He gave a jerky nod. Yes. Yes he had.

"And after that," Coran said, "did she say or do anything regarding your quintessence?"

Lance gave another nod. "She said… she said she wanted it. She was going to…” The next part came out just above a whisper. "A weapon. She said she was going to use it as a weapon. To… to hurt you."

"Oh, Lance," Hunk murmured, pulling Lance tighter against him and Lance accepted the half-hug, pressing his face against Hunk's arm.

"Can she do that?" Pidge whispered, aghast. Coran had said quintessence could be used to give
Zarkon or Haggar power, but as an actual weapon?

"She could," Coran said. "Whether she used it to power one of her creations or absorbed it into herself for an even more powerful magical attack… she can turn any quintessence into a weapon. And given the strength of Lance's as well as its connection to the Blue Lion… any hit sustained with it would be devastating on not just a physical level but an attack on your own quintessence."

"But you stopped her," Keith said, directing his comment to Lance. "You fought back." And he knew firsthand how both terrifying and difficult that was and he had only faced physical attacks from the Druid. For Lance to have found the strength after days of imprisonment and torture… He felt the familiar pulse of guilt and shame that he'd ever once thought of Lance as the weak link of the team.

Lance gave the barest of inclinations. Because yes, he had fought her then. But not later. And if it hadn't been for his team's arrival then it would have all been over. Haggar would have gotten everything she'd wanted and Voltron would have nothing.

It had been so close. Too close. He couldn't suppress the shiver then but leaned further into Hunk to try and quell it.

"There's… there's more," Lance murmured. "She said later that if she had to she'd… she'd take it by force."

"Force?" Pidge repeated, looking at Coran. "Does that mean…?"

The advisor shuddered out a sigh as their earlier kitchen conversation came up. "Yes, Number Five. Force would imply the first option of removing quintessence through the body. Which is fatal for the subject."

Fatal. It seemed to echo in the silence of the room.

"We won't let her," Hunk said firmly, and Lance felt a warmth wash over him at the declaration. He had been right. He didn't need to do this alone.

"Most certainly not," Coran said. "However this does bring up some questions."

"We're not doing it," Keith interjected sharply, sensing where this new discussion was headed.

"Keith, we talked about this," Shiro said, voice even. "It's not up to us."

"I'm still with Keith," Hunk said, grip tightening on Lance. "It's too dangerous."

"It?" Lance voiced quietly, feeling an uncomfortable churning in his stomach again. They were talking once more about something he was in the dark about and it was about him.

"We found a way to contain your quintessence," Pidge blurted out, kneeling and leaning around Hunk so she could look more fully at Lance.

"Contain it?" Lance repeated quietly, the uneasy feeling not fading. Contain it for what? To use as a weapon as well?

"With a barrier," Pidge clarified quickly. "It would theoretically prevent your quintessence from being taken by Haggar so she can't use it."

Lance's eyes widened. That… that sounded perfect. It solved everything. But if that were the case why had Keith and Hunk not seemed to like it?
"We don't know if it'll affect your ability to form Voltron," Keith said, fixing his intense gaze on Lance, who was surprised to see a hint of fear beneath the fire. Fear for him? "Or connect with the Blue Lion. It's untested."

Oh. Oh. His heart clenched and he felt a sharp stab of sudden loss at even the idea. His face must have projected something because Keith gestured at him with a "See?" and Hunk's arm tightened even more protectively about his shoulders.

"If I may," Allura cut in with a tone that demanded silence and she received it. "Thank you. Lance," she turned to him, sitting forward on the couch and her jewel-bright eyes too much and he turned his head down, feeling sick. Because Allura would be the one to make that decision and enact any type of barrier with her brand of Altean magic. She could cut him off from Blue. And yet…

"Lance," she repeated. "Look at me, please."

He forced his head back up to meet her eyes. "I will not do anything until we are certain whatever measures we take will not harm your bond with the Blue Lion or with Voltron," she said firmly. "It is important to keep Haggar from taking your quintessence, yes, but not at the cost of your well being."

"Thank you," Hunk breathed, relief evident and Keith also let out a sigh, sitting back on the couch from where he'd nearly come off it.

And Lance should have felt relief too. But instead all he felt was fear and Allura's soft smile turned to a worried frown. "What is it?" she asked gently.

"How soon is she coming?" Lance whispered and he felt the uneasy glances around the room.

"We're not sure," Shiro said after a moment. "But Lance, that's not for you to worry about, okay?"

But it was for him to worry about. She was coming after them because of him. They were in danger because of him and his quintessence. If… If he could at least stop her from getting it and using it to hurt them… it was the best he could offer. He would do anything to protect them and if that meant…

Well, he'd already tried to offer his life. How was this any harder? At least this way he'd still be alive, even if he couldn't be a Paladin. That was more than he thought he'd possible just days ago.

And Blue… he swallowed thickly. She'd understand. She knew how strong his desire was to protect their family because she felt the same way. Besides, it wasn't a guarantee that it would block their bond. It could still work.

And if it didn't… well… at least he knew his family would be safe. Or as safe as they could be given the circumstances that he had put them in. This was for the best.

"Lance, no," Hunk said, desperation clear in his voice as he saw an all too familiar resolution enter deep ocean eyes.

"I have to," he whispered. "I can't… I can't let her hurt you."

"And you think we're just going to let you hurt yourself instead?" Keith retorted, nearly vibrating off the seat. "Were you even listening to us?"

"I can't let her," Lance repeated. "I can't. It's my fault."

"Now stop that thought right there, lad," Coran interrupted, normally genteel eyes flashing. "What
you suffered through was through no fault of your own." His voice softened even as his hand tightened on Lance's knee although not uncomfortably. "And I will not having you thinking in such a manner."

"Coran is right," Shiro said, voice brooking no argument although his face was kind. "Lance, we would never ask you nor want you to hurt yourself to protect us," - Lance flinched ever so slightly at Shiro's words Hunk and Coran exchanged a concerned, worried glance over the dark head - "and we will not be making any rash decisions regarding your quintessence and bond with Blue."

"But," he whispered, "If she…"

"The Castle's defenses are on high alert," Allura said, resisting the urge to place her own hand atop Lance's clenched one to soothe the tension, "and no one, Druid or Galran or even Zarkon himself will be boarding. And should the need arise we are more than prepared to fight the witch ourselves.

"Besides," Allura continued, nostrils flaring, "I must be the one to enact the barrier and right now I refuse to do so. Not when it poses a chance of harm."

"I… I agree with all of them," Pidge said, voice small. She looked earnestly at Lance, honey eyes shining. "I'm sorry, Lance. I thought… I thought it was a good idea, but not if it… if it cuts you off from Blue."

She pressed a trembling hand against her heart. "If I lost Green it'd… it'd be like losing a part of myself. I can't let you do that. We'll find a different way until we know for sure that it'll work."

"Pidge," he whispered, feeling something lodge in his throat.

"It is sound in theory," Coran said, "but the risks are too great as they stand right now." His eyes met Lance's, nearly burning with intensity. "I know you want to protect us lad, but please," and Coran's voice broke, "let us this time protect you."

Tears came unbidden then and Lance hurriedly tried to blink them back at the absolute heartbreak in both Coran and Pidge's voices.

"Okay," he agreed quietly and he could feel the tension drain from both Hunk and Coran through their touching limbs. He allowed himself to feel that same relief now too, the heartache that he might lose Blue shrinking until it disappeared and the sick feeling mostly disappearing from his stomach.

Because they were still in danger because of him. That had not changed.

"Everything is going to be all right," Shiro reassured, as if reading his mind. And who was he to doubt Shiro? Shiro had never failed them, not even when the odds were stacked high. He said he trusted them so now it was time to actually do so. "Besides," Shiro continued, voice hardening, "they come after one of us, they come after all of us. We're in this together."

"Couldn't have said it better myself, Number One," Coran agreed. "And with that, I think it is time we put this conversation to bed. Along with a number of Paladins."

Lance wanted to protest he wasn't tired. He'd been in a pod and then sleeping in his bed and then sleeping in Blue, but his body ached with exhaustion and if it hadn't been for how tense that conversation had been he may have fallen asleep, as comfortable as he was on the couch and pressed up against Hunk's warm body.

But he didn't want to sleep. So far both instances had been relatively dream free, surrounded as he was with Blue's quintessence and Hunk's steady, warm presence that had soothed away the worst
nightmares before they could really go anywhere. Now though, he'd insisted on returning to his own room where there was only space on his bed really for one. Hunk had squeezed on before during really bad nights and Lance knew he would again in a heartbeat, but he was scared that in his dreams Hunk's arms and hands would turn into the monsters and he didn't want to hurt Hunk when he would no doubt shrink away.

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Allura said. "It has been a long day for all of us."

Yet no one moved and Lance realized that as tired as they all were no one wanted to actually go to bed.

Shiro let them have about a minute before he clambered to his feet, letting out an ear-splitting yawn that made Pidge giggle and Keith snort and they both removed themselves from their respective seats.

"Lance," Hunk said quietly as Allura rose then too and began to put the couch back while Shiro and Keith moved back the ottomans. "Would you be all right if I bunked with you? On the floor; I can grab my mattress. Only if you don't mind though."

Because Hunk had felt Lance stiffen at the suggestion of sleep and he knew from the long nap earlier that Lance most definitely wasn't going to be having pleasant dreams. Waking up all alone after one of those had to be terrifying and Hunk didn't want Lance to go through that alone. However, he also didn't want Lance to think of him as any form of weak for not wanting to sleep by himself. Personally, Hunk wasn't sure he could sleep on his own right now either.

"Por favor," Lance whispered, word muffled as he pressed his face against Hunk's arm and the Yellow Paladin felt the tense shoulders release.

"Gracias, hermano," he said just as softly, rubbing a hand on Lance's back. "Let's get going then, hm? Before we both fall asleep on the couch."

Lance gave a mumble to that and Hunk smiled. "All right, up we go then. Is it all right if I just carry you? We'll give walking a try tomorrow when you're more awake."

"'s fine," Lance answered, tucking Flafie back into the convenient hoodie pocket and a few ticks Hunk had pulled Lance into his arms and stood, the long legs dangling over while his hand supported under the knees and the top of Lance's back. He kept away from Lance's head though as his small observations had shown that while Lance might press his forehead particularly against Hunk he still flinched away from any outward movement towards his head.

Lance shifted so he was slightly more comfortable in Hunk's large arms, tucking his head up against Hunk's broad chest so he wasn't quite lying like a limp noodle and could survey the room. The furniture had all been returned to its original setting and everyone was sort of just standing now as if not sure what to do.

"Pleasant dreams, lad," Coran said, breaking it and shooting a warm smile at Lance who wished he could return it but his lips only gave a tiny wobble. "You as well, Number Two. I shall be awake a while longer in the kitchen should you need anything."

"Thanks, Coran," Hunk said. "Good night, everyone."

"We'll see you for breakfast?" Shiro asked.

Hunk looked to Lance who gave a tiny nod and he grinned. "Yup! For 0800-ish."
"We'll get to try out your breakfast muffins," Shiro smiled. At Hunk's look he clarified, "The batter you were mixing earlier. We turned them into…well, we hope breakfast."

"Sounds delicious."

Everyone uttered good nights then, Allura volunteering to accompany Coran to clean up the kitchen as she planned to be up for a while longer as well. Keith had bade them both a good night and slipped from the room as silently as a ghost. Shiro gave Lance and Hunk's shoulders a gentle squeeze and then went off after Keith.

Pidge had remained quiet the entire time, only really making a noise when Shiro had ruffled her hair in parting, and she sent an anxious look to Hunk and Lance after the room had cleared.

It was silly, but she couldn't help it. She had been bunking with Hunk for the first few nights and then having large group sleepovers the last two. The idea of returning to her own room and sleeping by herself felt…lonely. She didn't like it.

Plus she wanted to see Lance. She missed him. And although this Lance wasn't quite her Lance, not yet, he was still Lance and she wanted to be there for him. She had left earlier so she didn't crowd, but she didn't want to leave now.

She didn't want to be alone.

She was trying to phrase the best way to say as much when Lance beat her to it.

"What's wrong?" he asked, and it was the soft tone he used to use on her when she'd been feeling homesick or thinking too much about her brother. It was tender and care and comfort and concern all rolled into one and it was so Lance that her breath caught in her throat and all she could do was mutely shake her head.

He was there. Just as she'd thought.

"I... ummm..." And she couldn't seem to articulate words, fistng her hands instead and letting the nails bite into her palm.

And while Lance did not quite smile his face seemed to soften. "Hunk is sleeping over," he said carefully. "Do you... want to come too?"

Because Pidge looked upset and Lance knew he was the main cause of that. He wasn't sure if this was entirely a good idea – he did not want to scare her anymore than he already had with his nightmares – but he needed to do this, to open himself back up to others. As he'd told himself, he couldn't hide away in his room with just Hunk because that was as safe as it got right now. This was a good step and he could almost feel Blue's purrs of approval.

"Yes," Pidge breathed, feeling the nerves vanish in an instant. "Yes, please." Her honey eyes met Lance's cool ocean. "Thank you."

"Go get dressed and then come on down to Lance's room," Hunk instructed with a smile. "I'll come grab your mattress then, okay? I think I should be able to get them both to fit on the floor." He pictured Lance's messy floor piled with laundry and blankets, but if he shoved them into the corner he was pretty positive it could work. And Pidge was tiny anyways.

"I'm really proud of you," Hunk said quietly as Pidge scampered away – mentioning something about grabbing her tablet from the kitchen first – and they headed towards the living quarters.
"For what?" Lance murmured back, a hint of bitterness on the words. "Agreeing to a sleep over?" Because just over a week ago Lance would have jumped at the idea; instigating pillow forts and cookies and making up games and ghost stories and turning it into an all out event. He'd have even tried to drag Keith in for some forced bonding time and maybe he would have had fun. In any case it was nothing to be "proud" of him for.

"Not that," Hunk said arms tightening. "Well, I mean, that too because as small as Pidge is she's still an extra person and I know right now it's probably pretty easy to feel overwhelmed with more people."

Lance allowed himself a small nod. But that was why he had to do this. He wanted to get back to… well, whatever normal was. Not this sad, sorry excuse.

"That's what I'm proud of," Hunk said, looking down and meeting Lance's eyes. "I know you're hurting, Lance. I know you're scared. But you saw past all that and saw that Pidge was hurting too and you made it better. Just like you helped Shiro earlier."

"But I didn't…" he trailed off, not sure what he was trying to say.

"You're amazing," Hunk said and sincerity and warmth filled the words. "You've been through so much and you're still trying to help others. And you're beyond brave, talking about what happened and I know how scary that is, especially since it was about her."

"Hunk," Lance whispered, feeling his cheeks darken. He didn't deserve these kind words.

"And you can talk to me about anything, Lance," and Hunk tried to project all he could into that. "You know I'm here for you. Always." His embrace tightened. "You're my brother, mi hermano. I'll always be here. No matter what."

Lance felt hot tears prick at his eyes as new guilt and shame were rekindled at the thought of the dark secret he hadn't yet divulged. Perhaps… he should tell Hunk. Maybe Coran, who he had the unsettling feeling knew something.

He hadn't wanted to. He wanted to spare Hunk the pain of that secret. But… but maybe he needed to tell someone else.

Small steps. Just like Blue had said.

And if he told Hunk and Coran… well, then it wouldn't be just on Hunk's shoulders. And Coran he felt too would understand. Just like Blue. Coran wouldn't – at least, he hoped – be disappointed in him.

But not now. Not when he still felt so raw from sharing what he already had.

Tomorrow. He gave himself that ultimatum. Sometime tomorrow he would tell them, when his heart didn't quite ache so much and he'd distanced himself from the horror by another night. He'd find the courage tomorrow. He'd live up to their words calling him brave and strong, even if what he was sharing was a weakness.

He was truly so, so lucky to have someone like Hunk. His brother in all but blood and in some ways even closer to Lance than his actual siblings. He nuzzled his face against Hunk's chest, trying to dry the tears in the coarse vest and Hunk's arms somehow embraced him even more from the carry.

"Gracias, Hunk," Lance mumbled, knowing it didn't come close to expressing his gratitude for all that Hunk was to him, but he had to start somewhere. "Te… te quiero."
"Love you too, hermano," Hunk responded, voice equally choked. "We're going to get through this, okay?"

"Sí," Lance whispered. And just with Blue he felt something loosen in his chest, felt the blackness recede just a little bit from the strength of Hunk's eternal love and belief in him.

And amidst all the darkness and despair that had taken root inside him he felt a flicker of hope that perhaps, yes, everything was going to turn out all right.

And he was going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Lance speaks! Well, a little bit at least. We've still got so much to uncover and talk about, but it was a great first step even if it did confirm the rest of the team's biggest fear. Well, at least it's out in the open now so we can fix it without cutting off his bond to Blue. And... sleepover time? :D

For my little Spanish down there at the bottom, "te quiero" is generally the "I love you" used amongst family and close friends while the more recognizable "te amo" is generally reserved for a spouse/lover and is more romantic/sexual in nature (which is hilarious to me because te quiero literally translates to "I want you" and isn't that ironic?).

Also, before this gets buried, I want to apologize to all of you. I've been noticing over the last several weeks a rather steep decline in readership via both comments and views and I believe that the biggest cause traces back to how bloody long this fic has gotten and I am sorry for that. I know it isn't (and hasn't been) full of the action and whump of the first 25ish chapters and I'm not sure most of you signed up for such a long, introspective fic (in my defense I had no idea it was going to go quite this route xD). If you did not and are sitting here twiddling your thumbs and sighing at all of this while waiting for Haggar and Theodek to make an appearance I am sorry for the wait. I wish I could tell you when it is they will be coming, but I do not know. I thought this story would easily be wrapped up in 50 chapters, but it's looking like we're going to be likely hitting at least the 60s before all is said and done. Because, despite the aforementioned fact, I will not be rushing Lance's recovery from what he suffered in the first part of this story; to do so would be unfair to him and to this fic. For those of you who are still here and commenting and enjoying it, thank you. Your comments are what keep me going. So if you are still along on this very, very long journey, please do drop a review now and then (or every chapter, really, no complaints here) with your thoughts and comments. I really do appreciate it.

♥

That said, thank you to the lovely people who did pop in last chapter (and thank you for the birthday wishes as well!): Tyler, Bunshin, Ookamisouleaper, Lancelangst, spn_angels, Whatever, somewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, FandomHuntress, DawnWriter, justaboyfromcuba, rlekt, KethriHolmes, cipheredsong, cipheredsong, Nora, QueenMcawesome, DarumaDoll, Amora, maychorian, JoSaysChill, EverlastingCookie, Proxy_17, Fangirl1967 and Minimicic!
Merry Christmas, happy holidays and good cheer to you all!
Chapter Forty-Seven

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith really shouldn't have been surprised when Shiro fell into step beside him, a calm, steady presence in direct opposition to the uneasy fire racing through him.

"This isn't the way to the living quarters," Shiro said after a few moments.

"Not tired," Keith mumbled, keeping his head down.

Shiro hummed and continued to keep pace as Keith made his way to the training room. He needed to… to hit something before he lashed out at someone else and hurt them and taking on the Gladiator was sure to help ease the almost painful anger that burned inside.

He wanted to fight. To take the battle to Haggar and end the threat so then Lance wouldn't make such stupid declarations about sacrificing himself. Had he really not been listening to a word they'd all said? About how much he meant to them? Lance was an idiot and it pissed Keith off that the other boy would even for a second consider hurting himself like that just to protect them.

Keith growled low in the back of his throat, hands clenching into white-knuckled fists. Did Lance think they couldn't fight back? Was that it? Did he think they were so weak that they'd let Haggar on the ship and practically offer Lance up on a silver platter to her?

Lance had fought against her for days by himself, wounded and alone and honestly thinking he'd been abandoned. That only made Keith angrier that Lance would ever think they'd so callously leave him behind for the sake of something like the universe. Family came before anything else and Keith had finally realized what an amazing one he had right here and he wasn't about to lose any of them.

But upon the first sign of danger Lance went and offered himself up like a lamb to the slaughter. Was that really all he thought he was? Some spare that they could afford to lose? No. No. Keith had seen the fear flicker across Lance's face when he'd realized what the barrier could do. And he still fucking volunteered himself.

Idiot!

Could Lance not be selfish for once in his life and say what he actually wanted? Because although it had taken him a long time to realize it, underneath Lance's jokes and tricks and bravado, he was the most unselfish person Keith had ever met. He would give up anything and everything to make others happy.

It pissed Keith off. Because making others happy and safe should not come at the expense of one's own. Had Lance even ever been happy? He'd acted like it, sure, but all of this had really opened Keith's eyes to just how good of an actor Lance actually was. He'd hidden those feelings so deep that Keith hadn't even suspected there was anything else to the seemingly shallow boy.

Why though? Why would Lance want to project that kind of person? It wasn't who he really was or Hunk would have never been Lance's best friend and Pidge wouldn't have softened to Lance in the way she had.
It was Keith's fault. He'd pushed Lance away, taking the rival comments as mean-spirited rather than Lance's attempt to bond with him. He'd been cruel and harsh because Lance was so carefree and Keith had taken that to mean incompetent and a liability.

And now, when he wanted to try and make amends for his earlier behavior, Lance could barely even look at him. He curled in on himself, reminding Keith so much of who he had once been that it physically hurt, because although he wouldn't say it he was in pain. He'd been through so much and it had left behind scars so deep that Keith wasn't sure they'd ever really heal.

But he wanted to try and help. He didn't like seeing Lance so lifeless and quiet and scared and trying to hide it still as best he could. But he didn't know how. Pidge had said to be himself and she had seemed so confident with that explanation, but Keith still felt lost. How did he show that person to Lance? And when? Lance was so fragile right now and Keith didn't want to hurt him unintentionally to try and make himself feel better.

And all of it came back to how utterly angry the whole situation was making Keith. From the suggestion of a plan that could hurt Lance to Lance accepting it without hesitation because he wanted to protect them. Damnit. He needed to go slice up the Gladiator and cool off this anger before it hurt someone else.

"So," Shiro said and Keith startled, so caught up in his own thoughts that he'd forgotten the other was even there, "want to talk about it?"

"It's stupid," he muttered.

"Keith," and Shiro's tone was soft and unyielding at the same time, "if it's upsetting you it's not stupid. What's wrong?"

He'd stopped walking and Keith found his own legs had copied, leaving the two of them standing in the long hallway. A hand descended on Keith's shoulder and squeezed gently. "What's wrong?" Shiro repeated and Keith was reminded so strongly of sun-warmed park benches and a gentle hand and a younger Shiro smiling so tenderly and promising to always listen and be there for him that he found the words tumbling out.

"Lance," Keith said, "Lance is wrong." Shiro waited patiently as Keith tried to sort his jumbled thoughts into something coherent. "He's… why does he do that, Shiro? Hurt himself? Does he… does he not trust us to help?"

"I think," Shiro said gently, slowly, "that for Lance it's less about himself and more about others. He knows the consequences, Keith. We all saw that. But he… he doesn't want us to get hurt. And to him, that's more important than anything."

"He's being stupid," Keith hissed without any heat. "Doesn't he understand that when he does shit like this he's hurting us too? It's like whatever we say doesn't mean anything to him. He's not listening."

"He's been through a lot," Shiro said quietly. "And it's going to take time for him to feel better." Shiro's face hardened into a mixture of worry and guilt because as Keith knew Shiro always tried to take the blame even when it was not his. "These feelings he's expressed worry me because I didn't see them earlier. It makes me wonder what else I've missed."

"Shiro…"

"All we can do now is look forward and be there for Lance. He's got a lot to sort through, as do we
all." He smiled then, soft and warm and the guilt nearly gone, "And you're doing a great job, Keith. I'm so proud."

"Why?" Keith asked, voice small. "All I do is get angry and…" he swallowed. "How is that helping?"

"You're upset for Lance," Shiro said. "That's the difference. You're looking out for his best interests because right now he isn't doing so himself." Both of Shiro's hands came to rest on Keith's shoulders. "You're being a really good friend, Keith. Lance needs that right now."

"But…" Keith shifted his eyes to the side. "He won't talk to me. He'll barely even look at me."

"It's not just you," Shiro comforted. "He's still finding his feet again, Keith. All of the things he's experiencing right now can be overwhelming. I know. And unlike me…" Shiro let out a soft sigh. "Unlike me Lance hasn't locked those memories away. He's experiencing them here and now and it's… it's beyond terrifying."

Shiro couldn't help the small shudder that made its way down his spine. Keith noticed though and took a step forward, gently wrapping his arms about Shiro and he was tugged in closer a second later with a more contented sigh.

"Thank you," Shiro mumbled, his words muffled as he spoke against the top of Keith's head.

"We're all here for you too, Shiro," Keith said, leaning his cheek against the broad chest and feeling the anger from earlier draining away in the face of Shiro's pain. "And… and you're the strongest person I know. Don't be so… so hard on yourself."

Shiro's response was to tighten the embrace.

"Give him time," Shiro said quietly after a few moments. "Things will work out."

Keith nodded, suddenly bone-tired and if it hadn't been for Shiro he may have slumped to the ground right then.

"Come on, let's get to bed," Shiro said, changing his grip so one arm was snug about Keith's shoulders and turning them back in the direction of the living quarters. "Do you want to bunk with me again?"

"No, I'll be okay."

"My door is always open."

"I know. Thanks, Shiro. But I'll be fine. Really." He needed the time to himself. He had been surrounded by the team for the last two days and comforting and nice as it was, it was also a lot all at once. And now that he knew Lance was home and as safe as could be the nightmares should ease. Hopefully. He knew he'd never stop hearing the screams though.

"All right then," Shiro said a few minutes later as the stopped in front of Keith's door. "Good night." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the top of the dark head and Keith flushed a warm pink. "Pleasant dreams."

Keith surprised himself and gave Shiro one more hug, quick and tight, before he mumbled his own good night and slipped into his immaculate room. He quickly changed into sleep clothes and then slipped under the covers, holding one of the pillows tight to his chest and fell into a restless sleep.
A few doors down the hall Lance was lying similarly curled up on his bed, but Flafie was tucked to his chest and one of his many quilts was wrapped tight about his shoulders. Hunk had insisted he take the hoodie off for bed and he’d been so cold when it had been removed even with the long sleeve shirt underneath, so Hunk had secured the quilt about him and then the blanket before leaving to change into his own sleep wear and secure a few mattresses.

A tentative knock sounded outside the door before it whooshed open and Pidge stepped in, looking swamped in a large tee shirt and Lance wondered if that was how he was appearing to them all now.

"Hey," she said, walking further in and dumping a blanket, pillow and a few other odds and ends on the ground and then settling herself on top of the pile.

"Hi," he said softly, feeling like it wasn't enough but not sure what else to really say.

Pidge didn't seem put off though by the lack of speech and was instead craning her head to look about the room, honey eyes large and bright and not obscured by her glasses, which she must have left behind in her own room. It had been a shock for Lance to learn that not only was his teammate a girl but also the glasses were just for show. He understood her wanting to wear them though. If he'd had anything of home to remind him of his family he'd certainly do the same.

"You have plants?" she landed on, standing up for closer inspection.

"Mm," he affirmed.

"You'd think I'd have some in my room too considering I'm supposed to be one with nature and all that. Maybe…" she sent him a little grin, "you could help me pick one out on our next planet stop?"

"You… want a plant?" Lance repeated, the concept not yet computing but the sheer randomness of it easing the nervous ache somewhat. This was just Pidge, he reminded himself. There was no need to be scared. He could do this. Just like old times. "Where would you put it?" he found himself asking.

"Your room is…"

"A junk pile, I know, I know," she sighed.

"You're a hoarder," Lance told her, feeling his lips trying to twitch into a smile, failing and he tried not to dwell on it.

"And a proud one," she grinned. "My mind works better in chaos. Besides, you're one to talk. Look at this laundry pile. It's got to be a week…" she trailed off, realizing then why exactly there was such a large build up. "Anyways," she corrected quickly, "maybe a plant will encourage me to keep some section clean. It's worth a shot right?"

Lance wasn't sure what he was going to say to that, but his stomach came up with its own answer, growling loudly and painfully. He winced at both the volume and the gnawing ache, curling up tighter around it.

Pidge gave him a sympathetic look. "Stomach okay?"

Lance managed a tiny shake of his head. "Hungry," he admitted. "It hurts." And yet he knew he shouldn't eat anymore, not until Hunk or Coran gave him the go ahead. Everything had finally settled and he'd been relieved that he hadn't thrown anything back up following the quintessence discussion. Eating more could make it better but it could also make it worse.
Pidge edged a little closer to the bed, kneeling though so her head was about at Lance's height, her hands tucked up under her arms and Lance realized with a pang of guilt she was afraid to touch him. That hurt. More than it should have.

"Would a heat pack help?" she asked, not commenting on his newest wince. "My mom used to give them to me and Matt when our stomachs hurt. I… I have something similar that Coran gave me since I fall asleep in the hangar all the time and it gets rather cold in there. I brought it with."

She rustled into her blanket pile and emerged with what looked like an oddly thin green pillow about the size of a dinner plate. "It'll last for about six varga," she said, turning it in her hands. "If you want to try it."

Lance's throat felt abnormally tight again but he managed to squeeze out a quiet "Gracias" and Pidge gave him another tentative smile.

"Here," she said, holding it out and closing the space between them. "I already turned it on."

Lance carefully pulled his left hand free from under the blanket and took it, eyes widening at how warm it was. It was like Hunk packed up into something small. He lifted the blanket and tucked it against his shirt and stomach, the heat seeping in and driving away the worst of the pain.

"Thank you, Pidge," he said after a few moments, letting the heat soak in. "It… it feels nice."

Her smile that time did not reach her eyes and he was alarmed to see the hint of brightness gathering. What had he said wrong?

"Did…" she broke off, averting her gaze. She couldn't ask that. She wasn't here to make him think about his captivity or his pain or anything of that nature. She was here to… to be here for him. And, guiltily, because she couldn't stand the thought of being alone right now.

Despite the fact his head was on the pillow Lance somehow cocked it in a question, as a permission to go on.

"Did they feed you?" she blurted out, coloring immediately but unable to take it back. It had been her worry since the beginning; feeling bad for eating food when she wasn't sure if Lance was eating at all. And given how he had grown thinner, highlighted especially in his face, and the way that Hunk was so, so carefully monitoring portions as though worried about refeeding syndrome, she couldn't help but fear her suspicions were founded.

And now, seeing him in actual pain and trying his best to hide it just made her feel even worse for eating anything at all. It was selfish of her, looking for some confirmation to set her own guilt aside, but she too also wanted to know more about what had happened. She wanted to help and she couldn't do that until she had more data. Lance was the only one who could give that to her.

All was quiet in the room for a moment then and Pidge was just about to apologize – this had been a mistake, she should have never asked, she was turning people back into numbers and God was she stupid– when Lance spoke.

"No," he whispered, curling up tighter at the word. "They… they didn't. No food. No w-water," he tripped over the last word and Pidge's heart ached remembering Coran's observations about drowning. She mentally kicked herself for asking, for putting the need for knowledge ahead of Lance's feelings.

"I'm sorry," she whispered back, desperately wishing she could reach out but resisting the urge. She had done enough damage now with her question. Her, stupid, stupid question.
Lance sniffled and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out what had been conjured. The first days had been the worst; locked in the cell with no contact and no answers. He'd been near delirious with thirst and pain by the time they finally retrieved him and it had never been sated during his entire time with the Galra. They gave him enough to keep him alive through the vein valves, but that was it.

His stomach growled again and he whimpered. Feeding it anything had almost made it worse because he was reminded of what it felt like to have food again. The last couple days had been so full of pain and horror that he hadn't even given his aching stomach a thought. Now it was back with a vengeance. It hurt.

"Lance?" Pidge asked voice small and Lance felt the ache intensify that he was scaring Pidge. Just as he'd worried he would. He forced his eyes open, the scene blurry with gathered tears but Pidge was hovering just next to him.

"Lance," she repeated. "Can… can I put my hand on your shoulder? Please? I…"

"Sí," he managed and the tiniest of hands descended feather light on his upturned shoulder under the blanket. It moved in a hesitant circle, but Lance leaned into it – Pidge's hand, Pidge's hand, he told himself – and her movements became slightly stronger but still gentle.

"I'm sorry," she whispered again. "That was really stupid of me."

"No," Lance mumbled, finally relaxing into Pidge's careful touch. "No. I… I need to…” He swallowed. "I need to… to stop being so… pathetic," the last word barely audible.

"Don't say that about yourself," Pidge said. "You're not. You're funny and brave and… and…” her own throat felt tight. "I love you. And I just… I just…"

Her hand tightened unconsciously on Lance's shoulder. "I'm sorry I hurt you," she got out. "I hurt you. I shocked you and I hurt you and it was my f-fault. And then I…” tear-lined eyes looked to her hand and she withdrew it back to her, hunching over. "I did it again. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Lance."

It took Lance a few seconds of watching Pidge cry with guilt, clutching her hands to her and kneeling before him, before he shook off his own remembered despair and struggled to sitting, desperate to soothe her.

"Pidge, no," he whispered. "No. You never…"

She only shook her head. "I hurt you. I even… even…” she hiccupped. "With Blue. I th-thought… the barrier…”

Lance carefully slid off the bed, dragging the blanket and quilt with him and sat in front of her. He kept his right hand tucked up against his stomach and the heat pack he was loathe to relinquish, but his left he reached out and placed it lightly atop Pidge's clasped hands.

Her head jerked up, tear tracks rampant on flushed cheeks and hiccupped back another sob.

"You've never hurt me," Lance said, giving her hands a small squeeze. "Never."

She didn't look like she entirely believed him but she didn't try and protest. Instead she looked down at their hands, bandaged mocha over pale peach. "Can…” her shoulders gave a small shake. "Can I hug you?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Sí, yes."
Her hands came shakily forward and encircled him about his chest, followed by her body as she pressed her head against his chest, his heart thumping just as fast as hers, and breathed.

This was different from any hug yet. Where Shiro and Hunk were both large and had encompassed all of Lance within their arms, Pidge was so small. Lance raised his own arms and settled them against her lower back, not tight but there. She snuggled more into the embrace, her own tightening but not painfully.

"Is this okay?" she mumbled into his chest and Lance gave a nod. There was nothing to be scared of here. Just Pidge and Pidge needed a hug. Needed to give one. And she was no Haggar. She was soft and warm and tiny and smelled vaguely of mango.

He inhaled again, realizing the scent was coming from her hair that was tickling the bottom of his chin. It didn't make him flinch back though, not the way a hand towards his face did, so he leaned further over, tucking his chin against her head.

"I am sorry though," she whispered. "For everything you went through. For... for not being there. But I'm here now." Her hands tightened and it felt like the protective hold it should rather than a threat. Lance relaxed even more. "I'll always be here. We all will."

"Gracias," Lance murmured into her hair, tears pricking his eyes again.

All was quiet then until the door opened with a whoosh and with it Hunk's voice, muffled behind mattresses. "Okay, I can't see where I'm going so Pidge, please don't let me step on you, okay? I already almost took out the mice."

"We're by the bed," Pidge called, pulling her face free of Lance's chest. She sounded congested but her tone was brighter than it had been just minutes before. After a tick she sounded affronted. "How small do you think I am?"

Hunk appeared a moment later after dropping two heavy mattresses with a thump just inside the door. His eyes widened and then softened as he took in the two sitting together still in an embrace with fresh tear stains on their faces. But neither looked upset and Lance didn't appear to be uncomfortable so Hunk beamed at them and entered the room more fully, shaking out his arms

"You could have made two trips," Pidge said, not relinquishing her hold on Lance.

"But I managed so well in one."

Pidge stuck her tongue out at the teasing tone and Hunk laughed.

Hunk maneuvered around them, shoving Lance's pile of dirty laundry into the closet and the stool under the desk. Both mattresses were squeezed in, although the edge of one rode of the other for now until it could move flush against the length of Lance's bed, that two Paladins were currently blocking.

Pidge reluctantly pulled her arms back from Lance so she could get out of the way and assist, moving her own pile of bedding onto the far mattress. She knew it was best if Hunk was closest to Lance for the evening.

Lance missed Pidge's hold as soon as she'd left, and despite the loss he felt such a relief that his feelings towards touch were beginning to slowly morph back to what they had once been; that the lack of it was the hardest part.

He was getting better.
It almost brought a smile to his face, but not quite, and that dampened the stirring of joy.

He tried not to let it show though, awkwardly pulling himself back onto the bed. Hunk was there a moment later, shaking out the blanket and placing it back over him although his eyes were drawn to the heat pack that Lance still had yet to let go. It was definitely helping soothe the ache and warm him as well.

"Stomach hurting?" he asked gently, retrieving Flafie from where it had tumbled off the far pillow and allowing Lance to take it in his left hand and cuddle it to his chest.

"A bit."

Hunk settled himself on the bed next to Lance, one large hand coming up and giving Lance's back a gentle rub and Lance curled in further to provide more access. This was nice. It was almost like what his mamá would do when he was feeling ill. Rub his back and pet his hair – he broke that thought off before he could dwell on it right now. He'd been doing so good. He wasn't going to think of her tonight. Not if he could help it.

"We'll get you some more food in the morning," Hunk said. Some fluids too, if possible, he noted silently. The vein valve had been keeping Lance decently hydrated and while the gamibolap did have quite a bit of water in it, it was not enough. Lance really needed to try and drink something, but Hunk knew not to push that yet. Small steps. Worst case, maybe they could hook him up to a vein valve just to get something else in him. So far there had been no adverse reaction to that.

Lance gave a soft hum of acknowledgement, feeling drowsy with the continued motion.

"Get some sleep, hermano," Hunk said. "Pidge and I will be right here if you need anything, okay?"

He thought he might have answered that, but he wasn't sure, the heavy contentment pressing pleasantly down on him. A second later he was sound asleep.

"He's exhausted," Pidge observed quietly, sitting on her mattress with a spare pillow hugged to her chest.

"Hopefully he'll sleep through the night," Hunk sighed, removing his hand, adjusting the blanket one last time, and then sliding to the floor to join Pidge. "He needs it."

"I think this is the earliest I've ever gone to bed," Pidge said, lying down as Hunk lowered the lights in the room, leaving the corners glowing though with a soft blue light so they could still make out each other's features but dark enough to not interfere with sleep.

"You can stay up for a while, if you want," Hunk said, although he was settling himself into his own mattress. "The light won't bother me if you wanted to work on something on your tablet."

"Nah," Pidge said. "It's been a long day. I am tired. Besides," her voice lowered, "I don't want to look at the… the barrier data right now."

"Hey," Hunk rolled so he was looking at her. "Don't beat yourself up for that, okay? It's a brilliant idea. It just… needs some fine tuning."

"I'm an idiot," she muttered. "Everyone thinks I'm this genius and yet..."

"Pidge…"

"It was Keith – Keith! – who is even worse with feelings than me to point out the obvious," she
interrupted, guilt coloring her words. "I was just looking at the numbers, Hunk. I didn't even think about what… what that would be like. I just… I just want him to be safe and… and…" She swallowed heavily. "Happy, Hunk. I want him to be happy and he can't be if he's cut off from Blue. And I was willing to do it."

"And he was too," Hunk said softly. "You want to protect him, Pidge. He wants to protect us. Neither of you are wrong in your feelings. And it's all going to work out, okay? We either figure this out with a guarantee that it won't hurt Lance or we'll find a different way to stop Haggar."

"My plan would have hurt him, Hunk. I wasn't protecting him then."

"Come here," Hunk said, opening up his upper hand and Pidge needed no second bidding to scoot across their conjoined mattresses and into Hunk's embrace, his larger body enveloping hers completely and she sighed, pressing her back to his chest. "You didn't hurt him," he repeated. "You're looking out for him. And I know you." He squeezed her tightly. "You're going to figure this out. I know it."

"Thank you," she said after a moment, voice thick. "I… thank you, Hunk. I won't let you guys down."

"You never do."

She blushed prettily in embarrassment and patted at his hands to release her then. He did and she rolled back to her own pillow stack.

"So," Pidge said, voice a little more level after a few moments. "I should warn you before you fall asleep."

"This sounds dangerous," Hunk teased, pulling his blankets over him. "What?"

"I cling."

"Cling?"

"Like a koala bear," she admitted. "You may wake up to me hanging off you if I roll over enough."

"I'll be honest, that sounds adorable," Hunk smiled and he completely deserved the pillow Pidge tossed that landed on his face.

"Just letting you know," she mumbled, voice muffled by the pillow she'd placed over her face to hide its redness. "So you don't… panic, or something."

"Lance is an octopus," Hunk told her. Or, well, he was. But he chose to focus on the happier memory and hope that they got back to that. "At least your limbs are all cute and tiny."

He got another pillow to the face and Hunk vaguely wondered how many she had.

A second later he felt his mattress dip and Pidge tugged at the newest one that Hunk had commandeered. He let it go with a laugh and Pidge rolled back to her side.

"I'm not cute," she muttered. "Or tiny."

"I beg to differ. You're like a little munchkin."

"Hunk…"
"Part of the lollypop guild."

"I hate you," but there was a smile in her voice.

"Go to sleep you adorable little munchkin," Hunk told her. "Dream of lollipops and yellow brick roads."

All was silent for a few minutes when Pidge spoke. "Thank you," she whispered. "Good night, Hunk."

"Good night, Pidge."

And both slowly drifted off, neither admitting to the fact that there were indeed lollipops and a yellow brick road leading them off to their dreams.

xxx

"I… I believe I may have found something."

Allura's quiet announcement pierced the otherwise silent kitchen as Coran had finished washing the dishes and was drying them to be put away.

She had gone to the kitchen to keep Coran company, but with the recent conversation still weighing on her mind, had become distracted by some of the texts she had been reading prior to dinner. So while Coran cleaned she had read and the mice, who had remained behind in the kitchen and were looking rather rotund from licking most of the plates free of their crumbs, lazed about the table.

"What is it?" Coran asked, drying his hands and coming over.

"It is regarding the transfer," Allura said, pointing to the page she had been on. "Look. What do you see?"

Coran studied the diagram in front of him, eyes widening. "A circle. A transfer circle."

She nodded, excited. "Yes, exactly. A circle. A mutual circle, Coran. If… if all of our current Paladins were to give quintessence then… Lance should be able to still connect through them to Voltron. And the Blue Lion! He would not be cut off at all!"

"The circle would create a continuous loop," Coran mused, tracing one out with his finger. "The quintessence feedback should remain infinite between all parties this way and Lance would never lose contact with them or the Lions. In fact, should this be channeled into him…" He looked up, eyes wide. "He may very well be able to sense all of the Lions. Like yourself, Princess."

Allura nodded, almost giddy with the idea. "Yes, I think so too. It should not be the mental link like he has with the Blue Lion, but he would receive constant signals from them all." Her smile faltered. "You do not think that is too much, do you? I do not want to overwhelm him."

"You are able to control it, are you not?" Coran asked and Allura nodded. She had dampened her link with all of the Lions to where she could feel them if she sought them out, but otherwise she left their connections alone. "Then you can teach him," Coran said. "Besides…" he smiled, "if any of our dear humans were able to handle such a bond I have no doubts it would be Lance."

"Agreed," Allura smiled. "Oh, Coran. This… this is wonderful."

"Let us not rush though," Coran cautioned.
"Of course. I was thinking, perhaps, tomorrow if Lance is up for it I could try and make a connection." She tapped the page. "Not a transfer of anything, but an attempt to connect to the other Paladins to see if I can even handle the flow. It might be too much," she frowned. "It will be more quintessence than even the Balmera, Coran, and at that time I had the Balmera to guide me. I do not know if…"

"I will be your anchor," Coran said, placing a hand atop her slender one and squeezing it. "I will help you to channel however I am able to."

She placed her other atop his. "Thank you, Coran. I could not do this without you." A small smirk. "Quite literally, I may add."

Coran laughed then and Allura joined in, their hearts light with hope.

This could work. And then Lance would truly be safe.

xxx

"I have done it."

The words echoed about the small chamber, clustered full of vials and arrays and books scattered across tables. A long purple finger traced along the edges of such a rune, inked in beautiful red blood.

In the center of the array rested a single vial with a tiny drop of glowing blue energy. She smiled at it lovingly. It was the last piece of her Lance that she had right now.

And now it would lead her to him.

It had taken longer that she had wanted, but her array and spell were complete. Once activated it would scour the universe for its perfect quintessence match through the astral plain. No technology, no gimmicks and not even Altean magic could stop her spell. It was perfect. Just like her Lance.

A whispered incantation lit up the room with a sick yellow that matched the gleam in Haggar's eyes and she laughed a bone-chilling sound of delight.

It would not be long now.
lots of little extra goodies from the first one, *Shining Strong*. Enjoy!

Love and hugs and sweet dreams of yellow brick roads to the wonderful reviewers: Guns_Of_Gamora, FandomHuntress, Proxy_17, Ookamisoulreaper, xxxshino, Minimicic, chrisiecub, saltrock_sea, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, MilkyWay, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, StingingLikeABee, QueenMcawesome, justaboyfromcuba, alexries, Izzy, SteamPunkFae, Clawbreeze, Neokru, Alexa, Anna_4158, glitteringconstellations, maychorian, soldmysoultofandoms, EverlastingCookie, joey, Nora, Space Dad and Sophie Friedenwald-Fishman!

Enjoying the fic? Please do drop a comment! And just because you review once doesn't mean you must ride off into the sunset never to return like some beautiful action hero; you are more than welcome to post again and again (and again and again, you get the picture ;p). To those of you who come back week after week, you are the best ever and I love you for it! Thanks guys, look forward to hearing what you thought of this chapter!
Hunk blinked his eyes open trying to figure out what had awoken him. He felt cocooned and comfortable in his blankets with something warm wrapped around him and –

That made him turn his head, alarm dropping as soon as it had spiked as Pidge was revealed, arms and legs encircling his arm and tucked up against body. Koala indeed. He huffed out a soft laugh, realizing that her hold must have awoken him.

But then he remembered why, exactly, Pidge would be sleeping on a mattress on the floor with him and he turned his head quickly back the other direction towards Lance's bed. And his stomach dropped as it revealed not the sleeping Lance he wanted but one that was shaking with barely there moans issuing between sealed lips.

"Oh, Lance," he murmured. He set about prying Pidge's rather firm grip from him, praying she would remain asleep. No such luck as by the time he had freed her second hand Lance's distress was growing louder and interspersed with muffled words and Pidge was blinking awake at the sound and the movement.

"Lance?" she mumbled, sleepy honey eyes gaining clarity. She shot upright. "Lance!"

Hunk was already at Lance's bedside, trying to rouse the boy with just his voice. "C'mon, Lance, wake up. It's okay. It's just a dream. Estás bien."

"No," Lance whispered, eyes fluttering beneath tightly closed lids. "N-no."

"Lance, you're okay," Hunk cautiously put a hand on Lance's shoulder but Lance didn't even react to the touch except to speak more, faster.

"No me dejes. Por favor. N-no..." Lance's voice broke in his sleep. "No me dejes."

"Lance, wake up, c'mon," Hunk pleaded, shaking one thin shoulder gently. "I don't know what you're saying, hermano. Wake up, please. It's okay. Estás bien."

"P-please," Lance pleaded, lost to the throes of some nightmare. Or worse, Hunk grimaced, a memory.

"Lance, it's okay, you're safe," Pidge tried, hands wrapped around Lance's left forearm. "It's us."

"Please," he whispered again. "No me dejes. D-don't... please don't leave m-me."

"We're right here, Lance. We're right here," Hunk soothed even as his stomach bottomed out. Leave him? When had they left him? What was he seeing? "Come on now, wake up."

And Lance did, with a choked gasp and flailing limbs. His eyes were blown wide and stared past both Pidge and Hunk, unseeing.

"Lance, hey," Hunk said gently, giving the shoulder under his hand a gentle squeeze.
It was the wrong move.

Lance let off a panicked yell and wrenched himself away from Hunk's hand, desperately scrambling backwards until he hit the wall. "No me toques," he choked out. "No me toques."

Hunk felt his heart shatter.


Lance continued to press himself against the wall, breath coming in harsh pants.

"Lance, Pidge whispered, hugging her arms to herself so she didn't try to reach out. "It's us. We're here. You're s-safe."

"Should have grabbed the carmodian leaves," Hunk muttered, guilt filling him. He cast his eyes about for something else instead that might do the trick and his eyes landed on Lance's desk full of various skincare products.

"Keep talking to him," he instructed Pidge, dashing over to the selection. As he pulled off lids and popped caps he heard Pidge continue to murmur, keeping her voice low. Just like how one would talk to a scared animal.

He blinked back tears as he grabbed yet another jar, trying to find a scent that might help. This one, he realized, was Lance's face cream and smelled of mint and cloves. It wasn't as strong the carmodian leaves, but it was better than nothing and he stumbled back across the room.

Pidge had pressed herself up against the bed but was remaining kneeling on the ground, loathe to get closer when Lance was cowering away from her words, mumbling "no me toques," over and over again.

Hunk clambered onto the mattress, knees sinking in, and he held out the jar his full arm length just under Lance's nose. On Lance's next panicked inhale he coughed instead – the cloves, likely, Hunk thought – and clarity returned to the dark eyes.

"H-Hunk?" he stuttered, remaining tucked against the wall. His eyes roved past Hunk's face. "P-Pidge?"

"Estás bien," Hunk spoke slowly, remaining where he was. "We're right here. We're in the castle. ¿Recuerdas el castillo?"

Lance's eyes darted about again, before coming to land on Hunk's face. "¿Castillo?" he repeated, voice small.

"Sí," Hunk murmured. "En el castillo."

Lance seemed to deflate then. "Lo siento," he whispered. "Yo no ... I didn't mean to... to wake you."

"Lance, no," Hunk said gently. "It's okay, hermano. I, we" – and Pidge nodded fervently– "don't want you to go through that alone. It sounded like a really scary nightmare, huh?"

Lance paused, something undecipherable flitting across his face, before he gave a nod and Hunk's stomach clenched. He was right then. It wasn't just a nightmare. It had been a memory.

But of what?
"Do you want to talk about it?" Hunk offered, and as he anticipated Lance shook his head, eyes widening. "That's okay, it's okay," Hunk said. "Would… would you like a hug instead?"

After a second Lance gave a hesitant nod. Ever so slowly he pried himself off the wall, the empty space behind him sending a new shudder up his spine. Hunk waited patiently on the edge of the bed, arms non-threatening by his sides and his expression, while worried, was gentle. Pidge was just a foot off of that, biting her lip and looking a blink away from tears.

Lance hated the hot wash of shame that seemed to fill him, but unable to stop it. Dios, even when he thought he was doing better he wasn't. He was still a mess that even now seemed to be filled with Haggar's whispers. Pathetic. Weak.

The nightmare, or memory, he supposed, was fading but the overwhelming despair of it was still lodged in his chest and making it hard to breathe. He thought he'd been abandoned. Again. All of this had just been one long, wonderful dream, but he'd found himself back with Haggar and his friends taking off with a copy of him.

But then that despair had turned to fear as hands reached out and grabbed him and suddenly he was back with Theodek and Haggar, strapped to a table, and then wrapped up in Haggar's arms, her nails digging into his arm, and then to Theodek, dragging him across cold metal before a burst of cloves had wrenched him from his nightmare world.

It wasn't real. Not anymore. He was safe, in the castle. He wasn't there anymore. He hadn't been left behind. He never had been. It was all some sick lie Haggar had made and he had believed it and he had failed and –

The spiraling thoughts ground to a halt as Hunk's hand ever so lightly descended upon Lance's shoulder and the comforting warmth from just that pushed back against the darkness.

"Hey, hey, it's all right," Hunk murmured, slowly pulling Lance to him and Lance let him, sinking against the broad chest as the arm more securely wrapped around his back. He felt Pidge's hands then land on his upper right arm and she pressed herself against his other side.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing heartbeat. This was okay. This was safe. He was safe.

"We're here," Pidge whispered.

"And we're not going anywhere," Hunk said, voice thick.

And Lance believed them.

This was what was real. Not Haggar's twisted mind games or her poisonous words. This.

He let out a soft sigh, pressing his cheek against Hunk and listening to the thumping heartbeat below. Steady. Just like Hunk.


Hunk squeezed him then. "Glad to hear it. Think you're up for trying to go back to sleep? We've got a few more hours till morning."

He was tired, but…

"I have an idea," Pidge said, disentangling herself from the hug and scooting off Lance's bed. She
made for his night table and pulled out a familiar pair of headphones and the music player identical to her own that she'd rigged for Lance. "How about some music? No headphones," she said pulling them from the port as she noticed Lance's eyes focus on them with a slight uptick of breathing. "Just... let's listen to the classical Altean orchestra."

She clicked it on and the sound of something similar to a piano sounded from the device, a slow, soothing melody.

"I can run to the kitchen and get the carmodian leaves," Hunk said, but Lance's left hand latched tighter to where it had tangled in his shirt. "Or not. The music okay, hermano?"

"It's nice," Lance mumbled. "Gracias, Pidge."

"Donut nada," she said and Hunk snorted so loudly it near echoed in the room and Lance's shoulders spasmed as though he was laughing although no actual smile showed on his face.

"What?" she asked. "Isn't that 'thank you'?"

"It's 'de nada'," Hunk clarified, still chuckling.

"You two are just going to have to teach me then," Pidge said, placing the music player on the nightstand so it wouldn't get bumped. "Rude jerks, seriously."

Lance though had perked his head up and cast a curious, hopeful look at Pidge that wrenched something inside of her. "You... you want to learn Spanish?"

"The more knowledge one has the better," she said matter-of-factly. "And... I know it reminds you of home," her voice grew softer. "I thought, maybe, it'd be nice to hear more often."

Tears were sparkling in the dim lightning but Pidge was right in assuming they were happy tears. "I... Pidge... gracias. I'd... I'd love to."

She sent him a full mega-watt smile. "Excellent. We can start tomorrow. For now though let's all get back to sleep. Bien night."

Hunk did laugh out loud then and Lance let out a soft huff.

"What?" Pidge demanded. "Bien is 'good', right?"

"It is," Hunk chuckled. "But you would use 'bueno' in this case. And then night is 'noche' but you're addressing it to us so you'd say actually 'buenas noches'."

"And... 'noches' is feminine plural," Lance added in quietly, with faint amusement. "So it's opposite, I suppose to what you'd think. You use 'buenas' instead of 'buenos'."

Pidge let out a low shriek of frustration and threw her hands up. "What kind of language is this?"

"Less complicated than English," Hunk said with a straight face. He would know. He still didn't understand half of what was said when he went to Lance's house but he was pretty good at inferring and guessing.

Pidge opened her mouth to protest, thought about it, and then sighed, defeated. "You win. Let's just go to sleep now though, please? You can correct me more in the morning."

She gave Lance's arm one last squeeze before she returned to her mattress, no doubts in her mind that she'd find herself on Hunk's again come morning.
"Ready to try to sleep again?" Hunk asked, voice low and interspersed with the piano melody. "I'll stay up till you fall asleep."

"You don't have to do that," Lance said as Hunk helped him lie back down and pulled the quilt and blanket back over and tucked Flafie back up to him.

"I don't have to, but I want to." His hand smoothed down the blankets and rested itself on Lance's shoulder. "Sleep, hermano. We'll be right here when you wake up."

"Buenos noches," Pidge called from her pile of blankets.

"Buenas," Hunk and Lance corrected in tandem and Pidge let out an undignified scream into her pillow.

The two boys caught each other's eyes and Hunk was delighted to see a sparkle to Lance's.

"Buenas noches, hermano," Hunk smiled. "Sweet dreams."

"Buenas noches, Hunk," Lance whispered, eyes already closing. "Gracias."

Within a matter of minutes there were two sets of heavier breathing echoing in the room as exhaustion won out against anything else. Hunk gently removed his hand from Lance's arm, not wanting to become a part of any nightmare, and slid to his own mattress.

He remained awake though, staring at the ceiling with trouble thoughts churning. Lance had awoken from a memory. A horrible one where he thought… thought he'd been left behind? Abandoned? He'd already told them he hadn't thought a rescue was coming – and that hurt fresh all over again – so what had he been seeing in his nightmare?

It brought Hunk back to when Lance had awoken the second time, whispering that this wasn't real. He hadn't given it much thought, as Lance had calmed down after he'd connected with Blue, but he had seemed determined to believe that they weren't actually there, despite identifying Hunk just seconds before.

He cast his memory back, trying to recall those terrifying moments as he bundled Lance into his arms and raced for Blue.

Lance had screamed for something – someone – to get out of his head, trying to gouge his own so hard that blood had stained his fingers. Haggar? It was the only thing that made sense even as it made Hunk's stomach roll. He knew now that she had been trying to break Lance's mind so it stood to reason Lance thought he was hearing her. Maybe?

And then on his sprint to Blue, Lance had alternated between begging and pleading and uttering "I know" in both English and Spanish. But knew what? That this wasn't real? Why would he think something like that though? Why would he try to keep telling Hunk, or whoever he thought Hunk was, that he knew this wasn't real?

More and more of the aftermath was coming back now, frightening in its intensity and Hunk shook.

Lance had asked Shiro and Coran if they were real. He was blind at that point, so it made sense to make certain it was indeed them. But someone would normally ask if they were there, not if they were real. Real's opposite was fake and if they weren't real then Lance thought they were fake and what exactly did that even mean?

He'd had hints of it later too. When Lance had awoken from his nap and had clung to Hunk,
murmuring in Spanish and inhaling deeply as though trying to actually sniff Hunk. And, as they'd realized, scent had a beyond calming effect on Lance. Hunk had at the time chalked it up to heavy breathing from the nightmare, but what if it was exactly as it sounded (smelled?) and that was that Lance was trying to ground himself through something other than sight and sound.

As though reassure himself that Hunk was actually there because he couldn't trust his other senses.

Hunk's blood ran cold.

God, what had the witch done? What had she made him believe?

They'd seen the clone she'd made of Lance, so real that they had believed it to be him. If it hadn't been for Blue they would have fallen for her trick, hook, line and sinker. And Blue had been the only one able to identify him because she sensed his quintessence. Humans did not have that ability. Which meant that...

Which meant that if Haggar had made clones of them then Lance would have thought they were real. Even if they had not been perfect Lance had been in so much pain and disoriented, not to mention blind for who knew how long, that they would have seemed real to him.

Hunk muffled a horrified sob in his pillow as the implications sank in. Haggar had used them to torture Lance. To break him apart from the inside. What had she made them say? Do? Had they been the ones to drive knifes into him? To burn him? To… to drown him?

Hunk felt his stomach heave and only through sheer effort did he not throw up, instead curling himself into a ball and trying to breathe only through his nose. Even as his stomach eventually calmed his thoughts raced, terror building with each pass.

He did not sleep for the rest of the night.

xxx

Lance fortunately did not suffer any more raging nightmares for the duration of the night. Hunk had soothed away the two that had tried to crop up, his words flowing with the Altean music on in the background as he himself was not sleeping.

Pidge had awoken a little after seven and blinked at Hunk, who was leaning against Lance's bed and almost nodding off.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asked.

Hunk jerked his head up with a snort. "Wha—? Yes, no, I think so?"

"Are you always so articulate in the morning?" Pidge grinned. "Seriously, you look awful. Is Lance…?"

"He's okay," Hunk said. "Slept through the rest of the night."

"You clearly didn't."

"Couldn't," Hunk admitted, rubbing at his eyes. "Thinking." He debated telling Pidge his new discovery but held his tongue. No sense in freaking her out right now. He'd wait until he had a chance to talk to Lance. Or maybe mention it to Coran or Shiro and see what they thought. Make sure he wasn't crazy before he launched his theory and scared them all more than they needed to be.
Because despite the hints Lance had not come outright and said anything. Whether that was because he as ashamed or scared to or he was trying to hide his pain from the others was anyone's guess, but Hunk was going with the latter. That's what Lance did. He bottled things up so he wouldn't hurt other people and if Haggar had done what Hunk thought she had… It was no wonder Lance didn't want to say anything because it would hurt them to know their faces and voices were used in such a way.

"Well I'm thinking a quick shower before breakfast," Pidge said, cracking her back. "I'll remember to change the sign this time too."

"Appreciate it," Hunk grinned.

The Paladins all shared a communal bathroom that had one shower, one toilet and two sinks that all went around in a big open almost locker-room type chamber. The shower did have a curtain and the toilet a stall door, but it was still rather public.

After they'd found out Pidge was a girl – and she had previously been taking showers in the dead of night to avoid any unwanted interruptions – they'd created a sign to be hung outside on the door for Pidge to put up if she was in the bathroom and wanted privacy. It was supposed to be just the standard 'woman' icon used for public restrooms, but Lance had colored it green and added cat ears to the head and a tail and Pidge had added the figure to be holding a wrench and her bayard.

Allura had initially offered to move Pidge to another wing of the ship so she'd have her own bathroom, but she had refused the offer as she had no desire to be several hallways down all by herself.

However, Pidge often forgot to flip the sign to open when she left. Hunk had come out of his room one time to find Lance practically crying at the bathroom door – he'd been there for over an hour – because he wanted a shower and Pidge wasn't coming out and training was starting in less than ten minutes. Hunk had admired his patience as Lance normally had no qualms about barging in on someone's personal space but Pidge was rather terrifying, especially in the mornings if she was particularly sleep-deprived from working on projects all night.

Pidge had strolled by a near minute later, humming and not realizing the danger. Lance had looked between her and the sign and chased her down the hall screaming bloody murder. It ended somehow in a giant food goo fight in which they had both needed showers and Pidge had been forced to wait outside while Lance got one first and he took over an hour abusing it.

Pidge rarely forgot the sign since, but it had also been a few days since she'd had to use it as no one was really in the sleeping quarters at the same time anymore.

Hunk had no desire to take a shower but he did want to get dressed. Lance was sleeping soundly, breathing deep and even, so Hunk hurried to his own room to change back into his regular clothes and then back, the whole thing done in under five minutes.

Lance was still asleep although lightly stirring. Fortunately, it appeared, not from a nightmare.

Hunk set about tidying up the room some, propping the mattresses against the wall because he was not planning on leaving unless Lance asked him to. Not while Lance was having both sleeping and living nightmares that were still rattling Hunk hours later.

By seven thirty though Hunk knew he had to start getting Lance actually moving or they were going to be late for breakfast. Teeth brushing was a must – even with just toothpaste, if that was all Lance could handle – and Hunk really had to pee too. Pidge should be well and clear of the bathroom now
"Lance," he called softly, shutting off the music and turning the lights up to a mid-level and Lance moaned, turning his head into his pillow to escape it. "Lance. Time to wake up." While Lance could certainly use the sleep, he needed food just as much. Hunk figured they could eat breakfast and then retire to the lounge where Lance could nap if he wanted to or maybe be up for talking about something light.

"Lance," Hunk repeated. "Don't make me have to take the blankets off." That was normally the number one way to wake Lance, who hated the cold. Hunk had done it more than once a week normally at the Garrison to get Lance up and moving before he was late to class. Or, well, later. Because Lance had a full beauty routine to complete in the mornings that could not be rushed no matter the consequences.

However, Hunk was hesitant to do so now in case it triggered anything the Galrans had done. The light seemed to be making Lance uncomfortable enough, although he wasn't shaking so Hunk took that the fact he'd hidden his face to be a normal reaction rather than a fearful one.

"La-ance," he sing-songed. "Wake uh-hup….

Lance gave an audible groan then, muffled as it was by the pillow. A second later a pair of glazed ocean eyes opened and stared uncomprehendingly at Hunk. Hunk smiled back as the eyes slowly blinked.

This would be the first time, he realized, that Lance had awoken normally and without a nightmare. He had almost gotten used to the quick gasps and the flurried movement, so this was a nice change. A bit of normal and he relished in it.

"s morning?" Lance mumbled, eyes closing again.

"On this ship it is at least," Hunk said, a throwback to one of their old arguments of it always being morning/night/lunchtime somewhere. "Come on, breakfast is waiting."

Lance did perk up ever so slightly at that and his stomach let out a painful sounding grumble a moment later. Lance winced and Hunk did too as no doubt that was actually painful.

"I've got your hoodie right here," Hunk coaxed. "And I promise, the room isn't cold."

Lance let out another groan but his left hand pulled itself free of his blanket cocoon and he shoved the blankets down, shivering a moment later.

Hunk was already there though and offered the garment up. Things passing near Lance's face still had him flinch, but he did do slightly better when it was his own hands doing the movement even if he still withdrew some.

But the sweatshirt was more than big and it practically just fell over Lance's head without any tugging and Lance pried his arms up and through the sleeves.

"There you go," Hunk said as Lance was dwarfed in the yellow garment and looking more awake. Fully aware too, he noted with relief. There was no hint of fear and it only reinforced the saying that everything looked better in the morning and his own advice about time. The more time they could put between Lance and his captivity the better he would feel.

Lance did look better too, Hunk observed as Lance dug into the blankets to retrieve Allura's stuffed animal. The bruise-like bags had nearly disappeared from under his eyes and his skin had a more
natural pallor to it that didn't make him look so tired. His movements were a little more steady too, although he was avoiding using his right hand and arm completely, keeping it tucked up against his stomach. They would need to start working on that sooner than later. Maybe later today, although Hunk didn't really have much of an idea of how to actually do therapy. Hopefully Coran had some ideas.

There was one thing they could do though.

"Up for walking?" Hunk asked cheerfully.

And to his immense pride Lance met his eyes with a tiny nod. "To the kitchen?"

"With a stop at the bathroom," Hunk said. "But then straight onwards to breakfast." And, fortunately for them, the bathroom was en route to the kitchen. No more than a few minutes' walk total.

"Okay," Lance said, and there was a determined slant to his eye even as his heart thumped loudly and his hands shook. He could do this. He felt… well, he still felt tired. And his stomach was a gnawing black hole now and his legs, draped as they were over the edge of the bed didn't feel completely steady, but he mentally felt prepared to do this.

He stood carefully, socked feet pressing against floor and his left arm out for balance as he wobbled precariously for a moment. Hunk stood nearby, letting him get his bearings without any sign of urgency. Lance stood for about a minute, his legs steadying with each tick and the slight dizziness fading.

"Ready?" Hunk asked then as Lance looked to the door. It was a question that was so much more than what it seemed.

Ready to walk again?

Ready to face the day?

Ready to feel better?

Ready to try and be happy?

Yes, Lance decided. He was ready for all of those things. Small steps, Blue had told him, and now he was literally going to take one.

And with one final deep breath, Lance did just that.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest; this chapter originally kept going, but then it was getting way, way too long and I didn't want Hunk's really scary and (for me) a little bone-chilling observation to get buried. Because damn, now I wish I had had Haggar make Lance think his friends had hurt him. #plotbunnyforanotherficpleasedonotletme But to even all that out (and the nightmare scene, yay!) we get some butchered attempts at Spanish (*snorts* donut nada) inspired by mine and a co-worker's purposeful destruction of our names in Spanish. Granted, Brandon doesn't have a Spanish equivalent but I'm pretty sure Brande-dee-no is not correct. Mine does (Natalia, not Nat-ah-lee-ah, thank you very much) but he purposefully enjoys ruining it (made funnier because he has such a southern accent
xD). Oh, I'm going to miss him when I switch to overnights starting... today, hoshit! Sleepy author alert everyone. Very sleepy author.

As always, abrazos y besos a mis comentaristas! Muchas gracias a: chewbacca_bear, Pine_tree, Space Dad, FandomHuntress, Lanceylangst, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, kipper, glitteringconstellations, HonestlyCasualTaco, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, Ookamisoulreaper, QueenMcawesome, YukiSetsu, BrokenHeartedQueen, WindyOccamy, chrisiecub, xxxshino, maychorian, Nora, soldmysoultofandoms, Cuthalion, heyheroics and JoSaysChill!

I also wanted to gush that I got another gorgeous piece of fanart from the wonderful Proxy_17 and a trailer (a movie trailer omg?!) from Wolfwind97 for Color. You guyssssssss. See them both on my profile!

Enjoying the fic/chapter? Please do show your appreciation with a comment. Muchas gracias!
The first step went well. No falling, no flashbacks and the dizziness was held at bay.

Bolstered, Lance took another step and then another, a sigh releasing from him with each successful footfall.

He'd always been graceful, Hunk knew. Like a dolphin slipping through water or a cat walking a razor-thin beam. It showed even here, an almost glide to his steps as he kept his feet under him for the first time in… well, Hunk wasn't sure how long, but surely a while.

And with the success of reaching the door without incident Hunk could almost see the swell of confidence, of stark relief, in Lance's face. No smile yet for his accomplishment, but there was a near contentedness to his face and his eyes were shining a little brighter.

"How do you feel?" Hunk asked as the door slid open and they stepped into the hall.

"Good," Lance said, seeming surprised by his own answer.

"Slow and steady," Hunk advised as they made their way down the hall. "I know you're all healed, but your body is still w—recovering," Hunk changed at the last second, as even in this context he didn't want Lance thinking of the word.

They reached the bathroom at the end of the hall without issue and Hunk was pleased to note that Pidge had flipped the sign over, displaying four stick figures that Lance and Pidge had designed to look somewhat like the male Paladins but also with cat-eared heads.

Hunk opened the door first and peeked in, relieved when the lights were all dark indicating no movement inside. It's not that he didn't want to see Shiro or Keith, but the less chances for someone to startle Lance the better because there were a heck of a lot of water-sounds in a bathroom and given Coran's recounting to him of how pouring a glass of water had startled Lance Hunk was not taking any chances.

Hunk moved over to the sink and turned the tap on to barely a trickle, no gush of water or really any sound and Lance had been drawn to his cubby on the far wall where his toiletries were kept. Hunk gave a small sigh of relief. Obstacle one down.

If he ignored how quiet Lance was being this was almost a normal bathroom morning, Hunk thought, as Lance joined him at the long counter and double sink.

He did see Lance's eyes track to the sink and the barely there water droplets and watched as they widened ever so slightly.

"Okay, so I've got the weird mint or the sort of orange," Hunk said loudly, taking Lance's toothbrush from the caddy Lance had brought over and running it under the sink. "Which flavor are you feeling today?"

His voice jerked Lance's attention back to him and Hunk sent out the most comforting smile he
"Which flavor?" he prompted.

"Hunk, I…" Lance's gaze was drawn back as if hypnotized to the soundless drip of the faucet. His left hand gripped the edge of the counter, knuckles white.

"Lance," Hunk's voice lowered into something more gentle. "Miráme." Lance dragged his gaze back to him. "You've got this, hermano. Just brush and spit it all back out. Now; mint or orange?"

"M-mint," Lance decided on after a moment and Hunk squirt a small amount onto Lance's barely damp toothbrush and handed it back to him.

"Nuffing to eet," Hunk mumbled around his own toothbrush. Lance looked down at the toothbrush and then raised it as though it was going to bite him.

Hunk turned away but watched Lance through the mirror as he finally brought the brush to his teeth. It was the slowest teeth brushing in likely all of history, but he was doing it, even if his eyes were squinted tightly closed. Small steps, Hunk told himself. Small steps.

While Lance seemed quite preoccupied with his snail-like teeth brushing, Hunk took the opportunity to visit the toilet, and Altean technology flushed it all always silently. When he rejoined Lance at the sink, opting to use a bottle of alien hand sanitizer then risk turning the water on to past the drip-drop, Lance was still holding his toothbrush with a foamy mouth.

"You've gotta spit it out," Hunk said softly. "You don't even have to rinse after if you don't want to." Hunk hadn't, although he was tasting slight orange aftertaste but regretted nothing. Not if the water was going to scare Lance.

Lance seemed to be trying to convince himself of the task and Hunk waited. There was nothing more he could do to help Lance with this. And a few ticks later Lance expelled the remains of the foam from his mouth, coughing after and bracing himself on the counter.

"There you go," Hunk said, coming up and placing a hand on Lance's back and rubbing it in a circle. "All over."

Lance lifted his left hand to wipe at his mouth but froze in the action as his eyes spotted the mirror in front of him. And obstacle two. Hunk had a feeling mirrors were going to be sensitive for a while, given the state he'd found Lance in yesterday, but there was no way to cover the one in the bathroom easily and doing so would have only drawn more attention to it.

"Hey," Hunk said gently, and his voice startled Lance out of his staring contest. "What do you see?"

"…Us," Lance said after a moment. He looked behind him, as though expecting there to be more and Hunk felt a frown of confusion and worry form, before he faced the mirror again. "Just… just us."

A bandaged left hand lifted and came to rest on the visible bandages papered around his throat. Lance flinched at his own touch and only the fact that Hunk still had a hand on his back kept him from stumbling backwards.

Weak he heard Haggar hiss and he was unable to stop himself from agreeing with her. Weak for getting the scars. Weaker still for not being able to look at them.

He was a coward.

"You know what I see?" Hunk asked, cutting of Haggar's words. Lance mutely shook his head. "I
see two Paladins of Voltron," he said, and Lance met Hunk's gaze once more in their reflections. "They've gone through a lot and one of them more than any could possibly imagine, but they're both standing here. Together." His hand squeezed Lance's shoulder. "Still fighting and still moving forward."

Lance still did not look convinced and Hunk continued on. "Know what else I see? I see strength. And love. And compassion."

Hunk leaned forward and tapped against the mirror right on Lance's neck. "This? This shows strength. And here," he tapped where Lance's heart was. "This is compassion and love. And all together they make up the strongest person I have ever, ever known."

Lance averted his eyes. "I don't feel strong," he admitted quietly, fingers still pressing on his neck. Hunk's words and feelings were at war with the sick darkness inside him that refused to let go no matter how much Lance tried.

"What do you feel?"

"Weak," he whispered. "I… I let this happen, Hunk." His gaze drifted back to the mirror, looking at the bandages wrapped about his neck and visible hand. A stark, permanent reminder of what had happened. What he had allowed to happen.

"Do you think Shiro's weak?" Hunk asked and the question threw Lance so much he looked back up.

"What?"

"Is Shiro weak?" Hunk repeated.

"No," Lance protested. "Of course not." Shiro was the strongest person he knew. He had been Lance's hero and idol long before they'd been catapulted into space and that respect and admiration had only continued to grow as he saw all the things Shiro did, what he had endured, and they had only made Shiro shine even brighter. Shiro was a hero.

"And what about Shiro's scar?" Hunk asked, tracing a line across the bridge of his own nose.

"That's… that's different."

"How?"

Lance just shook his head. Shiro's scar was different. It was a mark of bravery, of likely the arena. And unlike him Shiro did not try to hide his or cover it up or pretend it wasn't there. It just was. And Lance felt so, so small next to him with his own cowardice.

"Lance, you are not weak. Your scars, they don't make you weak. Remember what Coran said?" Hunk near pleaded for him to understand. "They show strength, Lance. You went through a horrible, horrible experience and you came out of it and you're getting better and these marks? These marks are just a testament to how much you endured. The scar does not define you, just like Shiro's doesn't define him. He's an amazing leader and pilot and brother and none of those things relate to what happened to him with the Galra. Same with you."

"I can't look at it though," Lance whispered. "I can't look at any of th-them." And if that wasn't a sign of how pathetic he was, then what was it?

"And that's okay," Hunk soothed. "It's going to take time, Lance. I know it's… it's a big change."
Inspiration stuck and Hunk ran with it. "Remember… remember when Rosie got that horrible perm on a dare?" It had been truly awful; Lance’s older sister's normally gentle waves had been transformed into a mess of rat’s nest like curls.

"She had trouble looking in the mirror for a while, right?" Hunk continued. Lance gave a slow nod. Mirrors had made Rosie burst into tears as she’d caught sight of her hair again and again until the point where Lance had clumsily made her a large headscarf to cover most of it as their mamá had forbidden Rosie from chopping it all off, telling her she needed to learn her lesson and humility was the best teacher.

Eventually though… eventually Rosie had been able to find the humor in the situation, poking fun at her own destroyed curls and coming out of the experience a little wiser. That was just hair though, which had eventually smoothed out again. It had been the result of a silly dare, not… not the complete inability to protect not only himself but his family.

"I know that a bad haircut isn’t… it isn’t close to what you went through," Hunk said gently, picking up Lance's train of thought, "but just like Rosie you'll slowly start to be able to look and see yourself again and not the marks or the hair. They don't make you you, Lance. And just know that none of us are looking at your scars as anything but a mark of how strong you are, all right? Can you believe me when I say that?"

Lance managed a small nod. He did believe Hunk. He just… didn't know if he could believe in himself yet. But it was a start and he slowly lowered his hand from the bandages.

"Good," Hunk sighed, relieved. "Good. Let's finish up in here and head to breakfast. Do you need to use the bathroom?"

Lance shook his head. He still felt so empty as all he'd really managed at this point was dinner last night. Maybe later. If he drank something. He swallowed thickly at the idea but knew that it was going to have to be addressed at some point soon. The others were being pretty observant to things like that and he flushed at what he must have done to warrant such a stance. He was grateful at least that no one was pressing him for answers yet, but it was only a matter of time before he was going to have to talk about it.

Talk about it. He had promised himself after all. Today. Hunk and Coran. He shivered.

Breakfast first though. He was rather excited by the prospect of it actually and hoped it would help the ache in his stomach even a little bit. Hunk packed away their toothbrushes and Lance risked one more glance in the mirror, relieved when no Haggar hovered over his shoulder. He didn't try to smile but he gave himself a nod, an encouragement. His eyes lingered on the bandages and he let them, picturing what lie beneath but forcing his gaze to remain.

He wasn't strong enough to look at them. But this… he raised his hand again and lightly touched them again, refraining from flinching this time. He could do this. Even if it was just acknowledging it was there. And then maybe, with enough time, he might see what the others insisted they saw under the bandages. Not scars, but badges of bravery and strength.

He would really like that.

The walk to breakfast was uneventful even though Lance was starting to feel slightly light headed by the time they arrived. He hoped some food would help.

Pidge was already there, clicking away at her tablet, but she looked up with a "good morning," that Hunk cheerfully returned and Lance murmured back quietly, sitting in the chair across from her.
Pidge beamed at them both.

"Okay, I think I heated these correctly," Shiro said, coming over from the kitchen-area with a tray of steaming 'breakfast muffins.' "Coran said not to hit the high-heat button, but everything is in Altean so I sort of just pressed a few and hoped for the best."

Hunk moaned comically in distress at that and Shiro just chuckled, putting the platter on the table.

"They smell good," Pidge said, plucking one for herself.

"I've got some more gamibolap too," Shiro said nodding his head back at the stove. "Plenty for everyone who wants it."

"Where's Keith?" Hunk asked as he retrieved the fruit mash.

"Here," called the boy in question, coming into the room and smelling of sweat and a towel wrapped about his neck. He was dressed in his training clothes of a black shirt and pants and Lance realized he must have been up and fighting the gladiator already. He glanced at his right hand, lying useless across his lap, and tried to quash the bitter feeling of despair.

Pidge grimaced. "You couldn't shower first?"

"Nope." He took the chair right next to the girl, who scowled and scooted hers over a few inches.

"They do smell good," Hunk said, sliding a bowl of gamibolap in front of Lance and another one in front of his seat. "Unlike Keith."

"Sweat is a good smell," Shiro countered, earning an exasperated, "thank you, Shiro," from Keith. "It means you've been working hard."

"But at the breakfast table?" Pidge countered.

Lance let the conversation about appropriate table etiquette fade to the background and took a tentative bite of his breakfast, savoring the sweet taste on his tongue before he forced himself to swallow. It went down as easily as dinner had last night and bolstered by it he took another bite and then another.

He was just scraping the bottom of the bowl and wondering if Hunk would allow him to have any more when Allura's loud greeting had him near jumping in his seat.

"Paladins!" Allura announced herself and Coran with an unusual early-morning wave of enthusiasm, striding into the kitchen with a sheath of papers in hands.

"Well somebody woke up on the right side of the bed," Pidge smirked as the Alteans neared.

Allura cocked her head at the phrase and Coran twirled his moustache with a, "Is there a wrong side?" He looked to Allura with barely concealed alarm. "Have we been violating some sacred Earth rule?"

"It's just an expression," Shiro assured as a wicked gleam entered Pidge's eyes, who normally along with Lance, enjoyed confusing the Alteans sometimes a little too much. "Just means you likely had a good night of sleep and are ready for the day."

"Oh then yes, I have most definitely awoken on the 'right side of the bed,'" Allura grinned. Her eyes sought out Lance, who felt the gaze and looked up from his breakfast. There was only excitement
shining in her jeweled orbs and Lance relaxed the tight grip he had on the spoon. Allura had made it clear last night that she would not do anything until she knew it would work and he had nothing to fear here.

"I believe I have a way to enact the barrier and guarantee Lance's bond remains with both the Blue Lion," Allura said, rushing it all out in one breath as though she could not contain the information any longer.

Gasps sounded about the room but Lance found he could not make a sound, his throat closing off as something he had not felt in a long time thrummed through him. Hope. Because if this worked… if Allura was right…

This would protect them. Haggar couldn't take it and… and… He could still connect with Blue. He wouldn't have to lose her to save them; he wouldn't have to rip that part of his soul even though, if it was for them, he would do anything to ensure they were safe.

"How?" Keith near demanded at the same time Pidge asked, quieter, "One hundred percent sure?" and Lance felt the warmth in his chest grow at the protectiveness of both of them, while Hunk tenderly squeezed his arm.

"A quintessence circle," Allura explained, offering the sheaf of papers up to Pidge, who took them with a muttered thanks and scanned them for herself. "By using the infinite shape of the circle and combining it with all of your quintessences the barrier would allow for like quintessence to be filtered through your team bond, which—"

"Which means Lance could connect with Blue!" Hunk blurted out.

Allura nodded, a smile gracing her lips. "Indeed. And all of yourselves." She looked to Lance, face going serious. "It is not without risk, however. I am under no false pretenses that this will be an enormous amount of quintessence and I do not know if I am capable of harnessing and redirecting such power. If I was able to do so, I have no doubt that this quintessence barrier would be effective in both preventing the siphoning of your quintessence and allowing you to still access your Paladin bond. But I am afraid I doubt my own ability to do so successfully."

Allura never quite looked distraught thanks to her royal upbringing, but her hands were twisted together and there was a furrow to her face. Lance did not like seeing it on her. Not when she was so amazing and wonderful and everything the universe could have hoped for to find in their savior princess. And he would not be the reason why she looked that way.

"I trust you," Lance said, simply and yet not, conveying all he could. He met Allura's gaze, steady. He trusted her with everything he had. Allura was… was amazing. He was certain there was nothing she could not do. This was their best chance. "Allura, I… I trust you," and the worry lines lifted from her face and were instead replaced with a calmer gaze and a half-smile.

"Thank you, Lance," and the way she said his name made the glow burn brighter. She looked about the room, meeting each set of eyes. "I will need all of your assistance in this."

"You have it," Hunk said, squeezing Lance's arm again.

"As long as you can guarantee what you say," Keith said, not as quick to fully believe.

Allura nodded. "Which is why I wish to just try forming the circle right now. I will not be transferring any quintessence or building a barrier or anything of the sort. A… a test run, I believe you call it," she said, looking at Pidge and receiving a nod in return. "I shall do nothing that cannot
be reversed. This will just be to see if I am even capable of channeling the mass quintessence that each of you possess."

"Now?" Shiro said, focusing on the first part of the statement. "As in, right now?" He looked around the assembled group; he and Hunk were the only ones dressed in full clothing while Pidge and Lance were in pajamas and casual wear and Keith was in very sweaty training clothes. They seemed rather… lowkey for what sounded like something of great importance.

"I leave it up to Lance," Allura answered. "We can attempt the circle whenever you are ready," she said, turning back to him. "That can be now, later today, in several quintants—"

"Now," Lance interrupted, feeling his cheeks heat a second later at how rude that was to interrupt a princess. But if he put it off then he wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it and it would plague him for the rest of the day. Besides, what Allura was suggesting was not anything permanent. Just a test. Nothing bad.

And if it worked…

"You heard him," Pidge grinned. "No time like the present!"

Allura nodded. "Very well. It would be best if we had a large, open area, and preferably somewhere comfortable. I do not know how long this process may take."

"The lounge again?" Hunk suggested and everyone around the room murmured their agreement.

The trooped there in almost the same formation as last night, except this time Lance made the trip on his own two feet. He still felt a tiny bit dizzy, but breakfast had helped and he was actually glad he hadn't had time to ask Hunk for a second serving as his stomach was doing little flops.

He didn't just want this to work. He needed it to. Because if it did not then they were back to square one with Haggar coming for him and no way to stop her. He had the sudden image of the team trying to booby trap the castle but he had no doubts it wouldn't end up in their favor like in Home Alone. But Haggar was no bungling thief. She would blast through anything without breaking a sweat. She'd hurt them to get to him and—

"Lance," Hunk whispered, "breathe," and Lance became aware that he had stopped walking in the middle of the hall and drawing concerned glances his way.

He choked out stale air and greedily inhaled fresh, clarity returning.

"We can do this at a later time," Allura said gently.

"No," Lance weakly protested. "No… I'm fine. I'm ready."

She inclined her head. "Very well."

Lance focused the rest of the short trip on watching his feet, left hand out for slight balance and right tucked inside the hoodie pocket with Flafie and taking comfort in the soft material brushing over his fingertips.

When they reached the lounge Allura instructed him to sit down in the middle of the floor in whatever position he would find most comfortable and Lance settled in cross legged, tucking both hands now into his hoodie pocket. He hated that even here, surrounded by his family, he felt exposed like that with nothing at his back except looming space.
"Pidge, you sit here," Allura said, instructing the girl to a spot by Lance's right knee. "Face towards Lance, please. Keith, here," and she guided him next to Pidge but towards Lance's back so they made corners.

She had Hunk sit opposite Pidge and Shiro against Keith so they formed a box-like circle. Coran placed himself between Shiro and Keith and she took up a spot between Hunk and Pidge. Lance felt some of the tension leave at Coran's steady presence at his back.

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath. "This is how the process shall work. Keith and Pidge and then Hunk and Shiro, take each other's hands." Pidge didn't even comment on having to touch the sweaty Keith and instead took his hand with an almost bruising grip. Shiro felt his own hand buckle under the force of Hunk's and he tried to squeeze back reassuringly.

"Shiro and Keith, you will place your other hand on Coran's shoulders and Pidge and Hunk you shall do the same for me once I have joined. That will form the circle."

Her jeweled eyes met Lance's then and he forced himself to hold it. "Once I have established a quintessence connection with the other Paladins I shall place my hands on your shoulders," she said, "and Coran will place his as well from the back. Will this be all right?"

"Sí," he whispered. Hands weren't so bad now when he was expecting them and he was so relieved that Haggar's poisonous touch was beginning to fade away.

"All I shall do during this exercise is attempt to channel each quintessence through me," Allura said, meeting Hunk and Pidge's eyes and then back to Lance. "That is all. To do that, I will require everyone to focus solely on their own self. A mediation, if you will. Should anyone feel any pain, please, drop your hands immediately. Does everyone understand?"

"Yes, Princess," Shiro said, voice in leader mode. "Loud and clear."

"Lance, are you ready?" she asked and he murmured another "Sí," trembling slightly but resolute in his termination to try, reminding her once again of his own strength and trust and she resolved to return it.

She took another deep breath and settled herself to mimic the cross-legged pose everyone else had adapted. "Then let us begin."

Allura closed her eyes as she felt the humans' hands descend on her shoulders. Like the Lions she could always vaguely feel the powerful quintessence that surrounded each Paladin. But she did not just want to be aware of them now; she wanted to merge with them.

She steadied her breathing and felt the others do the same. She cast her mind out, seeking first Hunk on her left. His quintessence came to her then, a pale yellow that spoke of sun-warmed rocks and a pleasant spring day. She caressed it with her own opalescent pink and felt it latch onto the yellow. One down.

She pushed through Hunk towards Shiro, tracing the path along their conjoined hands until she encountered a soft black, pulsing like the night sky and studded with starlight. Her breath caught as she lightly brushed against it, feeling the strength and vastness to it.

She secured it as well and carried it through Coran, who was acting as her anchor. His quintessence was a warm orange, not as bright as the Paladins but steady and secure. She let it ground her and then moved to Keith.

His quintessence near burned her and she sent a pulse of Hunk's sunshine to dampen the simmering
fire. More cautious she reached out again, this time letting the red wrap about her like flames. Keith's burned with passion and a fierceness, as wild and dangerous as fire but yet comforting. With Hunk's balance the heat calmed to warm embers and Allura continued on.

Pidge's quintessence, a forest green, pulsed with energy and twined about her own like creeping vines, seeking to explore and grow. It was bright and inquisitive and so, so Pidge.

Allura brought it all back to herself, feeling the thrum inside of her veins and her blood racing. She felt powerful. She felt scared. She forced herself to take another breath to steady all of the branches of quintessence flowing through her.

She lifted her head then to look straight at Lance, who had his eyes pointed down. She could see his quintessence now, an almost glow encompassing him. It was a bright blue, flowing about him like water and speaking of protection and love. It made her feel calm and safe and she could almost hear laughter as the waves trickled over her. However…

There were dark patches marring it, like someone had taken a knife and tried to hack away at it. Unlike Shiro's quintessence though this black felt cold. Cruel. It had been damaged, ripped literally into pieces and leaving gaping holes behind.

Not for long though, Allura resolved. They would fix it. They would pour all of their own into it to fill up gaps, to make Lance whole once more. But not now. Now was just seeing if this was even possible, if she was capable of even trying to direct this power into the runes and spells to create the barrier.

It was the moment of truth now. "Coran," she heard herself murmur. She could not see him but she felt him move, felt the flare as Lance's quintessence was added to the circle through Coran's touch.

It… it was strong. Almost too strong. She raised her own shaking hands up, hovering them in the air. Should she do this? Could she control it? Lance looked up then and his eyes met hers. Trust shone through them, nearly glowing in the light of the quintessence that she physically saw now.

Yes, she decided. She could do this. She would do this. The Paladins had loaned her their strength and trust and she would not fail them.

She held Lance's gaze as her hands extended. And before she could let doubt creep in again she placed them on his shoulders, fingers overlapping Coran's.

It was like a punch to the gut. Allura gasped as all about her the colors flared so hard her vision went white. It was bright. Too bright. Too much.

This had been a mistake.

Hunk's gentle sunshine morphed into a scorching rock, a crushing pressure on her lungs and she tried to claw her way free. Shiro's starlight was a sucking black hole and her scream was lost to the void. Keith's flames were a raging inferno, blistering and burning while Pidge's curious tendrils turned harsher, choking and spreading.

And Lance. Allura gasped. His quintessence was threatening to drown them all, a crashing tidal wave bearing down and battering them about.

It hurt. Oh Alaaran, it hurt.

Over the sound of the ocean's fury and the snapping of flames Allura heard a scream. She forced her eyes open against the blinding whiteness, realizing with a chilling second later it was coming from
her.

Herself and Lance.

His head was tipped backwards, tears streaming down his cheeks, matching the ones Allura felt on her own face.

She was hurting him. Oh Alaaran, she was hurting him.

"Allura!" Hunk's pained gasp sounded. "St-stop!"

"Allura," moaned Pidge, her nails digging into Allura's shoulder. "I c-can't move."

Lance screamed louder, the blue of his quintessence being swallowed in a mixture of black and white, but like the others he seemed frozen in place.

"I… I cannot," Allura said with horror as her attempts to remove her hands – her hands burning and bruising and drowning Lance – yielded no results. "I—"

Her words were cut off with a scream, mingling with Lance's in the sparking air.

There were more cries then. Her name. Lance's. More shrieks. The light grew brighter in its darkness and Allura screamed out in pain and fear as it closed in around them.

And with one final, agonizing pulse the light exploded and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

So, you can see why this chapter ended up on its own, huh? Let's ignore that huge elephant at the bottom of the chapter and instead focus on that beautiful mirror talk between Hunk and Lance. Isn't Hunk just so precious? Dios, I cannot get enough of him. And then breakfast. Yay breakfast! Haha, okay, okay, let at me now. What have I done? You'll have to wait and see~! But I had so much fun assigning feelings and imagery to the quintessence and then watching them all explode. Quintessence is powerful, scary stuff and Allura has never had the training to fully control it. I hope you all are enjoying all of my headcanons with quintessence as much as I am writing it. And also, color. I love color. I named this fic so well xD #patsselfontheback

Thank you to the beautiful reviewers who took the time to leave a comment! All of my love to: Ookamisouleaper, FandomHuntress, Nora, someonehowsbelowaaverageatcommenting, Faith, Grace, Ash_in_water, keepasecretgetastrawberry, joey, maynarmi, Izzy, glitteringconstellations, Whatafangirl, maychorian, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, soldmysoultofandoms and heyheroics!

And guys, I know I sound a bit like a broken record on this but I'm going to put it out there one more time. Writing is hard work. It's not just an idea meets paper and publish. It's thinking and editing and backtracking and writing and re-writing and re-writing again and then finishing and going back to edit. It takes a lot of effort and all authors on this site do it of their own time and merit. There's no monetary compensation or book deals or dream jobs openings from writing fanfiction (although, hey, Dreamworks, just call me and I'll be there). And I know that I write as much for myself as for all of you
and hearing your comments is the highlight of my day and is what keeps me writing. I'll admit, I get frustrated and sad when I see so many people disappearing from the comment section despite the fact the hits and alerts and all those other numbers are still there and rising. So I ask all of you, please, for any fic you are reading and enjoying please leave the author a comment. We're not looking for novels (although hey, if you want to please be my guest and I will love you forever!). We appreciate an "I love it!" or "update soon!" too, but I think what most of us just want is a line or two about what you specifically enjoyed; it's those little details that make up the fic after all and it's what gives us those warm fuzzies to read. Pull out a line of dialogue that struck you, talk about a scene that happened. Mention your favorite character and what they did this week/chapter and why you loved it so. Just please, remember that authors are people too and a little appreciation and a thank you goes a long, long way to keeping them happy and creative. PSA over and thank you all for reading (if you made it through this wall of text, holy...)

Last (but certainly not least!) couple things to this note: I have more fanart! Gosh! There's a beautiful piece by asterinn and then I pulled out the old tablet and drew out the mirror scene because I had the urge to do so. Again, all art can be found at the bottom of my profile.

And last bit; I have a Tumblr, icypantherwrites (someone else took IcyPanther, the nerve) if you'd like to follow! Thank you to those who messaged me thinking someone was copying me. Y'all are so sweet and I love you. I'll primarily be using it to post chapter updates, little snippets, new projects, writing things as well as someday figure out reblogging.

Thanks everyone so much for the support (and reading these notes, sorry they get so long!) Please do drop a comment below if you enjoyed the chapter! Muchas gracias!
"Allura! Allura, can you hear me?" Coran's tones sounded close by, full of worry.

The Altean princess groaned as hands pried at her shoulders and the yelling got louder around her.

"Allura, wake up!" Pidge's voice was right by her ear and she winced at the volume and how it made her head ache more. She shifted slightly and felt a coarse texture rub her cheek.

"What?" she mumbled, sounding not at all like a princess but rather a drunkard. She felt like one too. Had she overindulged on a wine, perhaps?

The voices became even more insistent and she felt strong hands wrap about her shoulders and pull her to sitting and even with her eyes closed she felt her vision spin.

"Allura, please, open your eyes," Coran was near begging now and sounding close to tears. Worry jolted through Allura at what could have caused this and despite the pain she forced them open. This was no mere inebriation confusion.

They widened as she took in Coran, hovering just next to her and looking as anxious as when she had first come out of the cryo-stasis. But she couldn't focus on him for long as the scene beyond beckoned. They were on a beach, the coarse texture she had felt some type of sand. Water stretched out as far as she could see, of a dark blue hue that was slapping most alarmingly in rolls of tide.

Above the sky was a foreboding gray and clouds loomed large.

"Where… where are we?" she gasped, whirling her head around to take in more of the scene, which seemed to go on and on for miles. She saw Shiro behind her, his hands holding her up, while Pidge was crouched on her left. Hunk and Keith were battling against the waves in the water and Hunk was screaming Lance's name, although it was being torn away by the wind that was growing stronger. Her stomach bottomed out as she realized who was missing. "Where is Lance? What happened?"

"We're not sure," Shiro said, and he sounded more shaken than Allura had ever heard him. "We all woke up here and Lance is... " he swallowed. "Lance is missing."

"He's not in the water," Keith announced, trudging over. His eyes turned to Allura then, flashing with a fire that made her throat catch as it all came back - fire and water and pain and light swallowed by darkness - and snarled, "You promised! You said you wouldn't hurt him and you did!"

"Keith!" Shiro snapped from behind her. "That's not helping!"

Guilt pulsed hot and heavy and Allura shook her head. "No, he is right. I…" She swallowed thickly. "I... I am sorry. I do not know what... what happened."

"Then start figuring it out," Keith growled.

"Hey," Hunk put a large hand on Keith's shoulder. "I'm worried too, Keith, but yelling at Allura
won't make it better. Let's all just calm down…"

If Keith could have he'd have steam curling from his nostrils and he shrugged of Hunk's hand but didn't go anywhere, merely crossed his arms and squared his shoulders. He knew it was irrational to be angry at Allura, who seemed to be just as distraught and in pain, but he couldn't help it. Lance was missing because the princess tried to mess around with something she didn't know if she could control and they had no fucking clue where they were.

They'd been in the lounge one minute, frozen together in a mixture of pain and magic as Lance and Allura had both screamed, the conjoined sound nearly making Keith's sensitive ears bleed. And then the next thing he knew he was falling and falling and falling into blackness before he'd hit the ground - hard - and found himself on a stormy beach in the same clothing he'd been wearing in the castle.

The other Paladins and Coran had been conscious as well, climbing to their feet within seconds, but Allura had been passed out cold and Lance… Lance wasn't there. He and Hunk had caught each other's eyes and immediately taken off to the tumultuous ocean, as if Lance had landed there then…

Well, it wouldn't be good. Lance had been drowned, repeatedly, by their guess, and winding up in the middle of a churning ocean would be disastrous. And that was assuming he was awake. If he was unconscious like Allura then it would be a death sentence.

But whether it was good news or bad, they hadn't found Lance, although they hadn't been able to look as deep out as they'd wanted given the strength of the waves. One had taken Hunk down and if he hadn't been such a strong swimmer Keith was afraid he may have been dragged out to sea.

"Coran?" Shiro asked and there was so much uncertainty in Shiro's tone that it physically hurt to hear. "Do you have any ideas?"

A rumble of thunder crashed down then and everyone startled. Only the humans, recognizing the sound, looked to the sky. The clouds were coming in quicker, a full gale starting and the winds turning cold.

"This is not a normal storm," Hunk observed, feeling a chill down his spine. As if to emphasize his point another roll of thunder seemed to shake the very ground.

"And that would be because this is not a natural phenomenon," Coran said, jewel eyes narrowed in thought as he looked around.

"Do you know where we are?" Shiro asked.

Coran shook his head. "I do not think it is so much a where, Number One, as a who."

"Who?" Hunk repeated.

"I think…” Coran looked around again at the assembled group, "I think we may be inside Lance's mind."

"In his mind?" Pidge repeated, doubtful.

Allura though gasped, hand flying to her mouth. "Are you saying this is…?"

Coran nodded. "I believe this is Lance's mindscape."

"If this is his mind or mindscape or whatever it's called, then where's Lance?" Hunk asked, looking around as though expecting the boy in question to pop up.
"I am not sure," Coran said, rising to his feet and pulling Allura to hers. "But I imagine he should be around here, somewhere."

"What is a mindscape?" Keith demanded, fear making his tone even shorter than normal as more lightning crackled across the darkening sky.

"It's a space in one's mind," Coran said, words being pulled from his mouth and lost to the wind that was growing stronger. "It is an escape of sorts to protect the individual from physical pain that… that is normally fatal." His voice wavered on the last word and Allura blanched. She had… almost killed Lance?

"How is this protecting anyone?" Pidge asked, being batted about by the wind and Hunk put both hands on his shoulders to steady her, his bandana tails flapping. "This is going to build to a hurricane!"

"The mindscape reflects the individual's state of mind," Coran said, voice raised now to be heard.

And if the landscape had seemed harsh before it was downright ominous now. This… this was how Lance was feeling? Thunder rumbled again and a sharp sting of raindrops began to come down, the wind shooting them like bullets against exposed skin.

"We need to find Lance!" Shiro all but yelled, hand up to shield his eyes from the blowing sand. "Now!"

"Where?" Pidge asked despairingly. All around them was sand and more sand that led to the ocean, whose waves were crashing with a terrifying roar against the surf. Where did they go?

Where was Lance?

"There!" Hunk shouted, pointing down the beach. About a quarter mile away was an outcropping of rock that butted up to the shore's edge; a natural cove. It was the only thing other than sand and Hunk's gut instinct told him to go to it.

"Go," Shiro ordered, but as they all turned in that direction the wind seemed to pick up, sending Pidge stumbling fully back into Hunk and Keith lost his footing, only remaining upright due to Shiro's quick reflexes.

It was… it was as though the storm did not want them to go that way.

As if Lance did not want them to.

Well, Hunk gritted his teeth, that only made him more determined. Lance was out there, alone, and likely, given the state of the landscape, scared and in pain. Nothing was going to stop him from getting to his side. He'd told them they were in this together and he meant that with every piece of him. Lance was not going to weather this literal storm by himself.

Never again.

"Get behind me!" he yelled to Pidge, who was being pressed against him by sheer force. She nodded and keeping her hands firmly attached to his jacket maneuvered herself around, sock-clad feet digging into the sand. Hunk then lowered his head like a battering ram and plowed forward. Next to him he saw Shiro doing the same with Keith while Allura and Coran both forged on as they were, Allura's hair whipping wildly behind.

And with a determination to overpower even nature they battled their way across the sand.
Everything hurt.

That was the first thing that registered to Lance. His body was aching and his head felt like someone was trying to chisel into his brain. He let out a moan, fighting back tears from the sheer pounding pain.

What had happened? He couldn't remember. Fear spiked in him at that and he forced his eyes to open. Weak light filtered in and he squinted at it, trying to pick out through the gray hues some information. There was a loud, crashing sound now and his heart thumped wildly as he realized what it sounded like.

Waves. Powerful, angry waves.

Water.

That made him jolt right up, the movement sending his head spinning but that had nothing on the icy clench of his heart and the sudden burning of his lungs.

Because he knew where he was.

"No," he whimpered as cold stone walls with a sandy floor were revealed, offering a glimpse of the ocean just feet away and slamming against the walls. Thunder rumbled overhead and wind howled both outside the natural structure and in.

He was in his mindscape. How? How was he back here?

Why?

He choked on his next breath, terror seizing him as he looked wildly for Haggar to appear. Had she done this? Was she here?

But the Druid did not show herself and Lance released the painful breath, eyes still darting about. She had shown herself after he thought he was safe before. She could come at any moment.

He scrambled backwards, stone hitting his back and he flinched at the rough edge. A glance down showed that he was back in his swim trunks from before, blue and white not marred by droplets of blood.

Not like last time when he'd...he'd… But as if summoned Lance felt a sharp sting and then fire seemed to erupt along his arms. He wailed, the sound lost to the screaming winds, but even that was not enough to express his pain.

His head smashed into the rock behind him but that did not dull it at all. It only made it worse, the hit too reminiscent of smashing into metal walls as water tossed him about before he had made the decision to…

His wrists burned anew and Lance tried to swallow the next sob, bowing his head and pulling his now bloodied arms to his chest. He didn't want to look at them but found his eyes drawn down nonetheless, tracing the broken, gaping wounds he had inflicted upon himself.

The burn scar covering his arm was there as well and at the observation it pulsed with a fresh wave of agony and a low keen built in his throat and he hugged the limbs tighter to his chest as if that could help.
The wind only howled louder and the waves beat out a war cry on the rock.

What was happening? Why was he here? Why was this happening to him again? Hadn't he been rescued? Wasn't he safe in the castle with—

Memory struck like a freight train and he gasped as white light seemed to explode in his head, followed by a mawing black that left him panting and shuddering. That's right. Allura had been trying to control their quintessence.

And clearly it had not gone as planned.

He stifled another sob as remembered agony raced through him, the sound of Allura's screams echoing with his own.

But if Allura had been there… if the others had been connected then did that mean...

That they were here with him?

The wind picked up, dashes of cold, sharp rain sneaking in as surely as icy tendrils wrapped about his heart. If they were here…then they would see.

His gaze went back to his freely bleeding wrists, jagged lines of failure exposed to all the world.

They would know.

"No," he whispered. "N-no. D-Dios, no…"

Not like this. They weren't supposed to find out like this.

"Please," he cried, fingers digging against the flesh as though he could pull it back together. "Por favor…"

He felt that almost familiar pressure on his mind then, the whisper of water. But the natural basin from last time was gone. All that was here were the waves, raging a timpani outside and Lance moaned. No. No. He couldn't. Not again.

The ocean roared louder and Lance flinched back against the far rock wall, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Dios, por favor," he begged, "ayúdame. Por favor. I… I c-can't…"

The wind only shrieked louder and more icy rain battered its way inside.

Why was this happening? Why was he here? Why were these wounds the only ones present? Even thinking about the burn hadn't caused it to actually reform and his wrist did not bend back unnaturally. No claw marks decorated his shoulders or holes in his hands.

The answer came with horrifying clarity as he hunched over his bleeding wrists.

Those wounds had all healed.

These ones had not.

These ones were not so much a physical wound but one he had inflicted upon his very soul. He had done this. He hadn't been able to forgive himself, not even with Blue's support, for this crime. For this sin.
And he couldn't hide from it here. Not here, where his mind was literally laid bare and his agony was expressed through tangible means. As if to agree more rain crept in, but this time it was warm. Sticky.

Blood.

Lance recoiled from it as another sob heaved its way free.

He… he wasn't this messed up still, was he? He thought he'd been getting better. But Haggar had said his mindscape reflected him and… well… He had no doubts she had been telling the truth about that one.

Was he really this weak? This pathetic, still?

Thunder crashed so loud that the rock shook and Lance felt a few pieces pepper down and cracks etched themselves into the walls.

He was destroying his own mind.

He was hurting himself.

He needed to get control. But how?

A hysterical, desperate sounding laugh burst from his throat as the old adage of 'what would Shiro do?' came to him then.

But as he pictured his hero he felt something… warm… inside him and the icy grip receded just a bit. He remembered Shiro holding him, his passionate words that Lance had never let them down, had never let him down. That he was proud of him.

Lance shuddered out another cry, but this one did not hurt as much. It calmed him. He gulped noisily for air then, feeling the sticky hot rain being replaced with the cold watery version of before.

Better. Still awful, but better. He pressed his forehead to his upturned knees, trying to focus then on the rest of his family and their love to calm the literal raging storm inside of him.

But he couldn't.

The ocean was still shouting its challenge, each breaking wave sending him recoiling against the wall because any second now the rock would give and the water would come in and he would drown drown drown—

His wrists throbbed in remembrance and he felt more hot blood gush from them, painting his chest and he cried out, pressing them more against him.

And then, over the sound of the screaming wind, he heard something else.

Voices.

No. No no no no.

"Por favor," he sobbed, "not like this. P-please. Please."

Panic and shame and terror rolled together and he heard the voices grow louder as the rain turned back into blood.
No. Please no. They couldn't see. He couldn't let them see. Let them know.

They'd hate him. They'd hate him, they'd hate him, they'd hate him, they'd—

"Lance?"

Hunk's voice, hoarse and scared cut through the spiraling thought but Lance only curled himself tighter around his knees.

They'd found him. Dios, they were here.

"Lance!" called out Pidge's voice, high and terrified, and then other voices joined in, seeming to echo about the small space as they piled in.

"Is that blood?"

"Holy shit!"

"Lance, what's wrong?"

"Lance, mírame."

"Oh God."

Lance whimpered and tried to shrink back as if preventing the inevitable for another minute would make it all go away. He couldn't face their disappoint. Their disgust. Blue was wrong. They could never forgive him for what he'd done.

How could they when he couldn't forgive himself?

"Lance, hey," Hunk's voice was close now. So close. "Hermano, estás bien. Estás bien. It's just me. Soy Hunk."

Lance kept his face firmly pressed against his knees, curled up as much as he could be against the wall so he didn't see their faces when they realized how pathetic he really was.

"Lance, por favor, mírame," Hunk murmured and Lance gave the barest shake of his head. No. He couldn't. "It's just me, Lance. It's okay," Hunk tried to soothe and Lance realized that yes, the other voices had stopped. But he knew they were still inside and here because outside it was raining blood.

Raining blood because he couldn't stop it because he was weak.

A large hand descended butterfly light on his shoulder and despite himself Lance leaned into it, into the warmth and protection that Hunk offered.

"It's okay," Hunk repeated, although his voice shook and Lance felt guilt swell in him now too. He was scaring Hunk. Hurting him. He didn't want that. He'd never wanted that.

He'd wanted to protect them.

And he'd failed, so, so badly.

"I'm here. It's okay," Hunk continued. "You're safe, Lance. Nothing… nothing is going to hurt you. I promise."

At least, Hunk hoped it was a promise he could keep. Because something had hurt Lance. There was
blood all over the floor of the rocky shelter, more than what should have been possible from the sprinkles of the – ugh, he cringed thinking about it – rain of blood that had cropped up. It was covering Lance's chest from what he could see since Lance was wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks in this strange place. There was so, so much of it and a week ago Hunk probably would have puked. But his stomach had grown stronger in the last two days and now all he did was shift his hand around Lance's back, pulling him slightly off the cold rock wall and letting Lance settle into his arm instead.

Lance only shuddered though and kept his arms locked fully to himself and head down.

Hunk looked up from Lance's shivering form to where the rest of the group had clustered a few feet away to give them space, horror and fear clear but above all of that worry and concern. They'd all immediately tried to rush toward Lance but Coran had thrown his arm out, stopping them. They would not be having a repeat of the first time Lance had awoken with the group and all of the concern only scaring him. He'd caught Hunk's eye and nodded and Hunk had hurried forward.

Because all of that blood? It was streaming down the back of Lance's arms and Hunk had a terrifying idea of where it was coming from and if he was right then Lance did not, would not, want anyone to see. Not in this way.

But if this was how it was going to happen – and Hunk had a sick feeling that a large part of the turmoil lashing outside was because of this one injury – then he was going to ease Lance into it as best he could, to make him as comfortable as possible in this really, really awful situation.

However, Lance was not responding to him. He wasn't lost in a memory, Hunk didn't think, as he had sworn Lance had shaken his head when he asked him to look at him. So if it wasn't a flashback then it meant that all of this pain was from the here and now and it was so overwhelming that Lance couldn't break free.

"Coran," he whispered and that was all the urging the advisor needed, moving silently over to the two of them and crouching down in front of Lance.

"Lad," Coran whispered, not touching, but his tone as good as a caress. "How can we help?"

Lance gave a small shake of his head.

"You c-can't," he mumbled, words obscured by his knees. "I… I…"

"You are hurt," Coran said gently and Lance stiffened under Hunk's hand. "Please, lad, let us help you."

"You can't," Lance repeated, voice small. "I… I did th-this."

"And together we can fix it," Coran said softly. He placed a hand carefully on Lance's knee. "You are not alone anymore, Lance."

"You'll h-hate me," Lance whispered, barely audible.

"Never," Hunk said vehemently and Lance shied at the tone. "Never," he repeated, softer. "Lance, we love you. Te quiero, hermano."

"But I…"

Lance finally raised his head, ocean eyes red-rimmed and tears streaming down mocha cheeks. "I..." he choked out. "I..."
His gaze saw past Hunk and Coran then, lighting upon the others and flinched as through struck, averting it back to his drawn up knees.

That was enough for Shiro. He couldn't stand by while Lance was in so much pain – so much blood, how? – and he came carefully forward, not surprised at all when the others joined him. But Coran nor Hunk made to stop them and Shiro crouched down next to the Altean advisor.

"Lance," he said as calmly as he could, aware of Pidge creeping even closer and sitting just inches from Lance's other side and Keith mimicking his own pose between himself and Hunk and he could feel the tension thrumming off of Keith. Allura remained standing behind him, arms wrapped about herself in a measure of self-comfort but her eyes were steady on Lance. "Buddy, it's okay. We're here to help."

"You can't," Lance said, desperation leaching into the tone. "You c-can't."

"You're bleeding," Shiro pointed out delicately. "Let's bandage you up, okay?"

Lance shook his head though, fervently and pressed his arms together to his chest. "N-no. You can't. You can't… you can't s-see," and the last word was said so quietly they wondered if they'd heard it at all.

"What can't we see?" Shiro asked gently.

Lance shook his head again. "You can't," he mumbled. "You'll h-hate me."

Shiro hated the uneasiness that was turning his stomach as Coran and Hunk exchanged a glance in front of him. They'd done that a few times now, but Shiro hadn't given it any thought. Now though he wondered what he was missing.

"We won't hate you," Keith said, tone an odd mixture of softness and fierceness. Like he was trying to talk down a wild animal that he wasn't sure would lash out or not. And, Shiro's stomach rolled again, he hated how accurate that depiction was.

"Lance, please," Pidge gripped her own knees tightly, knuckles white. "You're hurt. Please let us help."

Lance shivered again, not even Hunk's warmth enough to chase away the chill. What did he do? They couldn't sit here in this stalemate forever. They were going to find out. They were going to know and then all of this concern would vanish because he was weak and pathetic and… and…

He felt Haggar's sneer and her cold hands took the place of Hunk's warm ones. You may have hidden it before but now the other Paladins see you for what you are: a disgrace. He shuddered and heard the others call his name as he bent his face back over his knees.

"Lance, we wish to help," Allura murmured. But her voice morphed then into something crueler. Anyone who would fall so far as to take their own life is no Paladin of Voltron and Lance choked back a cry as darkness took hold.

But then Hunk's arm tightened about him in a hug and with it came a new burst of warmth against Haggar's ice and her grip disappeared, washed away with more murmured, soft tones from all around him of "estás bien," "we want to help," please, Lance" and he drew them all close to drive out more of the cold.

Allura had never said those words. Haggar had. Haggar had tried to trick him, to feed him lies when he had refused to give in.
She was a liar.

Instead Allura had told him... told him that Blue chose him. That she supported Blue's decision and would not replace him. And Blue had told him that the others would listen. They would understand. And he believed in Blue. He believed in her with all his heart.

They will never accept you, Haggar hissed, her touch cold, not after what you have done.

But... he'd done it for them. To protect them. To save them. He'd told Haggar that once upon a time. His determination had burned bright then, even in the shadow of her darkness and twisted words. He'd known then why he'd done it.

He'd always known, deep down. But that decision had been distorted from pain and cruel words and lies until he had not known what to think.

But he did now. He knew why.

They do not know that, Haggar reminded him. And they never will.

But they could. He shook in Hunk's hold. He could tell them. Explain his words over his actions. The shame, the sense of failure was still there, but...

That was not all that had fueled his decision. He had offered all of himself, all that he could possibly give, to protect them and keep them safe. That was what mattered.

It was time he stopped letting Haggar control that fear. It was time he let his family's love in instead. He loved them. He believed in them. And after they all had said and done, why should he doubt that they felt the same? Why should he believe Haggar's poisonous words over their own?

He shouldn't. And he didn't.

Outside the sky ceased its bloody torrent, still raining but giving way to the patter of raindrops, and the waves calmed their relentless attack on the rocks. Lance could practically feel the tension, the bated breath, in the room. But more than that he felt their concern. Their worry.

Their love.

He raised his head, dark eyes drinking in his family all clustered about him.

They were here. For him.

They loved him. No matter what. He could almost feel Blue's reassurance then, a gentle nuzzle that seemed to warm him from the inside. Strengthen him. Encourage him.

He could do this. He could tell them and they would understand. They wouldn't be disgusted like Haggar said. They wouldn't turn him away or kick him out. He trusted them and loved them and it was time he accepted that they felt the same.

Lance took a calming breath and then ever so slowly unfolded his arms.

Chapter End Notes
And yes, that is indeed where I am cutting this chapter off. *runs cackling into the night* And ha, back to the mindscape we go! Some readers from the Q&A may remember I mentioned we would be returning here and I hope it did not disappoint. And would you look at that, Lance didn't end up getting to tell Coran and Hunk because instead he's going to tell everyone. Everything happens for a reason after all and getting blasted into his mindscape, as terrifying as it is, may be what Lance really needs. Please put away your pitchforks now? :p

Wow guys. This is chapter fifty. FIFTY. Damn. A few other big milestones too that I owe all to you guys. We've hit just shy of 1300 comment threads, almost 29,000 views, 500 subscriptions and over 250k words. Just wow. Thank you all for your support of this fic. I never had any idea it would morph into something this grand and for all of those who have been supporting me along this journey, whether you've been here since the beginning or dived in in the thirties, I cannot thank you enough.

The biggest of thanks go to the reviewers whose comments never fail to inspire me: Thrubi_Nevie, heyheroics, StingingLikeABee, Ookamisouleaper, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, Anielka, FandomHuntress, Iris, ybijvank, WindyOccamy, marzaally, Justanotherfangirl, krystal, Space Dad, keepasecretgetastrawberry, Cris, chrisiecub, DawnWriter, killjoy2246, dean_winchester_has_fallen, Nora, Skylar, BrokenHeartedQueen, Elizabeth May, maynarmi, Demonsdetox, ThisOneIsBlue, maychoryan, Alexa, Samantha_is_trash, HonestlyCasualTaco, ImaShayne, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, Benny_IsA_Dog, glitteringconstellations, mechanicmonster, soldmysoultofandoms, Tenaya, C, Ashley, Clawbreeze, joey and Angery_lonce!

Okay, wow. I'm still typing. So sorry. I will be doing another Q&A if you are interested in attending since it's been a few months and quite a bit has happened since then. For those new to it, it's an opportunity to chat with me and fellow readers in real-time and ask questions about really anything and I generally answer pretty in-depth :p It'll be held on Tuesday, January 23 at 2000 hours CST (8 pm for you non-military time folks). Check it out on the [Google doc here](#) and you are certainly welcome to submit questions ahead of time even if you can't make it.

Please do drop a review before you click off. I'd love to hear what you thought of the chapter. Thanks so much!
Lance winced as he moved his arms from where he'd hugged them to his chest, the open wounds pulling off with a dull squelch where they'd near congealed to him. He propped them up on his knees, keeping his head tilted down.

He lowered his eyes further as he heard the harsh intakes of breath and Hunk's arm tightened where it was grasping his left upper arm. He may have come to the conclusion that ultimately they would understand, but that didn't mean it was going to be right away. He blinked back a tear. They were still going to be so disappointed.

"That's a lot of blood," Pidge whispered, voice small, and Lance hated that he'd made her sound like that. He knew it was only going to get worse.

He heard movement to his right and then the dull sound of fabric being ripped and Keith's quiet murmur of "here." A tick later a piece of soaking wet black cloth was being thrust past his arms and onto his chest and he gasped aloud at how cold it was while his heart stuttered at the miss. They still didn't see?

"Sorry, buddy," Shiro apologized, gently rubbing the cloth against the mass of red on his front. "Let's just wipe this off and…" his voice trailed off. Lance knew why. Because there was no wound there, save for the small scar. That wasn't where all of the blood was coming from.

He pushed his arms slightly more forward over his knees, palms up as though surrendering. He supposed faintly that he was, in a way.

"Lance," Hunk murmured next to him and there was something knowing in the tone that made new tears form.

"Here, let me," Coran said and Lance felt more of the ripped shirt touch this time down on his inner arm while Coran's other hand lightly gripped up by his elbow. He hissed in pain but thanks to Coran's hold he couldn't really move his arm back.

Peeking through his lowered bangs, Lance could see as the blood was cleared from his arm to reveal the gaping incision, which pooled immediately again with a thin line of crimson near his wrist.

"What did they do?" Keith sounded horrified and Lance winced. Hunk's grip tightened and Lance shuddered. Coran moved onto his right arm, showing the same injury on top of the grotesque burn scar.

"Some… some type of ritual?" Pidge hazarded and Lance's heart clenched at how despite glaring evidence they still didn't… didn't think that of him. He wished it had been something like that. Some spell or punishment. That would make this so much easier.

But it wasn't that. And he couldn't let them think that. Not if he wanted to truly get better. Hunk seemed to know – and he felt new shame and hurt then but also an unbelievable warmth because Hunk had known and Hunk had still said all those things and been there – and he was pretty certain Coran too knew. They knew. And they still loved him.
It was the small nudge of courage that he needed.

"They…” he spoke, his tongue heavy and eyes down. "They didn't... do this." He swallowed thickly and pushed the last words out, barely a whisper. "I did."

A stunned, horrified silence reigned after he spoke and Lance felt new tears drip down his cheeks. Still though… it was out now and the relief warred equally with the shame. Because he wasn't going to hide it anymore.

He wasn't going to be a coward. Not again.

"What?" Keith was the first to regain his voice and Lance flinched at the undertone of anger. "You did this? To yourself?" Lance gave the barest of nods. "Why?" and the last part came out so broken and desperate that it hurt more than the anger.

Lance just shook his head, keeping his eyes averted.

"Let's all take a deep breath, hmm?" Coran suggested gently and Lance felt his chest hitch even more as the man's hand gave his upper arm the most gentle of squeezes, so tender and soft. "And give Lance a few dobashes."

The room was silent once again as Coran very carefully wrapped more strips of shirt around the wounds and Hunk shifted so that his arms were fully enveloping Lance. Lance hid his face in the broad chest, taking inhales of honeysuckle and engine grease.

Hunk's hands rubbed gentle circles on his back, which only made the tears come harder and he pressed himself even more against Hunk as though he could hide that way even though he knew he couldn't. Not anymore.

"I've got you," Hunk murmured, his words reverberating through Lance. "Te quiero, hermano. No matter what."

Lance nodded, trying to dry his tears against the damp vest. "Gracias, Hunk… yo también te quiero." Hunk gave him a squeeze. "Pienso que... estoy listo ahora."

"Didn't catch that last bit," Hunk admitted. "Lo siento."

"I'm... I'm ready now," Lance mumbled and he could feel Hunk nod.

He pulled himself back to sitting although Hunk's arm remained snuggly over his shoulders and tucked his arms into the divot between his stomach and propped up knees. The wounds were wrapped now although he knew from his previous times here that he wouldn't actually bleed out. Still, he was glad to not have to look at them.

He did need to look at the others though. No more hiding. He forced his chin up, bracing for the worst but at the same time hoping for the best.

And although there was confusion and he could still feel anger radiating off of Keith – but not at him, he didn't think at least – there was otherwise worry and concern. No disgust. No hatred. He swallowed thickly at this near overwhelming love. What had he honestly done to have people like this in his life?

He could almost hear Blue's purr of the opposite, questioning how they had deserved him and it warmed him from the inside out to know just how lucky he was.
"Are you all right, Lance?" Allura asked, having joined the others on the floor at this point, wedged in between Shiro and Coran, and she sounded nothing but concerned. For him. There was no hint of the cruel tone Haggar had adopted for her and Lance felt guilty that he ever could have thought Allura would ever say such a thing.

"I don't know," he said, struggling to keep her bright gaze. "I… I want to be though." And he did. So, so much.

"Us too, buddy," Shiro said, smile warm if slightly pinched with something Lance couldn't quite place. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Not really. But that decision was out of his hands now and he needed to. Want was no longer an option.

"I… I did this," Lance repeated in answer, shifting his arms slightly. "B-because…" Dios, it was so hard to say. Coran gave his knee a rub and Hunk did the same to his shoulder while everyone else remained patiently quiet.

"I…" he swallowed again, starting over. "I tried to kill myself."

And although he'd gathered that they had already come to that conclusion he still winced as he heard Pidge’s whimper at the confirmation and Keith and Allura curse.

"Why?" Shiro asked and Dios, he sounded so hurt too. Why did he only seem to be capable of hurting those he loved? Why?

"She," and he couldn't say her name, still, coward, "she… was almost… she almost… and I couldn't anymore." He felt treacherous tears sting his eyes and he welcomed them, blurring out the faces in front of him. "I couldn't stop her," he whispered.

"She wanted information," Lance continued, gaze dropping back to his knees. "About you. The Paladins."

No one interrupted but they were all thinking the same thing; this confirmed their original suspicions that the extended timeline had been so information could be tortured from Lance. But there was no satisfaction in being right. Only dulled horror.

"I wouldn't tell her. But she…" and Lance unconsciously lifted his left hand to his head, "never stopped trying. To get i-in." He looked up, trying to convey the truth of this to Shiro. "I stopped her. I d-did. I didn't tell her anyth-thing. Anything," he repeated, desperately. "Not once."

"We know you didn't," Shiro said, carefully reaching out his flesh hand to put on Lance's other knee. "We know. You were so brave, Lance."

Lance shook his head in denial. He wasn't brave. He'd just been scared. For himself. For his family. For the fate of the universe.

"I… I didn't think you were coming," Lance murmured. "I tried to escape, but…" He squeezed his eyes shut. Not now. He couldn't think on all of this now. It was too much but as if summoned the scars on his hands and feet ached with pain. He heard a few intakes of breath and he felt blood drip down from the new wounds and Pidge's quiet but terrified, "what the hell?"

"Lance, lad, your mindscape is reacting to your emotions," Coran said calmly as the wind, which had been slowly dying down, rose back to a howl and Lance whimpered with it and the roar of the waves turned into shouts from the crowd. "Take a deep breath for me." Lance tried above the newest
pulse of pain and Coran murmured, "That's it. And release. And another one, please." Lance did as Coran asked, one breathy sob after the next.

"There you go," Coran encouraged, his voice rising above the Galran and sending them to silence. "Let's not think about that for now, all right? Not when it is hurting you so, lad."

Lance managed a nod and focused on taking another steadying breath, feeling the throbbing recede and moments later his skin was back to just the ugly scars. He tried not to look at them.

"¿Estás bien?" Hunk asked quietly.

Lance shook his head. It was all so vivid and here, in his mind, he made things actually real. He needed to get control of himself before he did anything else or made the storm worse and it took out their small shelter. At the thought he felt a tremor go through the wall and he winced as everyone shifted about.

"She…" he tried to pick up where he left off and ignoring what led up to it, "she and Theodek, they… they tried something different. Phase three. Because I wouldn't… wouldn't tell them anything from just the… the…" Despite his attempts he pictured the metal table then and the straps and knives and rods and gasped as he felt something puncture into his thigh while a searing line cut across his chest.

"Lance!" gasped out Hunk while Coran barked out a sharp with worry, "Don't think about it!" and he tasted blood between his lips and felt claws rake down his arm.

"Lance, stop!" Pidge pleaded, hands lighting on his upper arm as if to ground him. "Please!"

And Dios, he wanted to. It hurt but the pain only conjured more and a high keen broke free as something stabbed into his stomach and hot blood gushed while he felt his hand scream as fingers were broken and twisted and Hunk's hand turned into a cruel grip that threatened to crush bone.

"Lance!" Shiro all but roared, piercing above even his own breathless cries of terror and agony. "You're not there! You're here." His voice broke. "With us. You're safe. Please… you're not…"

"Shiro!" called out Keith and he sounded absolutely panicked. It was enough to drag Lance from his haze, seeing the moment where Shiro collapsed in on himself, face a mask of remembered hurt and distress.

"Sh-Shiro," he mumbled, guilt flooding him and taking the place of the pain. He was hurting Shiro. He was hurting Shiro. "Sh-Shiro, I'm… I'm so s-sorry."

Keith was crouched next to Shiro now and Allura on his other side, hands splayed across his back as Shiro shuddered, face pale and pinched. The guilt felt enough to drown Lance and he found himself mimicking the shudder in Hunk's arms.

"Just breathe for me, hermano," Hunk murmured. "Concentrate on me, okay? In and out. Shiro's going to be okay, let's focus on you. In and out with me."

Coran was there then too, blocking Lance's view of Shiro and his hands were steady on top of Lance's own. "You've got this lad," he encouraged. "You can do this. Focus on us now."

Lance tried, matching his breathing to Hunk's and concentrating on the feel of Coran squeezing his hands in time with his breaths and Pidge's small, warm ones holding tight. Slowly, slowly the wounds sealed themselves back together leaving only lines of blood to show that they were ever there.
The twin wounds on his wrists though remained, Lance could tell, even obscured by the bandages. He swallowed back a sob. Of course they were. He hadn't yet been able to talk about them.

And now he was only making everyone else feel his pain.

"Estoy bien," he said softly once he felt somewhat stable again and the worst of the pain had faded to a sharp memory. "¿Está Shiro…?"

Coran shifted then to reveal Shiro, being propped up by Allura's strength while Keith, bare-chested, was crouched on his heels next to him with both hands wrapped about Shiro’s upper arm.

Shiro looked up at that moment and his charcoal eyes caught Lance’s and he managed a small smile. "I'm okay, buddy," he said, although his voice was still tight. "Sorry for scaring you."

"Lo siento," Lance choked out. "I didn't mean t-to—"

"Lance," Shiro interrupted, "don't apologize. It's okay. I'm all right now. Are you okay?"

Lance managed a tiny nod, guilt still roiling his stomach.

"I do not believe it safe to speak on such things anymore," Allura said, casting a worried look at Lance. "Not when these memories trigger such…torture."

Because the wounds that had appeared one after the other on Lance's skin could be anything but. Lance been tortured. Allura clenched her hands so tightly she felt her nails dig into her palms. Haggar had done this to her paladin. She had made him weep blood and tears and even now continued to strike. She hissed. She would make the witch bleed for what she had done to her family.

And yet, she loosened her grip with an attempt at a calming breath, despite all of that pain and fear Lance had undergone, he had said he had not told Haggar anything. He had suffered the Galran's cruelty again and again without revealing a single drop of information that could have hurt them. He had done everything he could to protect them.

Allura had never felt such pride and horror rolled into one.

"I am not sure we have a choice, Princess," Coran said, bringing her back to the present. "The wounds are," he nodded towards Lance's arms, tucked back into his lap, "they are not yet healed."

"I'm sorry," Lance whispered, ducking his head. He was keeping them stuck here with him. The wind blew louder and he closed his eyes, leaning more into Hunk and Pidge's touch.

"There's nothing to apologize for, lad," Coran said, rubbing Lance's knee. "We can take all the time we need. We are here for you, Lance. We will go at whatever pace you need."

Fast. Lance wanted this over with. He wanted to get out of his mindscape, which was no longer the comforting place it had once been. He wanted to go back to the castle and bury himself in Hunk's hoodie and curl up in bed and forget all of this.

But he couldn't forget. He could never forget. And right now he needed to remember, to talk about it but without triggering another bout of injuries that hurt everyone. He cast another guilty look through his bangs at Shiro, who was still paler than he should be.

He'd done that. He'd made Shiro think back to his own time with the Galra and Lance shuddered. Shiro didn't talk about what had happened. They'd picked up bits and pieces; a gladiator ring and fights to the death, his being a guinea pig for Haggar's prosthetics, but they had never pried. Lance
wondered, heart clenching, what Shiro had just seen.

Fast. Right. He needed to talk then. The sooner he got this over with the better.

He took one deep inhale, trying to summon up what little courage he could and Hunk squeezed his shoulder again.

"Phase three," he managed after a moment. "It was… they…"

The ocean waves responded to his memory, no matter how hard he tried not to think on it, crashing with a new ferocity against the rock and Lance recoiled back into Hunk's arms. _Dios_, he couldn't say it. He tried to think of anything else – garlic knots, quilts, the mice – but the ocean only grew louder and louder, literally drowning out his own thoughts. He couldn't suppress the whimper as he imagined the water coming in and going over his head and—

"Lance, breathe, hey, it's okay, you're okay," Hunk squeezed him tightly. "Breathe, _hermano_. We're right here." Lance trembled in his arms, willing the ocean to calm.

Keith spared him from having to think any more on it. "You were drowned," he said bluntly although not without an undertone of concern and Lance hiccupped out a "sí," more tears dripping down his face. He hurriedly brushed them away before he could taste the salt.

"A metal box," Lance whispered, shuddering. "Full of w-water. It was dark and he kept… kept…"

Lance felt Pidge's head lower to press against his arm and he tried to draw strength from her support.

"He said he'd stop if I… if I gave h-him information. But I… I wouldn't. And he just…" Lance shuddered. "Over and over. I couldn't br-breathe. Couldn't see. I couldn't get out. There was just w-water everywhere." He felt his throat closing off now just trying to talk about it and Hunk rubbed his back gently, grounding him.

"Oh, Lance," Allura murmured.

"Then she was there. In my h-head. And… and I couldn't stop her anymore. I tried. _Dios_, I… but…" his voice dropped. "I couldn't. And I knew that if she… if she got in she'd h-hurt you. And I couldn't let her.

"So I… I…" Lance glanced at his bandaged wrists and then quickly away and back to his knees.
"There were these spikes. Under the water." Hunk's grip tightened and a little moan of distress issued from the larger boy's lips.

"I thought…" Lance closed his eyes. "I thought if I… died," the word a breath of air, "then she couldn't get in my head. She couldn't hurt you. I just… I wanted to protect you all," he finished, voice small. "But I f-failed."

"You did not fail," Shiro said fiercely, color returning to his cheeks. "You protected us, Lance. And…" his voice broke, "I'm glad you didn't…" His own words became locked in his throat and instead he leaned forward, wrapping his arms almost awkwardly about Lance's knees and what he could reach of his torso, including Hunk, Pidge and Coran in the embrace as well.

Lance let out another sob and shifted to kneeling so Shiro could more comfortably hug him, burying his face against the older boy's front while Hunk continued to rub soothing circles on his back and Coran and Pidge adjusted accordingly.

"I'm sorry," Lance cried. "I'm so sorry. I m-messed up. I'm w-weak and—"
"No," Allura interrupted sharply. "No, Lance," she said again, softer, and there was so much emotion in just his name that Lance nearly started crying again. "You protected us with your life. I… I am so, so sorry that you had to make such a decision, but I am not sorry that your attempt failed. I do not know what we would have done had you succeeded." She sniffled, eyes bright. "You are a part of our family Lance and I will not—cannot—lose you."

"But if I died… then you could get a better Blue Paladin," Lance choked out his admission. "I g—gave up. I couldn't… I c—couldn't anymore."

Because as altruistic as his intentions were there was a selfish part in them too. He had wanted an out, no longer able to continue the never-ending struggle. And, he had thought then in those dark moments, that the universe would be better served by someone more competent than he. And with him gone they could get a new and better Blue Paladin.

He didn't feel that way now. He still felt, still knew, he was the weak link. But he was the Blue Paladin. Blue had made that very, very clear along with the rest of the team. He was still trying hard to accept their high praises, but he was trying. They expected nothing less and he couldn't let them down again.

"You went through unspeakable horror with no reprieve," Allura said, voice firm again. "You fought off Haggar's mental attacks as well as suffered physical wounds and hurts while sick and alone. You thought…" she swallowed. "You thought we had abandoned you and no help was coming. You were beyond brave and courageous and you…" her hand descended onto his shoulder that Hunk had not commandeered, "you did what you thought would best protect us. The honor of that decision is not diminished at all from wishing for an end to the pain. I do not think many would have endured as long as you, Lance. You are truly one of the strongest individuals I have ever known. Please, do not ever forget that."

"Allura…" he whispered, warmth filling up his chest and battling away the cold. The outside torrent of wind and rain continued to lessen.

"Lance," Keith spoke then, inching his way forward into the huddle and Allura placed one hand on his back to draw him even closer. "I… I don't want to hear you saying that about yourself again. That you're weak. Because…" he paused, voice catching. "You're not."

"Keith…" Lance could feel new tears brimming again.

"And… and I don't want anyone else to be our Blue Paladin," Keith continued, a light flush highlighting his cheeks. "There's no one better than you. So… so don't think that about yourself again. That you're weak. Because…" he paused, voice catching. "You're not."

"Keith…" Lance could feel new tears brimming again.

"And… and I don't want anyone else to be our Blue Paladin," Keith continued, a light flush highlighting his cheeks. "There's no one better than you. So… so don't think that about yourself."

"Keith," Lance repeated, the warmth growing. Keith was saying those things about him? Keith thought that? Keith?

Looking a little out of his element but with the determination Lance had come to expect from the Red Paladin, Keith joined in with the others and lightly put his hand atop of Lance's left where it was still pressed against Shiro's chest.

"Lance," Keith said, seeking out Lance's eyes with his own. "You're not weak. What you did… you protected us in the only way you could. You were strong. You are strong. Okay?"

"Okay," Lance whispered, having a sense of déjà vu, compounded when Hunk asked a quiet, "Okay, what?" behind him.

"I am strong," he said quietly, feeling the truth and power behind the words. "And… and I did this to
He gasped then as heat seemed to sear his wrists, but it was gone as quick as it came and the throbbing ache he had nearly managed to block out disappeared entirely.

His eyes widened and he drew his hands free from the various holds and embraces.

"Lance?" Hunk murmured as Lance tentatively went to push aside the blood-soaked bandages.

"They're gone," he breathed. His left wrist and forearm were unblemished mocha and his right, while still covered with the angry burn scar, had lost the self-inflicted wound. He stared it for a few seconds before tucking it back against him to both prevent looking at it and accidentally triggering another memory.

"Great job, buddy," Shiro beamed, giving Lance's upper arm a squeeze and sitting back to give Lance some space. "You did it."

"The storm has gone too," Allura noted. Indeed, the wind and rain had vanished and the ocean waves had gone back to a gentle roll breaking on the surf.

Lance could feel it within himself, the calming of the elements around him and he took one deep cleansing breath and then another. He knew it was not all over and he still had a lot he needed to say.

But he felt better. Lighter.

Peaceful.

That dark pressure had released its hold and ensconced as he was in Hunk's arms with everyone else clustered around he felt completely safe. Content.

Happy.

He nearly startled at the almost foreign feeling that was filling him. Happy. He... he was feeling happy.

"Look," Pidge gasped. "The sky!"

The clouds were turning from dark gray to wispy white while sunshine was beginning to peak through and cast its rays upon the beach.

"Lance, lad," Coran said, voice awed and full of such pride. "Look at what you are doing."

For as they all had learned the mindscape reflected the individual's state of mind. And if Lance was turning the storm into a sun-warmed beach then...

"Do you want to go outside?" Hunk asked, eagerness clear, as the sky changed into a brilliant azure blue to match the indigo waves.

"Yes," Lance whispered. "Yes," he repeated with more conviction, the shakiness from just minutes ago near vanished.

The others were already pulling themselves to their feet and dusting off sand-covered bottoms. Lance was still sitting with Hunk behind him when Keith extended a hand down, a soft smile on his face.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Lance tentatively held out his left, eyes skidding right over the mark through his palm, and Keith
grasped it firmly and pulled Lance with surprising strength to standing. Pidge was there then, taking his still trembling right hand tightly in her own and giving him a wide grin.

"Let's go, let's go!" she cheered, giving it a tug as Lance stalled upon standing. Out there was still the ocean, dangerous and wild and so, so easily able to drag him down.

"We're right here," Hunk said and a large hand descended on his shoulder. "Right here, hermano."

Lance nodded. And with Pidge tugging on his hand, Keith holding the other steadily, and Hunk offering up his strength from behind Lance took a careful step forward and then another while the others waited at the entrance of the cove with wide smiles.

His bare feet sank into sand, tickling his toes with a fond familiarity. The sun was bright, almost too much, and he winced at its light, but the beams felt nice falling on his shoulders and he forged on ahead.

Pidge and Keith released his hands as he stepped more fully onto the beach. He kept well away from the inviting but still much, much too powerful waves and buried his feet into the golden dunes.

He turned his face up, soaking in the sunlight that spoke hope and happiness and love. He could feel it wrapping about him, heard the sound of childlike innocent laughter and the playful roar of his Lion, and the blossoming warmth expanded.

He closed his eyes, picturing the blue of his quintessence and this time it glowed with unbridled joy and enveloped him in its comfort, a purr reverberating through him. He tipped his head back more, letting the sunshine kiss his face and warm him from the inside out with the physical peace and happiness he had been able to conjure.

And Lance smiled.

Chapter End Notes

He smiles! I'm so happy! *bawling* Our boy is so brave and beautiful and just…
*dissolves into more blubbering* Look away, guys. I'm not a pretty crier.

Intense chapter (you do not mess around in a mindscape!) to start but a happy ending there with Lance finding inner peace what with that huge weight off his chest and the (as we all knew would happen) absolute acceptance from the group. There's still plenty of stuff that we do need to talk about before this story ends, but Lance just took a giant leap forward here and I have never been prouder. I know I've been leading to this moment for like, forever, so I truly hope I did it justice.

Much love to the reviewers who make my day shine with happiness too: glitteringconstellations, BubbleGumi, FandomHuntress, keepasecretgetastrawberry, StingingLikeABee, smol_lil_demon, Benny_IsA_Dog, Ookamisouleaper, ThisOneIsBlue, AnnnnmotherFandom, dean_winchester_has_fallen, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, Maddie, kipper, TomboyGamer, QueenMawesome, ImaShayne, Yuki Akira, Grace, Nora, joey, xMysticx, rlekt, GeorgieGinger, HonestlyCasualTaco, Elizabeth May, maychorian,
Glittersessa, Justanotherfangirl, Potatosaurusrex, and InfinityPheonix!

Before this gets too buried I wanted to announce that Color is having a 2,000 Kudo Kiriban! For those unfamiliar with the term, a kiriban is a milestone number (normally pageviews) where the author/artist has a prize for whoever spots it first. In this case I decided that 2k worth of kudos deserves a little something (and it has the added benefit of no spamming allowed since only one kudo allowed per user for a fair playing field). So, details. If you are the first person to snap a screenshot of Color with 2,000 – 2,003 kudos shown (a little leeway) and post the link (photobucket, imgur, tinypic, etc.) in the most recent Color chapter you win! Timestamp will be determining factor in the off chance multiple readers actually try xD If you are the winner you get a VLD fic of your choice from 2k – 5k. Anything gen goes! ♥ Good luck if you choose to play, and thank you all for getting this story to this point!

That said, even more than kudos I love comments ♥ Please please do drop one below before you head out. This was a big chapter and I’d love to hear what you thought of Lance’s confession and then ultimate resolution with himself. Thanks so much!
"Hunk," Pidge whispered, as though being any louder would disrupt the moment, but sounding absolutely giddy. "Lance—"

"I know," Hunk murmured back, "I know."

Because Lance was smiling. It wasn't a large grin or playful smirk, but instead a soft upturn of his lips, greeting the sun like a blooming flower and it was beautiful.

They had all come to an abrupt halt to watch as Lance had tipped his head back, golden rays highlighting his skin, and he had seemed to soak in that brightness, a look of peace and contentment growing until it had resulted in this.

Hunk had never been happier or prouder. Lance had confessed to him his pain of not being able to smile, the fear that something was wrong with him because of that. Hunk had come to the conclusion that it was because Lance was not actually happy and the mask that he normally was able to summon to cover up that hurt had been broken and without it Lance was laid bare. Hunk had always hated those fake smiles anyway.

So to see it now, that gentle, sweet expression that was completely at home on his best friend's face made Hunk just swell with joy. Because Lance was getting better. He was overcoming the horrors he'd suffered under the Galrans and Haggar and he was returning to himself. Hunk hadn't realized until just now how incomplete Lance had been without his smile.

Pidge seemed to share his sentiment, clutching onto his hand with enough force that he was genuinely afraid she might break a finger. Everyone else too was watching Lance smile into the sunlight with shared looks of fondness and happiness.

After what was probably only a few moments but it felt so much more than that, Lance turned to look at them, that beautiful smile still gracing his face, although his eyes were welling with new tears. "Hunk," he whispered and the larger boy needed no second urging.

He flung his arms around Lance, not quite sweeping him off his feet like he used to, but squeezing him tight to his chest and only barely remembering not to put a hand through Lance's hair, settling it instead on his shoulder.

"I'm smiling," Lance said even as tears caressed his cheeks. "I... I...."

"I knew you could do it," Hunk managed around his own budding tears. "I knew it, hermano." He pulled him tighter. "I'm so happy for you."

Lance let out a happy sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh and it was the most beautiful thing Hunk had ever heard, made even more so as Lance's smile widened and his eyes crinkled before he buried his face into Hunk's chest and his own arms wrapped ever so lightly about the broad back.

Hunk would have been content to hug Lance for forever, but Lance composed himself a moment
later and released his arms, prompting Hunk to step back to let Lance run a hand over his tear-
streaked face.

Lance turned then to the rest of the team, who had all come to stand together on the beach just outside the cove.

"Muchas gracias," he said softly, still feeling the smile on his face. "Thank you… I…"

"It is most wonderful to see you smiling once more," Allura said, eyes sparkling and her own brightening her face. "You are feeling better?"

"…Yes," Lance said after a moment. "I… I am."

And he was. The smile felt natural; no longer fake or forced. It was second nature again to have it there, to feel the edges of his mouth curling up and the way it made his entire body feel lighter. And more than that, he felt better. He felt… happy.

Talking about it had helped and they had understood, just like Blue had told him they would. He could almost picture his Lion rolling her eyes at him and nudging him with her nose with a "see?" And not only had they understood his reasons, even denounced his weaker thoughts, they had accepted him completely. They were rightly horrified, but not by what he thought. They had been scared of losing him. Him. It made him feel warm inside, chased away most of the cold.

Parts of it were still there. The sound of the waves crashing on the beach created a tension in him that he had previously never known. His right hand still shook ever so slightly, useless in a fight. The scars still shone like beacons that he could not yet face. Haggar still lurked, her darkness lingering even with his friends' light.

But he knew, really knew, now that he could get better. Be better. Feel better. He just had to have the strength, the courage, to try. And with his space family all around him, supporting him with everything they had, he knew he could.

"We're glad to hear it, buddy," Shiro smiled at him, all of the paleness and tightness gone from his face.

"So this is your mind?" Pidge asked, peering with interest about her surroundings now that the danger had passed.

"Mindscape," Lance and Coran corrected at the same time and the advisor shot Lance a questioning look.

"You know what this place is?" he asked. None of the other Paladins had had an inkling, which meant that Lance had learned about it from someone else.

Lance's smile faded as he gave a short nod. "Yes. She… she told me about it. When I first got here."

"What did she tell you?" Coran asked carefully.

"It's… part of my mind, I guess," Lance said, looking about the beach. "She said it reflects my personality. And my current state of mind." He lowered his eyes as a cloud passed over the sun as he recalled how broken and violent it had been just minutes ago. "I guess you already saw that though."

"And look at it now," Hunk said, giving his bare shoulder a squeeze. "It's beautiful, Lance. You did this. You." Lance managed a small smile at that and Hunk beamed right back and the cloud shifted to reveal the sun again.
"She also said," Lance continued, hand unconsciously moving to rub at his chest where his lung rested, "that the mind comes here when… when the body is failing." He looked up then, a sheen of fear dancing in his eyes. "Did… did something happen? At the Castle? How are we all here?"

Had he almost died again?

"I believe it may have been caused by a quintessence overload," Coran said and Allura hung her head, shame painting her cheeks.

"I am sorry, Lance," she apologized. "I thought I could control it and I could not. You suffered greatly for my mistake and I cannot apologize enough."

"It's not your fault," he mumbled, toeing the sand. He didn't like seeing guilt on Allura. And she had tried her best and he had given her the go ahead. She wasn't to blame at all.

"It is," Allura countered, not so easily able to let it go. "I put you at risk, Lance. I hurt you."

"But you didn't mean to," Lance said quietly, meeting her jewel eyes with a look of utter compassion and understanding and not a hint of fear. Despite it all he still trusted her and Allura felt her breath taken away by it. "You were trying to help."

She managed a nod. "Yes. But… I cannot try again. Not without more time and training until I am capable of channeling such power. And that means that I cannot," she swallowed, "I cannot create the barrier as we had hoped."

"We'll find another way," Shiro said comfortingly and she found some of the tension draining from her as his warm hand came to rest on her shoulder.

"In the meantime, when we get back to the castle it'll be bed rest for the both of you," Coran said. "No arguments, Princess," he said seeing her open her mouth. "All of that quintessence at once has shocked both of your systems. You need rest to reset yourselves, so to speak."

"How though?" Keith asked. Upon seeing the questioning faces he clarified. "How do we get back?"

Coran raised a finger up and then let it fall, brow furrowing. "I… I do not know, Number Four. That is indeed a rather important point." He turned to Lance, who had leaned back into a loose embrace against Hunk. "Do you have any ideas, Lance? Do you recall how you left when you found yourself here before?"

Lance worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he thought back to that first time here. That had been when the mindscape had battled back against Haggar and he'd chased her off and then taken to swimming in the ocean. He'd been looking at the constellations and then—

He blanched at the memory, his first time drowning although he'd been more terrified at the time of the blood staining the water and the pressure forcing him down as his right hand had contorted. Only Hunk's concerned "Lance?" along with a low rumble of thunder brought him back.

"Deep breaths, hermano," Hunk said, rubbing his large hands on Lance's back and Lance found himself being lowered to the sand. "It's okay."

Lance nodded weakly, forcing the blood-stained water from memory and trying to focus on the how instead.

"The… the first time," Lance said softly. "I think—"
"Wait," Pidge interrupted. "The first time?" Lance gave a small nod, looking somewhat confused. "The first time," she repeated, feeling breathless. "Didn't… didn't you just say that you end up here because you're dying?" She heard Shiro's sharp intake then and Keith curse below his breath in horror.

Lance nodded again, the confusion being replaced now with something Pidge couldn't quite identify. Sadness, maybe? Hurt?

"How many times were you here?" Shiro asked, voice wavering.

Lance looked down at his hands, held in his lap, and mumbled out a number. Hunk's eyes widened but he was the only one who had managed to hear it.

The large boy looked up and swallowed thickly. "Three," he said for the rest of them.

"Three?" Pidge repeated, feeling sick and by the looks of it her team was in a similar state. Three times that Lance had been so badly injured and under so much strain that he had ended up here.

How?

Her feet moved mechanically forward, instinct driving her to fall to her knees in front of Lance and Hunk and take Lance's scarred hands into her own, enveloping them as best she could.

"Lance," she whispered, not sure what else to say. She could feel the others closing the small distance now as well and if it wasn't for the reason why they were all doing that she might have giggled at the sight they all made worming their way into a tight half-circle about Lance as though they could hide him from the world.

"Estoy bien," he said after a moment although he made no move to shift her hands away and Pidge only held on tighter. "It's… it's over now."

And for as simple as those words were they said so much. Lance had come such a far way from the fear that had plagued him just an hour ago. He was fighting against the memories and Haggar's poison to remain here, with them. She squeezed his hands even more.

"The first time," Lance repeated, voice soft but filled with a strength not many could have summoned in that moment, "I ended up here was after my escape attempt." He took a deep breath and the clouds that had been closing in shifted again to reveal the sun. "I got shot," he continued. "Fatally, according to… to her. I woke up here. And then I woke up back in the real world when they…" he swallowed, "when they were still healing me. Druid healing is… painful," he finally settled on. "That brought me back."

"An outside stimulant then," Coran observed, his hand lighting on Lance's knee and giving it a squeeze of support. "Was that the case for all three of your... visits?"

Lance shook his head. "No. The second I… I don't really know how. I was here after…" His hands stung and he willed the thought of the Kri Za Kri away. "After I was hurt," he offered, noting the looks of concern at the omission but he couldn't talk about that right now. Not until he was free of his mindscape where at least then the pain wasn't made real.

"I think I might have fallen asleep here," Lance added. He didn't quite recall now that he was thinking about it how that time in the mindscape had ended. He had been crying in the rain and then he'd been waking up to sheer blackness and wishing he was home.
Coran nodded, looking thoughtful. "One cannot technically fall asleep or unconscious in one's own mind because one is not really awake," he said. "It is possible that upon your mind trying for that exit your physical body was reawoken."

"So maybe he just needs to fall asleep?" Hunk suggested hopefully. It certainly sounded like the more viable option as they didn't have anyone in the castle capable of waking Lance up through a physical mean.

"Possibly," Coran said. "But let us explore all of our options. Was the third time a different exit method, Lance?"

Lance did flinch at that one. "Yes," he said after a pause. "That one was when I… when I…” he nodded his chin towards his wrists and Keith's hand found his shoulder and gave it a reassuring if hesitant pat. "I'm not sure how I got out of that one," he admitted. "She was here and she… she hurt me," he whispered, recalling her glowing hand and purple and black lightning wreathing around him and making him feel like he was drowning in fire. "But on the outside I was being hurt too." He'd awoken to water in his lungs then, a hand shoving his head deeper and deeper under while he spasmed and shook to no avail.

"Oh, Lance," Allura murmured, seeing his face twist in remembered pain.

"Sleep," Hunk said quickly. "I vote sleep."

Because they had no one outside to wake Lance's physical body and they certainly as heck weren't going to torture him into waking here. Nope, there was only one clear option available.

"I could go for a little shut eye myself," Coran said brightly. "How about it, lad?"

"I could try," Lance said. The sun did feel nice and warm now, heating his mostly bare skin pleasantly and he did always love naps. He wasn't really tired at all, but he too also liked this idea the best. And if Coran thought it was plausible then it was worth a shot.

"Let's all get comfortable then," Shiro smiled.

"We should all be touching," Allura said as Lance settled himself down and Hunk flopped next to him. "Just in case."

It was a sound suggestion given that they'd all come in latched onto one another and Lance had never been here with others, except for Haggar, but she seemed to be able to come and go as she pleased. Her playground, he shuddered as her words ghosted to him. Well, his hand tightened ever so where Pidge had kept her hold on it and was lying on his other side, not anymore.

They made an odd line down the beach; Keith next to Pidge and already starting to lightly burn and Lance felt a tiny stab of guilt about that and tried to will a cloud somewhat over the other teen without luck. Shiro was on Keith's other side, prosthetic pillowed behind his hand and eyes closed against the sun.

Next to Hunk rested Allura, one of her dark hands intertwined with Hunk's and her other holding onto Coran, who looked absolutely content as a gentle breeze blew over them.

Lance tried to settle down and close his eyes as well and will sleep to come so they could all get out of here. After a few minutes though he didn't feel the normal haze of sleep that napping in the sun normally brought and he shifted restlessly.

Sleep, he chanted at himself as Hunk gave their conjoined hands a squeeze and rubbed his thumb in
slow circle over Lance's. Sleep.

But by his guess of nearly ten dobashes later he still felt nothing pulling him back to his body.

This wasn't working.

"I can't sleep," he finally said, trying to give it a few more minutes but nothing was happening. He sat up, prompting everyone else to do the same, shaking off loose sand from their clothing.

"Maybe we could knock you out?" Pidge suggested. "Carefully!" she said, raising her hands placatingly as Hunk turned a frown upon her. "Like... like a pressure point."

"I do know of one," Shiro said. "But it's..." he raised his hand and placed it on the back of his neck. "Here."

Lance tried his best not to wince as he felt a sharp sting ripple about his neck at the reminder of shock collars and needles. The sky did darken slightly though and that was enough of an indicator.

"Any other ideas first?" Hunk asked, trying not to seem too desperate. Because Lance was still very, very wary about anyone going near his neck and no matter how gentle Shiro was the motion would likely still be uncomfortable and Hunk did not want Lance to suffer any more violent memories.

"I may have one," Allura said slowly. "One moment please." She closed her eyes and pressed her hands to her temple, casting her mind wide open.

Even here, in Lance's mindscape, she could feel the residual quintessence of each Paladin and it gave her hope that if she could feel that then her connection to the physical plane was not entirely removed either, possibly because she had sent them here in the first place. If that was the case she may be able to link with—

There! She felt a small, warm presence touch her own mind and she concentrated fully on it. Chuchule she called out and she felt the mouse perk up.

"Can you hear me?"

She felt an affirmation and nearly sighed with relief. I need your help, dear friend. Please, go to the main lounge.

She felt an affirmation and nearly sighed with relief. I need your help, dear friend. Please, go to the main lounge.

Chuchule chirped with confidence, puffing out her chest. I need you to awaken Lance Allura instructed. Avoid his head, please, but do try to rouse him.

She could feel the mice then all joining in on the effort and they projected their attempts to her; Chuchule was nosing his hand while Platt was bouncing his large girth up and down on Lance's stomach. Plachu was wiggling his whiskers against Lance's sock-covered feet and Chulatt was pressing her wet nose against a piece of exposed skin on Lance's side where the hoodie had ridden up.
But Allura could feel that they were not having success and she winced at what she knew they had to try then. If the gentle touches were not doing it then perhaps a more severe one was what was needed to truly jolt Lance from his mind.

Chuchule she called you must bite his hand. The mouse let out a squeak of alarm and Allura could feel the firm backlash at such a suggestion.

You must she ordered. It is the only way.

She felt the resignation but the understanding in one rush as she sent her own feelings of urgency and desperation to them.

A second later she felt everything flicker about, but Chuchule informed her that Lance had not awoken. Again she instructed. All of you at once. It will be all right, she soothed. This is to help Lance. I promise.

There was a moment of pause as Allura felt all the mice reconvene to Lance's left hand, each selecting a finger to nibble on. Do it Allura ordered, feeling their hesitation to cause such pain.

A second later everything shifted and Allura felt herself thrown head over heels. She opened her eyes with a groan, expecting to see the bright sunlight shining down but instead saw only the lights of the castle's lounge.

With a gasp she jerked upright, tipping over a second later as her head spun and it if hadn't been for Hunk suddenly there she would have fallen right back over.

"Easy, easy," Hunk murmured and Allura closed her eyes as the room spun in a dizzying loop. "I've got you."

"Lance?" she managed, tongue feeling too large for her mouth.

"He's in quite a bit of pain, Princess," came Coran's voice. "But awake." His voice lowered then, likely talking to Lance and Allura forced her eyes to open against the spinning.

Coran was kneeling next to Lance, who was still in the middle of their circle, and holding one of his hands gently and murmuring to him. Lance's face was scrunched with pain and he looked abnormally pale.

Shiro was on Lance's other side and Keith next to him, hovering anxiously but his eyes met hers in a narrowed glare. "What did you do?" he demanded.

"The... the mice," Allura got out, sinking more against Hunk as the room continued to spin. Pidge was already sitting on the ground with four small quivering bundles of fur in her hands that were projecting such guilt that it made Allura's heart hurt. I am sorry she thought to them and they all gave little morose squeaks in her mind.

"Come, let us put them to bed," Coran said, standing and easily holding Lance in his arms, the boy's eyes squeezed tightly shut. "Hunk, can you assist the Princess?"

"I am all right, Coran," Allura tried to insist, even as she tightened her grip on Hunk as he shifted.

"You need rest, Allura," he said, sounding as serious as she had ever heard him. "Quintessence overload can be dangerous beyond measure. Rest, please."

"Very well," Allura sighed, knowing that he was right and she was not certain she was capable of
doing much else anyway. "But I shall remain here, in the lounge." There was no room for argument in her tone and Coran knew when to pick his battles and gestured with his chin at one of the long couches and Hunk assisted the princess to it.

"Lance, lad," he asked gently, looking down at the boy who had nestled his face against his jacket, "do you wish to return your room or remain in the lounge as well?"

"Lounge," Lance whispered, just as Coran knew he would.

Coran brought him to the other long couch and placed him tenderly on it while Keith came over a moment later with one of the blankets that had wound its way back up there and the advisor gave him a soft smile and murmured thanks.

"There we go," he said, spreading it over Lance and tucking it on the edges. The boy looked nearly asleep already, despite the clear pain he was in, brow furrowed with an apparent headache. "Would you be all right with a vein valve, lad? Just to get some fluids in you? It should help with the headache."

Lance let out a barely conscious hum and Coran took that as permission.

"I'll get it," Pidge volunteered. "I know where they are."

"Thank you, Number Five, that would be most helpful."

Pidge deposited the mice, still all huddling together, on the couch with Allura where they scrambled up to nestle under the girl's chin, and scurried off.

"What can I do?" Keith asked, hovering next to Lance while Shiro went to grab another blanket across the way.

"If you could dim the lights in here, Number Four," Coran started, Keith already heading to the controls by the door.

When he returned though his face was drawn and Shiro looked at him concerned. "What is it?"

"We were in there for hours," Keith whispered, having seen the time and date projected on the controls. "Shiro, it's almost 1300."

It was Shiro's turn to blanch. "What?"

"What do we do?" Hunk asked, joining their little huddle as Allura succumbed to the exhaustion as well, her mice standing guard. "There aren't any alarms going off. That's good, right?"

"I'll go check the bridge," Coran said. "Number One, come with me please. Number Two, are you able to insert the vein valve when Number Five returns?"

"No sweat," Hunk said. "Me and Keith'll keep an eye on things here."

"We should hopefully be back shortly," Coran said. "Hang tight till then, Paladins."

He and Shiro were then hurrying away and Hunk retreated back to Lance's couch, sinking down wearily next to it.

"Are you… okay?" Keith asked, feeling out of his element but the Yellow Paladin looked so worn down in that moment he felt he had to ask.
The last few moments in the mindscape had not been easy on any of them. Upon the suggestion of the pressure point Lance had hunched in more on himself and they had all seen him wince several times as likely residual pain from a memory broke across his face. Hunk had done his best to soothe him, rubbing his hand over Lance's back while they waited for whatever it was Allura was trying to do, and while the sky had remained mostly clear a cooler breeze had picked up and the waves had lashed more firmly about the shore, causing Lance to flinch.

Keith had tried not to look at the scar, remembering Coran's original warning, but it was hard not to. The thick, ropy line made up of mottled browns and dark pinks was stark on Lance's skin and spoke of torture upon torture. Keith could still remember the first time they'd seen it activated, when Lance had tried to argue for himself at the Kri Za Kri. Lance's face had gone from confused to horrified to such pain in that moment.

For it to have created such a scar the collar would have had to have been used again. And again. And then again. The Galra's cruelty truly knew no bounds and Keith hated them all the more for it.

Just when Keith was half-tempted to poke Allura and demand to what she was doing – she had better not be screwing around with quintessence again – they had all felt a tug and Lance had let out a gasp of pain, hunching over.

Coran had yelled at them all to hold together then as something was clearly happening outside the mindscape. Lance had cried out softly a moment later and he had barely had a chance to raise panicked, tear-lined eyes to Hunk's before they were all being tossed head over heel as though they'd attempted to wormhole with just their bodies.

It had hurt just as much as landing in the mindscape had, but Keith knew they had all escaped relatively unscathed. Lance had been whimpering with pain upon emerging and Allura had not looked much better.

Hunk had been a rock through all of it; surprising Keith with how quickly he had adapted to the mindscape's constantly changing environment (this from the boy who used to get so anxious he'd get lost in the castle he would refuse to leave his room without an escort) and going straight to Lance and comforting him in any way he could. Keith was slightly jealous at how naturally it just seemed to come to Hunk; the soothing words, the light touches, the hugs. He had tried to add in his own two cents when Lance hadn't yet seemed to believe Allura and Shiro and it thought it might have helped, but it was nothing to what Hunk was able to offer.

Through it all though Hunk was there, shouldering every tear and nightmare and memory without a word of complaint about how it was affecting him. But now, with Lance asleep, Hunk had dropped his guard and he looked exhausted.

"I could really go for a nap," Hunk admitted, picking his head up from where he'd rested it on the couch. "I was…" he yawned, "I was up all night."

"Why don't you?" Keith asked, nodding towards the last open couch.

"Can't," Hunk yawned. "Not till Pidge gets back with the…" he yawned again. "The vein… thingy." And wow, he was definitely tired.

"I can put it in," Keith volunteered.

"Keith, man, that's really nice of you to offer, but—"

"I know how," Keith interrupted. "I…"His jaw clenched then, halting the words on the tip of his
tongue. He could feel that wall rising, the constant reminder that whenever he tried to open up to others he only ever got hurt. But this was Hunk. And Hunk was his friend.

"I know how," he repeated, grateful when Hunk didn't interrupt. "My dad… My dad had to have an IV drip after he got… got worse. I helped. Before he went to the hospital. It's been a while, but I can do it."

"All right then," Hunk said, and there was such a warmth to his tone and no further questions or judgment that Keith felt himself flush. "I leave you to it. I'll just…" he pulled himself up and tottered over to the spare couch. "Be over here. Thanks, Keith."

Hunk was out cold not even a minute later and Keith was left standing there feeling his heart near bursting with the trust that the other boy had given him. Hunk was trusting him to look after Lance in his stead. It was both terrifying and wonderful all at the same time.

Before Pidge could return, Keith busied himself with fetching another blanket to drape over Hunk and squeeze a pillow onto the couch with Allura for the mice, who had calmed down now and they all gave little squeaks of thanks at the gesture.

Keith then dragged over one of the ottomans to Lance's side and set himself down with a casual grace. Lance remained sleeping through it all, although he still looked to be in pain even then.

"It's going to be all right," Keith told him quietly, smoothing the blanket fold on the edge of the couch for something to do. "We… we won't let anything happen to you. You're safe now." Lance did not so much as stir but his brow was smoothing ever so slightly and so Keith kept it up, his tones as low as when he would try to befriend the stray cats that sometimes meandered a little too close to the violent group home.

"I promise," Keith said, meaning it with everything he had, "I won't let her hurt you ever again. I…" he closed his eyes, still too easily recalling the sight of Lance's broken, bloodied form lying in the cell and then how absolutely terrified Lance had been upon realizing someone was there with him, clearly expecting only to be hurt. "I promise," he repeated. "You'll never be that scared or hurt or lonely again. I'll try to be a better friend too. I will. I just…" he grabbed at his hair, a nervous gesture.

"I don't know how, Lance. And I'm afraid I'll make things worse." He paused. "I always make things worse."

"Keith?" and the swordsman startled off the ottoman, surprised beyond anything to find Pidge standing just a few feet away. He normally had impeccable hearing and yet she had appeared out of nowhere, the vein valve and fluid packs in hand.

"Pidge," he muttered, feeling a flush darken his cheeks. What had she heard?

She came and perched herself next to him on the ottoman as he righted himself.

"You don't always make things worse," she said rather bluntly after a moment and he wasn't sure if it was meant to be comforting or a fact. Maybe both? "I mean, sometimes you do, but you're learning, Keith. We all are."

"I'm not good at this," Keith admitted.

"Neither am I," Pidge agreed. "But we're both trying and that's what's important." She gave him a nudge with her elbow and a smile. "And from a completely biased opinion I do think we're doing pretty good."

"Our opinions don't count," Keith muttered.
"Maybe, maybe not," Pidge shrugged. "But the way I see it, Hunk left you in charge here and he wouldn't have done that if he didn't think you could do it. So what does that tell you?"

"...Thanks, Pidge," Keith said quietly.

She gave him another gentle nudge, which Keith was quickly learning was her way of showing affection. "Now you just need to tell Lance that when he's awake. He'd really love to hear it."

Keith gave an uncomfortable roll of his shoulders. He was better at saying things in the heat of the moment; not a pre-planned apology or bonding attempt.

"It'll work out," Pidge said to that. "You have good instincts, Keith. Listen to them. For now though I'm hoping you also have an idea of what to do with this," she held up the fluid pack, "because as you know I'm just getting the hang of bandaging."

"I can do it," Keith said. "Just hold a tick."

He carefully lifted the blanket that was draped over Lance and tugged Lance's left arm free. Lance twitched slightly but otherwise remained still as Keith settled it atop Lance's stomach and pushed the large yellow hoodie sleeve up to Lance's elbow.

The skin there was unblemished and showed nothing of the trauma that had once been inflicted. Keith found himself drawn to that smooth patch trying to force the sudden knot out of his stomach. Lance had lived. He hadn't... he hadn't ended up like others Keith had once known; those who had given up on getting out of the system and had taken the only escape they thought existed.

Lance hadn't done it to escape though. He'd done it to protect them, to keep them from harm. It was different. And, he brushed his thumb over Lance's arm, Lance had lived. He had made it out and he was going to be okay. He'd seen that resolve and hope there in the mindscape. He didn't have to worry about Lance like that.

If anything, his biggest worry was that Lance would throw himself back into harm's way if it meant keeping them safe. Keith knew he himself was reckless, but he fought to survive and never planned to not come back. Lance... Lance was just as reckless but unlike Keith he put others far, far ahead of his own well being and didn't think about the consequences to himself. That was more terrifying, Keith thought, than his own dangerous stunts.

But that's what they were all there for. To make Lance realize how important he was and that they could not lose him no matter what. There was no replacing Lance and so Keith refused to entertain the notion.

"Keith?" Pidge asked and the swordsman realized he'd drifted off into his own thoughts.

"Can you hand me the vein valve?" Keith replied instead of an answer and Pidge placed it into his open hand. Keith prodded along Lance's arm, spotting the best place easily thanks to the small dot left behind from previous valves.

With practiced ease – despite the name the Altean's version of an IV was identical to Earth's – he slipped the needle and tube in, taped it down with the sticky patch that had been attached to it, and removed the needle. He affixed the fluid bag and then propped it up on the armrest of the couch. Lance continued to sleep.

Pidge didn't question how he knew what to do, but gave him another nudge and pulled herself to standing.
"I'm going to go grab some food and drinks from the kitchen," she said. "Want anything in particular?"

"No food goo," Keith replied automatically and Pidge grinned.

"What do you take me for? Please. I'll be back with whatever I can scrounge up that looks edible. And then, when I get back, you need a shower. You still smell."

Keith looked down at himself, realizing that yes; he was still in his now stiff with dried sweat training clothes from that morning. But at least his shirt was still intact in this world. He had rather liked it but hadn't hesitated at all to offer it up for bandages upon seeing all of the blood.

"Okay," he agreed, trying not to wrinkle his nose as now that it was pointed out yes, he did rather smell.

Pidge hurried off soundlessly again and Keith turned his gaze back to Lance, whose expression had fully evened out to something peaceful.

"I know you can't hear me right now," he said softly. "But when you wake up… I'd like to talk to you. About… about us. If you'll let me. A lot has changed, Lance, since you were… away. I've changed. I think for the better. I hope so, at least.

"So," Keith ran a hand through the back of his hair, "consider this my promise to talk to you once you're awake to listen. I won't back out of this or make up excuses. We… we need to talk. I need to apologize. And…" his hands clenched in the blanket. "I want to be your friend. A real one."

And in his sleep Lance's lips turned up into a small smile as though he'd somehow heard Keith's words. Keith sat back on the ottoman with a smile of his own and a promise burning bright.

Chapter End Notes

So, lot's happening in this chapter. More progress and reveals for Lance, more hugs and bonding moments and even the mice got to make an appearance. I love those furry little beans so.

And gosh, I am so not subtle with some of the refs from Burning Bright this chapter, complete with the gosh darn title in here. I'm having too much fun with my own version of Easter eggs. Someone stop me, please xD This is becoming more problematic than grape juice in my Harry Potter fics :p Since I've had some inquiries, yes, Keith and Lance will have a bonding moment. As some of you may have already spotted, all of the characters are getting a one-on-one moment (or several, if you are Hunk :) with Lance, somewhat subtly woven into the storyline. We've got three still to go and I am legit bursting with excitement for them :D

2,000 Kudo Kiriban Winner! As you can see we did hit 2,000 kudos. Wow, guys. (all of y'all want to drop a comment too? *shot*) DarumaDoll/RedDaruma was our winner! Their prize will be posted on Tuesday with the title of What the Universe Sees (And Does Not). Will post some details to my Tumblr (icypantherwrites) this weekend, but otherwise know it's a Hunk-centric oneshot! (although our blue boy is also a main
character) ♥

So much love to the amazing reviewers. You guys blew me away with the response last chapter and I am so, so grateful. Y'all are amazing. I'm running a bit behind this week so I can't go nab all the names, but y'all know who you are. Thank you so much for the comments!

Please do drop a comment before you click off! I love hearing from you guys. I've unfortunately been having some sad personal friend problems, so your kind comments would really cheer a girl up. Thanks so much and see y'all next week!
Fortunately, despite several varga of the castle ship being left completely unmanned, there was no cause for alarm. Nothing had registered on the castle's radar as coming within the ten pylon range Pidge had set and all systems were functioning as normal.

Coran still completed a full diagnostic scan of the cameras for any movement that had been detected, but the only signatures had come from Allura's quarters and the kitchens – identified as the mice – and then the mice again as they went to the lounge.

Upon the last final check, both males had given each other relieved glances, and then returned to the lounge where they'd found Hunk, Lance and Allura all sound asleep and Keith and Pidge chowing down on bowls of re-heated chili and with a side of the breakfast muffins next to Lance's couch.

"We're good," Shiro said in way of greeting, although given how both younger Paladins hadn't looked any type of worried he figured they'd already guessed that by his slow walk. "What've you guys got here?"

"Plenty," Pidge smiled at them as she swallowed a bite. "Since we all missed lunch. Help yourselves."

Both men fixed themselves a plate and settled down on the floor opposite the other two as all of the couches and ottomans had been commandeered.

"Is Number Two all right?" Coran asked, shooting a look at the softly snoring Yellow Paladin.

"He said he didn't sleep well last night," Keith said.

Pidge nodded. "Said the same to me this morning. Lance woke up with a nightmare and I'm not sure he honestly slept much again after that."

"We'll be quiet then so he can catch up," Shiro said, lowering his voice. "The only thing on the agenda today is to rest up and…" he frowned.

"And?" Keith prompted.

"We need to prepare for Haggar," Shiro said bluntly. "The barrier didn't work and as we are right now it's not safe for Allura to try again."

Coran nodded. "I agree. We were lucky that the quintessence exhaustion is all that happened; given that we were transported to Lance's mindscape it was a severe wound dealt to him at the start. Remaining in that stasis though allowed both his and the Princess' body to recuperate some of what was lost. They will still need plenty of rest but that looks to be the worst of it." He cast his gaze to the three Paladins then. "Are any of you feeling any ill effects from earlier?"

"No," Pidge answered for all of them. "You?"

"Fortunately not," Coran said. "I know we must prepare, Number One, but we must also allow our
bodies to rest. Even though we are not showing symptoms I have no doubts that such an… excursion did indeed deplete our own quintessence levels to some degree."

Shiro inclined his head. "I understand. Nothing strenuous."

"I'm going to go take that shower then," Keith said, clambering to his feet and earning a grateful "thank you," from Pidge. "I'll come back here after for… for whatever." Keith wasn't really sure what he could contribute to preparations for Haggar and he hated the useless feeling that clawed up, just like it had when they were first waiting for word from the Galrans.

He'd fight when the time came, but until then? He couldn't do anything. He absolutely hated it.

Before he could dwell on that anymore he took his leave figuring that if he was going to be useless he could at least do so and not smell like a locker room.

Back in the lounge Pidge turned to Shiro and Coran. "I was thinking then, maybe we could all go over some of the rear shields? I had an idea about configuring some of the panels with the castle's power grid to enforce them. I'll need Hunk later, but thought we could take a stab at it in the meantime."

"I will have to decline," Coran said, looking apologetic. "I had planned actually to begin preparations for Lance's therapy this morning, but I will of course be on stand-by should you need to run anything past."

"That's a good plan," Shiro nodded. "And Pidge, I'll offer what input I can. I'm not much of an engineer."

"But you're good on tactics," she retorted. "Besides, I need someone big to move the crystals around."

Shiro let out a laugh and shook his head as she had the audacity to wink at him. "Fine, fine. How about both of you go grab whatever you need and Pidge, I'll meet you in the generator room? Coran, I'll hang out here until you get back."

"Excellent," Coran said, straightening up. "I'll be back in a couple of jiffies."

"My tablet's in the kitchen still," Pidge said. "I'll clean up from breakfast and lunch," she was already messily stacking plates and bowls into a pile, "and meet you there in… thirty dobashes?"

"Want to add getting dressed to that line up too?" Shiro teased and Pidge looked down, pajama bottoms and sleep shirt greeting her.

"Point," she sighed.

"And Pidge?" Shiro's voice grew more serious. "Keep your bayard on you too, okay? Just… just in case."

Her lips thinned and she suddenly looked much older than a girl clad in pajamas should. "Should I grab my armor too?" Both it and the bayard were in the changing room right before she took the lift down to Green's hangar.

"Maybe bring it back to your quarters," Shiro suggested. "Since all the Lions are still in the hall. But I don't think we need to wear it around the castle." He'd feel safer, certainly, if everyone was armored up but the tension it would raise was not worth it. Besides, they would have more than enough warning with the shields and perimeter alarms if something did happen.
"Okay," she said quietly. "See you in about thirty."

Shiro let out a sigh when she had left, burying his face in his hands. He knew they were fighting a war and certain things were inevitable, but this last week had stripped so much of the innocence these children had been able to still hang on to. And now he was insisting Pidge carry a weapon on her person in the safety of the castle. He hated that it had come to this.

That reminded him though. He still had Lance's bayard down in his own room, settled on his dresser. He needed to return it but at the same time he was hesitant to do so. He knew right now Lance couldn't use it, not the way he would want to. But it was his and perhaps having it back in his possession would give him the physical reminder that he was indeed their Blue Paladin, injured hand or not.

Shiro nodded. Yes. Next time he returned to his room he would retrieve it and give it to Lance. He still needed to talk with Coran and Allura about armor replacements seeing as they had left Lance's behind on the Galra ship. Coran was quite the expert at repairing it when it was damaged so hopefully the creation of it would be right up his alley as well.

Unable to sit still any longer, Shiro got up to do a round about the room. He stopped at Lance's couch first, face softening as he took in Lance's peaceful looking one. He tucked the blanket a little more snugly about him, careful to avoid the arm on top of the coverings with the vein valve attached. The fluid bag was over halfway gone and he wondered if Coran would want to give Lance a second.

He smoothed his hands over the blanket, reassuring himself that Lance was well and truly asleep and as comfortable as could be, before he went over to Hunk. The larger boy's face was slack and free of worry, broken up only by his snores. Shiro re-tucked Hunk's blanket as well and gingerly eased off his shoes, placing them right next to the couch.

Allura was the last sleeping occupant, her face drawn even in unconsciousness and the mice, curled up as they were, were mimicking her.

"Hey guys," Shiro greeted softly as Chuchule cracked open an eye at his approach. She let out a soft, sad squeak, looking distressed.

"What's wrong?" Shiro murmured, carefully reaching out a finger and running it down the furred back.

Plachu opened his eyes and gnashed his teeth at Shiro. Shiro raised an eyebrow. The blue mouse let out what could only be described as disappointment that that wasn't enough and he reached over, grabbed Platt's little paw and mimed putting it in his mouth.

"Oh," Shiro nodded, understanding dawning. "You bit Lance. To wake him up."

Chuchule let out another sad chirrup and Shiro resumed his petting. "It's never a good feeling to hurt someone you care about," he said softly, and something must have sounded in his voice because a second later all of the mice were clustered about his hand and nuzzling their own cheeks against his fingers.

The action made tears spring to his eyes and he hurriedly blinked them back. "We did what we had to though," he continued, trying to speak past the lump in his throat. "To help Lance. That's what is important, all right?" All four furry heads nodded in tandem. "Good." He coughed. "Now get some rest so you give the princess good dreams, huh?"

The mice squeaked and curled back up on the pillow, Chuchule giving Shiro's hand one last nuzzle,
and as their faces smoothed out so did Allura's and Shiro smiled softly. He readjusted the blanket over Allura and then went back to the open ottoman still perched in front of Lance.

Not even ten minutes later Coran returned, a large box in his arms.

"What is all that?" Shiro asked as Coran set it down on the coffee table.

"Some bits and bobs," Coran said lightly. He rummaged and pulled out a small orange jar and uncapped it. An almost wistful smile filled his face as the scent wafted up before he held it out to Shiro.

The Black Paladin took a tentative sniff. Cherries, he thought. Maybe almond too? "What is it?" he asked as Coran recapped the jar.

"Novora paste," Coran said, "made from a mixture of novora tree bark and sap and some other little things. It helps with muscle pain and stiffness. I'm hoping it might help relax Lance somewhat as this is no doubt going to be somewhat painful once we are able to begin when Lance awakens."

"How long are they going to be asleep?" Shiro asked.

"Hard to say," Coran sighed. "I wish I had more knowledge on matters such as these, but I know only the bare bones."

Shiro gave Coran's shoulder a squeeze. "We're lucky we have you to know even that much. I honestly don't know what we'd do without you, Coran."

Coran's moustache turned up with pleasure and some of the heaviness from his shoulders seemed to lift. "Thank you, lad. Still, I wish I did know a more accurate answer. I am hard pressed to say who even took the brunt of the quintessence shock as the princess was conducting it but Lance was the recipient. However, I may be able to provide a little more insight than speculation."

He pulled a familiar looking scanner out of the box and clicked it on. A pass over Lance's body had Coran nodding and Shiro watched curiously as Coran did the same to Allura and then to Hunk.

"Hm," he mumbled, flipping through data screens. "Interesting."

"Interesting how?" Shiro asked, peering at the device and seeing only Altean script.

"I'm not sure what to make of this," Coran said. He flipped rapidly through to one screen. "Here is Number Two's data; see the steady line? This device cannot measure quintessence per se but it can detect anomalies within the body. Number Two's systems are all functioning as normal."

He brought the scanner to another data projection. "This is Princess Allura's," and unlike Hunk's she did not have a single steady line. She had several of various levels all over the screen with one larger one in the middle. "I have never seen anything like it," Coran admitted, "but if I had to take a guess I would say her body currently has the other quintessences from the connection flowing through it."

"Really?" Shiro peered closer but all he saw were the lines.

"Mhm. And if you look at Lance's... A new screen popped up showing a single line but lower down on the chart. "He has a single level but his system is functioning at low levels, and I can only imagine it previously dropped to the bare minimum, hence our venture into the mindscape. I think that while the princess is suffering from quintessence overload, Lance has the opposite with quintessence exhaustion."
"How can we fix it? Just rest?" Shiro asked.

"Mainly, yes," Coran said. "For Lance though his body burned through what little energy he had stored. If you don't mind holding another few dobashes I'll run and grab some nutrient pouches for Lance. Those should help speed up his recovery."

"Of course," Shiro said. Pidge he knew wouldn't mind waiting a little longer.

Coran was back relatively quickly and attached one of the nutrient packs to Lance's valve along with a secondary fluid pack as the first was near drained. "I'll keep an eye on their levels," Coran said, fussing with the blanket. "I imagine the princess should awaken within the next varga or so and hopefully Lance will be up and moving by dinner."

"I'll go join Pidge then," Shiro said. "Everyone's in more than capable hands here." He gave Coran one last smile and hurried to the engine room.

Coran was just settling in, unpacking his box of supplies, when Keith wandered back, hair still damp and now in his regular Earth clothes. He looked a little lost and unsure and well that just would not do. Coran had seen the efforts the most reclusive member of their team had been making and it warmed his heart. He wouldn't let any sort of doubt creep in now.

"Over here, my boy," he called, patting the ottoman next to him and after a pause Keith joined him. "You are looking, and smelling, refreshed," Coran smiled, relieved when it drew a small match on the boy's face.

"I guess I feel a little better," Keith said. His eyes lighted upon the items spread out on the table. "What are all of these for?"

"Hopefully some basic therapy exercises," Coran said, "once Lance wakes up."

At the mention of the Blue Paladin Keith turned to look at the sleeping subject and then at the rest of the room's occupants. "How much longer are they going to be asleep?"

Coran chuckled. "Number One asked the same thing. You two are quite alike." Keith flinched ever so slightly at the comment and Coran's eyes widened in alarm. He had seen the close bond the Red and Black Paladins shared and had never observed any discontentment between the two. What had caused such a negative reaction?

"What is it?" he asked, lowering his tone.

"It's nothing," Keith said quickly. "Don't worry about it."

"It is my job to worry," Coran tried once more with a blip of humor but Keith's face remained flat. "Has something happened between you and Number One?"

"What? No!" Keith protested. "It's... it's not that."

"Something is bothering you, Keith," Coran said, the name rolling interestingly off his tongue and he realized he was not certain if he had ever said it before. "Please, allow me to assist."

Keith cast his gaze back to Lance and Coran saw him take a deep inhale. He waited patiently.

"She said the same thing," Keith finally said. "Haggar. She said Shiro and I were alike."

Coran only tilted his head, knowing there was more coming.
"She said," Keith continued quietly, turning bright purple eyes to meet Coran's, "that me and Shiro made Lance feel… insignificant." He swallowed thickly. "Is that true, you think? Did I… I make Lance think that?"

"Oh, lad," Coran said, carefully laying a hand over Keith's knee. "No. Please, do not think anymore on those witch's words."

"I put him down so much though," Keith said, averting his eyes back to Lance's slumbering form. "This… this rivalry he made up, I thought it was one big joke. I treated it like that. But Lance didn't. He was doing it to be friendly and I just… I saw it as a stupid competition. And every time I beat him at something – beat him at everything," he amended, face lined with pain, "I thought he'd knock it off and stop trying. Thought maybe he'd grow up."

"Keith," Coran murmured.

But Keith wasn't done, the words spilling out now. "I never thought about how it would feel to constantly be knocked down like that and never… never offered a hand back up. I should have though. I should have."

Coran shifted his hand to wrap about Keith's shoulders and the boy leaned into the touch even as he remained rigid.

"I should have," Keith repeated. "I know what it's like to… to think you're not worth anything. And if I made Lance think that then I...I'm a horrible person," Keith all but whispered.

"No," Coran said firmly. "No. Keith, look at me." The small boy did so and Coran was unsurprised to find tears lining his eyes. "You are not a horrible person," Coran stated. "You are the farthest thing from it, my boy."

"But I–"

"You are not. You are a very, very talented young man, Keith. And," Coran sighed, "we have all recently come to see how Lance views himself. It is through no fault of your own that Lance came to judge his own merit based off of not just your talents but the rest of the team's. It is… a miscommunication, really."

"A really bad one," Keith muttered.

"But nothing that cannot be fixed," Coran said gently. "Why, the fact you are here even saying such things shows me how much you wish to make things better with Lance."

"What if I can't though?" Keith whispered. "Pidge and Shiro, they tell me to give it time. To… to be myself. Like that'll fix it."

"I think they are absolutely right." Coran gave Keith's shoulder a squeeze. "You need only speak with Lance. I can tell you with certainty that he will listen and he will understand."

Keith nodded and the broken expression gave way to a resolute one. "So…" he asked, "when will he wake up?"

Coran chuckled at that. "I am not sure. Hopefully before dinner. He is most certainly suffering quintessence exhaustion and rest is the only true remedy for it."

"Dinner?" came a panicked, sleep-slurred voice. "Is it dinner already? How long have I—?"
"Calm down, big guy," Keith snickered as Hunk bolted to sitting, hair sticking out in every direction. "It's only been like an hour."

"What? Really?" Hunk heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank God. Still time to make something edible then." His honey eyes turned then towards Lance and his voice lowered. "How's he doing?"

"Recovering steadily," Coran replied. "And yourself, Number Two?"

Hunk yawned loudly and stretched his arms up, back cracking. "'m good. Nap definitely helped." He turned his eyes to Keith then. "Thanks for the help, man."

Keith gave a small shrug. "It was nothing."

"Now don't say that," Hunk said, throwing his feet over the couch and upon realizing his shoes were off retrieved them from the floor and shoved his feet into them. "I mean it and Lance does too."

Hunk looked to Coran then. "Say, Coran, how do you think Lance's stomach would be for something a little heavier?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Hopefully something resembling potato stew," Hunk grinned, tying the last lace. "Not too watery but should still go down easy and packed full of other good stuff." His smile dimmed some as he looked at Lance, thin arm appearing even more so in the over-large hoodie. "He needs it."

"I think it would be worth trying," Coran said. "And I do have more gamibolap if this stew disagrees."

"Awesome." Hunk draped an arm about Keith's shoulders then. "Keith, you're with me."

"I am?"

"You like cooking, yeah?" and Keith gave a small nod. "Then come on. We're going to need a lot of those green potato things and they do not peel easy."

Neither Coran nor Hunk missed the way Keith's entire posture seemed to soften at the inclusion and Hunk gave Coran a wink over the dark head. He steered Keith from the room, going on about the potatoes and trying to recall aloud if they had anything possibly carrot-like in their stores.

Coran was left alone with two sleeping and equally dear to him individuals. He picked up his scanner again and beamed at the results. Allura's strange fluctuations had nearly settled back into a single line and Lance's had risen significantly. Most excellent of news.

He settled in on Hunk's vacated couch, a book in hand about Altean body composition to read in the interim until they awoke. The book would not be quite accurate, but given the similarities between Altean's structure and the humans it would be his best resource for now.

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Not even a half hour in he heard a series of chitters and squeaks and he looked over the edge of the book to see Allura slightly stirring and the mice bouncing eagerly atop a pillow.

Closing it with a quiet snap he made his way over just as Allura's eyes were peeling themselves open. "Coran?" she mumbled, pressing a hand to her temple and wincing.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently as she slowly sat up.

"I have a terrible headache," she said, closing her eyes against even the still dimmed lounge. "What
"A quintessence overload," Coran said. "Do you recall? You were attempting to—"

"Lance!" she cut him off, eyes flying wide. "Is Lance all right?"

"He is fine, Princess," Coran soothed. "Resting just across from you."

She frowned. "He has not yet awoken?"

"He suffered a rather severe quintessence depletion," Coran said. "But he will be all right. Given my last scan I would advise he should awaken within the varga."

Allura took one of Coran's hands in her own. "Thank you for looking out for us, Coran." The mice, ignored still, squeaked indignantly and Allura turned her bright gaze to them. "And thank you, my dear friends, for your assistance. You truly saved the day." They chirruped happily and rushed to nestle into Allura's loose hair.

"Is there anything pressing at the moment, Coran?" Allura asked.

"Not at all, Princess. The defenses are up and no abnormalities from earlier. Numbers Two and Four are preparing dinner and Numbers One and Five are seeing to some shield modifications."

She nodded. "In that case I may retire for a quick shower to see if I can ease this headache away."

"Here," Coran said, digging into his jacket pocket and handing over a Glornack seed. He had taken to just carrying them on his person for now. "Take this with a full glass of water."

Allura beamed at him. "Thank you."

"Take your time, Princess," Coran advised. "Dinner I imagine will be in about two hours."

"I shall see you there then," she said, despite her head pain elegantly rising to her feet. "Truly, thank you Coran. And," her eyes lowered. "I am sorry I was unable to create the connection."

"There is nothing to apologize for, Allura," he said kindly. "We will find another way."

She did not look entirely convinced but inclined her head. "We will," she finally said. "In the meantime though I shall try channeling on my own to improve myself."

"Not tonight," Coran cautioned. "Your body is still recovering from earlier, Princess. Please, take it easy."

"A long bath then," she acquiesced and all of the mice save Platt, who looked rather distressed at the mention of the word, squeaked in joy. "Yes," she said to them as they projected their thoughts to her, "I will get the floating soap bars for you. And Platt, none of that. You have not had a bath in over a week."

Coran smiled fondly as Allura headed towards her chambers, still speaking to the mice. He had found the connection between the little creatures and his princess a bit alarming at first, but they were all a good sort and he knew they brought comfort to Allura. And he would do anything to always make sure a smile was on Alfor's daughter's face.

He retrieved his scanner and brought it up over Lance once more, relieved when the levels were closer to what Hunk's had been earlier.
Coran had barely gotten back to his research when a muffled groan sounded from Lance's couch and he was over there lickity-split, removing the vein valve without even a pause from the nearly empty bags. Lance didn't even seem to take notice of the action as he turned his face more into the back of the couch.

"Headache, lad?" Coran asked gently and Lance startled slightly.

A muffled sounding "Coran?" was asked into the couch and Coran chuckled lightly. "That is indeed my name. Are the lights still too bright? I can dim them some more."

Lance rolled his face free of the upholstery then, eyes squinted. "Coran?" he repeated. "What... what happened?"

Because he had this crazy, crazy dream where they all ended up in his mindscape and he told them all about... about it and they had understood and hugged him and then he had smiled of all things and there was just no way all of that was true.

"I think you know, Lance," Coran smiled. His hand squeezed Lance's left still atop the blanket and that was all it took for Lance to feel his eyes sting with tears.

It had been real. It really had. He felt his lips curl up then into a small smile that felt right and that solidified the truth.

"I'm so proud of you," Coran murmured. "And it is truly a delight to see you smile again."

Lance felt it grow wider even as a tear tracked down his face. He struggled to sit up, having to burrow out of blankets and Coran relinquished his hold on his hand. But Lance didn't let it remain that way for long. "Coran?" he whispered, licking suddenly dry lips, because he had asked so much of Coran already but he wanted it, needed, it. "Can—?"

"Of course, lad," and without any further prompting a pair of strong arms wrapped snugly about Lance's back and pulled him in close. Lance sniffled, lifting his own to loosely press against Coran's back.

A hand rubbed circles on his back and Lance burrowed his face fully into Coran's shoulder, breathing in the unique scent that made up the advisor – something both spicy and sweet and possibly almond.

"Everyone," he asked, voice distorted in Coran's jacket, "everyone really...?"

"Mhm. We all love you, dear child. And it is my dearest wish that you come to love yourself as we all do."

"You sound like Blue." He blurted it out without thinking but Coran just laughed lightly.

"I take that as a high compliment. The Blue Lion has shown to have impeccable taste and a wisdom and insight that not many can rival."

"Thank you, Coran," Lance said softly, pulling back from the embrace so he could meet Coran's jewel-toned eyes. "Muchas gracias. For... for everything." It wasn't enough, nothing ever would be, but it was what he could offer right now and he felt that delightful warmth fill him at the words and the memories behind them.

Coran gave him the fondest of smiles and Lance found himself returning it, relief and joy shining in the action.
"How is your head?" Coran asked, moving back to his original query. "The princess had a rather steady headache upon waking herself."

"It hurts a little," Lance said, but he kept his hands at his sides. He may have made some apparent leaps and bounds just this morning, but anything coming in range of his face and forehead, even his own hands, sent prickles down his spine. And really, the headache wasn't that bad. Nothing like what it had been after he'd fainted trying to get out Allura's bed on his own.

"I have a Glornack seed," but Lance was already shaking his head. Not yet.

"Do you wish to lie back down?" Coran asked. "Perhaps close your eyes for a little longer?"

But Lance didn't want to go back to sleep. He was awake now and feeling… energized wasn't the right word, but something close to it. He wanted to do something. Make sure that the progress wasn't some fleeting thing.

"I have a suggestion," Coran said, seeing the spark enter Lance's eyes. "You may of course say no if you are not feeling up to it, but I do think it would be good to try."

"What is it?" Lance asked, stomach knotting in anticipation. Or hunger. Or both. Dios, he could not wait until dinner.

"I have here," Coran said, gesturing to the coffee table across from him, "some items that might help your hand."

Lance stiffened and without meaning to he glanced at his right hand, which had come to rest in its now familiar spot against his stomach and just below the hoodie pocket. The fingers were limp although if he really tried he could make his index finger twitch ever so. But otherwise they did nothing except tremble.

"I believe the sooner we can start on this the better," Coran said quietly, "but we will go at whatever pace is most comfortable for you."

"What… what if it doesn't work?" Lance asked, pressing his left fingers against the back of his right.

"We will not know until we try. And," Coran met Lance's eyes, "we must give it time, lad. Time and patience and hard work."

"Okay," Lance breathed. He'd promised Hunk he would try before he considered other options. And he had wanted to prove to himself that he was getting better. This would be a good test.

"I don't want to do anything strenuous to start," Coran said. "I thought we might begin with a hand and arm massage to reinvigorate your muscles there, and depending on how that goes some possible light finger exercises. Does that sound all right?"

Lance felt a faint "yes" issue from him and Coran sent him a reassuring smile. "We can stop at anytime. For now, come, let's sit at the table."

The table was too low to sit comfortably on the couches from so Coran dragged two cushions free and set them up next across from another. Lance tentatively took a seat and Coran sat opposite him. He placed his shaking right hand on the table and Coran nodding approvingly.

"I will need to remove the bandages," Coran said gently.

Lance inclined his head, trying to hold back the shudder.
Coran's hands were feather light, hiding the strength Lance knew was behind them, as he pulled the edge of the wrap free and unwound its length from Lance's hand. Revealed beneath it was more mocha skin but also a white and pink colored starburst that had Lance's stomach clenching.

He could almost feel the knife sinking in, hear the crowd's screams above his own and Theodek's laughter.

"You're not there, Lance," Coran's voice cut through the haze and chants of 'Kri Za Kri! Kri Za Kri!' "Listen to my voice. You're here, in the castle. You're safe."

Lance followed the accented tones, shuddering as he came back to himself and the lounge came back into focus. Coran had placed his own hand over Lance's, hiding the mark from sight. "Are you with me, Lance?"

"I'm here," he whispered, barely cutting off the apology before it could escape. He knew Coran did not want him to apologize for that.

Coran squeezed his hand carefully removed his hand, the mark once more laid bare. Lance's breath caught as he looked at it, really looked at it, but he remained firmly seated in the castle this time.

"All right?" Coran asked and Lance managed the barest of nods. "It would be best if I could remove the bandage on your arm as well, but we can go without if you would prefer."

Lance's entire hand spasmed at the thought of the burn scar that marred his entire inner forearm.

Coran nodded, decision made. "We shall leave it—"

"No," Lance gasped, even as he screwed his eyes shut like a child. "N-no. I can do this. I…"

"Lance," Coran's hands settled back over his own. "You do not need to prove anything to me or to anyone here, dear boy. When you are ready—"

"I need to do this," Lance interrupted. "I… Coran, I can't… I can't keep being scared." A sob seemed to choke him then. "I want it to stop. And if… if…"

"How did you sustain this wound?" Coran questioned instead and Lance brought tear-lined eyes up.

"What?"

"Let us talk about it first," Coran said. "And we shall determine then if you are ready to see it."

Lance trembled even as he knew what Coran was saying made sense. Talking about things had helped. Telling them about the drowning and his attempt to… to kill himself – and he felt himself shudder out a breath that he could admit it and move past it – had made it more bearable.

"Theodek gave it to me," he said after a moment and he vaguely wondered why he was still capable of saying the Galran's name when he could barely even think on Haggar's.

"And who is Theodek?" Coran asked gently.

And Lance realized in that moment he had never told them. He thought he might have stuttered the name out once or twice but he had never explained. "A Galran," he whispered. "A commander. He… he helped her hurt me." His eyes scrunched shut and his voice grew even quieter. "I killed his brother."

Coran hummed and gave Lance's hand a squeeze. "And how did he give you this wound?"
"He was mad," Lance found himself saying. "That I tried to… to kill myself. He was in charge then. He said if I'd died he would have been held responsible. So he wanted to make sure I… didn't do it again."

Coran waited patiently as Lance swallowed back his tears. He could do this. It wasn't even like the mindscape where he had to to make the wounds go away. This time he wanted to. He wanted to get it off his chest and hope when it was done he could breathe just a little easier.

"He ripped my arm open. I think. I couldn't see," Lance admitted. "I don't remember a lot of what he said then. It… hurt a lot. And I think I started blacking out. But then he…" And this time Lance couldn't help it as his shoulders shook and Coran rubbed a soothing thumb over his hand.

"He burned me," Lance managed. "He cauterized what he'd done. He said… he said he saved my life. I just remember," a tear dripped down his cheek, "remember thinking I wish he'd ended it instead."

Coran left his seat across the table and came around to bundle Lance into his arms instead. "I know I am very glad he did not," Coran murmured, "but I hate that you had to suffer so."

Lance's left hand gripped the front of Coran's jacket as he felt hot tears slide down his cheeks. "I thought I was going to die," Lance whispered. "And I was okay with it. I thought… I thought if he did it then it wasn't so bad. And you'd all be s-safe."

"Oh, Lance," Coran's hug tightened. They remained in the embrace for several long minutes as Lance's sniffles slowly faded and Coran rocked him ever so gently.

"Pienso que..." Lance cleared his throat. "I think… I think I'm ready now."

"You are being very brave," Coran said tenderly.

"I don't feel like I am," Lance mumbled.

"That is when you know you are," Coran smiled. "Take it from someone who has lived a very long life in your Earth years. You are the definition of brave, Lance. You do all in your power to protect others and care and love with your entire self. There is nothing more brave than that."

And to Coran's relief Lance did not try to protest or disagree. Instead he hiccupped another sob and gave a tiny nod and Coran's heart swelled.

"Let's take this off then," he said. And at Lance's barely there "'kay" Coran pushed the unresisting oversized sleeve up to Lance's elbow and slowly unwound the bandages that lay beneath.

This scar was not a pretty one, Coran would admit that. It was a mess of pink and brown puckered skin that stretched in about an inch-wide line from the boy's wrist to his elbow and Coran internally cursed that the pods had not been able to lessen this mark.

Coran brought his hand down atop the scar, feeling the ropy texture. He pressed his fingerpads against it. "Does this hurt?"

"No," Lance shook his head. "No pain."

His eyes were fixated on Coran's fingers as they traversed up and down his arm. It didn't hurt but it did feel… odd. His flesh was still sensitive and every little bump that Coran encountered on the scar made his breath hitch.
"Ready to try a massage?" Coran asked after another moment of making certain that the action truly
did not cause any actual pain.

"Ready," he replied, even as his stomach clenched.

Coran returned to his side of the table and opened up a small orange jar, showing it to Lance. "It will
help," Coran said simply. "I believe you will find the aroma pleasant as well." He dipped his fingers
into the jar and removed them with a dark brown paste. He pressed the mixture against Lance's hand
and Lance nearly jerked back at the tingling sensation. But it was not unpleasant and he watched as
Coran set about smearing it all over his hand, rubbing it gently into the flesh although he did not
quite feel it as strong as he knew he should.

Coran did the same to his arm all the way up to his elbow and Lance found himself slowly relaxing
as Coran continued his ministrations. This wasn't bad at all. Coran's hands were warm and the paste
did smell good and the actions didn't hurt.

"All right," Coran said after a few minutes. "I'm going to begin now. If you feel any actual pain
please, tell me at once." And unlike earlier that morning Coran knew that he would most definitely
be able to stop it.

Coran started as gently as he could, knuckles kneading from the base of Lance's wrist up the inner
forearm, soothing out the tension that Lance still held. He pressed firmly but not too hard, repeating
the motion again and again before switching to his thumbs and doing the same.

Lance did wince a few times when Coran pressed against his wrist, so he returned to that area and
more gently soothed it before reapplying the pressure, making circles with his thumbs on both the
underside and top of the wrist.

He turned his attention to Lance's hands next, starting with the palm and working his way out to each
finger, tugging at them gently and keeping his touch light. It was easy to fall into the rhythm and
Lance offered no complaint, his hand becoming more and more compliant in Coran's hold.

Coran gazed down at the dark skinned hand and he was so easily able to picture another; even more
slender and with a silver band that its owner refused to take off. His hands ghosted over Lance's
index finger, skipping over the small patch of skin as he had grown accustomed to doing.

He could recall the last time he had held her hand in his, a shaking trembling limb filled with sorrow
and pain and regret. Her other had gripped his with the last of her frail strength, fading quickly while
he could do nothing except murmur prayers and pleas.

It had not mattered, in the end. She had passed with one last gasp and his name on her lips.

He had not thought of her in so long and his grip tightened about Lance's hand to try and ground
himself. Now was not the time.

It was never the time.

She would have liked Lance, he thought, trying to blink back traitorous tears and concentrate on the
blurred hand in front of him. Perhaps their son would have even been someone like Lance. Coran
liked to imagine so.

"Coran?" and it took Coran longer than it should have to trace the distressed sounding voice back to
Lance. He realized then that he had stopped his movement and was merely holding Lance's hand
tight within his own.
"What is it lad?" he managed, forcing a smile to his face and trying to blink back the rest of his tears.

"What's wrong?"

And although Coran had seen Lance's compassion so readily given, this was his first time being on the receiving end of those deep ocean eyes that seemed to want to peer right into his soul and make it better. It was rather breathtaking and Coran almost forgot for an instant as to why this was happening.

But then he collected himself and mustered up, "It's nothing, lad." This was not what Lance needed right now; an old grieving man who had not expected such a familiar routine to bring those emotions straight to the surface.

Lance's left hand, tucked in his lap, moved then to clutch onto Coran's that was still holding onto the boy's right. "What's wrong?" he repeated and Coran found he could not look away from that bright gaze nor find it in him to deny his own hurts again.

"I'm sorry," Coran apologized quietly, giving Lance's right hand a tender squeeze. "I became lost in a memory. Of my wife. Neleenia."

And oh, Alaaran, he had not said her name aloud in decafebes and it was just as beautiful and heart-wrenching now as it had been nearly one hundred years ago. Or, ten thousand and one hundred.

Lance's eyes widened and then seemed to fill with a sadness all their own. For he knew as well as Coran that the advisor and Allura were the only remaining Alteans left. Which meant that…

"She passed many, many years ago," Coran murmured. "Before… before the destruction of Altea."

"I'm so sorry," Lance whispered.

"She was always rather frail," Coran said. "And her hands were in constant pain from tremors. I did all I could to ease that for her." He rubbed his thumb over Lance's.

He sensed Lance's question and sighed. "The cryo-pods are amazing pieces of technology but they could not help her. Her pain was not from an injury but from a disease that despite all Altea had to offer could not find a cure."

"I'm so sorry," Lance repeated and he tightened his own grip as best he could. "Coran…"

"It is all right, dear boy," Coran sighed. "It was a long time ago."

"That doesn't mean you can't… can't be upset about it still. You loved her."

Coran managed a smile. "With all my heart. She was the love of my life. She still is."

He sighed again, not surprised when he felt the story spilling for his lips. Lance had that effect on people, he supposed, and those dark eyes were gazing at him with such shared heartbreak that Coran could not stop.

"We were returning from a mission to Mystirialdal, a planet known for its beautiful flower gardens. Alfor often allowed Neleenia to accompany me on ambassador missions and her sense of adventure knew no match," he smiled fondly. "Why, she would have gone to every corner of the galaxy and stopped upon every planet to explore it if she had her way. The amount of trinkets and souvenirs that filled our home… it would make Number Five's stash pale," he chuckled.
"Neleenia insisted she accompany me on this mission as she was… she was pregnant at the time and
would not be up for traveling much later."

Lance’s eyes widened. Pregnant? Coran… had Coran been a father?

"Upon our return trip she went into early labor," Coran said, eyes misting. "Four decofebes early.
We had very few medical supplies aboard the ship and of course no doctor. And Neleenia… her
body was so weak. We did what we could but… she passed before we could make it back to Altea."

"Oh, Coran," and Lance felt his eyes filling with tears as well.

"Our son," and Coran choked on the word, "did not make it either. Our son, he was so small… he
never even awoke."

Coran's shoulders hitched and Lance had had enough. He shifted around the table, his right hand still
ensconced in Coran's, but settled on the man's side and brought his left arm up wrap as tight as he
could in a hug.

Coran brought their conjoined hands to his chest and Lance leaned further into the embrace, pressing
his face against Coran's arm.

"You remind me of her," Coran said thickly. "I imagine… I imagine our son may have even looked
quite a bit like you."

Coran freed one of his hands and dug underneath his shirt collar, removing a necklace with four
rings on it; two silver and two gold. Lance picked his face up to watch as Coran fumbled with one
hand to press a ring of each color together and they made a little click and glowed Altean teal when
he was done.

"Here," he murmured, bringing the ring towards Lance.

Inside of the rings a picture had formed, likely some form of Altean technology. Lance traced over
the two figures standing next to one another, feeling like he was looking at some fairy tale. Coran
appeared slightly younger, his hair long and tied elegantly over his shoulder. His arms were wrapped
about a dark-skinned Altean, her color a few shades lighter than Allura's, ebony hair in smooth
ringlets pulled back with a pink sash and a few loose tendrils framing her face and highlighting the
jade markings on her cheeks. They were dressed in Altean formal wear and a sweeping balcony
stood behind them, stretching out to glistening flower fields.

"She's beautiful," Lance whispered. And if he took away the Altean markings and imagined her face
to be rounder she even resembled his middle sister, Maria.

"The most beautiful woman in all of Altea," Coran sniffed. "Not even the queen could hold a candle
to her." He snapped the rings apart and the picture disappeared in a burst of light. "It is perhaps better
this way," he said softly. "Had… had they lived I would have only lost them both in the Galra attack.
At least this way… I was able to mourn her passing. I was able to find joy again in Alfor's daughter,
who I love as though she were my own."

"I'm still sorry," Lance whispered, "that you had to lose them at all."

"Thank you, dear boy," Coran said tenderly. They remained in silence for a moment until Lance felt
Coran take a deep breath and his voice leveled back to normal. "I think we should perhaps end
today's session. How is your hand feeling?"

Coran released it from his grip and Lance took it to himself and straightened up. His hand was warm
and smoother than normal, thanks to the balm. He tried to move his fingers and they only still twitched but the tremors had faded some and the pain in his wrist felt more like a good ache than a bad one.

"Better, I think," Lance said.

"We'll begin some exercises tomorrow," Coran smiled although it did not reach his eyes yet. "And I do promise to not go to pieces on you."

Lance shook his head. "I'm... always here to listen, Coran. I know... I know I could never replace him, but I..." Lance's left hand clutched Coran's jacket. "I... love you. And I know I—"

"I love you too," Coran murmured and this time he pulled Lance into a hug. "You are a son to me, Lance, if you would allow it to be so."


"My son," Coran said tenderly and Lance didn't even stiffen at the address. There was nothing possessive about it, no intent to own or to hurt. It just was. "My son," Coran repeated and there were tears streaming down his face but this time of joy and he hugged Lance just a little tighter.

"My son," he whispered one last time. "Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

All hail Coran, the gorgeous man, who is gorgeous through and through. This apparently turned into his chapter (and easily the longest one of this story holy quiznak, debated cutting it but nope, y'all get this monster) and I regret nothing. I actually have a couple of headcansons I like for Coran's family, but this one fit best given the circumstances both here and in canon because it is (to me) the only possible reason why we have not yet had *anything* showing Coran's grief from what happened to Altea because his biggest loss was before its fall. I also adore the relationship Coran and Lance have and really, really wanted to make that big. Also, anyone able to guess who Neleenia's design is based off of? Think Disney :p

As you can see/guess, the next few chapters are likely going to be similar to this; bonding moments and healing and recovery with some angst thrown in there – all for healing purposes, of course. I know they aren't quite as exciting for some of you but I do hope you enjoy and I would love to hear from you. *nudges towards comment button*

As I notified y'all last week, the 2,000 kudo kiriban prize is up! If you're looking for even more fluffy/comfort goodness for Hunk and featuring Lance you can read it here, What the Universe Sees (And Does Not).

Thank you so much to all you amazing reviewers: Sophie Friedenwald-Fishman, Glittersessa, Tyler, rlekt, keepasecretgetastrawberry, ImaShayne, BubbleGumi, maychorian, FandomHuntress, Ookamisouleaper, BeckKingOfHell, Maddie, Whateves, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, heyheroics, HowAboutYouDo, dean_winchester_has_fallen, Imadorable, WindyOccamy, ThisOneIsBlue,
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Hope to hear from you down below!
"Coran?" Lance murmured, his head resting comfortably on Coran's chest where they'd been for the last several dobashes in companionable silence.

"Yes, my boy?"

"I can't feel my legs."

Coran chuckled at that, the movement sending Lance shaking too. "I cannot feel mine either. I think perhaps that is the universe's way of saying we should get up, hm?"

The two managed to disentangle themselves and Coran rose to his full height, offering Lance a hand and pulled him to his own feet with ease. Lance wobbled for a second as pins and needles raced down his limbs while Coran, after a single shake, seemed to be good as new.

"We have some still before dinner," Coran said. "I'm going to go see how Numbers One and Five are faring on the shields. Numbers Two and Four are in the kitchen if you might perhaps like to join them, or if you'd like you can rest here and I'll be certain to rouse you for the meal."

"I think I'll go to the kitchen," Lance said slowly, realizing this was the first time he was making a decision on all his own as to what to do with his time since he'd returned. And he had chosen to engage with company rather than remaining alone, and one that would have him walking through the castle hallways by himself.

He hated that he felt such a small thrill at the idea of it because really, it wasn't that special. But in a way it was. He was being left to his own devices and he felt capable of such. He didn't feel like he was going to have a panic attack in the hallway or freeze up from a flashback brought on some sight or sound.

A small smile settled on his face. He was getting better. He was. A few days ago he had been so convinced, so certain that he was going to remain in that terrified, pathetic state for forever and now… now he felt ready to at least try anything. And if walking by himself to the kitchen was what that meant right now he would do it.

Small steps. Lots of them.

"Righty-o then," Coran beamed. "I'll see you for dinner at six sharp." He clapped a hand on Lance's back, firm but not so hard that Lance would stumble on still shaky legs, and followed it up with a tender squeeze.

"Bye," Lance said softly as Coran headed out the far lounge door.

He remained standing in the room for a moment, taking one deep inhale and another. Just as he was about to take a step though he glanced down and his eyes widened.

Coran had not replaced the bandages.
He hurriedly tugged his hoodie sleeve down to cover the large burn scar, stomach still twisting at the sight, but his hand was bare for all the world to see. He pulled more on the large sleeve, easing it somewhat over his hand so that only his fingers remained but as soon as he shifted he knew it would rise back up.

What did he do?

He stood there, heart beating out a timpani, and legs shaking again.

"You can do this," he whispered aloud, trying to bolster himself. Hunk and Coran had been more than clear about how they and the others saw the scars. And he had managed to look at the burn scar once already today and talk about it.

"You're brave."

The words seemed to echo about the empty room and Lance repeated them. "You're brave. You… you can do this."

He ever so slowly brought his left hand up to eye level, the bandages beginning to turn a dirty white from all of the activity they'd been put through.

He swallowed. Could he do this?

Yes. The answer thrummed through him and before he could hesitate a moment longer Lance brought his hand to his face, trying not to wince at the proximity, and then bit at the underside of his wrist where the bandage wrap was tucked.

He freed a piece and managed to flip it around his wrist so it dangled downwards. His right hand was still all but useless, but he used it to pin the dangling bandage against his chest and then he rotated his left hand in opposite circles.

His breath was too loud in the quiet, turning into harsh pants as he willingly, purposefully, set to revealing the scar. Not even a minute later the bandages hung loose and with one tip of his hand he knew they would slide right over his fingers.

Squeezing his eyes shut he did just that.

His right hand wormed its way inside the hoodie pocket, brushing over velveteen fur and floppy ears and he repeated the motion and let the plush ground him.


Lance took his own advice and hesitantly opened his eyes to look at his visible left hand. The scar was nearly identical to the one he had already seen on his right and he flexed his fingers, watching as it seemed to ripple as tendons pulled.

He hesitantly flipped it around to look at the palm, the mark there more white than pink and defined with clear lines showing where he'd yanked against the knife that had impaled him.

Shuddering out a breath Lance pulled his right hand free and held both palm up in front of him. Both trembled.

Bravery. Courage. Strength. That's what they told him these marks represented. Lance stared at them, trying to see it. He hadn't felt those things. He'd only felt scared when he realized what was about to happen. Fear had turned to pain and it had been so intense he had blacked out before they'd
revived him.

Weak. Weak, weak weak.

But...

He flexed his left hand again, watching the scar ripple on the back. After that. He had screamed, yes. And cried. But he had not once pled for mercy. Not when he'd been shot at point blank range. Not when they'd ripped into him without restraint. Not even when they had used a pain enhancer.

He had kept his head high, his eyes straight. He had not begged. He had not betrayed his family. Not once. He had endured it all.

A sob worked its way up his throat and he let it, left hand clutching the base of his right wrist and holding his hands against him, curling over them.

He remembered thinking, when he could not stand after they'd let him down, that he was weak. That that had been his defining moment and his inability to stand had shown his true colors.

But that wasn't true at all.

No one could have stood after that, let alone walked. Not on feet sliced open to the bone. Not with shot up legs and even more holes through his chest and stomach. Not with bleeding, weeping hands and constant burning shocks that made his throat constrict and breath disappear.

Theodek had demanded the impossible.

He was not weak.

He shuddered.

He had to say it. Say it.

"I'm not weak," he whispered.

He was strong.

"I'm..." he swallowed thickly. "I'm strong. And br-brave."

He looked back at his hands, eyes tracing the ruined flesh. He had sworn to do, to give, anything to protect his family and the universe. These marks were a testament to that.

He had gotten them because he had tried to escape. Tried. He had failed. But he had tried and that was what he needed to focus on. He hadn't waited helplessly in his cell or given in to their demands. He had fought back in the only way he could. He had given it his best shot and he had gotten so, so close.

Even Shiro... even Shiro hadn't gotten out without help. He drew in a ragged breath. Shiro had had assistance in his escape. Shiro hadn't been near suffering from a stab wound or a broken wrist. Shiro hadn't been a high-ranking prisoner like a Paladin of Voltron with the security and resources to match. Shiro had even had a weapon, forced as it was, at his disposal while Lance had had nothing.

He needed to stop comparing himself to Shiro's situation. They were nothing alike and he couldn't look down upon himself for the fact that Shiro had made it out and he hadn't.

He had tried. He had almost succeeded with the odds stacked as they had been.
And all he had accomplished… he didn't do that because he was weak and pathetic. He'd gotten as far as he did because he had been brave, even if he hadn't felt like it at the time.

Lance took one more deep breath and straightened to his full height, feeling taller than he had in a long, long while.

He left the hoodie sleeves bunched at his wrists, hands on full display. No more hiding. No more being scared. Not over this. Not of marks on his own body.

He lifted his left hand and pressed it to his neck, bandages rough under his fingertips. Maybe… maybe not that one yet. That one was connected to too many memories. The Kri Za Kri, stumbling about blinded while Theodek and Haggar laughed, the drowning – he shivered at the thought – and then punishment upon punishment for no reason other than he wouldn't give them what they wanted.

No. Not yet. And that wasn't him being weak either. He nodded to himself. He needed to give himself time. What was the saying, time heals all wounds? Maybe not completely, maybe not ever, but it sure could help. He had to give himself that.

He had been with the Galrans for… five days, he thought Haggar had said. Five days had transformed him into a shaking, sobbing, terrified mess and he had only been actively trying to really get better for just over a day. And he had already come so, so far.

He hadn't let the Galrans or Haggar win then. He wouldn't let them win now.

Head held high he finally left the lounge, gait steady beneath him and his arms swinging lightly at his sides. Coran had said Hunk and Keith were in the kitchen. Maybe… maybe he could get Hunk to let him have a small bowl of gamibolap while he waited for dinner since he'd missed lunch. And if not, he could see what the two of them were cooking and maybe he'd even ask for a sample. He felt like right now he would be able to actually eat it.

His determined stride took him right into the kitchen where Keith was standing behind the counter, whatever he was working on obscured by the ledge and looking slightly overwhelmed, and Hunk… Hunk was nowhere to be seen.

Keith lifted his head up as soon as Lance entered the room, socked feet soft but apparently not soft enough on the metal floors, and the smaller boy shot him a hesitant smile, the gesture replacing the previous downturn of his lips. "Hi."

"Hi," Lance repeated, his steps slowing but he forced himself forward towards Keith who had been… strangely nice to him since he awoke. Mostly. But even in his anger Lance recognized the concern behind the words.

It was nothing like the sometimes too sharp comments that cut as surely as Keith's sword. The annoyance or frustration that normally tainted Keith's tone when he was dealing with Lance had been absent and instead he had sounded… kinder. Nicer. Was it pity? Lance wasn't sure, but he didn't think so. Pity would be apologies left and right and sad eyes and clucked tongues. Keith was still being himself just… gentler. A little more awkward and unsure. It wasn't a look Lance was familiar with in the brash and hot-headed Red Paladin but it… it wasn't wrong.

And he felt the fluttering of hope in his chest that maybe, maybe Keith didn't really dislike him after all.

Maybe then could actually be real friends.
"Where's Hunk?" he found himself asking, stopping a few feet from the counter.

"He went off to the storeroom looking for some carrot-thing he swore he saw," Keith said. "Insisted we needed it." Under his breath he added, "What we really need is a mop" and Lance's curiosity was peaked.

He inched a little closer, the work area still blocked by the high ledge that separated the kitchen counter from the island and stools. "What are you making?"

"A mess," Keith said bluntly. "We were aiming for something that might be potato stew," Keith added, nose wrinkling. "They don't look like any potatoes I've ever seen though."

He held up an item that looked more like a piece of coral than anything in a vivid neon green that could have rivaled the food goo. "They're awful to peel," Keith groused, setting it back on the counter.

Lance carefully shifted himself around the island, keeping a few feet from Keith but able to see what the two had been working on now and his eyes widened at the sheer mess that was revealed. Green shreds were everywhere – and he meant everywhere – and overlaying those were canisters of spices and a pile of another type of vegetable that appeared to have been attempted to be cut and given up on as numerous knives were sticking out of them.

Something had spilled and was running along the length of the counter while a pot on the stove bubbled near over and a bag of Altean flour had tipped and was coating another section in pale blue dust.

"Hunk is not going to be happy," Lance deadpanned even as his mouth was curling into something resembling a faint smirk.

"This is not all my fault," Keith protested, leaning backwards to turn the heat down on the stove. He pointed one of the coral plants at Lance and waved it. "Hunk did it too!"

Lance hummed in the back of his throat. He knew firsthand that Hunk was indeed a messy cook, but this was pretty impressive even for him.

Keith just sighed. "Do you know if we have a mop or something in here?" He righted the bag of flour. "Or maybe a space vacuum? I tried to ask Hunk but he said the carrots were more important."

"That's Hunk for you," Lance said, surprising himself with how easily the conversation was coming. Talking about Hunk though was easy. Other stuff… not so much. But this was good. This was… this was nice.

"If I'd ever left a kitchen like this," Keith muttered with a shake of his head, picking up some of the shaved peels from the counter and tossing them in the sink.

"A kitchen?" Lance repeated the odd phrase.

And to his alarm Keith's eyes widened and he got that deer-in-the-headlights look that Lance was honestly not certain he'd ever seen on him before and he hurriedly glanced away.

"It's nothing," Keith said, sweeping another handful of peels into the sink. "A kitchen, the kitchen. Whatever. Anyways, you going to help me clean up?"

Lance nodded, a sense of unease still lingering but he wasn't sure what to do about it. "Sure," he said instead and began to also pick up some of the radioactive peels with his left hand.
"Just throw them in the sink," Keith instructed. He eyed the pile of matching vegetables he and Hunk had managed earlier. "I think we might have enough," he said. "If we can figure out how to chop up those ones," he nodded at the dark purple vegetables that had stolen all of the knives.

"Did you try asking nicely?" Lance teased, delighting in the smile he could feel and hear. It was just like with Pidge and Hunk last night, except with Keith. And it didn't feel weird at all.

It felt better, actually. Because this time the warmth filling up his chest was all his own and the smile that danced across his face was genuine and everything felt right. He liked this feeling. Even as he caught sight of his hand and the mottled skin across it he tossed the peels into the sink everything still felt right. He felt calm. Safe. Happy.

And maybe this was what he needed when talking with Keith, this easy camaraderie that he had with Hunk and Pidge. Not the constant bitter feeling of envy at how good Keith was at everything and that voice that told him he would never measure up. That he would never be good enough. That the only way Keith would ever even look his way was if he could best him at something.

Maybe Keith hadn't wanted that though. He hadn't wanted a rival and Lance had to face it, he had been a terrible one. He egged Keith on with the hope that he might finally win at some challenge only to feel worse every time Keith bested him and that sick, dark feeling had grown. He had just wanted, did want, to be Keith's friend.

And he could be that now, if Keith would let him.

He knew, and it wasn't Haggar's poison or his own self-doubts talking, that he would never be as good at Keith. Not in swordplay or tactics. Not in piloting. Not in all of the things he had constantly saw as the only strengths that existed.

And that was okay. Because his strengths... they weren't any of those. According to Allura, his quintessence link with Blue showed that his lie in his compassion. His kindness. His laughter. His ability to adapt and bring people together. The heart, Blue had said, and he smiled as even just repeating the words made him feel warm inside.

Keith brought him back from his musings. "They're vegetables, Lance. They can't hear us."

Lance nodded, unable to shake the growing smile that Blue's memory had conjured. "You're right. They definitely aren't corn-like enough to have ears."

Keith just stared. "...What?"

Lance surprised himself at the light laugh that passed through his lips and it only grew as Keith tentatively smiled back at him although he still looked beyond confused.

"Really?" he asked. "Potatoes have eyes, corn has ears? Why you're not supposed to share a secret in the kitchen?" Keith looked at him blankly. Lance just laughed and shook his head. "It's something... something my mamá would tell us all the time," and he pushed past the pang of homesickness that came to his thoughts. "I think it was mostly to keep us from trying to sneak food before meals, but it worked. We were so afraid the vegetables would tattle on us."

"That is ridiculous," Keith said, but there was no actual bite to the words and he looked like he was trying to suppress a smile of his own.

"And yet very effective. I remember this one time Geoffrey—" Lance broke himself off. Keith never seemed to care about when Lance would talk about his family, often giving at best an eye roll and at worst leaving the room.
But this time Keith nodded at him – and was that guilt flashing in his eyes? – and prompted, "Geoffrey, he's your younger brother, right?" Lance nodded, surprised Keith knew that. Had he been listening all this time? "What did he do?"

Lance's smile morphed to a grin and he let it. "Well, it all started when mamá bought *galletas* – cookies – and those were a big treat." He picked up some more peels as he spoke and Keith grabbed a dishcloth to start wiping up some of the spilled broth.

"We were all allowed just one, but Geoff wanted more. So, he had this grand idea that if he got rid of all the potatoes they couldn't see what he was up to. Nevermind all of us nosy siblings."

Keith snorted and Lance turned to look at the other boy. But his eyes widened as Keith's hand was descending on the sink handle, dirty dishcloth in hand to rinse it.

His words froze in his throat as Keith turned the water on and it burst out of the faucet with a whoosh and slammed into the metal sink.

And he knew it was just a sink in the kitchen. He knew that. But that didn't seem to matter as the water hissed and he found himself stumbling backwards as the faucet morphed into a jet and the noise was suddenly echoing all around him, terrible and churning and he went down, legs sending him sprawling.

Something struck his shoulder and he flinched violently away from it, only to hit something else in the movement. They were walls. Walls that he was being tossed about as water filled his lungs and he couldn't find the surface.

He was going to drown.

He choked, feeling his lungs seizing. Something – water, it had to be – wet his cheek and he whimpered. No. No no no no no. Something else touched his shoulder and he jerked away, trying to keep his lips clamped shut to keep the air in.

There was yelling and shouting and he recoiled at it, left hand going to his neck with a silent plea forming. Please no. Not again.

It was becoming too much. He was growing lightheaded and his lungs were just about to give out. He was going to inhale water any second now. And then he would drown and Theodek would be there and he'd send him back in over and over and he'd just keep drowning.

He whimpered as his body gave up its fight and he had no choice but to suck in a breath. But instead of water filling him he took in a whiff of something absolutely rancid and his eyes – he had no idea when he'd closed them – flew open and he coughed instead.

He kept coughing, gagging, really, and hands were on his back then, rubbing while the shouting voice was there but it was softer, gentler.

"Come on Lance, breathe damnit, you're okay, come on." The words were slowly filtering in over his gasps and Lance clung to them. His hands stretched out and encountered rough cloth and he clutched it as best he could, fingers trembling.

"It's okay, that's it, you've got it. In and out, keep going, that's it."

The owner of the words sounded scared and that alone made it hard for Lance to place who it was. Things were starting to come back into focus and he eyed the red coat he was holding onto, tracing it up to see…
"K-Keith?" he managed, voice pathetically small.

"Yeah, it's me. Just keep… keep breathing, all right? It's okay."

Lance obeyed, shuddering out each breath and pressing his bowed head against Keith while warm hands continued to rub circles on his back.

He felt his cheeks darken with shame as reality trickled back in. He'd just been trying to tell himself that he wasn't weak and yet here he was, frightened by a kitchen sink.

When he finally felt that he had enough air to try speaking again he raised his head and forced his fingers to drop Keith's jacket and he felt Keith's hands leave his back. He straightened up to find himself wedged against one of the counters and Keith kneeling in front of him and looking as worried as Lance had ever seen him.

"Lo siento," he mumbled, averting his eyes.

"No," Keith snapped and Lance shrank at it. "No," he repeated, softer. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. I didn't even think about the water and…" Keith's voice broke off into a sob and Lance jerked his eyes back around. "I'm sorry Lance. For… for everything. For this and for being a jerk and for not listening to you and… and…"

And oh Dios, was Keith about to cry? This close Lance could see the sheen to the purple orbs.

"Keith," he whispered, hating how his weak his voice still sounded.

"I'm so sorry," Keith repeated and tears were spilling down his cheeks now. "I'm so sorry."

"Keith, no," Lance protested, guilt swelling and making his stomach roll. He was making Keith cry. Keith was crying. "It's… it's not your fault. It's mine—"

"Don't you dare say that," and there was a bite to the tone. Hands came up to clamp down on Lance's shoulders with almost bruising intensity and Keith shook him slightly. Lance was too shocked to be anything else. "Stop apologizing. Just… just stop."

"Keith—"

"Listen," Keith's hands tightened and Lance couldn't help the slight wince. Keith pulled back as though he'd burned him, horror crossing his face. He glanced at his hands and then to Lance and heaved out another sob, pulling his hands back to him. It was so reminiscent of Pidge just hours ago and Lance knew he needed to do something.

And, apparently, something ended up being a hug.

He closed the distance between the two of them, wrapping his arms tentatively about Keith's back. He wasn't entirely sure what he was doing but this felt right. And a second later Keith's arms came up to rest around him and then tightened so Lance was pressed almost uncomfortably against him.

Lance didn't mind though. This grip, while tight, was nothing like Theodek's bruising hold or Haggar's possessive one. It felt, he thought, desperate. And he hugged back just as hard.

"I'm sorry," Keith whispered, voice somewhat muffled by Lance's shoulder. "For… for everything. For hurting you. For… for being such a lousy friend. I didn't… I didn't mean to. I just…" His hands shook and he dug his fingers more into the thick yellow hoodie. "I'm sorry. I'm no good at this."
Lance remained silent, shoulders trembling, and Keith continued, desperate to make Lance understand. "I don't understand how to be a good friend," Keith said softly. "I... I have trouble trusting people and letting them in because... because it only hurts more when they leave. Everyone always leaves. But..." he swallowed thickly. "But that was wrong. I knew that once you were... were gone. I was scared, Lance. Scared that I'd never see you again and you... you were there thinking that I hated you—"

"Keith," Lance cut in, and while his voice was teary it was firm. "I've never hated you."

Keith released Lance from his grip, felt Lance do the same, and he sat up to meet the dark ocean eyes. There was no lie in them.

"What?" Keith repeated, dumbly. Shiro had told him Lance would say that but hearing it, actually hearing it, was something else entirely.

"I've never hated you," Lance said quietly, averting his eyes to look at his hands, which Keith also noticed for the first time were free of any coverings. He looked back up to Lance's downed face so as not to stare.

"I... I was so jealous of you, Keith," Lance continued softly. "Everyone at the Garrison... they always talked about how amazing you were, how talented. And when you left and I got bumped up... I was told all the time to be more like you. The Garrison went from the best pilot since Shiro to... to me. A cargo pilot who barely got into the program at all. Someone so forgettable that you didn't even recognize me." He let out a soft, sad laugh.

Keith felt his stomach twist uncomfortably. He had assumed Lance had been an engineer, he remembered, when the boy had gone to introduce himself on the night they rescued Shiro. He knew they would have had some classes together, even though Keith was a year ahead in the program. He should have recognized him.

"And so I thought... I thought the only way someone as great as you'd ever respect someone like me was if... if I made myself bigger than I was. So I marked you as my rival because a rival is someone you look at as an equal."

Lance finally lifted his head and met Keith's eyes. "But you didn't want that, did you? I just... I wanted to be your friend and I messed up and I made you not like me instead."

"That's not true," the words spilled out. "I mean, yeah, you did do things that I thought were annoying and petty and stupid." Lance looked away and Keith hurried on before he could stick his foot any more in his mouth. "But you weren't doing them to be mean or cause trouble. You... you were trying to make us laugh. And smile. And... and remind us that there's than just fighting and a war out there."

Keith placed one of his hands atop Lance's folded ones. "I'm still learning," he said quietly. "I don't understand being a part of a family. Not like this. Other than my dad," he swallowed thickly, "the only person who... who ever cared about me before was Shiro. And it's hard to go from that to... to all of this. All of these people who care and actually mean it. I'm not used to that. I..."

He took a deep breath. Now or never. "My dad died when I was seven. Cancer. I never knew my mom and so I ended up in the foster system and... it was not a good place. Not for me. I bounced around a lot, got labeled as violent and troubled and had some..." he tried to suppress the shudder, keeping his eyes glued to their layered hands. "Some not so nice experiences."

"I'm sorry," Lance murmured. "I... I had no idea."
"I don't talk about it. Ever," Keith said in answer. "But it got better. I met Shiro and he got me enrolled in the Garrison early. Shiro, he always saw the best in me. Told me to never give up on my dreams. He thinks I'll make this great leader and I try, but… but I really have no idea what I'm doing. I thought when I made comments about your piloting or fighting or whatever I was being a leader and trying to improve you, but I wasn't. I was only being a bully." He shook his head. "And I'm, so, so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Or make you feel like you weren't good enough to be a Paladin. I've never thought that."

"Really?" Lance's voice was small and unsure as though he was afraid to believe and Keith hated it.

"Really," he said firmly. "And I'm learning now that we all have different strengths and contribute in our own ways to the team. And Lance," his hand tightened over the scarred ones. "When you were gone… we fell apart. We only managed to come back together as well as we did because of you. You hold this team together. You remind us, remind me, that all those planets we save aren't just numbers and stats but people and why what we do is so important. That we're important. We're people too and sometimes… sometimes I forget that with what Voltron represents to the universe."

Lance's gaze had slowly drawn back up as Keith spoke and blue and purple met with a degree of understanding and compassion that almost made Keith forget how to breathe.

"So I guess what I'm trying to say is… is," he stumbled, "that when you were gone it made me realize how much I actually care. About you. About the rest of our team. And I don't deserve your forgiveness for how I've acted in the past, but if you'll give me another chance I… I'd really like to be your friend."

Lance smiled then and Keith was struck by just how right it looked on his face and how it made him want to smile too out of the pure happiness that radiated from Lance's. "I think we've been through too much to just be friends," Lance told him, eyes soft. "So… how about you be my brother instead?"

"Brother?" Keith repeated, chest tightening.

"Yeah," Lance smiled at him. "You're a part of my family, Keith. And… and I know we'll still probably fight. All siblings do. But… but just know that no matter what I'll always love you and—"

Lance's words were cut off as Keith launched himself forward and enveloped Lance in a hug, trying to stifle his tears against the overlarge hoodie. A brother. A family. He'd had plenty of foster ones before, but the word hadn't meant anything. Then he'd had Shiro and Shiro was his family then, his brother, and he had assumed that would be the end of it. But he'd been wrong. He had a family, a great one, right here.

And of course Lance would be the one to make him see it.

Lance couldn't wipe the warm smile off his face as he looked down at the dark head pressed into his shoulder. Everything felt right again. It felt better than right, actually. Because he and Keith had reached an understanding, a friendship deeper than Lance had thought possible with his deemed rival.

And, although he hated that apparently it had taken him being kidnapped and tortured for Keith to come around, at least he had. At least there was some silver lining to all of what he had endured. But it wasn't just with Keith either. He felt closer to all of his family now in a way that he never had before, even Hunk.

And even more than that, Lance realized, he himself had changed in some ways for the better. The
self-doubt and loathing at himself he'd been crushing himself beneath had lifted. By sharing those fears, those dark parts of him and learning that no one else saw him that way, no one else thought he was weak or useless, had let him draw a full breath he hadn't known he was holding.

Learning that the true nature of the Blue Paladin was not someone who excelled at fighting or piloting but was someone there who helped support others, lifted them up and made them all stronger by simply caring had made him reevaluate his entire role in the team and he what he'd found had felt right. It hadn't felt forced like those fake smiles or trying to be someone that he was not.

He was Lance. He was the Blue Paladin. He was a brother, a comforter, a supporter. He was the pilot of the most amazing Lion there was and he was the team's sharpshooter, even if that was going to take a little work. But he had his team – his family – behind him every step of the way supporting him as surely as he wanted to help them.

Haggar might have broken him and made him sink to the lowest depths possible to the point where he honestly hadn't thought he would ever find the surface. But now, here he was. Feeling better, stronger, than he had in a long, long time.

And, to top it all off, getting a hug from Keith. Lance couldn't quite return it, his hands trapped against his knees, and Keith didn't seem to be moving any time soon, so Lance bowed his head, pressing his forehead against the roughness of Keith's jacket shoulder ribbing, and fully relaxed in the embrace.

This was nothing like with Haggar. He was even starting to forget the feel of her cold touch, her long fingers wrapping about, those memories being replaced with Shiro's safety, Hunk's large hands, Pidge's small grasps and Coran's beyond gentle hold. And now, he burrowed his face further into Keith's jacket, he had this.

Haggar had lost. The Galrans had lost. They had tried to take the Black Lion, to break him. But they'd failed. They'd failed because Lance had refused to go down. He might still be out of the fight for a while, but he trusted his family to take up the banner in his place. And he...he would support them as best he could because that was who he was.

And whether it be a kitchen sink or a cup of water or a set of hands gliding through his hair... he wasn't going to lose to them. He was going to stand and fight and show Haggar that he was stronger than even he had thought possible.

He was the Blue Paladin of Voltron. And Paladins of Voltron never gave up.

xxx

Chapter End Notes

So... Keith finally talked to Lance. And just like everyone told him, Lance absolutely did not hate him. Instead we get hugs and love and bonding and I'm just going to let them hug it out for a while longer, okay? And I know that that part is what you guys are all probably the most excited about, but I'm over here waving my Lance flag and cheering because he has *finally* gotten to the point where he accepts himself. We had it at the beginning and the end but Lance is not backing down anymore; there will
certainly be bumps but he's not going to let fear control him and he's going to do whatever he can to feel better. I'm so proud of him. That trip to the mindscape has really opened a lot of new doors, huh?

Also, I just want to say I'm touched by how many of you expressed fellow love for Coran and his story. *sniffle* For those who did not ask but were wondering, Neleenia's design is based of Esmeralda from The Hunchback of Notre Dame. One of my favorite Disney films. Can't imagine why...

As a reminder, you can find me over on Tumblr at icypantherwrites if you'd like sneak peeks of chapters, snippets and other little goodies. Come say hi!

Big Keith-like hugs to all of the lovely reviewers: wingedflower, WeBeDragons, A_Zap, Ookamisouleaper, ThisOneIsBlue, ImaShayne, StingingLikeABee, FandomHuntress, heyheroics, RiyaMorut, GingerGeorgie, KethriHolmes, DayOfTheBethan, DarkLordMarshall, someonewhoseisbelowaverageatcommenting, Whateveres, CatelynJones, marzaally, Glittersessa, A_Brat_Without_Talent, Sophie Friedenwald-Fishman, savvysass, maynarmi, QueenMcawesome, killjoy2246, keepasecretgetastrawberry, Ash_in_water, rlekt, S H1, BeckKingOfHell, Holly, CaretakerGabriel, maychorian, Joooooo, WindyOccamy, Potatosaurusrex, VoltronTheLegendaryGay and Benny_IsA_Dog!

Small self promo before I skedaddle; posted a new fic called Razzle Dazzle featuring Lance and Lotor (but with elements of the team too and gen/platonic fic, as always) and it's going to be a short, intense five-chapter ride, hopefully finishing before season five (and yes, I have seen the trailer and yes, I'm stoked for Lance yelling out commands, but lord help them if they do not address Kuron...) if you'd like to check it out. Be sure to leave a comment! ;p

On that note, please do also drop me a line here if you enjoyed the chapter. I love hearing from you guys and it truly makes my day. Thanks much!
"Uh, hello? Keith you still here?" Hunk's voice came from the front of the kitchen. "I found the space carrots. They were—"

He broke off as he rounded the island and saw a sight he had not been expecting in the slightest but yet was completely right. Keith was hugging Lance with his head buried in Lance's shoulder and Lance was curled slightly over Keith's shorter stature with his forehead pressed against Keith's matching shoulder. He had no doubt they'd heard him as he saw Lance somewhat cock his head and Keith stiffened, but neither made a move to pull out of the hug. Hunk's heart swelled.

"Pardon me," Hunk said, placing his carrots on one clean space on the counter and awkwardly stepping around the pair, gathered in the middle of the narrow galley part of the kitchen, to reach the stove where the pot was bubbling madly and looked seconds away from overflowing.

That seemed to prompt the two to move as Hunk observed Keith retract his hands and Lance then straightened up. Lance's face was mostly dry although his eyes were bright while Keith most definitely had fresh tear tracks on his flushed cheeks.

Hunk said nothing but handed the smaller boy a clean dishcloth that he took with a whispered thanks while he bent down slight and squeezed Lance's shoulder and received a bright smile in return that just made his own grow.

"So," Hunk said lightly, "I found the alien carrots. Also ran into Coran and he told me that you don't cut puliparis – those weird vegetables that ate the knives – but rather you just mash them. Said the knives should come out once they're flat. Lance, you up for that?"

"Sure," Lance agreed easily and Hunk had to force himself not to stare out of sheer delight. He knew that Lance was going to be feeling better following the whole mindscape thing, but there was a confidence back in his voice that had been missing since they'd gotten him back. It wasn't the false note either Hunk had heard Lance use to try to convince both himself and others. This was genuine. This was his Lance again and had this been a movie and he capable of it Hunk would have broken out into a musical dance number to express his joy.

This was his Lance again and had this been a movie and he capable of it Hunk would have broken out into a musical dance number to express his joy.

Instead, he settled for giving Lance's shoulder another squeeze as Lance clambered to his feet.

"Keith, can you chop up our alien potatoes?" Hunk asked. "I'm going to get to work on the carrots. We really need to get everything into the pot pronto for it to really stew."

Keith looked up at that and Hunk smiled and held out a hand to pull him to his feet. Keith took it with a small nod.

"You okay?" Hunk asked Keith quietly as Lance set about opening various drawers looking for the masher he knew was in there.

"He called me his brother," Keith said, sounding a little shell-shocked.
Hunk laughed. "Dude, you've got three of us and sisters too and a super cool uncle." Keith blinked at him. "Hate to break it to you, but you've been a part of our little space family for quite a while." He pulled Keith into a one-armed hug. "Better get used to it."

"I was trying to… to comfort him," Keith said, nodding at Lance who had found the masher and was tentatively picking up the puliparis with his left hand and placing them onto a cutting board, "and apologize and… and instead he ended up comforting me." He wiped at his still bright eyes. "That's not how it was supposed to go."

"Things with Lance rarely do," Hunk said sagely. "And to be clear, it's not one or the other, Keith. You both helped each other and I'm so glad to see it. Lance has wanted to be your friend for a really, really long time."

"I was just too stupid to understand that," Keith muttered.

"Not stupid," Hunk corrected, "Just… a miscommunication."

"Coran said the same thing."

"Then you know it's doubly true. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Keith looked away but gave a short nod. "I'll try."

"Good," Hunk clapped him on the back. "Then let's get back to dinner."

"Um, Hunk?" and Keith was coloring again. "Don't… don't touch the sink."

"The sink?" Hunk repeated. "Why would—?"

Understanding dawned in his eyes and he jerked his head to the left to look at Lance, who was still moving the vegetables over but not looking troubled or scared, and then back to Keith.

"He's okay now," Keith said quickly. "It was an accident, I swear."

"You don't need to apologize for that," Hunk said gently. "You obviously didn't mean to." Still, he had to ask. "Did it prompt a flashback?"

"Yeah," Keith winced. His heart had leapt into his throat when he'd turned from the sink after hearing a loud thud and found Lance fallen down cowering against the opposite counter, eyes blown wide and no longer seeing the kitchen.

He'd shouted at first for Hunk, hoping he was on his way back, but when that had yielded no results Keith had gotten down on the floor and tried to snap Lance out of it by talking to him as he'd seen Hunk do and a touch to the shoulder.

All he'd gotten was more fear and Lance had flinched away. His face had been turning slightly purple and Keith realized that he was holding his breath and probably wouldn't inhale again until he passed out if he thought he was actually drowning.

Keith had stumbled to one of the spice jars he and Hunk had been experimenting with and grabbed the one that to him smelled like raw sewage. It wasn't comforting in the slightest but it was strong and would hopefully be enough to drag Lance out of his living nightmare.

And to his relief it had worked as Lance had coughed upon it being shoved under his nose and that had turned into noisy gasps for air and Keith had gone back to what he'd seen Hunk and Coran do
and rubbed circles against Lance's back as that seemed to help calm him. It had worked as eventually Lance had come back to and his breathing had evened and then they'd… they'd talked and everything was more than better now.

"You did good," Hunk told him and Keith felt his cheeks heat up again at the praise. Hunk gave his shoulder one last squeeze and made his way over to the carrots. Keith copied his lead.

"Hey, Hunk?" Lance asked quietly and Hunk observed that Lance's tone was even, shoulders steady and he nodded to himself; Keith had done an excellent job if Lance was this calm after a flashback not even ten minutes ago and Lance… Lance was getting better. If he beamed any harder he was pretty sure he'd actually break his jaw. "If… If I hit these won't the knives shoot out? And hit us?"

Hunk eyed them and his beautiful kitchen knife set that Keith had gone to town on, explaining they just needed to "find the right one," which clearly had not been the right solution. He really would prefer to avoid being impaled and absolutely wanted to avoid anything flying like that around Lance and now that Lance had said it that did seem to be a problem.

"Let's experiment," Hunk said, plucking one of them up and juggling it in his hand.

"What are you going to do with that?" Keith asked, looking up from where he was slicing potatoes with one of two remaining knives, although given that it was a butter knife it was a little slower going than it otherwise would have been.

"Throw it," and there was a gleam to his eyes.

Lance poked his head around behind Hunk's broad shoulder. "Hunk was a clean-up pitcher. Throws a ninety-eight fastball."

Keith knew very, very little about any sort of sport but even he knew that was fast and let out a low whistle.

"Aw, you guys," Hunk grinned. "It's nothing."

"You had professional scouts, Hunk," Lance said, some of his cheer fading. "Sophomore year."

"And I told you I never wanted to play baseball," Hunk said, and Keith sensed that this was a conversation they'd had more than once. "I wanted to be an engineer."

"And you could have done that still," Lance said. "If you hadn't gone to the Garrison."

"Hey," Hunk gave Lance a gentle nudge with his elbow, "None of that. I went where I wanted to and that's all there is to it. Now, come on, let's see if this thing really does pancake like Coran said."

Hunk twirled the vegetable in his fingers, adjusting so he wouldn't get caught on the knife, and with a round-up threw it across the kitchen where it smashed into the far wall above the table.

The resounding splat made Lance give a start but he didn't look frightened and almost eagerly trotted over with Hunk on his heels to look at their experiment. The vegetable had remained stuck to the wall and, as Coran had said, was smushed out to resemble a thin disc. The knife was still in it as well, blade flat against the wall and Hunk deftly pulled it all free.

"It cracks," he mumbled, the vegetable breaking into pieces as he bent it. "Like… like pasta. I thought it was going to be more beet like, honestly."

"Can we still use it?" Keith asked, accepting the knife Hunk handed him. So, so much better than the
butter knife.

Hunk put a small piece in his mouth and chewed. And chewed. And chewed.

"Alien gum?" Lance hedged. Hunk tried to blow a bubble and ended up spitting out the substance with the force.

"I think it might just need cooked," he mused, bending down and picking up the slimy piece. "It's like trying to eat really gooey cookie batter. Has an interesting flavor though."

He held up a piece and to his great delight Lance took it from him without hesitation and it was then that he noticed, as Lance held it tentatively to his mouth and licked it, that a set of white-pink scars were on full display.

Lance's face scrunched up as he licked it again, taking no notice of Hunk's gaze and the pride swelling in his chest. "It… sort of tastes like… cucumber? Or pickle, maybe?"

Keith made a gagging noise and shook his head when Hunk turned to him. "I hate cucumbers," he said with as much passion as Hunk had ever heard him speak.

"I agree with Keith," Lance said, shooting a small smile at the swordsman who returned it over his shudder of revulsion.

"Fine, fine, no cucumber gum pasta stuff in the stew," Hunk surrendered. "We're going to need more potatoes though."

Keith groaned at the thought of peeling more of the weird vegetable and Hunk clapped him so hard on the back he stumbled forward. "Let's hop to it or dinner is going to be late. Lance, you want to keep freeing the knives? We're going to need those back."

Lance did a sloppy salute with his left hand and about-faced to return to his pile. Hunk beamed again and hurried after to finish up his own assignment.

The kitchen was quiet as all three worked on their own projects, broken up by the *splat* of Lance hammering out the puliparis and the quiet clatter as he put the recovered knives in the sink and Keith's muttered grumbles as he hacked away at peeling more potatoes.

The kitchen was growing steadily warmer as Hunk turned his attention back to the stove and the different broths he had simmering. He saw Keith remove his jacket, leaving him in his short-sleeved black shirt and eyed Lance to see what he would do as he knew that the hoodie was rather warm.

Lance had paused in his squashing duties and his left hand was hovering at the bottom hem of the jacket as though he was debating pulling it over his head. A second later he saw Lance give a small but decisive nod of his head and his hand more firmly gripped it and he gave it a tug, revealing mocha skin as his shirt underneath rode up with it.

He gave it another silent tug but Hunk saw the frustrated crease as he brought his right hand to assist and it merely brushed against the clothing.

"Hey," he said gently. "Need an assist?"

"Yeah," Lance replied and he met Hunk's gaze. "I'm... I'm not there yet."

Yet. The word may as well have been spoken with sparklers and fireworks. It wasn't the "should have" Lance had fallen into it, the crippling self-hate that his body would not work as he wanted it
to. It was looking forward, hoping for better and Hunk tried to suppress the giant grin that wanted to take over his face.

"Arms up," he said instead and without complaint Lance obliged. Hunk tugged the sweatshirt up and over, retrieving the plush toy from inside. He went to hand both back to Lance and while a scarred hand took the stuffed animal he shook his head at the hoodie.

"I don't need it anymore," Lance said, and Hunk's eyes widened as he realized Lance didn't just mean right now in the kitchen. The hoodie, as comfortable as it was, had been something to hide behind; hide his arm, his trembling, and all of himself. But now he was coming out of that self-created shell like a butterfly from its cocoon and preparing to face the world.

"Lance…" Hunk couldn't stop himself this time from pulling him into a tight hug and he felt Lance let out a shuddering breath against his chest.

"Thank you for letting me borrow it," Lance murmured, soaking in the comfort.

"Any time, hermano. How about you keep it for movie nights though? It really is too small on me."

Lance smiled into Hunk's vest. "Okay."

Hunk released his arms and quickly folded the hoodie up and placed it out of the way on the unused counter. Lance went back to his vegetables without pause but he was standing just a little straighter, Hunk thought.

He could see now with the absence of the sweatshirt that the bandages covering the burn scar were absent as well, although save for a sliver of exposed skin by Lance's wrist it was still covered by his long-sleeved shirt. But the bandages were not there.

He hated that the mindscape had caused Lance such pain, watching those wounds pepper across skin and blood gush while Lance had whimpered and the environment around them had lashed out at the torment.

But, in the end, their trip there had helped Lance so much more than they'd have been able to accomplish out here. Hunk had no doubt Lance would have eventually opened up about some of the horrors he had undergone, what he had done, but it would have been over the course of days if not weeks or months. The mindscape had been like ripping off the bandage, Hunk supposed, rather than picking at the edges.

It was raw and painful had hurt so much in that moment, but then the pain was over instead of the constant itch and hurt that trying to slowly remove it brought. The mindscape had forced Lance to confront all of those horrors and self-hate head on. He hadn't been able to hide anymore and the end result of airing the dark secret, of talking about some of his experiences, had helped Lance so much. He could smile now. He was looking forward, not down or back. He was trying.

It wasn't all over though. Hunk knew there were certainly questions that needed answered, including his own fears about Haggar using their faces and voices to harm Lance. However, as he watched Lance squash one of the last vegetables, he was beginning to think his concerns might be a little over exaggerated. Something was certainly amiss, but Lance had not once withdrawn from them after he recognized it was indeed them and not a memory of Haggar or this Theodek that Lance had mentioned on a couple of occasions. That made the vice around his heart lessen a little bit. It wouldn't completely undo until he'd spoken to Lance, but not now. Not yet. Maybe tonight if Lance was feeling up to it, he decided. After they'd had dinner and a chance to all be together.
"All knives are now accounted for," Lance said a few moments later. "What next?"

They all needed washed, Hunk knew, but that might be a bit of a big step, especially given Lance's precarious reaction to the faucet being turned on not even twenty minutes ago. The stew was bubbling away happily with all of the potatoes Keith had finally finished, and other than keeping an eye on it and stirring every few minutes they were nearly done.

"Can you get the food goo for the mice?" Hunk asked, spotting the bowls the little rodents used. It wasn't that they couldn't have the food Hunk made, but Coran had looked crushed when everyone had made it clear that they preferred Hunk's cooking to the goo and the mice would literally eat anything. So they always started off the meal with the food goo and would then help themselves to any leftovers. A win-win for everyone.

Lance gave a nod and went to collect the bowls.

"How long till it's done?" Keith nodded at the stew, sweeping more peels into the sink.

"Maybe forty minutes?" Hunk said, spearing one of the potatoes, examining it and sliding it back into the pot. "These things cook up a heck of a lot faster than earth potatoes."

"Time enough to try making bread?" Keith suggested, still hesitant to intrude on Hunk's menu, but Hunk clapped his hands in delight.

"Yes! I found this Altean yeast that rises in like, a dobash, that I've been wanting to try. Hang on, I'll go find it."

Hunk disappeared into the huge pantry and Keith continued tidying the counters while Lance approached the food goo vats on the far wall. He placed the stack of bowls on the nearby table and holding one headed for the lever.

It was a simple thing; pull down for flavor (labeled as food goo one, food goo two, and food goo seven, strangely) and then right for the speed at which the machine dispensed the food, which went from a drop at at time (for flavoring, Coran explained, although why anyone would want to flavor a dish with food goo was not a question anyone asked) to a rapid-fire gush for when you needed to fill a lot of bowls quickly.

Lance decided on the mystery flavor seven, as that one he recalled had the vaguest hint of pineapple. He eyed his hands, the left holding the bowl and the right pressed as was becoming normal up against his stomach. He tried to move the fingers on the right, getting the minute twitch.

He eyed the dispenser again. He could probably hold the bowl against his body with his right cradling it and use the left to move the lever. Or, he could hold the bowl steady and safe in his left and shift the lever with his right by sort of just pushing it with the back of his hand. Gravity still worked after all and he didn't need fine motor skills to push a lever.

Plan decided, Lance held the bowl under the spout and his used the bottom of his right to push the lever to the correct flavor. Step one done. Now, to just move it partway to the right to dispense it.

He readjusted his grip on the bowl and then pushed the lever with the side of his right hand.

He pushed it too far.

Food goo whooshed out of the machine and slammed into the bowl with such force that it ricocheted up and Lance yelped mostly out of surprise as it splattered his face and chest but then there was that quick, harsh moment of fear as he felt it slide into his mouth and it was water then, threatening to
"Lance!" he heard Hunk yell as he stumbled backwards, trying desperately to cough and expel the substance and stay here, in the kitchen, which was wavering around the edges.

The sharp sound of shattering glass pierced through the fog and he realized that he had dropped the bowl. He'd dropped the bowl because he was in the kitchen on the castle and not… not...

There were strong, warm arms then lighting upon his shoulders and pulling him further back from the machine, which was dumping neon green food goo onto the floor in copious amounts. Not water. It wasn't water. It was just goo and it was stopping now as Keith hurried to the lever.

"Hey, hey, miráme," came Hunk's voice and Lance found the Yellow Paladin standing in front of him now, hands still braced on his shoulders. "Lance, miráme."

And Lance did. Hunk's warm brown gaze further grounded him and he let out a breath as the last tendrils of water and darkness released their hold.

The cold, wet stickiness did not though and he winced as a drop of food goo fell from his bangs to land on his cheek. He was covered in it; his face, his hair and his entire upper torso, making his shirt cling to him uncomfortably.

He needed a shower.

That thought had him suck in another breath because a shower meant water and water meant… meant…

"Lance, deep breaths, okay? Estás bien, it's okay."

Lance did as instructed, the panic receding with each exhale.

"I'm here," he said after a few more inhales, looking at Hunk and then at Keith, who was hovering right next to Hunk. "I'm… I'm okay. Just…” Another sticky glob descended down his face and he shuddered.

"Here," Keith held out a dishcloth and Lance gingerly took it and after a moment of hesitation pressed it to his forehead and bangs to keep any more goo from sliding down, flinching only for a second at his own hand.

"I need a shower," he managed to get out, hating how his legs trembled at the idea. All that water, gushing and echoing and– he shook his head, dispelling the cold waves. He wasn't there.

"You do," Hunk agreed carefully.

"I don't… I can't…” he wasn't even sure what he was trying to say. All of that resolve from earlier was slipping away at the idea of facing that. He hadn't even been able to face a kitchen sink and now a shower?

"What about a bath?" Keith suggested. The bath wouldn't have the loud jets or the constantly shifting water, but Lance shook his head so vigorously food goo went flying. A bath was definitely worse, as it would remind him far, far too much of the rotating box he'd been trapped in. As it was, the only bathtubs they had were Allura's gigantic in-ground one and the Altean swimming pool.

"You can do this," Hunk said quietly but his words were strong. "I know you can, Lance."
"I'm scared," he admitted, lowering his eyes although the admission gave him another breath back.

"And that's okay," Keith's voice was gentle, that same tone he'd used when trying to get Lance to breathe with him following the panic attack.

"How about I come with?" Hunk offered, his hand squeezing Lance's shoulder. "I can adjust the shower to just a really light stream before you get in. And I'll be right there. We can grab the music player too."

"I'm sorry," Lance whispered, not quite sure why he was saying it but it seemed right. Even when he was trying his best he was still inconveniencing others.

"I told you to stop apologizing," Keith retorted. To Hunk he said, "I can finish up in here and we can delay dinner till you guys are ready. If that works."

"How about it, Lance? That okay?"

He found himself giving a jerky nod, right hand shaking with a renewed tremble. He did want to try. He didn't want to be scared of water, which had up until recently been as familiar and comforting to him as his family. He hated that Haggar had twisted it for him, made it something to fear. He didn't want it to be, but Dios, it wasn't that easy.

"Come on," Hunk pivoted him towards the door with a last nod to Keith. "Let's get you cleaned up."

As they made their way out of the kitchen and down the hall towards the bathroom Lance tried to stop the shivers that were making their way through his entire body that even Hunk's warm hand couldn't stop.

This was it. Face his biggest fear or let it control him. Take back his life or let Haggar win. Literally sink or swim.

He knew what he needed to do. It was the only real choice he had if he wanted to move forward.

But…

His hands would not stop trembling and he felt like any second he was going to throw up as his stomach churned and darkness pressed in on the corners of his mind with a whisper that sounded too much like Haggar.

"Lance," Hunk stopped them in front of the bathroom door, and his voice was like a soothing balm that muted the chaos inside of him. Honey eyes met his. "You've got this."

Lance gave a slow nod. "I've got this," he repeated, voice small.

Hunk smiled then, so soft and understanding that Lance felt tears spring to his eyes.

Without another word Hunk pushed open the door and with one last shaky breath Lance stepped inside, knowing that the next time he passed over that threshold he would be a different person.

One way or the other.

Chapter End Notes
I would die of happiness to see Hunk tap dance. Better yet, let's just have a full on musical episode. I think the voice cast is more than up to it :D Lots of little things here building up to another big moment next chapter. Dun dun dunnnnnn. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter as I missed seeing so many of your lovely faces last week. All that bonding left you speechless, huh? :p

Unfortunate head's up though that there will be no update next week, as per my usual routine when a new season premieres. Please please please do not post spoilers in comments if you happen to leave one after it airs. I will not be able to watch it until at least the following Monday and I will be going on a self-imposed hermit state to the best of my ability to avoid spoilers, although being at an anime con all weekend should make that very interesting. (If you're going to Crossroads in Indy come say hi at my table!) Seriously. I will go on strike or something if such details make it into my email, which I will be checking over the weekend. Thanks for your understanding in that regard!

However, I do have a one-shot publishing Sunday as part of a challenge fic exchange with amazing author and friend wingedflower, titled All That Glitters Isn't Gold. Look for it and links to her fic, Of Crossing Swords and Crossing Lines, then! And Razzle Dazzle will be finishing up next week too so who knows, y'all might not even notice the lack of a Color update.

Much love to the fabulous reviewers: Fred, Ps, RobineBlack, savvysass, dean_winchester_has Fallen, S H1, Ookamisouleaper, Whateves1, someonewhoisbelowaverageatcommenting, MilkyWay, Pokimoko, QueenMcaawesome, ladykristianna, ImaShayne, Glittersessa, FandomHuntress, maynarmi, Islaboo22, heyheroics, Faith, Alexa+Miranda, VoltronTheLegendaryGay, soldmysoultofandoms, rootvegetable, rekt, maychorian, Yuki Akira, PepeThePoopyPants and Hecking_fight_me!

Also, real quick. I have debating moving Color to a Friday update as it fits better with my new schedule and when I'm awake xD. Would that work for all of you or would you prefer to keep it on Saturday?

Enjoying the story? Please do comment below - favorite scene this chapter, line of dialogue, overall impression, etc. Feed the author. She is hungry and really, really appreciates it. Thanks guys! See you in two weeks in a post season-five world.
Chapter Fifty-Six

Welcome to Friday updates! ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The bathroom was empty. Lance was pleased to note. Granted, the only person who could have been in there was Shiro (unless Pidge had forgotten the sign again) and it's not that Lance didn't want to see Shiro but he wasn't sure he wanted to see anyone else right now.

He moved like he was headed to the guillotine as Hunk walked further into the room towards the shower, its cubicle on the far back wall and a small bench just next to it. It was here Hunk gestured for him to sit and Lance did so, grateful as he wasn't sure his legs were going to hold him up any longer.

Hunk joined him, clasped hands hanging over his knees. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

Lance shook his head. "I feel sick."

"We can try something else," Hunk suggested. "Maybe just a damp cloth and wipe down the worst of it."

He shook his head again. "I can't keep hiding, Hunk," he whispered. "That's... that's what I told Coran. I have to do this now, or... or I don't think I will."

And he knew, thanks to his time in the mindscape, that hopefully this would be for the best. He'd face it head on and then it would be behind him, just like everything else. It was just... he shivered. This was ultimately what had broken him. He'd suffered through the other tortures with somehow still a spark of hope and determination, but drowning over and over had all but extinguished it.

Hunk gently squeezed a food-goo covered shoulder and rose back to his feet. "All right. Let's start with the water then. Nice and slow."

He made his way to the shower and pulled back the curtain, patterned with rubber ducks. Lance had nearly died of happiness when he'd found it at the earth store at the space mall and he'd replaced the former dull magenta in a heartbeat. Hunk decided it was probably going to remain pushed to the side unless Lance asked for the privacy, as it dulled the lighting inside the shower and the last thing Lance needed was a dim, enclosed space full of water. Not happening.

The Altean showers were nicer than anything they had back on Earth. There were a ton of dials and buttons that had taken some getting used to. Keith's scream of horror as an entire vat of some type of floral scented concoction had upended itself and left the Red Paladin smelling like a flower field for the entire week still brought a grin to Hunk's face.

This time though there was nothing fancy. Hunk changed the temperature to warm, comfortable but not scalding, and adjusted the flow setting so it was not the pounding stream that Keith had left it as
but closer to a sprinkle.

Lance had a clear sightline to the shower and Hunk turned to look at him. "Ready?"

"R-ready," Lance mumbled, left hand gripping the bench so hard his knuckles matched his scar. He was hyper-focused on the shower head, knowing any second it was going to start spouting water. Water that he was then going to go under.

He choked back the wave of nausea at the thought.

Hunk turned the lever and suddenly it was no longer just a thought.

Water was there. It was here. But it wasn't the harsh sound of the jets or even the kitchen faucet as it hit the basin. There was actually hardly any noise, just a very soft sort of hiss, and the trickle was so light it wasn't even rebounding off the floor.

"Come here," Hunk called softly. Lance mechanically stood up, legs still shaking, but he crossed the few feet to the shower where the noise was no louder than before.

Hunk held out his hand, smile soft but concerned and Lance swallowed thickly again before he placed his left hand into the larger grip. Hunk gave it a tender squeeze.

"We're going to put our hands in the water now."

Lance flinched but stood his ground and managed a small nod.

"I'll be right here, the entire time," Hunk comforted. "And we can leave at any time too, okay?"

"Okay," he whispered and that was the go ahead for Hunk to shift their conjoined hands into the warm stream.

Lance startled as the water hit his forearm and back of his exposed hand and he would have jerked away had Hunk's hold not been as strong as it was.

And, he realized letting out the breath he'd been holding, nothing bad had happened. It was just a light pattering of water that made the rest of him shiver at the warmth.

"Estás bien?"

"B-bien."

They stood there for at least a few minutes, hand in hand and letting the water mist over them. Lance felt his breathing return to normal, his shoulders relaxing as no memory tried to pry to the surface.

Hunk shifted then, releasing Lance's hand and the scarred appendage wavered in the stream all by itself. Lance left it, rotating it ever so slightly as the water danced across his skin.


He could do this.

Something must have shown on his face because next to him Hunk gave a nod. "All right. Let's get those clothes to the hamper and in you go."

Lance pulled his arm free of the stream and followed Hunk back to the bench, where he was gestured to sit once more. He did so, dripping arm resting over his lap as Hunk tugged off his socks.
with a grimace. He forced himself not to feel that flare of shame that Hunk had to do this because his hand would not cooperate.

"Coran was not kidding about cleaning," he said, holding one up for Lance's inspection. The castle wasn't dirty, per se, but there was certainly some grime as evidenced by the darker streaks and embedded dust into the sock.

Lance tried to muster up a smile at the attempt, but it fell flat. It wasn't that he couldn't, and that relieved some of the knot growing in his stomach, but that right now he just did not feel like it.

"All right, arms up," Hunk instructed and he pulled off the sticky, wet shirt with a squelch. Lance shivered as the cooler air of the bathroom, not yet warmed by the shower, brushed against his now bare torso. He saw his burn scar on his arm out of the corner of his eye and tried not to look at it. Not yet.

"You got those?" Hunk nodded at his pants and Lance returned it after a second.

Hunk left him to his own devices as he scurried to the cubbies to get shampoo and soap and Lance shakily stood, bare toes curling at the cold metal floor. He had to shimmy a bit to get out of the sweat pants and realized with a pang that he was not going to be wearing his normal casual pants for a while; he wouldn't be able to do the button and zipper or pull the stiffer material up his legs.

And now he was in just boxer shorts and the room seemed somehow even colder than before as he stood there, legs trembling again.

Nudity was not a taboo for him. Growing up in such a small house with so many siblings meant zero privacy and as such he'd never given it a second thought to changing in front of others or someone entering their shared bedroom without knocking. Being roommates at the Garrison and growing up together as kids meant he and Hunk had seen each naked other before as well. There was nothing here that was out of the ordinary but…

His left hand hovered on the waistband and he found he couldn't pull them off.

Hunk returned then from his foray into the cabinets and Lance could feel the concerned gaze. Of the two of them Lance was definitely less shy, and yet here he was, acting like Hunk had on his first day of high school gym class in a crowded locker room.

"What is it?" Hunk asked gently although there was a waver of fear in the tone that only made Lance hunch his shoulders more.

"I can't," he whispered after a second.

"They didn't…?" Hunk trailed off, hating the ice settling in his stomach. Coran had taken care of the physical exam and he didn't say anything and Hunk was pretty certain he would have said something if—

Lance shook his head ever so slightly and the relief left Hunk shaky himself.

"I just… I feel exposed." It was like being back on the table, clothed in almost nothing while Theodek and Haggar had laughed at his discomfort. It reminded him of being led like cattle through the throng of shouting Galrans, blinded and chained, where they had been able to view him but he couldn't see them.

He knew it wasn't the same at all but the nausea was returning and he wrapped his arms as best he could about himself as though it could comfort him. It did not. Plus, he was certain that this transition
to water was not going to go as smoothly as he would like and the idea of collapsing naked in the
shower and Hunk having to carry him out wasn't very appealing.

"How about I get your swim trunks?" Hunk suggested, placing a careful hand on Lance's shoulder
and relieved when the lanky teen still leaned into it. "I can grab the music player too."

Lance inclined his head even as he lowered his eyes. That would help. Hopefully. Maybe. He felt his
cheeks color that he couldn't even manage this.

"Hey, none of that," Hunk murmured, rubbing his thumb back and forth over the slender shoulder.
He wanted to tip Lance's chin up to keep him from looking down on himself, but any hands by the
face were still no-gos, evidenced still by Lance flinching when he'd applied the dishcloth on his own.
"It's going to take time, remember? And… and everything you went through? There's no shame in
any of it. Okay?"

Lance still would not meet his eyes.

"Lance, miráme," and those dark blue eyes slowly raised themselves up. "Por favor, escuchá. You
are amazing, Lance. You went through horrible things," he shuddered, recalling still how the
wounds had formed across Lance's skin in the mindscape. Seeing the wounds to dress them had been
horrifying enough, but to watch them come into being, to see the agony painted on Lance's face with
each reveal had made it worse. "Horrible things," he repeated, "and something like that… it would
leave a mark on anyone, Lance. The fact you're here, standing and trying and being so, so
brave… that is what matters. You're doing amazing, hermano. You are amazing. Please don't ever
think otherwise."

"I'll... I'll try," came the quiet response and that would have to be enough for now. Hunk knew that
the self-doubt that had festered and then grown under the Galran's captivity was not something that
could be erased in days, let alone weeks or months. But Lance had already made leaps and bounds
and he was improving, practically hour by hour.

"Good," he squeezed the shoulder again. "Wait here for a tick, okay? I'll run down to your room real
quick." He was gone a tick later, leaving Lance standing in the empty bathroom with the still quiet
hiss of water in the background.

"Come on," he whispered at himself, left hand rolling into a fist while his right hung uselessly. "You
can do this. It's just…" his gaze drifted to the shower. "It's just water. Solamente agua."

And besides, he'd always known water was dangerous, that wasn't new. He knew that you could
drown, choke… die. It's why his parents had been so strict when they went to the beach, why even
at a young age he could perform CPR. He'd certainly been dunked into the water before, grabbed by
his ankles by siblings and pulled under the surf.

But it had been different. There had been only childish laughter then and the ever watchful eye of his
parents just in case. It had been fun, letting the waves toss him about, seeing how long he could hold
his breath until his lungs gave out and he had to surface. He'd spent his entire childhood until they
moved to America on the beach and the water, practically a fish his mamá had joked.

He'd loved the water. He… he still loved it. Or, he wanted to. He didn't want to let one bad
experience ruin it. Then again, bad wasn't quite right. Traumatic, really. He winced but it was true.
And trauma wasn't something a band-aid could fix. It took time. And patience. And the courage to
stand back up and try again.

And that's what he was doing. Although, perhaps, a little more suddenly than he thought it would
happen. He rolled his shoulders, feeling the drying food goo crack and knew that there was no other option.

And, maybe just like the mindscape, this was for the best. His plan to tell Hunk and Coran about his attempt had been thwarted and instead he'd found himself spilling the dark secret to everyone. But in the end, it was probably for the best. He certainly felt better. He had to just picture the shower like that. Not quite planned but maybe it was what he needed.

The sound of the door swinging open drew his gaze from the water and Hunk smiled at him, a pair of trunks in hand and not, Lance sighed gratefully, like the ones in his mindscape.

"Do you want the music on?" Hunk asked, setting the recorder on the sink ledge and turning around to give Lance privacy as he switched out his bottoms.

"The one from last night?" Lance asked, tugging at the drawstring to tighten the shorts. They hung slightly looser than he remembered.

At his request the soft sounds of an Altean symphony sounded about the bathroom, not quite overriding the water but drown— Lance stopped that thought before it fully formed. He couldn't think like that. Not when he was about to...

"Estoy listo," he murmured and Hunk turned around.

"Just about," Hunk said. He brought his own hand to his neck and Lance realized those bandages were still in place and also covered with goo. But what lie beneath was even worse than that. He lightly touched them himself, closing his eyes.

Before he could hesitate too much he dug his index finger under the roll and pulled, shredding the damp cloth on one side. The scar was bumpy beneath and he tried as best he could not to flinch as he tugged the remaining wrap away and let it fall to the floor.

"Now let's get all that goo of you, huh?" Hunk did not make any kind of deal out of the action although Lance could see the beam of pride sent his direction. He appreciated it as somehow, even with the swim trunks now, he felt laid even more bare.

Lance's feet propelled him back to the shower although he stopped right before the shallow rim to step in.

"How about you put your hand in first?" Hunk tried. "That wasn't bad." He did so himself, sleeve rolled all the way up to this elbow and Lance joined him. The water was still nice and warm and felt pleasant on his chilled skin. He shuddered out a breath as Hunk placed his other hand on his shoulder and rubbed it gently.

"Okay," Hunk said gently. "It's time to get in."

"H-Hunk..." His legs felt like those of a newborn foal and were frozen in place.

"I'm right here and not going anywhere. You've got this, Lance. You can do this."

He edged one foot forward, toes hitting the cold rim. He picked it up and placed it inside the low tub, the ground there somewhat warm from the water. Next foot, he told himself as he hung back from the threshold.

That foot joined its twin and he stood now in the tub but still a pace from where the water was pouring down. Hunk's hand remained a reassuring weight on his back; not pushing or prodding.
He turned to eye the spout that was still wetting his hand. It looked so much more imposing up close, and really, he resisted the urge to sob, he was thinking of shower heads as imposing? As threatening? It was the same as it always was. It was him who had changed.

"Why don't you turn away from it?" Hunk proposed. "That way the water won't hit your face."

It felt backwards to Lance, who had been appalled to find that some people took showers facing away from the water stream (Hunk) but it did make a lot of sense at this moment. He pivoted his feet so that he was turned away from the stream now and his damp left hand fell at his side and Hunk's hand slid from his shoulder.

He took one last deep breath. Just water. It was just water and Hunk was here and he was absolutely not going to drown in the castle's bathroom.

He took the final sidestep into the stream and immediately stiffened as water droplets struck against his back, gentle as they were.

"You're okay, you're okay," Hunk assured from just a foot away. "Deep breath. In and out. You've got plenty of air, I promise. The water isn't going to hit your face."

Lance obeyed, breathing heavily out his nose and he kept his mouth tightly clenched as rivulets ran down his front and water made its way over his shoulders.

"Hunk," he whispered, shaking again.

"You're doing great, Lance. You are. Just keep breathing, nice and easy. Focus on me. Or the music."

Lance did so. His eyes drifted closed but he opened them with a start as in that new darkness the water had morphed into something else. He shivered even under the warm stream.

"Do you want it a little hotter?" Hunk asked, noting the shiver. Lance did always take showers that would steam up the entire room.

"I don't know," came the response, so quiet Hunk almost missed it. "Hunk, I…"

And Lance looked so small then, shoulders hunched and hands pressed against his stomach as though trying to curl in on himself while standing. Hunk wanted nothing more than to go in there, wrap him in a hug and make it better. But he could not. Lance had to do this on his own. Hunk could offer his support from here but Lance needed this.

Independence was important. He'd seen that when Lance had tried to stand for the first time, when he made small decisions like toothpaste flavors. He had been robbed of those things by the Galra and he needed to regain it if he wanted to move forward. Hunk wanted to help, but this was where he had to stop. Coddling Lance would not help him get better.

"How about a washcloth?" Hunk picked the item up and Lance's favorite bar of coffee-scented soap. It was like with the teeth brushing from that morning: if Lance was given no other choice he eventually would have to take one, whether that be accepting the items or calling it quits.

Lance's eyes cut over to him from where he'd been staring into the opposite wall and Hunk did not miss the fact that the droplets on his cheeks were not from the shower spray. He felt his heart clench and his resolve nearly wavered as a new tear slipped further down. But no. Lance had to do this. And Hunk had to let him.
"Here," he pushed the items forward and Lance ever so slowly reached out to take them, his left holding the soap bar and the cloth draped over his right. He brought the soap bar towards his face and took a delicate sniff. It had definitely been the right choice, Hunk congratulated himself, as some of the tightness in Lance's shoulders eased at the familiar scent. Hopefully the shampoo would have the same effect.

Lance carefully lathered the washcloth, which was barely damp but he was too afraid to turn and get a spurt of water in his face to chance it. Small steps here. Very, very small ones.

But despite how much he wanted to get away from the water he was still in it. Trying. The word echoed about his head as he placed the soap bar in the dish and then lifted the washcloth to his face. That's all he had to do. Try.

The cloth was a little coarse even with the soap and he winced ever so slightly as he rubbed it against his cheek. But it did not morph into Haggar's hands and so he continued, food goo sliding away.

He ended up rewetting the cloth by holding it next to his shoulder where the water was streaming over and down his front. It worked better than he'd thought and he relathered the cloth and trailed it over his shoulders.

Bit by bit he scrubbed away not just the food goo but the stale sweat that had adhered to his skin from one too many panic attacks. He turned his attention to his right arm and sucked in a sharp breath as under the heated water the burn scar seemed even more red and poignant.

It would be so easy to slide back into the memory; darkness and burning and cruel laughter. But he didn't want to. He tried to focus instead on the conversation he'd had with Coran; of gentle hands skimming over the flesh with such care it made his eyes water even now.

From there he forced himself to go back to his neck, gingerly pressing the cloth to the scar. It felt weird, but it did not hurt. He wished if he could just scrub hard enough he could make it go away and for a second he debated trying before reality knocked. He had to accept that it was there and nothing was going to change that.

"Ready to try shampoo?" Hunk asked as he finished up his washing and Lance hated that he cringed at the thought. Because shampoo meant he needed to get his head wet and that meant, like it or not, he was going to end up with water on his face. Right now only the back of his hair had been hit by the spray and not so much that it caused his bangs to drip.

The food goo was still there though, drying his hair into sticky spikes, and was the main reason he'd had to take a shower in the first place. But it wasn't just the water that was causing him fear. No, it was hands. Even his own. They would be in his hair and that was not an image he could so easily shake.

"You've got this, hermano," Hunk murmured, cutting into the sensation of phantom hands carding his bangs back.

Lance didn't trust himself to speak so instead he held out his hand for the shampoo bottle. Hunk did him one better though and squeezed a dollop into his palm. Lance had many shampoos, as he enjoyed picking them up planet-side and the different scents, and Hunk had selected one of his favorites that smelled like gingerbread.

He breathed it in, trying to relax as he very, very slowly tilted his head back and felt the water stream rise until it was hitting the top of his head. But then it trickled over and saturated bangs dripped into his eyes and nose and mouth and he felt his chest seize in remembered panic of water filling his lungs.
and the *pain* as he choked on it. No. No no no no. He stumbled blindly forward, eyes clenched shut, and struck cold porcelain. He slunk down against, and even the last bit of rational thought he had; that he was just in the shower and even out of the water stream now, was doing nothing to calm him.

He couldn't do this. More water dripped from his bangs and he shuddered. He couldn't. He couldn't. It was pathetic and cowardly but he *couldn't*. It was too much.

Hunk was saying something but Lance couldn't quite hear him, crouched against the furthest spot from the water and trying not to cry. *Pathetic* he heard Haggar hiss and he moaned, pressing his hands as best he could to his ears as though then he wouldn't be able to hear her. That only smeared shampoo, cold and thick, on his face and he winced back from it as well.

Hands were there then and he shrank away from them, even though these were large and warm and gentle as they settled on his shoulders. He was tipped forward, his forehead pressed against a familiar chest and one arm came to circle about his bare back. Even with the shampoo scent so strong he could still detect engine grease and honeysuckle. Hunk. He choked out a sob and Hunk's name and leaned further into the embrace.

"I've got you," Hunk whispered. "I'm here."

"I'm s-sorry," he whimpered. "I…"

"Don't apologize," Hunk said, tears in his voice. "I'm the one who is sorry. I'm so sorry, Lance. I thought…"

He thought this was what needed done, for Lance to move forward. But it had been too much, too quickly.

He'd miscalculated and Lance… Lance was so determined to try and prove himself that of course he wouldn't have refused.

"You're getting w-wet," Lance stuttered as Hunk had clambered in fully dressed.

"It's fine. Needed a shower anyway."

Lance let out another breathy sob.

"I wanted to," he whispered. "I w-wanted to. I just…"

"I know. I know."

"I… I want to try again."

That surprised Hunk so much that he nearly teetered over from his awkward kneel on the wet floor. "What?" he asked dumbly.

"I want to try again," Lance repeated, words more firm. He looked up then and despite the fear in those ocean eyes there was a familiar glint of determination that Hunk had seen time and again whenever Lance had gotten knocked down and pulled himself up to prove that he could do it.

Hunk gave a slow nod, pride mixing with worry. But ultimately he settled on the first and would save the latter for if it was needed. "Okay then." He released his embrace and rose, offering a hand down that Lance took without hesitation and pulled him back to his feet. "I'm going to step back out," he said and Lance nodded. "I'd turn around," he said after a second. "Once I move the water is going to come down."
Lance nodded and did so, standing with his shoulders braced as when Hunk did climb out of the shower the spray covered his back. He stiffened slightly but took a breath and the tension bled out of his shoulders.

"More shampoo?" Hunk asked.

"I think I have enough," Lance replied, bringing his left hand up to his ear and scooping the goop into his fingers. He stalled then, letting the water continue its warm cascade down his back.

Was he ready this time?

Because he clearly had not been before.

He took another deep breath. He was going to tip his head back. Water was going to touch his face. But he could step forward at any time. He could still breathe. No one was holding him under, no one was going to shock him for failure to comply.

He could do this. He couldn't remain scared and so the only option left then was to not be.

He braced himself this time as he took a step further back into the spray, letting it hit the top of his head and then, as it soaked into his hair, dripping down the front.

He held his ground as water streamed over his face, lips pressed tightly closed but eyes wide, arms trembling at his sides as he forced himself to not retreat. Not this time.

"You're doing great," Hunk called, voice pitched low.

Lance would have liked to answer back but he didn't dare open his mouth as water passed over to drip off his chin. He stood in that position for a couple minutes letting the water fall about him with nothing of note happening save now all of him was pleasantly warm.

Shampoo time. He cast his eyes to his left hand where a decent amount still clung to his fingers. These were his hands. Not Haggar's. And he was not going to be frightened by himself.

He brought his left up and pressed his fingers into his hair, wet but still stiff from the food goo. And he knew from prior experiences with food goo in his hair that it needed actual scrubbing and a gentle wash wasn't going to cut it.

He'd really dug himself in deep.

Brushing his hand across his head he spread the shampoo across the top and then he pressed his fingertips down into his scalp, breath hitching at the sensation. It can be used for pleasure as well, Haggar's voice filtered through his mind as hands massaged his head as she explained the effects of the saliidda. He had tried to protest and she had merely smiled and whispered But you enjoyed it.

It had gotten worse from there as she used every opportunity to caress his hair, his face, distorting the gesture. He hated that he had let her. He hated still that he continued to do so. Just like water she had taken a comfort and twisted it into something to fear instead, something that made his skin prickle and unease churn his stomach.

But he was getting better. He had to remind himself of that. Hugs were okay again, hands on shoulders or knees or his back. He was able to press his face into an arm or shoulder and have others do the same without summoning up memories of yellow eyes and purple hands. This was going to be the same. He was going to somehow turn water, turn touches to his face and head, back into what
they were supposed to be.

Haggar was not going to win.

He dug his fingers almost painfully into his hair then, working the shampoo into the thick locks and generating a lather. He tentatively brought his right up then, using the force from his arm to help disperse the shampoo. It wasn't as effective as the left but it was still doing *something* and that was what mattered.

He looked sideways to Hunk, who was peeling himself out of his shirt, jacket already on one of the towel hooks, as he'd determined he had a few moments to do so.

Hunk caught his eye and grinned. "You got enough suds? You look almost like Allura with all that white. Just missing the pointy ears."

Lance found a small smile tugging its way onto his face at the light teasing. He'd witnessed the jokes and laughs being shared amongst the others but they'd avoided roping him directly in, which he supposed made sense given how he wasn't quite reacting as he normally did.

In response he carefully tipped his head back and let the water begin to clear away the shampoo, keeping his left hand positioned to avoid letting any run into his face and sting his still open eyes.

A minute later the feeling of bubbles were gone and he ran his hand through the clean hair, relieved when nothing was conjured up.

"You did it," Hunk beamed.

Lance shook his head though and Hunk's smile wilted. "Conditioner," he said simply and Hunk perked right back up with a laugh.

"Of course. How could I forget?"

Lance stepped out of the water as he accepted a new dollop in his hand of the same scent and brought it up to his hair to let it set.

"Do you?" he asked after a moment, still slowly massaging it in.

"Do I what?"

"Forget your own conditioner?"

Hunk blinked at him and then burst into laughter.

That was not an answer. "You forget, don't you?" Lance pressed, trying to keep his voice light and concentrate on that rather than the water pattering behind him. "You know how bad that is for your hair."

"Hey, I'm doing better than Keith," Hunk protested. "I don't even think he uses shampoo."

Hunk laughed again at the look that crossed Lance's face. *That* was more like it. It was also a delight to him to see Lance taking any sort of interest in his appearance again. He knew how deep the scar wrapping about his best friend's neck had cut into him and not just literally.

It was still going to be a battle back to normal, Hunk had no doubts about that. But this was an excellent first step and it even kept Lance in the shower longer.
Lance's smile faded as he shifted to go back into the spray to rinse out the conditioner, but he did it with barely a flinch, carding wet bangs to the side without the earlier hesitation. A minute later his hair was a gleaming dark chestnut once more and that was apparently enough for Lance as he fumbled his hand behind him to shut off the shower head, still not turning to face it, which Hunk knew was for the best right now.

All was quiet then save for the last pattering of water striking the draining puddles on the floor. Lance lifted eyes to meet Hunk's.

"I did it," he murmured, a note of pride in the words.

"You did it," Hunk smiled and he held up a big fluffy blue towel, a matching yellow one already draped over his now bare shoulders.

Lance stepped into the towel and Hunk folded it about his shoulders and it swamped about him. Alteans apparently only had one size towel and they were bigger than the standard beach towel.

"Gracias, Hunk," Lance whispered, his left hand going to tighten on the towel's edge to pull it together. "I... I couldn't have done this without you."

Hunk pulled him into a gentle hug and Lance rested his head upon his shoulder with a contented sigh.

"You are welcome," Hunk said softly. "But there's no need for thanks, Lance." His arms tightened. "We're all in this together. And the only thanks I need is to see your beautiful smile again."

He felt it then, Lance's lips pull up against the plushness of his own towel. "Still," Lance whispered. "Thank you."

Hunk gave him one last squeeze before he stepped back. "Are you still up for dinner?"

Lance's stomach grumbled at that and he winced, reminded now that all he'd eaten today was the bowl of gamibolap for breakfast.

"Let's go get dressed," Hunk said, adjusting his towel more securely about his shoulders, "and then go get some food. Hopefully the stew is done by now, if you'd like to try some."

"I would," Lance nodded. And he felt that he would actually be able to eat it. Maybe even try a drink of water. After the shower, which despite a bump had ultimately been successful, he felt more prepared to try. He'd managed a torrent of water cascading onto his head after all. What was a little drink compared to that?

Hunk picked up Lance's discarded clothes, leaving his own shirt and vest to drip dry before he moved them to his hamper, and the two made their way in a companionable silence down the hall to the rooms, Lance shivering slightly as the colder air struck his still damp hair and legs that weren't covered by the towel.

"Do you want any help?" Hunk asked as they paused outside Lance's room.

"Socks," Lance mumbled, a light stain appearing on his cheeks.

"Happy to do so," Hunk said. "I'll come by in a few minutes then, okay?"

Lance nodded and let himself into his room, the door closing behind him with a hiss. He stripped out of the towel and swim trunks quickly, trying not to let his eyes linger on the reflection in the mirror.
He pulled out fresh shorts and a new pair of sweats, tugging them on with his left hand although he couldn't quite tie the drawstring as tight as he'd like. For shirts he was still cold and so he grabbed another long-sleeved one in deep indigo.

His eyes were drawn to the burn scar on his arm, nearly covered except for a sliver at his wrist. He looked at the roll of bandages sitting still on his bed and then shook his head at himself. No. He could do this. No more hiding.

He debated his jacket but it didn't really go with sweatpants and a wry grin tugged at his face. Look at him, choosing fashion over warmth. The smile faded though as despite his best attempts he caught sight of the mirror and the boy staring back.

He looked different though, from the last person who had gazed at him from the surface. He found himself drawn to it.

This version of himself… the haunted look had disappeared, the dead eyes restored with a spark. His skin was a warm flush from the shower and the bruises of exhaustion were all but gone. He pulled his lips into a smile, nothing large, but it was sincere.

He looked… he looked like himself.

The only thing that still screamed out wrong was the thick brown and red line encircling his throat. His left hand moved to touch the ropy texture but this time he did not flinch away. He hated it. It looked as ugly and horrid as it felt and he hated it and all it stood for.

But it was also a part of him. And, he took in a sharp inhale, he didn't want to hate himself. Not a single part and this scar was as sure a part of him as anything else.

He'd never love it. But he could accept it as he had other pieces and truths about him. That he could do.

He let out another breath, feeling a lightness course through him at the decision. He would not cover it up and try to hide it anymore. That was what Haggar would want; for him to hide his shame and fear so it would fester and crack him apart from within once more. He didn't ever want to feel that way again; that cloying darkness where revulsion and feelings of worthlessness ran deep. No. He wouldn't go back to that. He was better than that.

A soft knock sounded on the door and Hunk let himself in, eyes widening as he spotted where Lance had seated himself. But Lance met him with a smile and a radiated sense of peace.

"I'm going to be okay," Lance said softly, meeting his eyes. "I am, Hunk. I…" he pressed his left hand over his heart. "I feel it. I know it."

"Oh, Lance," Hunk crossed the space in under a second and swept Lance off the stool and into a fierce hug, which only tightened as Lance returned it with his own.

"Dinner?" Lance asked after a moment and Hunk let out a laugh of pure joy, swinging his arm to hang about Lance's shoulders and pull him flush to his side, delighting as Lance let out a soft, sweet laugh of his own and snuggled into his side.

"After socks," Hunk said, remembering his original reason for retrieving Lance. Lance sat back down on his stool and Hunk made quick work of pulling them onto the scarred feet. This time though Lance did not hold himself with that tight, scared air, but rather almost impatience as his stomach growled again and Hunk could not help laughing just because.
One day. One day had transformed Lance from a boy terrified of his own reflection to this happy, hopeful one.

And if all of that had happened in one day… Hunk swung his arms back around Lance's shoulders as they headed for the kitchen. If that was the result of one day…

The future was looking bright indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes (Apologies: a lot to say this week. Please read all the way through!)

Shower scene! I actually had a number of ways I had this going, complete with different people entering the scene to how Lance reacted to the water to how successful it was on its first attempt. But ultimately I decided this way was for the best as it shows Lance's growth and courage and ultimately his ability to find a measure of peace within himself. We're getting there!

Also, Lance is the weirdo for showering facing the spout and that little bit was based on a random discussion with a coworker in which I discovered that people do indeed face the water. Like, ow? All that water in your face? I figure though for a water lover like Lance that would be his desired direction. I'll stick with Hunk though. If you have a tick please do let me know in an informal poll in the comments which direction you face in the shower. We'll conduct our own study xD

Also! HAPPY BIRTHDAY COLOR! Color turned one year old on Wednesday. Crazy, right? Right. Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me to this point. Your continued support means the world to me. I'm doing a little celebration contest over on my Tumblr, icypantHERwrites, for the occasion where you can win a one-shot! See the Tumblr for details!

Speaking of Tumblr, for those who are not on it and did not see my announcement, I will be going on an indefinite hiatus for a little while. I will still aim to update Color weekly but I need to step back for personal reasons (and now added to that even more personal things involving my dog). Again, see the Tumblr post for more details.

I won't comment really on season five here so I don't spoil it for anyone who has not seen it, but… hot damn. Blew seasons three and four of the water and I'm very excited as to the direction this is going. Lots of good plot (with explanation!) and answering some earlier questions raised. Not all, but enough to the point where I feel sated. I did take a stab at my own oneshot for how I think season six should start off called Lost and Found and featuring Lance, Shiro and Kuron if you want to take a look!

Thank you as always to those who take a moment (or several!) to comment. I truly appreciate it. Love and hugs to you lovely people!

Please do drop a comment below. I'd love to hear what you thought of the chapter!
"This is delicious!" Allura exclaimed, scooping up another spoonful of the thick stew with an un-princess-like zeal.

"It did turn out pretty nice," Hunk said, blowing on his own spoon. "The bread too. Great job, Keith."

The Red Paladin shrugged, but the pink on his cheeks told a different story at the comment. He'd had to get creative after Hunk and Lance had left and so he'd returned to what he knew of the basics; flour, yeast, water, salt and eggs. He'd added in some of the alien garlic too for a bit of flavor as they were out of butter. Not that it really mattered as most of them were dunking the bread into the stew.

But even better than the compliment Keith thought was watching Lance eat. It was with none of the exaggerated gusto he'd make when Hunk cooked for them, proclaiming Hunk a God and other sorts of nonsense, but it was more of the fact he was actually eating and not with that scared, reserved demeanor of dinner last night.

Hunk had broken Lance's chunk of bread into smaller pieces and the sharpshooter was dipping each piece into the stew and letting it saturate before he ate it. As time had gone on he had gotten faster at it too, no longer pausing as he debated on whether to swallow and the soft look of delight at each successful pass and taste was making Keith grin like an idiot.

At least he was in good company. Everyone was watching Lance eat through side eyes although their subject seemed oblivious to the extra interest. A small cup of water sat untouched by his plate but the fact it was there at all told them all they needed to know.

Dinner had been delayed a bit as they waited for Hunk and Lance and so Keith had filled in the others very briefly about what had happened with the food goo and the attempted shower now. He'd seen the shared looks of concern everyone exchanged but Coran had nodded with a firm, "Lance is ready," and that had been that.

And as the Altean had predicted, Lance had been. He'd come into the kitchen with an easy grace, Hunk's arm about him but not in the way Hunk had been earlier, as though trying to shield Lance, but instead a hold just because he could. His hair had been damp and the food goo traces gone, indicating that a shower had indeed taken place. More than that though was the soft smile and the shine to his eyes that transformed Lance from a prisoner of war back into their Lance, their Blue Paladin and brother.

Even the thick scar visible on his neck, no longer hidden behind layers of bandages, could not take away from the quiet joy and Keith found his gaze easily sliding from it back to Lance's face. He didn't see the scar, just like he didn't see Shiro's.

Dinner was nearly wrapping up now, the mice happily finishing the leftover stew on the table with little burps of delight. They'd been a little downtrodden for them, Keith had thought, but as soon as Lance had pushed a piece of his bread towards Chuchule they had all squeaked and rushed to nuzzle against his hand.
Lance had looked surprised at the sudden attention before his gaze softened and he rubbed a finger over the little furry bodies. A finger, Keith could see, that bore the faintest traces of a bite marks.

"Well that was indeed a delicious meal," Coran sat back and rubbed his stomach appreciatively. "My compliments to the chefs."

"Which means everyone else is on clean-up duty," Hunk grinned and Pidge groaned. "Hey! We are not leaving my kitchen in the state of disrepair it has been." He turned to Coran. "You're excused, of course, since you did all the dishes last night."

Coran twirled his moustache. "Thank you, my boy."

Lance didn't even react to the comment although Hunk knew for certain he'd heard it. His grin widened.

"I am afraid I must decline such an offer," Allura said, rising to her feet and shaking out her dress. She had changed back into the familiar garment although had exchanged the jacket and cape for a comfortable shawl.

"Hey, hey, none of that," Hunk brandished his soup spoon at her. "Just because you're a princess—"

"I am sorry, Hunk," Allura apologized. "But before the evening gets too late…" She turned her gaze to Lance. "Might I have a moment?"

Lance's eyes widened in surprise and Allura inclined her head in what she hoped was less regal and more familial manner. She did not wish to make Lance uncomfortable but in the few hours she'd had to herself, relaxing in the bath (while the mice held soap bar races to her great amusement) had only made her more aware of what had happened and what she had seen; those dark marks gouged into Lance's very essence.

While today had shown her that her abilities with quintessence were still incredibly low, she did feel confident enough to look at his again. She needed to look again to make certain that her intrusion had not made those marks worse.

"Sure," Lance said after a few ticks.

"The lounge, please," Allura said, voice more confident than she felt. She glanced around the room, noting the new sense of unease that she had created. "If you would all join us after the kitchen has been cleaned? Perhaps for one of your… movie nights?"

Her words had the desired effect, the tension deflating and Hunk nodded enthusiastically. "Sounds great, Allura. I'll make some hot chocolate too."

Pidge stood up abruptly from the table, glasses flashing almost ominously. "Will there be marshmallows?"

"Um… I think I might have something?"

Pidge picked up the two bowls within her reach. "Then let the cleaning commence."

Lance got up from the table and retrieved something from the kitchen counter – her plush toy, Flafie, Allura realized – before he joined her, quieter than she was used and eyes somewhat guarded but face still open with trust that she did not deserve.

"Let us go," she smiled and Lance fell into step beside her. A week ago she would have expected
some sort of – what Shiro had informed her were called pick-up lines – advance or comment about being alone with the princess on a stroll, but Lance was silent this time. She wished to break it with some line of her own to lighten his spirits, but any words lodged in her throat.

They were at the lounge in minutes and Allura gestured for Lance to sit on the couch and she joined him. His eyes were downcast, focused on the plush that he had settled on his lap and was rubbing his thumb idly over.

"Lance," she said gently and his eyes came up immediately to meet hers. She swallowed thickly. "I have said it already, but it bears repeating. I am truly sorry for the pain I caused you this morning." She held up a hand as he went to protest. "I know you do not blame me, and for that I thank you so very much, but I think we are both more than aware that one has to believe such a thing themselves to accept it as real truth."

Lance's gaze shifted down again and he gave a short nod, her words striking home.

"I saw something before we were transported to your mindscape," Allura continued, clasping her hands in her lap. "Your quintessence. Or really, all of our quintessences."

Lance looked back at her. "You can see quintessence?"

"When I am in a state like that, yes," she said. "They appear as colors and feelings and…" she could not suppress the shiver at the reminder of the sheer power that had ultimately overwhelmed her. "Colors," she settled on.

"What color is mine?" he asked and Allura let out a soft laugh that he did not know.

"Blue, of course," she smiled and he returned it tentatively. "All of the Paladins represent their colored quintessence. I myself am a version of pink and Coran is a healing orange."

"Do other people have them? Colors?" And Allura was both surprised and warmed by his curiosity. She had always thought that it was only Pidge and Hunk of the humans who really wished to know how things had worked, but she had underestimated Lance before and was still doing so now. Besides, and she hid the sad frown, of them all Lance would of course be the most interested in quintessence.

"Yes," Allura nodded. "There are of course other people who do possess the colors, but none as strong as yours or the other Paladins. Mostly it is a wisp, not a full light like your own. Everyone in the universe has a quintessence, but most appear white with a few individuals possessing a semblance of color be that a full source or a flicker."

She reached out a hand and placed it gently atop Lance's right, resting on his leg. "I can most certainly say though that your quintessence is the most beautiful blue I have ever seen. It shines brighter than any Paladin's I have ever met."

"Really?"

"Really. However…" Her hand tightened on his own. "There was something else there."

Lance winced. "The dark patches."

She nodded. "Yes. You described it as such on the Astral Plane but upon seeing it for myself…" She paused then, needing to tread lightly. "I saw the damage that Haggar wrought upon your spirit. But I felt that… that hers was not the only hand to land such a blow."
Lance averted his eyes again and Allura felt the tremble through him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"No," Allura squeezed his hand. "Your apology is not needed or warranted. For we all contributed to this wound and as Princess I take full responsibility."

Lance looked confused. "But you didn't do anything…"

"Exactly," Allura said. "I did not do anything. I did not see that you were hurting inside. I did not care enough, and I am ashamed to admit that I wrote you off as a rather shallow individual and never looked deeper to see who you truly were. I should have," she said bitterly, "as the Blue Lion would never have chosen a Paladin she did not feel was worthy and yet I disregarded that. I did nothing to make you feel as though you could come to me with your concerns. You were hurting, Lance, and I did not – could not – see it and because of that you suffered more.

"I know I am not the most observant person – why, it was the mice who informed me that Pidge was a fellow female – and I can come across as harsh or cold. My training methods may perhaps be a bit… extreme," she allowed and a ghost of a smile flitted across Lance's face, "but I truly do care, Lance. More so now than ever before because I have had my eyes opened to how important you are to me. You are my family and I am sorry it took me so long to realize such."

"Allura," he whispered and she squeezed his hand again.

"I may have failed you in the past but I will endeavor to do better by you now," Allura murmured. "If you would allow it so."

It was all Lance could do to manage a nod, feeling tears blurring his vision.

It had been one thing, still shook him to the core, to hear all of the positive things Allura had said about him and his inner strength and compassion. To hear that she could not imagine her life without him, and those words spoken in the mindscape echoed stronger now in reflection. But for her to call him family… It was more than he could have ever hoped for.

"May I give you a hug?" Allura asked and Lance choked out a 'yes.'

Her hands were slender, nearly identical to Haggar's, as they wrapped around his back, but they were different. These ones held him tenderly and her head descended to rest against his shoulder, a waterfall of white. Lance tentatively returned it, as despite Allura's words she was still a princess and had a decorum that—

"Lance," she breathed into his shoulder. "Please. I am not royalty here."

She let out a soft, light laugh as his arms tightened and the tension left his frame. He leaned into her then, resting his cheek atop her shoulder and loose tresses. They remained for a moment until Allura lifted her head and Lance responded in kind.

"If it is all right with you," she said, bringing her hands back to layer gently atop Lance's own, "I would like to connect with you to view your quintessence. It will not," and her voice grew firm, "be anything like earlier today. I swear it."

"...Why?" Lance asked and while she could feel his hesitation, with good reason, above it all she felt his trust.

"My actions today caused you a near fatal quintessence depletion," she answered, "and is the reason..."
we were transported to your mindscape. I wish to make certain that your levels are stabilizing from such a venture. Coran informed me that the scanner shows your body to be adjusting but I wish to make sure I did not… did not do anything more than I already have."

Lance gave a small nod. "Okay. Um. What do I do?"

"Hold your hands out, palm up," Allura instructed, removing her own to allow him to do so. Lance did so, hovering them in the space between. "Close your eyes." He did so without delay and Allura felt her breath catch at still such confidence in her. "Empty your mind," she murmured. "Breathe deeply."

She gave Lance a minute to fall into a quiet series of inhales and exhales and she matched her own breaths to his own. His right hand was beginning to waver a bit at the extended reach and Allura gently placed her own palms to his and secured them with her thumbs.

With one last deep breath she closed her eyes and descended into the connection.

As normal she felt her own energy first; an opalescent pink that flowed in various shades over her. She sunk into it, grounding herself to avoid draining Lance again by accident. Once she was certain she had a hold on herself she opened her eyes to view the quintessence that she felt brushing against her own.

Blue. Lance was awash with a bright blue light, the colors mingling with her own and coloring their hands a soft purple that moved back and forth as though ocean waves. His eyes were closed and head bowed, face calm and radiating a peace that his quintessence matched; filling her with smiles and laughter and the tide brushing against her toes and a salty spray to the air. This was the Blue Paladin’s quintessence and she could have basked in it forever.

Her breath caught though as she looked at the light and the sharp inhale had Lance jerking his head up, eyes opening and blending so well with the color that flowed about him that Allura gasped again as they seemed to glow. "What? What is it?"

"Your quintessence…" she watched as it curled around Lance’s form, a tangible beautiful thing that she wished she could share with him.

For the black gouges were nearly gone. There were still some, dark patches that went from the deepest darkness to a somewhat brighter indigo, but it was nothing like the tortured soul she had viewed that morning.

It was healing.

"Oh, Lance," she breathed, and although she had not yet found the words to explain what she was seeing, Lance heard her tone and relaxed. The quintessence shone even brighter, exuding trust and love and hope and she never wanted to leave it.

"Your quintessence," she repeated, breathless, "It… It is healing itself."

His eyes widened. "What?"

She watched a tendril jump playfully, like the talefan playing in the water, before it dove back into the glow right above Lance’s heart.

"The darkness, it is nearly gone," Allura said, meeting his eyes. She gazed into that captivating blue, letting the light fill her before she abruptly lifted her hands, severing the connection before she could dive in too deep and cause another backlash. The action turned the lounge back into its dull form and
she blinked away the spots at the change.

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"How do you feel?" she asked instead. "Since this morning, do you feel different?"

He gave a slow nod. "Lighter," he said after a moment. "I feel lighter."

"You have done much today," Allura smiled, taking his hands in her own again and squeezing them. "Facing your fears one after the next, opening up to us all and in turn providing us the opportunity to open ourselves to you. Your strength is your compassion and trust, Lance. Your ability to smile and laugh and hope... As those pieces of you heal so too does your quintessence."

"But there's still black," he turned his head.

"Yes," Allura said softly, "there is. There may always be some, Lance, for a heart as open as your own is more likely to be hurt. But that is why we are here," and she placed a slender hand above his heart, feeling it race beneath her fingertips. "We will protect your heart. We will protect you so that you may continue to be this person. This remarkable, wonderful person whose ability to love truly has no barrier."

"What if I hurt myself again?" he whispered. For that is where all of this had started. His self-doubt and hurt had fed the darkness and Haggar had then ripped it wide open.

"We will be here. We will not stand idle again when you are in pain. And when you are feeling sad or hurt I hope you will come to one of us so we may help in whatever way we can."

He nodded. "I... I can do that. But I don't want to bother—"

"I shall be bothered if you do not," Allura interrupted. He eyes softened. "Please. Do not hide your pain from us. We cannot help if we do not know."

Lance gave another nod and a tentative smile that Allura matched it. She raised the hand that she still had in her possession and pressed a kiss to it, directly over the scar, and Lance's cheeks colored. "A promise," she said in answer, fighting a grin.

"Is... is that an Altean thing?" he asked, still pink.

"Yes," she smiled. "But only amongst family and friends. A kiss seals a promise of great importance, although generally it is placed upon the forehead or cheek depending upon relation." Her expression sobered as Lance's lips turned down and he cut his eyes away from her.

"Your aversion to touch there," she hedged cautiously, "it has something to do with the witch?"

She did not expect him to really answer, but Lance surprised her with a short nod. "She... Haggar," he swallowed thickly, wincing at the sound of the name, but he had to stop giving it power over him, "She liked to..." He carefully brought his free hand to his cheek and touched it gently, shuddering even as his own knuckles brushed against it. "I don't know why," he said quietly. "She just... liked to touch my face. Play with my h-hair. I told her to stop and she... she wouldn't."

"Haggar is cruel," Allura said simply but fiercely.

Lance slightly inclined his head at the statement.

Allura brushed thumb fingers over Lance's other hand, trying to offer comfort as she spoke. "She
enjoys making others feel helpless," she continued, "for she is the one who is weak. She distorts and
twists and hurts to make herself feel powerful. She saw your heart, Lance. Your compassion and
your love and, I believe, she wanted it for herself. But that is not love. That is possession and what
she did was every level of wrong."

Tears were forming at the corners of his eyes now, crystalline droplets making his eyes shimmer as
much as the quintessence. Allura hated that she could see why Haggar would have been drawn to
such a sight.

"Why can't I…?" Lance gestured at his face.

"Time," Allura said gently. "You need time, Lance. You have already come so far, but wounds to
the spirit are not so quickly healed. Do not feel as though this is a failure" – and at his wince she
knew she had hit that dorblang on the toe – "for it is not. Do not feel as though you must hurry the
process for any of us. We already view you in the highest of regards and that will never change no
matter if it takes you quintants or decofebes to fully heal. We will be here no matter what."

He let out a soft sob, rubbing at his eyes.

"I am going to hug you again," Allura cautioned him and the sob turned into a choked laugh and he
nodded.

She gathered the slender human into her arms and he relaxed fully in the embrace. Even now,
without being in tune with the Astral Plane, she could still feel the love and hope his quintessence
overflowed with and she pulled him even closer.

In this moment everything in the universe was perfect, Allura decided, breathing in the faint spicy
scent of Lance's hair.

She dearly wished it never had to end.

Chapter End Notes

A tad shorter (for me :p) but I didn't want to draw any attention away from the lovely
moment between these two. And with that I can check off one-on-one bonding
moments Lance has had with each member of his family. Don't think there still won't be
more, but my goal was to give them all at least one of just the two. And Allura was
fabulous to end this with and she has become an absolute favorite of mine to write.
Those speech patterns? *fans self*

Shower poll results! Let me just say this topic had way more passion than I anticipated
from both sides. Got some poetry too about showers so there's that :p For a more
rounded study I combined FFs answers with Ao3. So: We had a total of 32 responses
and the breakdown is as follows: 12 face away from the shower (37.5%), 11 turn into
the shower trying to drown themselves (I tried this. It nearly happened xD) (34%) and
the remaining nine made a new option of "both" (28%) with descriptions of rotating and
turntables. So, there we are. A surprisingly pretty even split across the board. Thank you
all participating in my study! :p

**Big news here:** As some of you may have noticed I have been posting a bunch of one-shot fics despite going on hiatus (yeah, that failed, I am terrible at self-care xD) and that is because a very dear friend of mine is in a really tough financial spot right now and I've been taking one-shot commissions with all proceeds donating to her (I feel weird taking money for fanfic writing but since it's all donations it feels less weird?) You can find all information on my Tumblr.I am accepting commissions through March 17th (tomorrow) so if you want one, act fast xD I will preface and say I'm not sure I'm ever doing this again, for either donations or myself (which still feels weird) as while it has been a ton of fun and so far every commission involves Lance (you guys!) it is definitely exhausting. So, last call is tomorrow. To everyone who has purchased one or reblogged or shared the information with your friends and readers, I love you all and thank you so much for helping me help a friend.

And I'll stop bolding the sentences now :p Thank you all for the lovely comments on the last chapter. It is indeed wonderful to see Lance healing and accepting himself just makes my heart swell with pride. Onwards to even more love and recovery. Oh, wait, you guys mean you're ready for a certain witch named a few times above to make an appearance? Hmm... She's closer than you think ;)

As always, if you enjoyed the chapter please do leave a review below. They're seriously the most wonderful way to tell an author thanks for writing and we love to hear from you. Thanks ever so much!
"Allura?" Lance asked quietly after a few moments and she reluctantly released her hold on him and he straightened to sitting. His eyes were red-rimmed from the tears but they shone with an inner strength that none could ever fully take away.

He held out his left hand and resting in the grip was her plush toy. "Thank you for letting me borrow Flafie. It… it helped. A lot. But I don't think I need him anymore."

Allura gently accepted her childhood comfort and cradled it in her own hands. "No, I do not think you do," she agreed. "But please know that he is always available should you wish to provide him your company."

Lance smiled softly at the words, but then a hint of a smirk turned up his mouth. "I would rather have your company."

She laughed, bright and clear, and gently swatted his shoulder. "But of course. Everyone wishes for the company of the Princess of Altea." She rose to her feet. "For now though, will you assist me in gathering the blankets for our movie night? I will take care of the furniture."

Lance though frowned, brow furrowing in a combination of worry and… fear?

"What is it?" Allura asked gently, sitting back down.

"It's just… Should we be doing this? A movie night?"

"You are worried about Haggar."

"Aren't you?" he whispered. "She's… she's coming, Allura. And I…" his left hand clenched into a fist. "And I'm endangering all of you."

"Not any more than the rest of us," she said and he looked at her confused. "We are in a war, Lance. We are the enemy to Zarkon and we have fought off his attacks before when he has targeted us. Yes, Haggar is most interested in you and will likely be leading this charge, but whether it is her or Zarkon himself we will fight as we always do."

"I can't fight though," he murmured.

"Not right now," she agreed. "Your body is still healing. But we will be there and we will not allow any harm to come to you."

Lance did not look reassured. If anything he appeared more scared and Allura wondered what it was she had said.

"I don't want you to get hurt for me," he said, voice small, and realization dawned. "And if you're trying to protect me then you aren't protecting yourselves and—"

"Oh, Lance," Allura murmured, taking his trembling hands within her own. "No. Do not think such things. We will prepare and—"
"How?" he interrupted. "How, Allura? The barrier didn't work and I don't think she cares if I live any longer. She'll use me to hurt you, to kill you, and I can’t… I can’t do anything to stop her."

"Lance…"

"Can any of us?" he choked out, hating the fear that was creeping about him. Not of Haggar but of the thought of what she could do to the ones he loved when they got in her way. "Do we even have a way to fight back? She's a Druid, Allura."

"We have done it before, we will do it again," she said firmly. "Be it Hunk's cannon or Pidge's holograms we—"

"What?" Lance cut in again, although unlike the previous desperation this time there was a tinge of horror to the words. "Pidge's holograms? When did Pidge…?"

Oh dear. Allura blanched at the reveal. It was not that they were keeping the events of Lance's rescue from him but, well, she supposed they sort of were. Other than her confession about facing down Zarkon and the Blue Lion then miraculously returning online as she sensed Lance, they had said nothing about the rescue.

It wasn't really on purpose. There had just never been a good moment to say anything with everything else that had been happening and Allura knew she, along with the others, had been infinitely more concerned about making sure Lance was feeling all right over recapping previous events. It hadn't even crossed her mind until now that Lance perhaps might wish to know the details of his rescue.

"Pidge fought Haggar?" he whispered, coming to the only logical conclusion from the previous statement.

"Believe me, that was my reaction too." Shiro's voice, confident and calm entered the conversation and Allura tried not to wilt with relief at the back-up.

He crossed the room with long strides and came to kneel in front of Lance, bringing them to the same eye level. "We've been asking you a lot of questions of you, Lance," he said softly, placing his own hands atop the pile. "Perhaps now is the time you asked some of us."

Lance's gaze shifted to Pidge, who had come in behind Shiro. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a smile that did not quite reach her eyes and Lance hated that his stomach clenched at that. "I'm okay," she said, "really."

"We're all okay," Hunk said, easing himself down on Lance's other side and placing a tray of well-balanced hot chocolates on the low coffee table. "We promise."

Lance traced his eyes about the group, all assembling around him; Coran on one of the ottomans, Pidge on the other and Keith sat on the ground next to Shiro. They looked all right and he knew that only Keith had wound up in a pod—

"How did you get hurt?" he blurted out to the Red Paladin, who started at the sudden address.

Keith looked to Shiro and received a small nod of confirmation. "Haggar," he said after a moment. "She and I crossed paths."

Lance's stomach rolled. "Did... did everyone fight Haggar?" and he felt a small moment of pride that her name came off his tongue so easily.
"No, no," Shiro assured. "Just those two and… and me."

Lance swallowed thickly. "What… what happened? When you rescued me?"

"What do you remember?" Shiro asked carefully.

Lance gave an uncomfortable roll of his shoulders. "Not much. Gunshots. Screaming." His eyes flicked to Pidge. "Spanish. Nothing… nothing particular." Not what he had previously mistaken as the attempted rescue that had left him behind. He shuddered at the recollection and Hunk's hand, stretched already across his shoulders, gave a soothing rub.

"From the top then," Allura said with a decisive nod. "But first, may I have a cup of this delectable smelling beverage?"

They took turns explaining their rescue while sipping from mugs of hot chocolate that lended a needed comfort to the conversation. From Keith and Shiro piloting the castle at half-jump speed to their infiltration of the base prior to the deadline and then the unlikely but timely assistance of a sympathetic lieutenant named Yanden.

Lance started at that, eyes widening. "I remember him. He was at the… the…"

"The Kri Za Kri," Pidge filled in.

Lance's face turned white. "The what?"

"Kri Za Kri?" Pidge repeated, uncertain now and hating the dread that was creeping up her.

Lance swallowed thickly, too easily recalling the chants and screaming and the pain. "How… how do you know about that?"

Pidge paled. Oh. Oh. Oh fuck.

"There was a video feed," Allura said, deciding blunt honesty was the best course.

"You… you saw?" Lance's voice was so small and Allura hated it.

"We saw the absolute depravity and cruelty of the Galra," she said. "We also saw the strength and resilience and courage that you possess. That is what we saw. Nothing more."

And really, Lance thought, he should have known. Haggar had told him that she was keeping the Paladins informed of his activities, to an extent, and why would she have neglected that part? She would have been trying to goad them into rushing after all to prevent a rescue attempt and there was nothing quite like seeing someone tortured live to get emotions running high.

"Were… were there any other times you… you saw things?" he whispered. He didn't think they'd seen his attempted suicide or desperate pleas as he thought he was left behind but…

"The first video message," Shiro said gently, running his thumb over Lance's right hand while Allura had commandeered the left. "With the instructions for the trade. And then there was a recording from when you were taken."

Lance nodded. He knew about those two; remembered the first and Hunk had revealed the other.

"That's it?" he whispered.

"That's it," Shiro promised.
Lance took a steadying breath. He had just told himself earlier in the day that he had not failed in his conviction at the Kri Za Kri. That he had been strong and represented the courage and bravery of the title of Paladin. And the knowledge that his family had seen him in such a state didn't change that opinion.

"Okay," he nodded. "So... so Yanden...?"

They picked up where they left off then. Yanden led Shiro and Keith to where Lance was being housed and gave them the key that would get them in. They'd retrieved Lance but had been waylaid by sentry forces once it was learned Lance was not in his cell. Shiro had gone back to fight them where he'd run into Haggar and, he'd scowled at the recollection, been powerless against her.

Keith picked up the tale then, explaining that Pidge had come to their add from the outside firefight and she had stayed with Lance to disable the tracker while he had gone to assist Shiro. He'd had to fight Haggar then and if it hadn't been for Pidge's again timely assistance... The two shared a look and Lance shivered at knowing how close to death Keith had come.

Pidge opened her mouth as though to say something, shook her head with downcast eyes, and Lance frowned. It was like the smile earlier; something else had happened besides Pidge distracting Haggar with the holograms and then knocking her out so they could make a clean escape.

"Pidge?" he asked quietly and she stiffened. "Are... are you really okay?"

She bobbed her head. "Yes. I just..." She looked up at Lance and he was alarmed to see tears gathering in her honey eyes. "I thought about killing her," she rushed out in one breath. "She was lying there and I summoned a knife but I... I couldn't do it. And I'm sorry. If I had then none of this would be..."

Lance found his voice frozen as he stared at Pidge. She had contemplated... Her small hands, clenched in fists at her side, could have...?

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

"No," Lance choked out. "No, Pidge. I would never... never want you to do that."

"See?" Hunk said gently as Pidge looked at Lance with wide eyes.

"It is time to put this guilt fully behind now, Number Five," Coran murmured, placing a hand on her shoulder. "There is no blame to be found here."

Pidge stared in almost disbelief at Lance and he gave her a small nod and a tight smile. Her shoulders slumped. "You're right," she sniffled. "Gracias, Lance."

"Donut nada," he smiled and she gave a short laugh.

The tension dissipated from the room near instantly at the sound and they continued their recap. Keith said they had made it back to the Lions and then rendezvoused with the others, including the Blue Lion who had sensed Lance.

Hunk explained that while all of rescue was going on inside he and Pidge had been in charge of stalling the Galra forces and making them think all of the Paladins were present. They were to negotiate the trade if it was proven that Zarkon was actually going to hold up his end and...

Here Hunk choked up and Allura took over despite the fact she had not been there, explaining how a fake had been presented that all of their scanners showed was indeed Lance and if it hadn't been for...
"A… a fake?" Lance repeated and Hunk's eyes widened as the nightmare from last night – and had it really been just then? – thundered back. Not real. Fake.

Was this what Lance had meant?

Lance was repeating Allura's words in his head, although others were rising to take their place.

*We are here to trade the Black Lion for the Blue Paladin,* Shiro's voice echoed.

*All scans show that it is Lance* he heard Pidge say. *God, Shiro, that's Lance.*

*Yellow's got the shuttle. We're ready to go* came Hunk's choked sob.

"Yes, a clone," Allura frowned, and her words broke the memory. "Meant to deceive us."

"So she… she did make one," Lance whispered, hands trembling anew in Allura and Shiro's. His nightmare could have so easily come true. If it hadn't been for Blue they may have lost Black if their back-up plan had failed.

It could have been real.

"Lance, hey, hey," Shiro murmured. "It's okay. Everything turned out all right. We weren't leaving the base either until we had absolute confirmation you were with us. We would never have left you there."

"But you did." The words came out before Lance could stop them, the memories and their apparent departure still so fresh.

"What?" Allura asked, horrified. She exchanged a look with Shiro and he shook his head in the same level of confusion.

"This is what you meant by not real, isn't it?" Hunk put in and Lance looked at him with wide eyes.

"When you woke up the second time, you were confused," Hunk clarified. "You kept saying we weren't real. Is that… related to this?"

"Sí," Lance managed, not sure how to explain. This was where he had finally broken after all. It was his greatest moment of shame for he had given up then when he thought it was over. In reality though his surrender would have spelled the actual end had the others not arrived when they did.

He'd nearly cost them everything.

Allura, her hand still holding Lance's, felt a flicker in her own quintessence as a reaction to his. She wasn't in the calm state to attempt viewing the actual presence again but she knew that some more of those dark splotches had just grown.

"You have nothing to be afraid of," she soothed, "please, talk to us. What is causing you such pain?"

Lance swallowed thickly. They had understood everything else and held no grudge for it. What had happened had happened and he could not go back and change it. Keeping this from them would only hurt him more, festering like an infection. He needed to talk about it. And hopefully, just like back in the mindscape, they would be able to forgive him.

"I gave up," he said, barely audible. No one seemed to have caught it so he forced himself to say it again, louder. "I gave up. I… I stopped fighting back."
No one interrupted save for Hunk's arm tightening ever so and Allura giving his hand a squeeze of encouragement. He kept his eyes on his lap, not yet able to meet anyone else's.

"Haggar was on the communication system and said… said they were commencing the trade. She… She imitated your voices, I guess. She'd done it before. I should have realized…" he shook his head. "You traded Black for me. But… but it wasn't me. It was some type of clone and I thought…" he trailed off.

"I thought the Galrans had the Black Lion now and you had… had nothing. You'd left with nothing." Tears pricked his eyes. "I gave up. If… if you hadn't really shown up then… then…"

"Oh, Lance," Allura murmured.

"It must have been awful to hear," Shiro said sympathetically.

"You… you aren't angry?" Because they should be. They should be upset and hurt that he could ever think that of them, that he quit and almost did cost the universe dearly. And yet they were all trying to comfort him instead.

"I am," Keith snarled and Lance hated that he felt his heart stop at the sheer rage in his voice. "I'm pissed, actually. How dare she make you think that? To use us against you?"

Lance's heart started beating again as he realized he wasn't the target of Keith's anger. "But I gave up," he repeated, because had they missed that part? That part where he could have ruined everything because he hadn't the will to go on any longer?

"In that moment, maybe," Keith said, purple eyes boring into Lance's. "But you honestly mean to tell us that when that witch tried to take it from you you would have just let her? You wouldn't have fought at all?"

Lance went to say yes, that is exactly what would have happened, but he paused. Because he had given up before in the mindscape, but then he'd been reminded by his own quintessence – or what he thought was Blue at the time – of his desire to protect others. He'd come back and fought and he'd won.

And even though in that moment he'd felt completely hopeless and helpless when the time came would he have risen to the occasion, somehow? Would he have found the will to keep fighting even knowing that no one was coming to save him?

Yes.

His eyes widened at the realization. Yes. He would have. Up until his last breath he would have given all he had to keep Haggar from getting in. She may have killed him then, withdrawing it with the force she likely intended to do now, but he would not have succumbed to her until such a time.

Keith nodded at him, an unusually gentle soft expression on his face. "That's our Blue Paladin."

"Most excellently said, Number Four," Coran dabbed at his eyes. "And Lance, you feel the truth now, yes? You are not one to give up, lad. You embody hope, after all."

Lance inclined his head, awkwardly reaching up to wipe at his eyes and Allura let go of his hand to allow him to do so.

"Anything else you wish to know of the rescue?" Allura asked when he had finished. "I believe that did about cover the particulars."
"No, I don't think so. Just... I know I've said it before but, thank you. So much." He met each pair of eyes. "For then. For n-now. For everything."

"And as we have said before, no thanks are necessary," Allura said, reclaiming his hand. "Now, if none are opposed, shall we end this evening with one of these movies humans are so fond of?"

"Wait," Lance said. "There's... there's something else I need to say."

He took a deep breath. "I've mentioned him before, a few times. Theodek." Nods about the room and under her breath Pidge muttered, "asshole," and Lance was reminded again that they'd seen the Kri Za Kri.

"The Galran I killed," and his voice did not waver and it was Shiro's turn to give his hand a squeeze, "was his brother. He helped Haggar with... with things but it was always personal for him. I know he wanted to kill me." He lowered his eyes. "I can't entirely blame him." He raised his eyes again then. "It's why I think he might help Haggar with..." he gestured awkwardly holding Allura's hand at the room.

"We will just be extra vigilant," Allura said. "Nothing has truly changed. We will stop anyone who comes aboard, be that Druid or Galra. I thank you though, Lance, for informing us of this. We can better prepare for a dual assault."

"Are we prepared?" Lance asked quietly. "For an attack?"

"The shields are all at max capacity and the outside cannons are set to fire on any craft larger than the size of a human," Coran said, pulling his tablet from his belt. "We have heat sensors to detect any anomalies coming into our airspace and our communications are cloaked; we can still see signals but they cannot see us."

"Everyone has their bayards on them," Shiro said, and Pidge, Keith and Hunk all demonstrated that this was true; Pidge's in her large shorts pocket, Keith's clipped to his belt and Hunk's inside his vest. "Which reminds me..."

He pulled Lance's bayard from where he'd had it strapped to the back of his own belt. "Here. I think this is yours."

Lance took it reverently, holding it in a shaking left hand. "How...?"

"It was one of the signatures Keith and I tracked. We couldn't grab your armor but this was too important to leave behind."

"I can't use it though," Lance murmured. "My hand..."

"Why don't you try to form your weapon?" Allura asked, and there was a knowing glint in her eye.

"But—"

"Humor me," she smiled.

Lance licked his lips nervously. Allura had to know it was going to form a blaster that he needed both hands to use. Even if he shifted it to the other hand to fire the trigger with his left his right could not support it as it was.

But Allura would not ask if she did not have a reason.
He concentrated on it and with a glow it transformed into… a pistol? His eyes widened as he held the lightweight weapon easily in his left hand.

"How?" he whispered while gasps of surprise ran about the room and Pidge leaned forward for a closer look.

"A bayard is formed to best fit the Paladin who wields it," Allura said. "Your bayard will not always be a large blaster, Lance, just as Pidge has shown she can alternate between her shock katar and a knife. It takes training to manipulate to different forms, but in this case your bayard has reformed to what you are capable of wielding."

"I can fight?"

"Oh no," Shiro nipped that in the bud. "Sorry, buddy, but your body is still recovering. This is for defensive purposes only, should something happen. So long as I can help it you will not be a part of this fight at all."

And that was fair, Lance supposed. His left arm, while healed, was still a little shaky and he knew the recoil would only make it worse upon use. But it was something. He wasn't as useless or defenseless as he'd thought.

"Gracias, Shiro, Keith. This is…"

"Keep it on you," Shiro instructed. "At all times. We don't know when Haggar will be here. It could be tonight, tomorrow, next week. It could be when we least expect it in another battle and she takes advantage. We don't know. What we do know is that she isn't going to win and after enough defeats she'll hopefully slink back to Zarkon."

"Regarding your quintessence," Allura said, "we will find a way to protect it. I will continue my research and control and eventually have a viable solution."

"What about ours?" Hunk asked. "Is she going to come after them too?" Because as Pidge had pointed out what felt like forever ago, they all had powerful quintessences but it had been Lance's capture that spurred Haggar to pursue it.

"I do not think so," Allura said. "I cannot rule it out, but to forcefully drain a quintessence of a Paladin would require a great deal of effort and time due to how strong it is. It will fight back and resist, just as its Paladin would. If she wished to attempt so, Haggar would need to have hours of time and we will never give her such an opportunity again."

"Then why…?" Lance asked, even though he feared he already knew the answer.

Allura's gaze saddened. "She has already had exposure to yours, Lance. She has touched it and immersed herself in the Astral Plane with it. It is not that your quintessence is available to her, but… she does have a back door, so to speak. She will not need much time at all to take it."

"Oh."

"But she will not step within a foot of you ever again," Allura declared. "I will not allow it."

And that scared Lance as much as it comforted him. He did not want them to put themselves in harm's to protect him. But he was being hypocritical because he would do the exact same thing if their roles were reversed.

All he could do was make sure that it did not get to that point. And if the time came, his hand
tightened on his new bayard form, he could at least fight back. He would not have to sit idly by. Defense, Shiro said? Fine. He would use it in defense of his family and he'd like to see their leader argue with that logic.

"Let's get this back to the movie night prospect," Hunk said, sensing the serious tone starting to sink them back down. "Pidge, what've we got?"

"Same selection as every time," the girl sighed. "We need to visit another space mall and see if they've got anything new. That said, I will watch anything except Monsters Inc. I can quote that one now word for word and I am not dealing with the short green jokes for at least another week."

"Lance, how about you pick?" Hunk suggested, ignoring Keith's snide comment of "oh goodie, two left."

They all knew their movie line-up by heart, save for Allura who had never joined them before. So what would be the best choice for a space princess who had never seen an Earth movie? Terminator or Disney's Hercules?

"Hercules," he said, earning a groan from Keith, laughter from Shiro and Hunk, an "I knew it," from Pidge, and a "Yes! The singing one!" from an enthusiastic Coran.

Pidge and Shiro worked to set up the television system and the improvised DVD player Hunk and Pidge had rigged and dim the lights. Hunk poured himself another mug of hot chocolate and then a second that he placed into Lance's freed hands while Allura had turned to ask Keith, turning around and propping himself up on the couch between Hunk's feet, what exactly a Hercules was.

"It's my best batch yet," he said quietly to Lance. "If you want to give it a try."

Lance eyed the milk chocolate brown liquid, only half-full in his mug. It felt nice on his hands and he wrapped long fingers as best he could about it, the right still just sort of settling against it. He had told Hunk earlier he might be up to drinking water. Hot chocolate was sort of that, just much better.

No one except Hunk was paying him any mind and Lance took a steadying breath. He could try. Just a sip. A very, very small sip so if he spat it back out it wouldn't be too embarrassing.

He raised the mug to his lips, the warm porcelain comforting. He tipped it gently, felt an equally warm liquid brush his lips. It was either open his mouth and swallow or it was going to leak all over his face. He went with the first option, the subtle tang of chocolate dancing on his tongue and after a few seconds of hesitation he finished the sip.

"What did you think?" Hunk asked, leaning back on the couch as though Lance hadn't just jumped a giant hurdle. "This new bean definitely tastes the most like cocoa but too much and it gets super bitter to where the sugar doesn't even balance it."

"It… it was really good," and Lance was alarmed to feel tears gathering. He took another careful sip, feeling it slide down his throat but there was no reflex to choke it all back up.

"I thought warm liquids might be best to start," Hunk said quietly. "We can try some tea in the morning, maybe? Or I can try to make some more hot chocolate."

"I'd like that." Lance settled more on the couch as well, tentatively resting his head back against Hunk's shoulder and Hunk in turn cuddled him a little closer.

"Lance, arms up," Shiro instructed, coming over with a blanket and tossing it over him and Hunk, not wanting to trap the mug underneath. He offered another to Allura who accepted with a smile and
then Shiro joined Keith on the floor and spread one over their extended legs. Coran had settled on the other couch and Pidge had curled up next to him, resulting in an absolutely delighted smile on the Altean.

"Okay, quiet everyone," Shiro ordered, remote in hand. "It's starting."

Snuggled in between Hunk and Allura and the rest of his family gathered around, Lance felt his eyes misting as the goddesses opened up the scene, his head someplace else for the moment. They had accepted everything he had told them, understood and cast no judgment or hate. They were here now, doing all they could to make sure he knew that, to keep him safe and protected and happy.

He had never felt so loved.

xxx

"You called?" asked an impatient voice of one who was not used to being summoned like a dog, especially at so late an hour.

"I hope your preparations are complete, Commander. We leave on the morrow."

Theodek's eyes widened. "You found him?"

"I told you I would, did I not?"

Fangs widened into a sharp grin. "I had not expected it to be so soon. I am impressed, Lady Haggar."

"We will take your cruiser," Haggar commanded, "and leave from hangar six at 0600."

"What is our plan? They will surely see us coming."

"Leave that to me." A dark smile crossed her face. "I have just the thing."

She sighed happily, turning from her spell that was glowing a sick yellow behind her to meet the eyes of the blood-thirsty Galra commander. "Tomorrow is the end for my dear Lance. Let us make sure it is a finale befitting him."

Theodek matched her expression. "It shall be my greatest pleasure."

Chapter End Notes

Ignore that Galran and Druid behind the curtain for a moment please. Yes, thank you. Up above we are all on the same page, yay! Granted, some individuals know more about certain things than others, but it's all technically out in the open and Lance has gotten it all of his chest. Phew!

Also, just wanted to say that I adore movie nights, but it never made sense to me in other fanfictions I read where they have this like, whole trove of movies (and recent ones too). If they're able to get recent releases why exactly can they not make some type of contact home? How far do Earth's signals extend? xDD So here we have three well-loved
movies they got from the earth shop at the space mall. Hercules is one of my absolute favorites too :D

And now, yes, have at me. Haggar blah blah blah. She is heading out and she has a plan. Go ahead and panic now :p (but not too much, okay? xD Feel free if you leave a review (and please, seriously do your author appreciates them) to comment on things other than the last 150 words of a nearly 5k chapter xD

Much love as always to the amazing reviewers, who deserve all the cookies life has to offer.

Please do drop a comment below! I'd love to get your thoughts on the chapter (*cough* the whole chapter *cough*). Thanks so much!
Lance awoke with a start and a quiet gasp that permeated the otherwise near silent room.

He took in a ragged breath, relaxing slightly as Hunk's gentle snores sounded and he was firmly reminded that he was in the castle and he was safe. That still did not stop him from fetching his bayard from where he'd stored it underneath his pillow.

Willing his heart to stop racing, he lied back down, both relieved and upset that Hunk had not awoken. The remnants of the nightmare had vanished, but the lingering sense of fear and unease had not and he really wanted a hug and some reassurance.

But Hunk was exhausted. He'd nearly trundled to Lance's room following the end of the movie, skipped the bathroom, and fell asleep as soon as he'd pulled his mattress off the wall. Lance had felt a flash of guilt because he knew Hunk was only that tired because he'd been looking out and taking care of him for the past several days, but he also knew that Hunk wanted to and did not want Lance's apologies. He was glad though that Hunk had chosen to spend another night in his room. He wasn't sure if he was ready to be alone yet.

Shiro had come by shortly thereafter to collect Pidge's mattress, who had said she felt all right to sleep in her own room that night. She'd given Lance a tight good night hug that he'd returned. Shiro had given him a one-armed one around the mattress and bid him pleasant dreams.

Despite the fact he really did not want to, Lance had crept down the silent hall to the bathroom to brush his teeth where he'd found Keith washing his face with the sink on full blast.

He'd paused for a moment in the doorway, legs trembling, before he'd forced himself in and to the other sink. He'd taken a shower already. He could handle a little sink spray.

As soon as Keith had noticed him he turned the sink to a lower gush, but not all the way off and finished up. He hadn't said anything but had given Lance a pat on the shoulder before he also retired.

He managed teeth brushing much better than the morning and after a quick run to the toilet he even managed to wash his hands without succumbing to any flashback as the water ran over his hands. All in all, he was feeling pretty proud of himself by the time he crawled into bed and the fact it was over such little things no longer made him feel bad either.

Everyone had stressed time and patience to him and he knew they were right. Things had already gotten so much better but he knew they were far from over. The most glaring problem was still his right hand, which he'd tucked up under his shirt and was warming it on his stomach with the heat pad Pidge had left behind. He didn't need-need it but it comforted him and he knew Pidge had left it for that very reason.

But now the peacefulness was shattered as he lay trembling in his bed, trying to calm himself. He knew it had just been a dream, or a fragmented memory, he couldn't quite tell at this point as pieces of it slipped away, but that didn't make this new terror any less.

There was still so much to be afraid of after all.
Allura had reassured him in some way that they would be ready for a fight with Haggar for when she did come. And Lance knew she would. He shivered again, nearly feeling her hands card through his hair and squeezed his eyes shut.

She wasn't here. It was all in his head and he just needed to ignore it.

But he couldn't ignore the real threat of her arrival. He felt a little better prepared now with his bayard at hand but this was Haggar. She wasn't going to be scared off by a few shots.

She wasn't scared of anything.

He could see her now, stalking down the castle's halls and blasting everything out of the way with sheer power, making Pidge scream as an energy ball collided with her, seeing Keith collapse to the ground, sword skittering away and blood pouring from his mouth as his imagination filled in the gaps from the earlier discussion and embellishing them with the what ifs.

He could see Allura slumped inside Blue, Hunk and Yellow spiraling into space. Shiro being pinned down by Haggar, helpless to free himself from her grasp as she snapped a collar of familiar design around his neck and his screams lit up the hall.

He sat up with a jolt. That was it. He was not sleeping right now. Not with those images dancing around in his head.

He cuddled the slightly warm heat pack closer and debated his options. He wanted to talk to someone, anyone, for reassurance. Allura had told him to go to them.

But it was the middle of the night. Just after 0300 according to the clock on his dresser. He had no idea what was in store for them later that day and he was loathe to wake anyone up because of a nightmare. They needed their rest.

He glanced one more time at Hunk, slumbering away. Normally he'd just crawl right in next to him and soak in the comfort Hunk always projected, but he didn't want to just lie there and try to sleep. He was too anxious for that but he didn't want to wake anyone up either.

He worried his lip. What did he do?

Blue. Duh.

He'd gone to his Lion more times than he could count after a bad dream or just a long night. Her presence never failed to soothe him and Blue never pushed outside of making sure he was okay. She always let him gather himself if he did wish to talk, but otherwise she would wrap him up in her presence and make everything better for at least a little while.

Yes. He'd go see Blue.

Lance gathered one of his quilts about his shoulders and slipped near soundlessly from the bed, socked feet sliding on the metal floor. He stood for a moment, regaining his legs as they were still shaky, especially after sitting or lying down for so long.

Once he had his balance well established Lance moved as silently as a shadow to the door and it opened with a soft hiss. He glanced worriedly over his shoulder that it might have awoken Hunk, but another snore sounded and Lance smiled. Hunk generally did sleep like a rock.

He made his way down the hallway, bypassing Shiro and Hunk's empty room and turned in the direction of the front hall, where all of the Lions were still resting. He knew they had to return to
their hangars at some point, but right now he appreciated the closer walk.

The castle was eerie in the late (early?) hour, and Lance hurried as quick as he could. He knew it was no longer haunted but the long halls and his near creeping about them reminded him too much of trying to navigate an exit out of the Galran ship. He cringed at the thought and picked up his pace.

Finally the doors of the front hall beckoned and he stole inside them with a heavier breath than the situation warranted, casting his eyes about the dim interior.

*Cub?* he heard Blue's inquiry and then the sound of metal shifting on metal. *Cub all right?*

"I'm okay," he said quietly, moving towards her large bulk. "Just… just a bad dream. Can I sit with you?"

He could feel her acceptance as well as her amusement that he even had to ask. She was lying down already, head between her paws, and Lance eyed the paw that he normally clambered atop of and rested in between the grooves. It was normally a simple matter but with his right hand he doubted he could pull himself up.

*Here, Lion assist.* He felt Blue's intentions before he felt her cold snout and she nudged his feet out from underneath him and lifted him onto her nose, depositing him with a gentleness that her huge figure belied.

A day earlier Blue would not have attempted such a thing, seeing the way her Paladin shook and trembled at any touch, even one as warm as Yellow's Paladin. But she sensed a brightness to him now and when she looked closer many of the dark spots that had marred his beautiful light had disappeared.

She purred at that as he settled himself into the groove, tucking a blanket about him, and she lowered her head back so she could easily see him. Her Paladin was feeling better. Much better. She nuzzled his quintessence with her own and was delighted when his wrapped itself back in the embrace.

And her Paladin laughed. It was music to Blue's ears and she purred all the louder. How had this all happened?

"I've got a lot to tell you, Blue," her Paladin murmured and she felt him rub a hand over her foot.

He shared his story in bits and pieces, made all the more vivid by the mind pictures he projected and the emotions that coursed down their link. Blue already knew her Paladin was the best – and no, she was not biased in the slightest – but to see how much he had overcome and grown to love himself in such a short time made her fit to burst with sheer pride and love for this cub she called her own.

She immediately tried to dampen the last thought, recalling all too clearly the fear that had welled up within her Paladin when she used such a term.

But her Paladin did not seem distressed. Thoughtful, really, and he pet her paw again as surely as his quintessence stoked her own.

"Blue?" he whispered. "You're my Lion, right?"

*Always* came her answer, thrumming with promise.

"Then that makes me your Paladin."

Yes she said with no less certainty but there was a sense of question as to where this was leading.
"Then... then you're mine," he murmured. "And I'm... I'm yours."

Blue's heart swelled as she realized what he meant.

<My Paladin?> she sent out quietly, bracing still for the backlash.

None came.

Only a quiet contentment and peace and Blue nearly cried with her own. <My Paladin> she repeated, stronger.

"My Lion," he breathed, a smile on his words. "Oh, Blue..."

<My Paladin, my cub> she nuzzled his essence again. She was not sure she had ever felt such joy as she had in this moment over her thousands and thousands of years. Her Paladin was healed. He was shining full of love and hope that he had found for himself. He had found the strength to overcome the darkness, just as she always knew he would.

But all was still not well. He had told her of the failed barrier idea to keep Haggar from accessing him. Ultimately, it had worked out in ways they never could have imagined for as terrified he had been of waking in his mindscape it had been what he needed to really move forward.

It still did not solve the problem of the Druid witch who still haunted her Paladin's thoughts; restrained and small in the grand expanse but still there. Blue hated that he still had this fear but she did not know how to soothe it away. It was a real threat.

She tried to stifle her feelings of despair so as not to alarm her Paladin, but he just patted her paw. "I know," he said quietly. "I'm scared too. I don't... I don't want the others to get hurt, Blue. I know they're all amazing fighters, but... it's her. And him. And they want to kill me."

Lion will not let them Blue snarled. Lion protect my Paladin.

Even as she said it though Blue felt despair. For unless her Paladin was safely inside her she could not do much. She could not rampage through the castle for blowing out a wall and opening the interior to the deep abyss of space would be as sure a death sentence as what the witch wanted.

She felt Black touch her mind, a concern in the inquiry as she had felt Blue's distress. Blue had felt her Paladin's confidence that the princess would indeed be able to do it given time... it was just time they did not have.

To Blue's surprised she felt Black roll her eyes and she growled at the perceived insult.

"Blue?" her Paladin asked gently. "What's wrong?"

Blue didn't have a chance to answer as Black fired back feelings and ideas that left Blue reeling. Was... was that possible? Black let out a deafening roar in answer that caused her Paladin to start in surprise and Black sent back a rather meek apology.

<My Paladin> Blue said, nearly tripping over her words. Black Lion has idea.

"An idea?" he asked hesitantly.

For barrier. Lions do it.

She felt his shock then mixed with hope. "You... you can do that?"
Black Lion says so. Black Lion connect with quintessence. Other Lions help make circle.

Black pressed on her mind then, reminding Blue of the potential risks. They had never attempted such a feat after all, and especially with a host in a weak body like the human's. But, Black had added hastily as she sensed Blue's ire at the word choice, Blue's Paladin was strong indeed and his quintessence beyond that.

Blue relayed these feelings to her Paladin and as she expected he nodded with a bravery she still found herself admiring anew each time.

"I trust you, Blue," he whispered. "Always."

And Lance did with every fiber of his being. Blue was everything to him. She was him, in a sense, as they shared the same blue quintessence.

"What do I do?" he asked, feeling her conversing with the other Lions but unable to follow their conversation. Around him though the other Lions were starting to awaken, yellow eyes piercing the dim room and metal joints creaking as they rose from their slumber.

**Sit in center** Blue instructed. **Lion join shortly.**

Lance carefully slid off the large paw, socked feet hitting the ground with a muffled thump. His heart was racing as he made his way to the somewhat center of the hall and sat down, pulling the quilt tight about his shoulders.

Could this actually work? He shivered at the thought. The Lions were all powerful. And the Black Lion did have a connection to the Astral Plane and thousands of years to have perfected traveling to and from.

If it did not work though... he could be sent back to his mindscape, possibly. Or, he could skip that step and just... die. It was a possibility; he had been drained last time according to Allura but this go-around would be the opposite and he could be overloaded instead.

Blue purred a reassurance down their link and he felt the fear wash away. Blue would never hurt him. None of the Lions would. This was his best chance. Their best chance.

The Lions were moving now, shifting to lie down in a circle about him heads facing inward and tails all sweeping to the right to lightly touch their neighbor. He tried to suppress the shiver as every yellow gaze was focused directly on him. It was more than a bit intimidating to have all of the Lions looking at him so.

Black had settled herself directly in front of him with Red and Green on her sides and Blue and Yellow out of sight behind him in the formation they made for Voltron. Lance pivoted so he could catch a glimpse of Blue and he felt her smile.

**My Paladin ready?**

"Sí," he managed, feeling his heart pick up tempo again. This was it. He vaguely wondered if he should have maybe told someone in case anything went wrong, but it was too late now.

**Do not fear, my Paladin** Blue murmured, wrapping him in her embrace. **All will be well.**

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak again.

**Close eyes** Blue instructed and Lance did so, acutely somehow more aware of the other presences
now. **Breathe. Listen. Feel quintessence.**

Lance centered himself as they had learned to do for the mindmeld, concentrating on the feel of his chest rising up and down with each breath, the pulse in his neck and the warmth above his heart.

Around him he could sense a brightening glow, warm and steady. He could either take the leap and move into it or he could pull back. It was entirely up to him, but he knew there was only one real option.

And with one final exhale he let go.

xxx

Hunk awoke to his bladder crying at him and lamenting the number of hot chocolates he had downed and he sent a silent apology to it and a promise for relief.

More awake than he wanted to be, Hunk rolled over to get off the mattress, looking at the clock that rested on Lance's dresser. Fifteen minutes past 0300. Ugh. His eyes moved to Lance's bed, hoping to see his best friend sleeping easily.

But he wasn't sleeping easily because he wasn't there.

Hunk shot up, much more alert than he had been a second ago as his heart pounded in his chest. He scanned the room quickly, somehow expecting Lance to materialize. "Lance?" he whispered as though that could summon him.

No one responded.

Hunk pulled himself free of his blankets and stumbled over to the bed. Lance's bayard was resting on the mattress next to the heating pack and the blankets were pushed back as though in a hurry.

Lance hadn't been… kidnapped, had he? Hunk shook his head. No. Impossible. He was being ridiculous. Lance had probably just had to run to the bathroom.

The bathroom where there were plenty of triggers; the water, the mirror, the large, echoing space. Hunk was hurrying from the room before he even processed the thought. Lance could be stuck in the bathroom, held in check by a memory and needed someone to break him out of it. He'd come so far but in the quiet darkness of the castle anything could have happened. Hunk practically flew down the hall.

He almost ripped the bathroom door off its hinges in his haste, Lance's name already on his tongue.

But the bathroom was empty. The lights had kicked on as he entered but there was no sign of Lance here. Hunk quickly relieved himself before hurrying out towards Shiro's room. Maybe Lance had gone to their leader instead of waking Hunk? He knew that Lance knew he was tired and it would be just like Lance to not want to bother him even though Hunk would not have minded at all.

Shiro's door slid open and Hunk poked his head into the gloom, searching for any sign of a wayward sharpshooter.

"Hunk?" came Shiro's groggy voice, awoken by the stream of light from the hall. Hunk felt his stomach plummet. Lance had not come this way and now he'd woken Shiro up.

"Uh—"
"What is it?" Shiro asked, tone sharper as sleep left and he knew Hunk would not have awoken him for no reason.

"Lance is missing. I hoped he might have come here, but…"

"Check with Pidge," Shiro instructed, pulling himself out of bed and dressed far more casually than Hunk had ever seen him; a loose sleeveless shirt and plaid black and red pajama bottoms. He caught sight of a few scars wrapping about Shiro's collarbone and another on his flesh arm and hurriedly averted his gaze before he could be accused of staring. "I'll check with Keith. Meet in the hallway."

Hunk nodded and hurried to do so while Shiro, after throwing on a hooded jacket and zipping it fully, made his way to Keith's, bare feet tingling on the cold floors.

Shiro dearly hoped Lance had not tried to visit Keith in the dead of night because he was now remembering that there was a very dangerous knife hidden under the pillow that Keith would likely not hesitate to draw. After they found Lance, he decided, he needed to talk to Keith about that. He'd put it on his mental checklist but it had fallen by the wayside amongst everything else happening.

Keith's room was dark and while he found no Lance he did spot the younger boy sleeping as he normally did; blanket squashed to him and face relaxed in sleep. Shiro knew how quickly that could change.

Shiro debated leaving Keith to his slumber, but something pushed at him to wake him. He'd learned to listen to his instincts and so ever so carefully he slipped his hand under the pillow, feeling out the sharp edges of a sheath. He pulled it free a moment later and once it was in his hand did he go to rouse Keith.

It took only one gentle shake and his name whispered for Keith to spring awake, nearly smashing his head into Shiro's and his hand moving in a practiced arc under his pillow. Shiro hated the noise that was torn from Keith's throat as it came up empty.

"Hey, hey, it's just me," he soothed as still bleary eyes looked his way.

"Shiro?" Keith croaked. "What…?"

"Here," Shiro handed him back the knife and the tension drained immediately away, Keith holding it near possessively to his chest. "We need to talk about that," Shiro said and stiffness came back. "Not now though. Lance is missing."

"Missing?" Keith repeated, voice rising slightly in pitch but he still slid off his mattress with grace and grabbed his belt to secure the knife to, his bayard also still attached.

"He wasn't in his bed," Shiro clarified. "It could just be a stop to the kitchen, and I'm sorry to wake you, but in case it isn't…"

He didn't want to think anything bad had happened. No alarms had gone off and it was incredibly unlikely in the event of a kidnapping they'd have left Hunk sleeping soundly feet away. Still, it didn't hurt to be prepared in case something was amiss. And again, something was prickling at the back of his consciousness that something was happening and Keith needed to be there.

He and Keith encountered Hunk and a glasses-less Pidge in the hall but no Lance. "Kitchen?" Hunk asked, trying not to worry too much and Shiro nodded.

They hurried their way there, relieved smiles being exchanged as a light appeared on in the room. Hunk knew that overeating was still a cause for concern and he really didn't want Lance to be sick, but he would take that over the other heart-stopping option.
"Lance!" Hunk cried out as he raced towards the open fridge door. "La—" the name died on his throat as the door closed to reveal Coran clad in blue and green striped pajamas and robe with a spoon in his mouth.

"Did Lance come through here?" Shiro asked urgently.

Coran's expression went from sheepish to being caught in the fridge to more serious and he plucked the spoon from his mouth. "No, he did not Number One. Has something happened?"

"He wasn't in his bed," Hunk explained for the third time. "Or the bathroom or anyone else's room."

"Have you tried the lounge?" the Altean asked. "Why don't you check there and I will check with the princess?"

"Good idea," Shiro said. He and the rest of the Paladins hurried to the room. It was still strewn with blankets and empty mugs that everyone had been too tired to return to the kitchen following their movie, but no Lance.

They were en route back to the kitchen when Coran and Allura intercepted them, the princess hastily still tying a robe.

"There are no signs of entry anywhere aboard the ship," Coran said in greeting as he scrolled through his tablet. "All shields are functioning and no release from any of the hangars."

Hunk slapped a hand to his forehead. "The hangars. Of course. He went to see Blue."

The ripple of relief that swept through them was nearly palatable.


"I'd rather you did," Shiro said, although he rubbed at his eyes tiredly. "Better to be safe than sorry."

"Let us go sneak a quick peek to make sure all is well and then back to bed with us," Coran said, already heading for the great hall.

"Man, I feel so embarrassed," Hunk lamented. "I'm so sorry for waking you all."

"Don't worry about it, big guy," Keith said abnormally gently. "As Shiro said; better safe than sorry."

As they approached the hall there was a soft blue light emitting from the open door and Shiro frowned, that weird feeling from earlier prickling again. "Coran, I don't recall a light fixture of that color in the hall."

"That is because there is not one," Coran said. Around him he heard the Paladins drawing their bayards but he held up a hand. "I do not sense anything hostile and the Lions surely would have surely caused some ruckus if that were the case.

"I recognize this," Allura gasped, eyes widening. "It…"

She darted forward the last few paces and the others rushed in her wake. They nearly plowed into the princess as she drew up short upon the scene laid out before her.

The blue glow was what she thought it was: Lance's quintessence. It was wrapped all about his form, visible despite the fact she had not transcended into the Plane and clearly visible to the others as well.
But more than that it was the circle of Lions, all lying down and facing the sitting figure and their normally yellow eyes lit by the color each Lion was named for.

"Um, why is Lance glowing?" Hunk asked.

"It's quintessence," Allura breathed. "It is his quintessence. But how…?"

"The Black Lion connects with the Astral Plane, does she not?" Coran observed, stroking his moustache and looking in awe at the scene before them. "She has brought the Plane here, it appears."

"What are they doing?" Keith moved to step closer but Shiro put a hand on his shoulder, stilling him. Even from here he could feel the power permeating the air and he had a feeling they were not supposed to get caught up in it.

"Creating a barrier," Coran said, wonderment in his voice. "They are creating a barrier."

The advisor kept his distance but circled to the right to take in more of the scene, seeing now that the Black Lion's eyes glowed with a mixture of black and blue hues. Lance's remained closed, his face peaceful, and he did not seem aware of their presence.

It was what Allura had tried to do, but using the human Paladin's quintessences. This… This…

"This is unprecedented," Allura whispered, taking the words right out of his mouth. "This much power in a human? How?"

As she spoke Lance flinched as though in pain and Hunk tried to move forward but found his path blocked by Coran. A second later Lance's expression evened back out as a sunburst of yellow swirled about his form and sank into it.

"Can he handle that much?" Shiro asked, worried. He'd seen what Allura's smaller attempt had done to both her and Lance and he was still vastly overwhelmed by the sheer raw power he felt whenever Black connected with him. Lance had all of that and then four more Lions' worth pressing on him.

"The Lions would not have attempted if they not thought it possible," Coran said. "Although if this works as we think it will…" He and Allura had briefly discussed the idea of Lance being able to sense the quintessences of the others from the Paladin's bond. This would let him sense the Lion's and by extension the Paladins.

But a human's mind, a human's body, was not the strength of an Altean. There was no physical way for its form to accept that much quintessence and yet, Coran realized, somehow Lance was doing so. It scared him as much as it made him swell with pride because this? This power was what Haggar was after.

He prayed that the Lions' plan worked because otherwise their actions would make Lance an even bigger, more desirable target. And he would never let the boy suffer for such ever again.

"It will what?" Hunk prompted, trying not to sound too desperate. "It will what, Coran? Is Lance going to be okay?"

"He will be all right," Coran assured. "He will just…"

"He will be able to sense the quintessence," Allura filled in quietly. "Like myself. He will be able to connect to the Lions and may even be able to sense you through them because of that connection. It is something no being other than an Altean or Druid is capable of and will be on a scale far, far greater than even my own."
"Wow," Pidge managed.

"Wow," Keith echoed.

Lance winced again, a tiny, soft moan issuing between his lips, but this time a green tendril settled about him, twining amongst his blue before it faded into the glow and his expression relaxed once more.

"You should all return to bed," Allura said, turning to face the Paladins. "This may take some time yet. Myself and Coran will remain to keep an eye on things."

"There is no way I can sleep right now," Pidge declared. "Sorry, Allura, but I'm staying right here."

Allura let out a sigh but a smile softened it. "I do not know why I expected anything less. Shiro, will you assist me in gathering some blankets from the lounge? Hunk, if it is not too much trouble could you brew us some tea? We should make ourselves comfortable at the least."

Everyone completed their tasks over the next several minutes, Allura and Shiro hauling in a stash of blankets and some of the couch cushions – Allura carrying six as though they weighed nothing – and Hunk passed out cups of the strawberry tea from earlier.

They settled in, Pidge curling up against Hunk and using his lap as a pillow for despite her claims she was indeed tired. Allura slumped down on next to Coran, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder.

Shiro stretched out fully, propping his head up with a pillow and his prosthetic arm and Keith sat next to him, hunched over and gaze fixated forward.

Lance continued to remain unaware of them, eyes closed and body relaxed as the blue glow moved like ocean waves about him and flashes of other color shone every now and then.

They were witnessing something that Allura was positive the universe would never see again and she smiled for no other reason than the sheer pride that it was Lance the universe had chosen for this honor.

Feeling absolutely content as the Lions' quintessences continued to fill the room, Allura settled in to watch not just history in the making, but a new future for Lance.

The room continued to glow blue.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone? Anyone see this coming? Hehe! I am so, so proud of this and for keeping it under wraps minus a few hints of quintessence and the Astral Plane and the mention again that Lance had mistaken his own quintessence for Blue. Allura might not have had the training necessary but the Lions certainly do. Whoot whoot! I do promise though, Lance is not some supreme being now and he's not going to wipe the floor with Haggar. No. Heck no. I *hate* stories/plots like that and you can be certain I will not be a part of that. No siree. This is what Allura wanted to do just… on a larger scale. Much larger. And look! Glowing Lance! Eeeee!
I have really missed seeing a lot of you guys and I'll be honest, it's more than a little disheartening. I put a lot of time and effort (and have been slowly killing myself on one shots which have also been seeing a steady decline and while that doesn't really pertain here just know that I'm running a little ragged) into this fic, as well as my others, and, to be blunt, if you can manage to read a few thousand words I'd really appreciate if you could leave a couple (ten, hundred, whatever you feel like) or so saying what you like about the chapter and show that you appreciate the effort I put into it. Thank you. This chapter especially was a pretty big deal (obviously ;p) and I'd really love to hear your reaction.

And to those of you who have been here week over week and especially those that do leave beautiful, sweet, (long, ilu ♥) comments. Thank you. Thank you so, so much. I appreciate it more than you know.
Chapter Sixty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It hurt. And not like those little twinges he'd been feeling that had been almost immediately soothed away.

Lance winced, a soft moan being pulled from his lips. His head felt like it was going to split down the middle, pressure rising and pulsing inside his skull. It hurt. Oh Dios, it hurt. He felt his hands pressing against the sides, not sure when he'd lifted them, blunt nails digging in as though to relieve the pain.

It did not help.

Colors were dancing in his vision despite his eyes being tightly closed, and with each burst he felt a presence that was so much bigger than himself. The Lions. He shuddered as their full might threatened to undo him.

Red was fire racing along his veins, burning him inside with her passion and fierceness and he whimpered as everything she touched became an inferno.

Green was snaking through him, numbers screaming in his mind of fractions and computations and percentages that flashed at a dizzying speed and his stomach rolled at the nauseating blur.

Yellow was a light so bright she hurt to look at, a weight pressing in that he could tell was supposed to be comforting but it was like being smothered and he gasped, feeling his lungs seizing as they fought for air.

Black pushed and pulled him in every direction, a war within himself as stars exploded and time rushed by in the never ending void of space that seemed to freeze his heart as sure as the frozen rocks of the ruins of the universe.

Blue was the only one that didn't add to the cacophony. Blue flowed through him like water, trying to soothe fire and quell sunlight, push against the blackness and ease the overflowing input, but it was not enough. She was a raindrop against the vast skies and she could not weather the storm.

"Bl-Blue," he choked, not sure if the word actually was spoken or inside his head. Everything was echoing; too loud and too quiet and too bright and too dark all at once and he could not escape it.

Something touched his face then and he flinched, as even in the agony filling him he recognized hands. On his face. He'd have tried to move further away but they held firm, slender and smooth. Thumbs brushed against his cheeks and he whimpered again. No. Please, no.

There was the faintest sound of soothing murmurs, whispers passing over his skin like a gentle breeze. Peace he felt Blue intone, her calm shining for one moment above the tumult before it was dragged back under. He tried to listen. His Lion had never led him wrong before.

The hands remained, cool against his burning skin, and he tried not to pull back as something pressed against his forehead. Not a kiss, he realized. Not lips. Broader, smoother.
Peace washed over him then, a pale and shimmering pink light that blanketed the other colors like a soft cloud and the overwhelming intensity disappeared. Lance was able to draw in a full breath as the cloud continued to roll across, tempering the storm.

*My Paladin* Blue sounded again, a mixture of fierce pride and concern. *All well now. Open eyes.*

He carefully, slowly lifted his eyes part way, expecting light to sear them. But it was dim and he more fully opened them.

Allura's eyes smiled back at him, inches from his.

Her hands were the ones resting alongside his face and her forehead was pressed to his own and all he seemed capable of doing was staring. When had she arrived?

"Hello," she whispered.

"'llura?" he asked, tongue feeling thick.

She sat back then, sliding her hands from his face. "How do you feel?"

"Dizzy?" he said after a moment as shifting slightly had the room reeling and only Allura's quick actions kept him from toppling over.

Loud footsteps sounded then and a pair of arms came to rest around his back. Lance leaned into them gratefully, this hold not the crushing weight of his Lion’s. "Hunk," he murmured.

"I've got you, *hermano.*"

His eyes drifted closed without his consent as he soaked up the comfort Hunk was projecting. More footsteps sounded and he was aware of the others coming to join them. Apparently they were all here.

"He's okay?" he heard Keith ask quietly and an answering hum from Allura.

Another hand descended on his forehead but he was too tired to pull away, especially when he recognized it as Coran’s, and a tongue clucked. "He seems to be running a little warm," Coran murmured. "Understandable given the circumstances."

"Did it work?" Pidge sounded, right next to him and a pair of small hands gripped his arm a moment later.

"Blue?" Allura called.

*My Paladin safe* came the response that echoed about the room, a weariness to the tone. *My Paladin has Pride's protection. A low growl rumbled through her. Witch will not touch my Paladin.*

"What is it exactly that you have done?" Coran queried.

And to Lance’s surprise he did not hear Blue answer, but images were suddenly flickering through his mind and he gasped aloud at the same time Shiro did.

"Shiro?" Keith called at the same time Hunk called out "Lance?" and both Shiro and Lance in tandem breathed, "Black?"

He forced his eyes open then, catching sight of Shiro pressing a hand to his forehead and if his weren’t lying so limply by his sides he might have done the same. The images were coming too fast
to interpret and it made his head spin, but Shiro seemed to be having a better go at it.

"Black… she…" Shiro winced. "She connected Lance to… to the Astral Plane through her to the other Lions. He…"

Charcoal eyes widened. "Lance can sense the Lions. All of them," Shiro finished. He caught Lance's gaze. "You can, can't you?"

Lance managed a nod, wincing as that seemed to jar the pink cloud and everything swirled for a moment before settling.

"They're all in there. In my head. It's… it's a bit much," he admitted, closing his eyes against the onslaught. "But there's this… cloud?"

"That would be my quintessence," Allura said gently. "Blue called for me to assist and I… well, I have an idea of what I did although I am not certain as to the how."

They had been there for about four hours watching Lance glow before anything had changed. During that time he had made small sounds of distress but they were wiped away within the moment by various bursts of color that the Lions possessed. The three younger Paladins had all fallen asleep over the course of the early morning while the adults had remained vigilant, although Shiro had found his eyes closing and then reopening several times.

But at shortly after 0700 Lance had let out a noise that bordered on a wail and they had all snapped to attention, the sound waking the slumbering three as well. It had not stopped and unlike previous times no colors came to soothe it away.

The light around him was changing as well, flickering through all of the colors of the Lions instead of remaining blue. Lance had moved then, more than the little twitches.

He'd been whimpering in clear pain and his hands had shifted to his head, much too reminiscent of when he'd first awoken and had believed the reality to be a trick. His lips had moved but from this far they couldn't hear what he'd try to say.

They had been frozen in indecision as the colors continued to flicker in a whirlwind about Lance. Blue's voice had sounded then. Princess! Go! and her desperation and fear was palpable.

Allura had stumbled to her feet and raced across the room, leaping over Black's tail and skidding to a halt in front of Lance. The colors seemed to lash out and she pulled back at the raw power snapping in the air, but Blue growled. Go! Help my Paladin!

"How?" she'd begged.

Blue's presence had near overwhelmed her then as she roared out Anchor! and Allura immediately understood. It was what she had used Coran for; an anchor to balance the multiple quintessences in the circle. And right now all of those quintessences were battling inside Lance.

She had wasted no further time, reaching out and taking a hold of his face while uttering a silent apology for the breach, but mind to mind was best and she needed him to remain still. He'd jerked in her grasp but settled as Blue's soothing presence rolled over both of them and she had pressed her forehead to his own, willing this to work.

Her own quintessence had risen then, a translucent pink and she had sent it straight into him, not quite sure what she was doing but knowing she needed to calm the other colors before they hurt him anymore. She'd dispersed it as quick as she could, blanketing them until they had dimmed and she
had felt Lance relax in her hold, the glow from him fading completely.

She had never tried to use her quintessence in such a way on someone else. She knew how to view other quintessences, could lightly brush against them with her own but so completely dampen them like she had just managed? To dampen the Lions' quintessences, the strongest in the universe?

"You guided me?" she asked Blue, gazing up at the giant Lion who had yet to move from the circle. All around the other Lions had remained but other than Blue and Black their eyes had gone out.

Yes Blue rumbled. Princess need learn. Lion teach.

"You… you wish to teach me?" Allura repeated.

Help the Lion amended. Princess untrained but powerful. Princess need guidance.

"I… I am speechless, Blue. Thank you. That is a generous offer and I shall gladly accept."

Allura felt the rush of acceptance before the Blue Lion's gaze turned towards Lance, still lying near limp in Hunk's arms.

My Paladin all right?

"My head hurts," Lance admitted to her quietly and she could see that for herself, all of her sisters' quintessences taking up lodging. It was similar to what she had sensed in the Princess and her connection to them, but if the Princess' was a stream than her Paladin's was a raging river.

Lion sorry she apologized, nuzzling her quintessence against his own blue and drawing it forth. She saw her Paladin sink into it with relief. My Paladin must learn control it. Too much for body.

"You will need to teach him, Allura," Coran said. "It will be like when you first established a connection with the Lions and the castle. He must learn to dampen it or he will be overwhelmed."

Allura bit her lip, remembering all too well that feeling. Her father had proclaimed her ready, as despite her young age she had shown great aptitude for quintessence, evidenced by her pink color, the element of the sky. A quintessence of the sky and love, her tutors had explained. A cloud meant to soothe and bring peace while spreading wonder and hope.

Her father had helped her to connect with all of the Lions, not to the extent that Lance had just experienced, but enough to sense them. The result had left her sick in bed for over a week, shaky and pale and unable to move for the ache in her head until she had last been able to soothe the voices with her own essence.

Blue quintessence was not as much a dampener as her own, but she supposed it was the next best. Gentle rolling waves and the spirit of laughter and love would be much easier to extend to the others than say Red's fire or Green's inquisitiveness. With Blue's help she was certain they could do this for Lance did not – could not – have all of the Lions constantly turning inside his mind. It would literally drive him insane.

And despite the consequences should they fail to control it, Allura could not refrain from the sheer awe at what had just happened. A human had been bestowed all of the Lions' quintessences, their protection. There was absolutely nothing in the world Haggar could do to touch him now.

He was safe.

"You are safe," she breathed, meeting Lance's eyes with her own. "Haggar… she can no longer…"
Lance and Blue inclined their heads as one. *Barrier up now* Blue explained, her voice growing fainter. *Only Paladins' access now.*

Allura frowned at that. "Then how did I…?"

*Princess connected to Lions. Lions connected to my Paladin. Circle.*

Her lips turned up. "I suppose that does make sense. Thank you Blue, Black," she nodded to the leader of the pride who inclined her large metal head ever so. "For all you have done for our family."

Everyone felt the resulting wave of pleasure and joy that both Lions sent and Shiro smiled wide as Black flickered a picture into his mind of the entire team sitting outside during a lunch break on a training exercise and the easy grins and laughter on everyone's faces. She did not use words but the meaning was clear: family and Black's absolute delight to be included after ten thousand years of being alone.

*Lion sorry* Blue sounded then. *Lion must sleep.*

"Sweet dreams, Blue," Lance murmured and everyone could feel the resulting pulse of love from the Lion. A moment later her eyes went dark and Black's followed a few seconds after.

"You're really okay?" Pidge asked after a moment, hand tightening on Lance's arm.

"Mhm. Head hurts though."

"Do you think you can walk?" Shiro asked gently. "It'd be a good idea to get you lying down on an actual bed and some fluids in you."

"I don't think so," Lance whispered after a moment as even turning his head on Hunk's chest left his vision reeling.

"I've got you then," Hunk said and Lance felt himself being shifted and then lifted easily into strong arms, his head tucked up against the Hunk's shoulder. "Lounge?" he asked to the others and received nods with Coran murmuring he was making a quick stop to the kitchen.

Lance sighed and snuggled into the embrace. It had been a while since Hunk had had to carry him, a whole day, in fact, but this didn't feel like a step backwards. It felt right and safe.

The feelings that he knew were the Lions had quieted in his head too; a combination of Allura's quintessence and the fact they had all powered down. Maybe the distance too? After all he could only talk to Blue when he was within a certain space of her. It hurt too much to think on it right now and he pressed his head further against Hunk.

He felt a little cold too and he shivered, wondering where his quilt had gotten to. He peeked his eyes open but he could only see Shiro walking directly in front of them. They reached the lounge a few minutes later and as Hunk settled him gently on one of the long couches, slightly inclined, Pidge approached with his blanket in hand.

"Cold?" she asked, hanging back for the moment and Lance nodded. She flipped the blanket out, not quite as efficiently given her height, but it fell over Lance and he shivered again as it brushed against his bare arms.

Coran was there then with a thick mug that smelled faintly of mint. "It will help with the headache," he said softly.
Lance weakly shifted his left arm out from under the blanket, limb heavy as though made of rock, and carefully took the mug and brought it to rest against his chest to steady it for a moment.

"So," Lance licked his lips as he stared down into the brown tea, "what… what happens now?"

"Training," Allura said. "For both myself and for you."

"What exactly happened to him?" Keith asked, concern and curiosity rolled into one. "Can he use all of our quintessences now too?"

"No, no," nothing like that Allura said. "At least… I do not think so." She looked to Lance. "May I?"

"Fluids first," Hunk interrupted. At Lance's look he raised his hands, "You need them. And it's nice and warm. Just try a sip?"

"Here, mugs for all," Coran said, drawing the attention away from Lance. "Drink up, Paladins."

Lance took a cautious sip, letting the warm beverage sit on his tongue for a moment and tasting the mint and something close to honey. Odd, but not bad. He made himself swallow it then, relieved when it went down as smoothly as the hot chocolate last night.

It didn't quite help his headache, and he shook his head slightly when Coran pulled a Glornack seed from his robe pocket, but it did settle his stomach a bit. Once he'd drained the mug Hunk took it from his hand and Allura settled herself on the edge of the couch.

She held out both of her hands palm up and without hesitation Lance placed his atop them.

"Quiet please," she instructed. "Lance, deep breaths. Relax." She squeezed his hand, feeling the tension in them. "All will be well."

His breath caught and his eyes flew open, staring at her in such a way she felt the heat rise in her face. "What?"

"N-nothing," he said, giving a small shake of his head and closing his eyes again. "Just… Blue said the same. Before," he bobbed their hands.

"I see," she said in understanding. She gave his hands another reassuring squeeze. "I will be careful, I promise."

She sank herself then into her own quintessence, feeling slightly more drained from earlier but otherwise no negative effects. Her eyes lifted to Lance's form and beautiful blue lapped about his frame. She extended her own to lightly brush it and the blue rose to meet it with a joyful laugh.

Several dark splashes still remained but they did not seem to be growing. There was a new one though, quivering in a rich indigo that rested right by his head and she brushed it with her own quintessence. She could not read thoughts or minds but she could touch on emotions thanks to her own pink element and at this contact she could feel a question of… self? She soothed the dark spot with her own, assuring it that all was well.

She could not sense any other color, not even a flicker. She let out a tiny sigh of relief. This, at least, she understood. He was just like herself now; bonded with the Lions. Nothing close to the insanity that Keith had wondered on, as though he was Voltron himself. *That* would have been too much for certain.

Her eyes skimmed to the other Paladins. They were not connected physically to her so she could not
see their actual quintessences, but she could detect a color in all of their souls. All was as it should be and she released another breath and then gently surrendered Lance's hands.

"Just blue quintessence," she told him as he opened his eyes. "The connection the Lions made with you did not affect your quintessence at all. You are still you, Lance," and based on the sharp little inhale she had guessed right from the spot she had observed. "Blue is still your Lion and you are her Paladin. None of that has changed.

"From what I can gather," Allura said, "the barrier created has literally connected you to each of the Lions. Myself and Blue will help you learn to control those links so they do not overwhelm you and so you can focus on your own Lion. Not today though. You are exhausted and the Lions have shut off following the barrier, although their powering down should be easing the feedback in your mind. How is it? Does your head still ache?"

"It's better," Lance shared. "Still hurts."

Allura hummed sympathetically. "You did just have the five most powerful beings in the universe inside that small head of yours."

"I think you mean his big head," Pidge teased, a carefulness to it but Lance cracked a smile, relieved that such a comment didn't stir any hurt and that Pidge felt comfortable enough to make it.

"His skull shape is not all that large," Allura frowned. "Is it considered abnormal by human standards?"

At that Keith did snicker and Hunk let out a small laugh.

"It's an expression, Princess," Shiro clarified.

"Ah, I see," she nodded. "In any case what occurred was no small feat." She patted Lance's hand. "Only someone with an incredibly strong spirit could have managed. You amaze me, Lance. Truly."

A warm flush spread across his cheeks and he ducked his head down.

"But what does the barrier do?" Pidge questioned. "Is it going to keep Haggar out?"

"I believe so," Allura said. "It is the same as the barrier I was hoping to create, just using the Lions quintessence rather than your own. If I am correct, it will not allow any outside quintessence interaction not associated within the formed circle. I would imagine there would be a negative consequence if anyone else were to try."

"We should test it," Pidge said, inquisitive eyes more bright without the cover of glasses. "To make sure."

"But," Allura tapped a finger to her lips, "all of us are linked to Lance now. Except for…"

Every head in the room slowly turned to look at Coran, sitting elegantly on one the ottomans and a cup of tea in hand.

"Oh dear," the advisor muttered.

"No," Lance protested, sitting forward. "No." His eyes locked with Coran's. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I do not wish for such either, my boy," Coran said gently, "but Number Five is right. We must
know what we are dealing with." He straightened. "I will assist in any way I can."

Allura's brow furrowed. "Coran possesses orange quintessence, the element of light and healing. I do not feel right using such an essence in this way."

"It is all right, Princess," Coran smiled. "Truly. However..." a sheepish expression crossed his face. "I have no idea how to actually use it."

"I can draw up a rune circle," Allura thought aloud, "meant to connect with another's quintessence. It is how I used to practice reaching the Astral Plane before I could center myself. It should take but a few dobashes."

"While you complete that," Shiro rose, "how about I go prepare some breakfast?"

"You?" Hunk asked, hoping the disbelief didn't show in his face and Keith couldn't quite suppress his choke as he recalled the last time Shiro had tried to feed them other than reheating already made proven edible items. He could still taste the sour pear.

"Keith will help me," Shiro grinned.

Hunk immediately relaxed even as Keith tensed, recalling Shiro's words from earlier that morning.

"Something warm please," Pidge requested, while Coran asked for another pot of tea. Lance didn't say anything, eyes already closed and head resting back on the couch arm.

"Up for the challenge of guiding me around the kitchen," Shiro asked, eyes soft with understanding as he'd seen Keith stiffen, "or do you want to close your eyes for a bit too? I know you're tired."

Keith realized he was being given an out if he really didn't want to talk and that knowledge quelled the worst of the butterflies in his stomach. Because just like when they'd first met Shiro was respecting his boundaries and wouldn't push if he really was uncomfortable.

But, he sighed, this wasn't going to go away by ignoring it. And Shiro would understand. He always had.

He clambered to his feet too from where he'd sunk down on the floor. "Fine. I'll make sure we aren't poisoned."

"You're the best, Keith," Hunk called out and it pulled a small smile to his face. Shiro childishly stuck his tongue out at the Yellow Paladin for the jab to himself and Keith felt his shoulders relax even further.

Shiro said nothing as they made their way to the kitchen and remained quiet as Keith directed him to a bowl of pea pods that actually tasted eerily close to raisins when shucked. He went for the pink and green speckled grain that was close to oatmeal and sweetened well with the alien sugar. Hunk had pointed it out to him yesterday on his tour of the kitchen and Keith remembered it because of the odd colors.

Keith set to filling a pot with water and after putting it on the stove turned around to the other side of the counter to help Shiro with the raisin pods.

"What do you want to know?" Keith asked after a few moments, keeping his eyes firmly on his work.

"Whatever you feel comfortable sharing," Shiro answered quietly. "This isn't an interrogation. We
don't have to talk at all. I'm just... concerned. By what I saw in the mindmeld."

Keith bowed his head further. Of course Shiro hadn't forgotten that.

"I know we haven't ever really... talked about things from... from then," Shiro said gently and Keith winced. "And we don't have to now, if you don't want to. But Keith... I saw that memory and I just... It's still affecting you. It's still hurting you. After all this time..."

And it terrified Shiro, if he was being honest. Back when he'd first learned of the mindmelding they would have to do form Voltron and they had all subsequently connected, he had not been surprised when Keith had been the first to slam up a mental wall. And Shiro had not pursued, had respected Keith's privacy. The only parts he'd ever gleaned of Keith's foster home life had been in very small, very brief anecdotes Keith would sometimes bring up before clamping up and abruptly changing the subject, and then what he had learned from Keith's file with the agency and the quiet, mumbled confirmations Keith had made as paperwork had been completed to turn him from a ward of the state to a ward of the Garrison.

Clearly though the lingering memories, the nightmares from those few years though were not as forgotten, as buried as Keith would have liked. Shiro had felt his fear, his terror, and it had been as fresh as if it had happened that day instead of years and years ago. He hated to see Keith in any kind of pain and now that he knew that those feelings were still there...

"I just want you to know that you can talk to me about anything," Shiro finished softly. "No matter what else is happening I will always be here for you. I'll always listen. It's of course up to you but I'm here, if you want to talk."

There was a long pause then that continued to stretch and Shiro let out a tiny internal sigh. He'd known it was a long shot, but he wanted to put the offer out there. He knew Keith knew that Shiro would always be there to listen, but sometimes a reminder was a good thing, especially after all they had recently been through.

"It was a long time ago," Keith muttered and Shiro started in surprise, eyes flicking towards Keith, before he turned them back to the bowl of pods. "Three years maybe before I met you." He shelled another raisin, watching it drop into the bowl. "First time foster family. Money issues. Thought I'd be the solution."

Shiro didn't interrupt but his expression darkened, running the numbers. That would put Keith at eleven, maybe twelve?

"They had twins, few years older than me. They didn't like me much. Thought I was intruding on their family. They..." his hands stilled. "One night they dragged me out of bed and tried to lock me outside in the shed to scare me. In January."

Keith winced and Shiro took a calming breath himself. "I managed to get away," Keith mumbled. "Tried to run back to my room and lock the door. They were faster though and I couldn't keep them out. So I..." he gave an uncomfortable roll of his shoulders. "I pulled my knife on them. Had it hidden under my bed. I just wanted them to back off but I cut one of them when he tried to get the knife. Nothing bad; a scratch on his hand."

Keith hung his head. "They got their dad. You saw that. He..." Keith winced. "Well, he wasn't happy."
"Did he hurt you?" Shiro couldn't stop the question even though he already had the feeling he knew the answer. Such a memory would not have still had the same level of fear without some sort of repercussion and, Shiro's hand clenched again, he knew Keith had had more than a few abusive homes.

Keith gave another uncomfortable twitch. "Belted me," he finally admitted. His hands clenched at the remembered pain and it was a miracle he hadn't scarred.

"And the agency didn't do anything?" Shiro's voice broke. He knew they hadn't, it hadn't been until Keith's last caseworker that things had changed, but Keith had been a child and they turned a blind eye to that?

Keith shook his head. "He was within his rights. And you know my file. I was always the aggressor and… and they never listened." His voice broke on the last word and he blinked rapidly to clear away hot tears.

"Keith…"

"Got sent back to the group home. Never saw them again," Keith finished quickly, hands clenched white on the counter and raisins forgotten. "The end."

Shiro maneuvered himself around the counter and pulled the smaller boy into a gentle hug. "I'm sorry," he murmured, feeling a stifled sob shake Keith's shoulders.

"'s not your fault," came the muffled response.

"I'm sorry you went through that," Shiro clarified gently. "And I know you don't like talking about it, so I appreciate you telling me." His embrace tightened. "This past week has opened my eyes to a number of things, but one of the biggest is that it really does help to share if something is hurting you. And I know, as hard as it was, talking with you about the…” he swallowed thickly, "the arena, it did help."

"Really?" Keith sounded unsure and voice still choked.

"Mhm. Lance isn't the only one who is learning to not keep everything bottled up. It's hard to share those things. Believe me, I know. But I feel better, and know I can be a better leader now."

"You're already a great leader."

Shiro chuckled. "I appreciate it. But I still have a lot to learn." He sobered. "A lot to process. I've been avoiding my memories because I'm afraid of what I'll find. Lance has shown me though that I have to face those fears. That I can't let them control me. So… so after everything is resolved with Haggar I'm hoping you can help me start."

Keith's arms reached up then and circled around Shiro's lower back. "Anything," he whispered. "I'm… I'm here for you too, Shiro."

"Thanks, buddy," Shiro whispered, leaning forward slightly and placing a kiss atop the dark head.

A harsh sizzle cut into the air then and Keith practically jumped out of the embrace and to the stove where the pot of water he'd set to boil began to overflow and Keith adjusted the heat before it could anymore.

Shiro watched as normally steady hands shook ever so slightly as they poured some type of mixture into the pot and then stirred vigorously. This wasn't over yet.
"One last question," he said quietly, returning to shucking the remaining raisins. He could only see the back of Keith's head but it inclined ever so slightly.

"Why that memory?"

His eyes landed on the knife that was attached to Keith's belt and as if feeling it Keith gently touched the hilt before turning back around.

"This was my mom's," he said quietly and Shiro's eyes widened. Keith never spoke about his mother, other than to briefly mention once that he had never known her. "My dad gave it to me before..." he trailed off and then shook his head. "I used to keep it hidden because I was afraid it would get taken away since it was a weapon. But it's all I had left. From... from either of them.

"I had to use it though. Not on anyone," Keith quickly clarified, looking up before down again. "Just to scare the kids at the home so they wouldn't come after me."

Shiro gave a slow nod. Keith had been a scrawny kid, still was rather small. He'd have been an easy target for bullies, especially with his own penchant for angering quickly and giving them the rise they wanted.

"Kept it under my pillow," Keith continued, facing the stove again and stirring the mixture. "Trained myself to reach for it first thing. The kids never tattled on it, but after that time the agency confiscated it and I had to steal it back and then had to hide it permanently after. But it kept the worst of it away while I had it."

He didn't say what had happened after he'd stopped pulling it and Shiro didn't push on that wound. Not today.

Shiro took a deep breath, treading carefully. "I understand why you would want to have that back then but... why now?" Why now when the only people who would be trying to wake him were his friends? Shiro understood keeping it close for the comfort its memory likely brought, but to still have such a reaction when he'd been out of the foster home for going on four years now...

"Habit?" Keith shrugged.

"You didn't have it at the Garrison," Shiro pointed out. He'd definitely have remembered during the few months Keith had spent in his room before getting housing of his own if he'd had a knife pulled on him.

"Kept it in my drawer in a pair of socks," Keith replied. He ducked his head. "I... That was the first time I didn't need it Shiro. I... you... You made me feel safe." Pink was highlighting his cheeks at the admission and Shiro felt his own heart warm.

But then...

"And after?" he asked quietly. "When you switched to your own quarters?"

"I put it back under my pillow," Keith admitted. "I... I know it's stupid, but even at the Garrison I... I didn't always feel... safe."

"It's not stupid," Shiro said quietly, although it was sad. It hurt him to know that Keith had fallen back into that habit as somewhere as safe as the Garrison, where Shiro was on campus even it if was the officers' dorms a building over.

It was a dangerous habit then and it was still one now.
"I hate to suggest this, but it might be for the best if you stored it elsewhere while sleeping," Shiro said slowly and Keith's eyes widened in betrayal. "I would never want to deprive you of it," he added quickly. "Especially if it makes you feel safe. But Keith, your reaction is dangerous. Imagine if Hunk or Pidge had come in to wake you earlier instead of me."

And by the sudden whitening of his face Keith had not considered such.

"I know you would never want to hurt them," Shiro continued quietly. "But all it takes is one wrong move. And given from what I've seen you've become closer with the others and they may take that as an invitation to barge in." Shiro knew it happened; Hunk and Lance went in and out of each other's room without even a knock and Lance and even Pidge had become less likely to announce herself when she was excited to share a project with Hunk or a video game attack plan with Lance.

"Maybe under your bed," Shiro suggested, "or on your nightstand. Just... not so easily within reach. No one is going to hurt you here. You know that."

Keith gave a jerky nod. "You're right. You're right." He ran a hand through his hair, gripping the strands tight. "God, what if I'd...?"

"Hey, hey, it's all right. No harm done."

"I could have hurt you," Keith said, voice small.

"But you didn't," Shiro countered, placing a hand on Keith's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "And now you can take the proper precautions to make sure you never do. Okay?"

"Okay," Keith agreed with an exhale. "Okay."

"So," Shiro smiled brightly, bringing them back to their actual purpose to the kitchen, "are we having oatmeal?"

"Something like it. I thought it would be easy on Lance's stomach."

Shiro's smile widened. "Very thoughtful of you. And... can I hazard a guess that you had a chance to speak with Lance?"

"How'd you know?" Keith looked surprised as although he'd told the team about the food goo incident he had not included his own role in being there.

"You seem happier," Shiro shrugged. "Less tense. A... a little more open."

"He called me his brother," Keith said quietly and this time Shiro's eyes widened. "He... he didn't hate me at all, Shiro. Even after all the things I've said. He just hugged me and... and..."

"I'd say I told you so, but I won't."

"You just did," Keith muttered and Shiro laughed. He sighed. "You were right. Like always."

"Not always," Shiro corrected. "But truly, I'm so glad the two of you had a chance to talk and clear the air." He let out a soft sigh of his own. "I hate everything that had to happen to get us all to this point, to recognize ourselves as a family, but..."

"I know," Keith said in understanding. "I know."

They lapsed into a contemplative silence then, Keith focusing on the oatmeal concoction and Shiro grabbed clean bowls from the cabinet (wary this time of the organization system) and placed them
one after the other on the counter next to the drying knives Hunk had lovingly cleaned following some mishap with a… cucumber gum vegetable?

It was true, as hard as it was to acknowledge. Lance was the heart of their team and it had taken that heart getting ripped out and then stomped on and broken for them to really come together, to realize how much they meant to each other. And that spark only continued to grow as they all healed, drawing them together with a love and laughter that had come so close to going out.

They were no longer just a team. They were a family. Together they were going to get through all of this, no matter what was thrown their way.

And then the alarm shrieked.

Chapter End Notes

Huh. Would you look at that. Stuff is happening. Maybe it's just a false alarm…? (Would I do that? Yes. Did I? …no) But hey, excellent timing all around by the Lions since Lance has an (untested) barrier that will hopefully protect him from Haggar. Also, if you're looking for a bit more of my headcanon for Keith's backstory you can find it in Burning Bright/Shining Strong series but otherwise flushed it out pretty well here, as well as over the course of the chapters via various snippets.

Gosh you guys, thank you so much for the love last chapter. It was lovely to see some old returning faces and a bunch of new ones. I really, really appreciate you guys taking the time to leave a comment, no matter how short, to let me know you're here and enjoying the fic. That's all an author really wants. And to those of you who I feel wrote me practically love letters; I love you too.

Lots happening this chapter for sure. I'd love to hear what you thought about it! Please do leave a comment below! You can talk about the whole chapter, your favorite part, freak out with me about what the heck I've just done (you wanted Haggar, remember? You got her!). Please and thank you very much!

Also! I had one amazing reader, the beautiful soul glitteringconstellations, make me an actual soundtrack for this fic. Blown away. You can find the master list and links to to all of the discs (!!!) on her Tumblr here, glitteringconstellations.
"You are certain this will work?" Theodek tried to keep the skepticism from his voice. This plan of the witch's just seemed too… straightforward for a group that had to be as on guard as the Paladins of Voltron.

"You underestimate them," Haggar sneered, floating next to him in the great expanse of space, robe billowing in the currents from his jetpack. "They are soft-hearted fools. They will take the bait."

The Galran commander held his tongue, merely watching his battle cruiser float further and further away. It rankled him that such a piece of technology was about to be blown to bits, but if that was to be the cost of revenge he would gladly pay it.

The witch's idea was simple in execution, but Theodek did admire the lengths to which she had gone in crafting the detail and her level of violence was something to be commended indeed. He had arrived in the hangar at the appointed time and was more than surprised to see a pair of slaves; large ones that nearly reached his own height and girth and skin covered in what looked like shimmering red stones tethered outside the door. Tloáns. He had never seen one in person before as they tended to hide deep deep in their mountains.

Haggar had emerged then from the ship and inclined her head for him to join her. He'd been shocked to find explosives rigged all over the interior of his cruiser, set to go off from a remote signal, and then cloaked with magic to make it appear as though they did not exist at all. The two Tloáns outside – a mother and her adolescent son taken from one of the work camps – had been promised their freedom and return to their home planet if they played their part in Haggar's charade. Otherwise only death awaited.

A dark smile had pulled on the witch's face then and Theodek joined her. Death awaited these chosen souls regardless and he delighted in the false hope she had brought them.

The witch was capable of opening up wormholes using stolen quintessence and Balmeran crystals and they had catapulted into the expanse of space shortly thereafter. Things only got more interesting as they popped out of the wormhole about a twenty minute jaunt to where Haggar had tracked the quintessence.

Without any sort of warning Haggar had driven a magic-infused hand into the male slave's body, shattering crystals and spraying the interior of the cabin with black blood as she wrenched it up and through his chest while the mother screamed silently and strained against the restraints holding her back. He'd collapsed in a silent, unmoving heap.

"He has little time left," Haggar had told her, wiping at the blood that had splattered her purple skin. "Consider this insurance. I will save him if you do as instructed, but otherwise his death is on your hands. " Her smile had sharpened. "You do wish to save him, don't you?"

The mother had sobbed silently and bobbed her head and only then had Haggar returned her speech. Theodek admired the choice. A mother's love was more potent, more desperate, than nearly any in the world. She would do anything to save her son, even if that meant condemning the universe.
He loved it.

He and the witch had exited the cruiser then, which was set on autopilot to bypass the planet the Paladins had anchored themselves in the shadow of; close enough to set off likely proximity alarms but not too close as though to indicate they were aware of the Altean castle.

The cruiser would lure at least two Paladins away, Haggar assured, as they would be unable to ignore a cry for help, but would not send someone without backup nor would they abandon the castle. With that logic two Paladins and the princess would be left aboard the castle along with his target.

He and the Druid would move simultaneously to opposite ends of the ship once the cruiser blew up, hopefully taking two Paladins out with it, and then enter. He was given free rein to do whatever he wished to any enemy he came across, including his brother's murderer, so long as he did not kill the boy until Haggar stripped him of his quintessence.

They were both equipped with the highest cloaking technology the Galra Empire possessed and enhanced with Druid magic making them invisible at their size to reach the castle. Theodek had on a rocket pack to propel him while the witch seemed capable of moving as easily through space as she did upon the floor. It unnerved Theodek just a bit.

Haggar had a hologram screen shining in front of her showing the interior of the cruiser. The alien had been warned that if she were to veer off course that Haggar would not hesitate to end it immediately and the creature had been too scared to ask how. Then again, Theodek shuddered, even had the cruiser not been rigged to explode he had no doubts the Druid was capable of doing something even from this distance.

The Tloán was with her son on the floor, holding him in her arms and openly sobbing, small crystals forming and running down her face to clink to the floor. She was well within range of the console though for when the Paladins reached out to the ship.

Which could be ten dobashes or forty. Theodek twitched, readjusting his grip on his sword.

"We wait," Haggar said in answer to his movement. "It will not be long now."

"And if they do not bite?"

"They will." She sounded so sure of that and Theodek gave a curt nod.

"Patience, Commander," she smiled darkly. "All good things to those who wait."

xxx

The quiet peace of the lounge was shattered by a shrill alarm that had Allura surging to her feet and Coran unconsciously stuffing the rune circle the princess had been showing him into his robe pocket and retrieving his tablet in the same motion, while Hunk and Pidge drew their bayards. Lance moaned at the pitch, ravaging his headache even more.

"It's the proximity alarm," Coran said, flipping his tablet around and shutting off the sound although a single teal light still pulsed in the corner. "The farthest setting."

"Galra?" Allura demanded, coming to view the display for herself.

"Unable to determine yet," Coran said. "We need to get to the bridge for a visual. It's moving in our direction, but slowly. Not actively firing upon us, at least."
"At least," Pidge muttered, wishing she had her own tablet but she'd left it behind in her room. Her fingers twitched in both frustration and a bit of fear as this could be it. She looked to Lance, who had pulled himself to sitting. He looked scared, she thought, and in pain. But his gaze was narrowed with determination and the sight of it bolstered her.

They could do this.

"What should we do?" Hunk asked, kneeling next to the couch and holding Lance's left hand in his own, as much to comfort Lance as himself. His stomach was tying itself into knots and he was trying desperately not to puke at the looming unknown.


She was already striding out of the room and Coran tailed behind her, expecting her orders to be obeyed without question.

"You okay to walk?" Hunk asked, turning his focus back to Lance. He knew Lance had been measuring things in steps and now it was his turn. Get Lance up, get to rooms, get dressed, get to bridge. Figure everything else out then. It provided a small sense of calm amongst the brewing storm.

He dearly hoped that it was nothing. An extra large space rock. A random ship just passing by – this was space after all. But they weren't that lucky. The universe had been against them from the beginning and Hunk didn't expect it to cut them a break now.

"Yeah," Lance nodded, although he winced at the action.

He pushed back the blankets with a shiver and carefully maneuvered himself to standing. He would have fallen though as black spots rushed to his eyes had Hunk not been prepared and caught him around one side. Pidge hurried to his other and helped brace him up.

"Yeah, that would be a 'no'," Pidge grunted.

"Sorry," Lance whispered, head hanging. He'd honestly thought he'd be all right, but clearly not. The sudden ache though was dulling again as vertigo faded away.

"Stop saying sorry."

"Lo siento."

Pidge growled at that, but at Lance's low laugh she found herself grinning.

"Seriously though, stop apologizing for stuff like this. It's not your fault."

"Can you walk if I support you?" Hunk cut into their little debate. "Or would you prefer if I carried you?"

"I can walk," and there was a stubborn note in the words. It made Hunk smile despite his own fears.

Pidge relinquished her hold and instead kept her bayard drawn, katar ready to strike at a moment's notice, as they made their way out of the room and back to their rooms.

Her room was first and while Lance and Hunk waited in the hall outside Pidge scampered in and retrieved a set of under armor as well as her actual armor (which she forced some upon Hunk to carry) and Matt's glasses. They made their way then to Hunk's room, which unlike Pidge's was clear
of clutter and Hunk helped Lance settle on the box spring on his bed frame.

"No looking," Pidge warned them, retreating to change inside Hunk's closet after giving the Yellow Paladin his own suit, earning a huff from Lance and a more sincere, 'I promise' from Hunk. Hunk himself stripped out of his pajamas in the main room and set about pulling on his under armor. He could feel his hands trembling as he buckled on his leg braces and was surprised no one had called him out on his heartbeat.

When he looked up from his braces though he caught Lance's eyes, which were dark with regret.

"Lance?"

"This is my fault," he whispered.

"Lance, no. We went over this, remember?"

"You're shaking," Lance observed, voice small.

"I am," Hunk said, coming to sit next to Lance and putting an un-armored arm around him. "I'm scared, true. But that is in no way your fault."

Pidge poked out of the closet, hauling her breastplate out with her. "What he said." Her voice softened. "We're a team, Lance. We're in this together. Remember what Shiro said?"

"Which thing?" Lance asked, although there was a hint of a smile in the words.

"He does say a lot of wise things," Hunk chuckled.

Pidge inclined her head in acknowledgement. "The one about us being a team and if Haggar comes after one of us she comes after all of us."

"That was a pretty good one," Hunk said. "You know, we really need to write these down. Shiro-isms. It'd be a bestseller for sure."

Lance lightly cleared his throat, torn between wanting to contribute to the conversation but at the same time feeling a little embarrassed. But as Pidge and Hunk turned his eyes to him he said, "Do you remember those 'what would Jesus do?' bracelets? I... when I was with the... the Galra I asked myself a lot what would Shiro do. Thought maybe when it was over I should make a bracelet."

"That's brilliant," Pidge cackled and Hunk snorted out a laugh too.

"You know though," Hunk said, coming down from his mirth. "I think there's a better bracelet instead. Not that Shiro isn't beyond amazing and all, but I think we all should have a 'what would Lance do?' one."

Lance felt his cheeks heat up. "What?"

"I agree," Pidge smiled, plunking onto the bed on Lance's side.

"Wh-why?" Lance stuttered, face growing redder. He didn't think they were teasing him, but...

"Because you," Hunk squeezed his shoulder, "remind all of us of what's good in the world. Your compassion and hope and love and trust... that is what we should always remember and live by. And that is what is going to get us through this."

"Although leadership and tactical skills are a good plus too," Pidge laughed. "But from what I
remember of our good old Garrison days we had a pretty good leader there too, didn't we Hunk?"

"Yeah, even if he did call himself 'the tailor'."

Lance was not sure how his face hadn't burst into flames yet and he pressed it against Hunk's shoulder to hide it. "You guys," he mumbled into the rough shirt.

"Nothing but the truth, hermano," Hunk said gently.

"Gracias," he sniffled, pulling his face free.

"Just give me a minute to finish and we'll go to your room," Hunk said, standing up to pull on his chest plate. "Your bayard is still on your bed and you could use a pair of shoes."

"Shoes?"

Lance glanced down at his sock-clad feet.

"Yeah, just in case. You won't slip so easily that way."

Pidge raised a hand. "I attest to that. It is not fun. Rather painful, actually, if you hit a wall."

True to his word Hunk finished in under a minute and then carefully helped Lance to standing. His hold wasn't as comfortable this time with armor digging into Lance's side, but upon trying to take a step on his own power his legs wavered and his head pounded so it was Hunk's way or he wasn't moving.

"We'll find out what's going on and then get you something to eat," Hunk said, pausing in front of Lance's room as Pidge hit the open button. "That should help with the dizziness. And don't say sorry," he cut in as he felt Lance's jaw open. "You just had a bunch of Lions bouncing around inside your head. It's pretty amazing these are all the symptoms you're showing."

"What was it like?" Pidge asked as Hunk once more helped Lance sit on a bed and he retreated to his closet to grab sneakers. "Could you understand all of them? Did you see their colors? You were glowing, you know. Did—"

"Pidge," Hunk cut in with an exasperated sigh.

"Sorry, sorry," she held her hands up.

"It was… busy," Lance frowned. "Like… like being in an elevator with a bunch of people and everyone is yelling what floor they want all at the same time."

"That's pretty specific," Hunk commented.

"Blame Green," Lance muttered. "She only spoke in numbers."

"Yeah, binary," Pidge nodded. "She'll press it on in calculations sometimes, but we don't really 'talk.' Not like you and Blue." A sad expression crossed her face at that, as she honestly doubted she ever would be capable of speaking to Green like Lance and Blue did. Her and Green had a great relationship but it had nothing on what Blue meant to Lance and vice-versa. She wasn't jealous though. She was so happy that Lance had that. That Blue had him. "So," she coughed lightly, "you heard Green? And the others?"

"Yeah. Well, heard their feelings and the like. Some stronger than others." He shuddered at the reminder, for as altruistic as the Lions intent was and how grateful he was to them for what they had
done, it had hurt. It was a different kind of pain than what Haggar and Theodek had put him through, but that didn't mean it was less. At least this one was done with good intentions and that was ultimately what got him through it, especially when Black's gasping space and stars had nearly swallowed him whole.

Hunk was pulling his shoes on then and patted his foot gently. "You okay?"

Lance sighed. "Yeah. It's still just a lot to process. And my head really hurts."

"I know," Hunk said sympathetically.

"Do you think it worked?" Lance asked quietly.

"Hopefully we won't have to find out," Pidge said seriously. "But yes, I do. I can't believe we didn't think of them in the first place, really."

"I'm not," Hunk said, tying up Lance's last shoe. "Just because they have power doesn't mean they'd know all of that delicate stuff."

"Black only found out because Blue told her," Lance said, accepting a navy zip-up Hunk held up from his closet that had deeper pockets than his normal jacket; perfect for his bayard. "So if she hadn't said anything..."

"Glad she did," Hunk smiled. It fell a second later though. "All of the Lions are out of commission now though, right? They used up all of their power and need to recharge."

"Not good," Pidge muttered. "Not your fault," she said, heading off Lance as she sensed the apology coming.

"Come on, let's find out what's going on," Hunk said, offering Lance a hand up and then putting a protective, steadying arm about his lower back. "Hopefully this is all nothing."

When they reached the bridge Shiro and Keith were already there, also in armor. There was also a tray of bowls and spoons with a pot of space oatmeal and sides of raisins and sugar and a pitcher of water that Keith was digging into. Coran too had a bowl in hand while he conversed with Allura and Shiro over the screen.

Hunk steered Lance to the food and helped him to sit down on the floor. To his relief Lance reached out to serve himself and gave a small nod of thanks as Keith pushed the solo steaming mug in his direction, as they had all observed that hot beverages seemed to be best for now.

"One bowl," Hunk cautioned as Lance ladled the concoction. He got a small nod of acknowledgement.

"What's happening?" Pidge asked. She normally wouldn't have an issue with interrupting the adults of their group, but this wasn't some typical mission and she did not want to break them from their concentration.

"They're still figuring it out," Keith said, swallowing his last bite. "It's definitely some type of spacecraft but it is the only one out there and it isn't actually coming towards the castle."

"Well, that's good," Hunk said. "Right?"

"It's not outright attacking at least," Keith acknowledged. "Doesn't mean it won't."
"Have we established communication?" Pidge asked and Keith shook his head.

"Not yet. They aren't broadcasting a signal and we aren't responding since we're cloaked."

"I've got a visual coming up," Coran announced then and a tick later the vast expanse of space was projected on the main screen and in it was the small form of a cruiser.

Lance felt his stomach bottom out. That was a Galran ship. His spoon clattered on the floor, sharp ringing startling them all out of their stunned silence.

"Fuck," Pidge cursed, stepping in for a closer look and Shiro didn't even reprimand her.

"Could it be a scout?" Allura asked, hands clenching around one another.

"Wrong type of ship," Shiro muttered. "That's a battle cruiser."

"But on its own?" Pidge sounded skeptical.

A new beep blared on the bridge and Coran hurried to shut off the sound even as he said, "They have a communication beacon activated. It's coded as a call for help."

"A call for help?" Allura repeated.

"This seems like a trap," Keith growled, arms crossed.

"What do you want to do, Princess?" Coran asked. "They're going to be outside our range in three dobashes unless we hail them."

"It is odd that they would leave if they were trying to attack," Shiro mused. "We're hidden here. We could easily ignore it and they'd be none the wiser."

"What… what if someone really needs help?" Lance asked quietly. He knew it could be a trap. It could be Haggar. But… it didn't feel right to ignore a call for assistance. If they started now then would this be how they treated ever distress beacon going forward? They couldn't do that; not if they wanted to save the universe.

Hunk squeezed his shoulders and Lance leaned back into the touch. He felt like a jumble of knots but he knew they couldn't avoid this. They were the Paladins of Voltron, the defenders of the universe. If they didn't help then who would?

"We are fully hidden," Pidge said carefully. "Invisible to outside eyes, the shields are hiding any infrared signatures and our communications are completely down. There's no physical way they could have tracked us."

"Black is offline too," Shiro put in. "And even before that she told me she's severed her connection with Zarkon. He isn't tracking us through her anymore."

"Which could mean this ship is just happening to pass thorough here, randomly, no coincidence whatsoever," Coran said, although there was heavy doubt in his voice. He could see another ship but a Galra cruiser?

"Can we hear their emergency transmission without giving our position away?" Allura asked, biting her lip. For it went against her nature to avoid helping others, but she would not, could not, endanger her family.

"I can do it," Pidge said, already heading to the console. "Just give me a dobash."
Her hands flew over the keys while everyone remained respectfully silent. Hunk tried to press the mug of tea on Lance, who weakly shook his head. He felt like he was going to throw up.

"Okay, done," Pidge hit another keystroke. "Ready?"

"Please," Allura inclined her head and Pidge accepted the emergency broadcast.

"—please, my s-son... oh, please, is anyone there?" Sobbing sounded then and an odd plinking noise. "Pl-please. Can anyone hear this?"

Pidge lowered the volume then, keeping the distressed sounding alien on in the background.

"That is not a Galran," Allura said quietly. "That sounds like a mother. In pain." She looked around at each member of the team, landing lastly on Lance. "What are your thoughts?"

"I don't like it," Keith said, eyes narrowed. "It's too much of a coincidence. And trying to play on our emotions like that?" He shook his head. "No."

"We need to help her," Lance countered, heart in his throat at the declaration. "We… we can't abandon her. Not if she really needs help."

"I'm with Lance," Hunk said, earning a grateful if nauseated looking smile.

"I don't know," Pidge whispered, hugging herself. "The Galra shouldn't have been able to track us to attempt a trick like this but… what if they did? What if this is a trap? But then…" She glanced to Lance, recalling their earlier conversation. "If someone really is in trouble and hurt…"

"If we were to hail them," Shiro said slowly, "can we pull up a video connection? See what their situation really is?"

Coran nodded. "Yes, Number One. We will be announcing our presence then but we can still remain cloaked and Number Five's program can redistribute our signal so they can't pinpoint us exactly. However, we can only receive video once the other party has accepted our audio signal."

"I do agree with Keith in that I do not care for this situation at all," Allura said. "That said, I cannot ignore a plea for help. I will further add that the castle has recharged and I can wormhole us immediately away should this be revealed as anything what it appears. So… are we all in accord with extending a transmission?"

"Do it," Shiro said as he received nods about the room and Keith inclined his ever so slightly, mollified with the wormhole exit strategy.

Coran typed in a few lines and then pressed a button, lighting the outgoing transmission line in green for live.

Allura swallowed thickly and then held her head high. This was either going to help one of the many universe inhabitants she had sworn to protect… or she was going to put her entire family in danger.

"Hello," she called. "We have received your emergency signal. How might we assist you?"

And outside the castle in the endless expanse of space two pairs of yellow eyes lit up with dark joy.
Whoops. They fell right into that one. Good job, Haggar. She knows they can't resist a call of help. Also, for those who have picked it up, Haggar seems to channel Mother Gothel throughout this story. What can I say; I adore them both. Also, got that WWSD bracelet back in there with a cute little twist. Can I get an "awww?"

I apologize to those whom I did not respond to reviews for last chapter. I've been super sick all week. Lo siento. Please know though that I greatly appreciate them and reading them has been a highlight of my week.

Thank you to all of those who left a comment last chapter. I truly appreciate them and your support of both myself and this fic. Even just a small comment about what you liked about the chapter or a favorite part or a note of encouragement can really brighten up an author's day. So please do leave one below before you head out. Thank you very much!
"Oh, blessed be. Oh. Oh," sobbed the alien on the other end of the transmission. "Th-thank you. Thank you thank you thank you."

Lance felt the lead in his chest releasing at the sheer sound of relief emitting from the speaker. Someone was in need of help. And if they'd ignored her…

"How might we assist you?" Allura repeated, not identifying herself as was custom. She would assist but precautions were still vital.

"My son. Please, help my son. He is… he is…" There was the sound of that odd plinking again, like marbles clunking into one another. "He is hurt," she gasped out. "There is blood… so much blood…"

"How was he wounded?" Allura kept her voice even. For these aliens were in a Galra battle cruiser and that was not something one just wandered into.

"In the escape. We… we were miners for the Galra. My son, oh, my son…"

"Are you able to connect to a visual feed?" Allura asked. "My doctor can attempt to assess the damage from here."

"D-doctor? Yes! Yes. Just let me…" Shuffling sounded then and a muttering too low for the comms to pick up.

"She doesn't seem familiar with the ship," Hunk said quietly. Lending proof to the idea of some idea of an escape and a commandeered ship. He felt himself relax more fully too.

"Ah!" A second later a small beep sounded and Allura nodded at Coran, making sure that only the two Alteans were in the frame and the humans were off to the side.

The alien that looked back at them seemed to be covered in red gemstones that covered a rounded head that was nearly oval in shape. Black eyes with a pinprick of red blinked up at them and as the watched a small red stone seemed to drip away and clink its way down her jeweled face. That explained the noise at least.

"A Tloán!" Coran gasped in actual surprise.

"Please," she pleaded. "Please. Help my son." She gestured behind her where a figure lie on the ground, head propped up on what looked like a toolbox and a stained red blanket covering his chest and more shimmering dark red liquid on the ground around him.

Lance had to look away from the sight, pressing his face against Hunk's shoulder and the Yellow Paladin brought an arm up with a soothing murmur.

"We shall help you," Allura nodded and the Tloán let out another sob of relief, "but first I must know how your son was injured."
"We stole a cruiser during a mine inspection," the alien rambled. "My son, he has been planning it for pylons. We just wanted to go home," her voice broke on the last word. "We have been slaves to the Galra for decades. But he... he..." she turned away from the camera to look at the still form before turning back to the camera. "Please! Please help him. He will not live much longer."

"May I see the wound?" Allura inquired. "My doctor," Coran raised a hand in a hello, "will need to see it before we can move him."

"Yes, yes, of course." She scurried over and with tender care pulled the bloodstained blanket back, revealing a mass of shattered red stones that revealed black skin beneath. It stretched, based on the missing gems, from his navel and cut up through his long torso and into his chest.

Allura was honestly surprised he was not dead given how long they must have travelled already, but she supposed that was the strength of Tloáns, known for their brute force. Coran caught her eye and gave a small nod. They could likely still save him if they got him into a pod quick enough.

"What is your name?" she asked then.

"Amalia," the alien said, replacing the blanket over the wound and murmuring something to her unconscious child. Allura's heart clenched. She would not allow for another parent and child to be ripped apart by the Galra.

"Amalia, we will help you," the Tloán pressed a trembling hand to her mouth. "Please, halt your ship and I shall send a team to retrieve you and your son. Keep the transmission open until we arrive, but please, tend to your son now."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you."

Allura shrunk the screen down to a small section of the console and turned to the Paladins. "We have a rescue to commence."

"I'll go," Shiro volunteered, but Allura shook her head.

"No. I need you to remain here." If this was indeed a lure, not that she thought it was, she could not afford to have Shiro stranded outside the castle as he was their best chance against at least stalling Haggar. "Pidge, Keith, you two will go. Amalia should easily be able to lift her son so size will not be an issue."

"The Lions are out of commission," Pidge reminded Allura, who pursed her lips.

"Take the supply pod," she finally said.

"That thing has no weapons at all," Keith bristled. "It's a sitting duck."

Allura cocked her head at the phrase but did not ask for an explanation, sensing from his tone that the swordsman was not pleased. "It is all we have right now. And there are no other ships in the area."

"They could attack," Keith gestured at the screen where Amalia was kneeling over her son. He wanted to help people, he did. But something about this was screaming wrong to him and he'd always trusted his instincts before. This didn't feel right but he couldn't explain why and Allura wasn't going to take "a feeling" as a good enough answer.

"Coran, can we do an infrared scan from this distance?" Pidge asked. "Make sure there's no one else aboard. Then we just make sure no one touches any controls while we're heading over."
"On it," Coran said. "Number Five, could you reconfigure the output please? Number Two, I could use your assistance as well."

"You okay?" Hunk asked Lance quietly, receiving a nod against his arm before Lance pulled back. Hunk gave his shoulder a quick squeeze before he clambered to his feet and went to assist.

Keith joined him then instead as Shiro volunteered to prep the pod and Allura maintained a watchful eye on the screen. "I don't like this," Keith muttered, slumping into a sit although his eyes belied his relaxed posture.

"They need our help, Keith," Lance said quietly, holding the mug of still warm tea in his hands and letting the heat soothe the trembling in his right. "We can't turn our back on them."

"This doesn't feel off to you?" Keith asked, turning a heated glare on Lance that the other boy had to look away from. "I don't believe in coincidences."

"If… if I was Haggar," Lance winced. "I'd… I'd have done everything to cut any ties to Galra. The fact they're in one of their ships makes me feel better, actually."

"And what if that's what she wanted us to think? She's manipulated us all before. Whose even to say those are real Toes, or whatever Coran called them?"

Lance brought his eyes back up, face solemn. "You… you really think so?"

"I don't know," Keith growled, tugging at his hair in frustration. "They look real. I just… I don't know, Lance. I have a bad feeling but I can't say why. I just do."

"Infrared scanner is running now," Coran called out. A moment later he added, "There are three heat sources aboard the ship" – Keith stiffened – "Two from our Tloáns and one from where I imagine the engine to be and the crystal powering it. No signs of anyone else aboard."

"I guess that's that then," Keith rose to his feet.

"Keith?" Lance hated that his voice came out almost a waver but it turned a bright purple gaze back to him. "Be careful."

"I thought I had nothing to worry about," Keith tried for a smirk.

"Please?" Lance asked quietly, face still serious. "If… if you feel something off…"

Keith's expression softened. "I'll be careful. Promise."

Pidge came over to them then, helmet tucked under her arm. "Ready?"

Keith looked at Lance and at Pidge. "Yeah. Let's go."

He walked away then but Pidge stayed and gave Lance a small smile as she tucked her glasses away and pulled her helmet on. "See you soon, tailor."

"Pidge—"

"I know, I know, be careful. We're just transporting two aliens back in a supply pod of a distance less than a mile, which you know is pretty short in space, with all signs checking out. It's going to be fine. Besides," she tapped her wrist, "this is something my WWWL bracelet tells me I should do."

He felt pink dust his cheeks at the reminder and the "Pidge" he mumbled then had lost its worry. She
was right. There was nothing to be apprehensive of. Keith's uneasiness was just getting to him.

"Keith and I have got this," she promised. "It's going to be a piece of cake."

She had already turned away by then so she missed the sudden paling of Lance's face. He'd said that exact thing before everything blew up in his face.

He shook his head, regretting it as his headache reflared, and then took a deep breath instead. It was nothing. Just silly words that had landed him in trouble once. He'd uttered it how many times about missions? Dozens. And nothing really bad had ever happened before.

But then why did he still have such a foreboding feeling?

xxx

"Docking sequence complete," Pidge breathed, hands shaking for reasons she couldn't quite identify. Things had gone nothing but smoothly and as she'd told Lance, everything was adding up and was going to be fine.

She blamed Keith, who had sat the entire short journey in the pod with his bayard drawn and posture tense. It was like he expected to be open fired on at any moment, but Allura had assured them multiple times over their comms that Amalia was sitting with her son on the floor and no one was reaching for any controls while Coran reported still no other proximity alarms had been dinged before he'd excused himself to go prep the healing pod.

"Let's get this over with," Keith grumbled, still not putting his bayard away as Pidge keyed in the sequence to open the door on the pod and then began to hack open the Galra ship door, as Amalia explained they had dashed in while the door was open and she did not know the code.

"We're helping people, Keith," Pidge said quietly, fingers pausing. "And her son? That could be Lance. It was Lance."

He sighed, going to run his hand through his hair and clunking it instead on his helmet. Pidge's observations made him feel guilty, but it still didn't make the feeling of wrong go away.

"Let's just get them back to the castle," he sighed. "Where we're all safe."

Pidge nodded and a second later the door to the Galra cruiser opened with a hiss. Despite all of their time of fighting the Galra they had never yet been inside any of their battle ships and as they'd anticipated from the feed everything was lit purple. There was a hallway of maybe four of Keith's steps before they entered the main cockpit, which was decently roomy given the size of the ship and where they found Amalia and her son.

Her black eyes seemed to grow large as they stepped in and a new patter of gems clattered to the floor. "We are saved," she whispered.

"Hi," Pidge smiled, lifting a hand in greeting while Keith remained stoic next to her, still holding onto his formed bayard. "I'm Pidge and this is Keith. We're here to escort you to our main ship. We'll just need you to carry your son."

Amalia nodded but made no indication to move quite yet, instead turning her gaze back to the unconscious figure, the blanket even darker then when they'd last seen on screen. Pidge knew he likely didn't have much time.

"We are saved," she repeated, tracing a thick hand on her son's face. "We are going to go home."
Pidge felt tears sting her own eyes. She wanted this for herself. She wanted to find her family, to save them. To go home to where her mom must be gray with worry but would be so, so happy when her family was reunited.

But she couldn't have that right now though. She still had to find her brother and father and even then she wasn't sure she could turn away from her role as a Paladin. Not when the rest of her space family was still out here, fighting. She had tried that once already and she regretted it, even though she hadn't gotten far at all. She would never leave them again.

What she could do though was make this a reality for these two aliens.

"We are saved," Amalia murmured, pressing a kiss to her son's head. "She will heal you now."

"She?" Pidge repeated, slight frown marring her features while next to her Keith inhaled sharply. "Coran is—"

A loud blast of heat and sound cut off the rest of her words. Pidge dimly heard Keith scream her name at the same time something slammed into her and knocked what little breath she had away before the world exploded in dizzying whirl of orange and reds and screams and pain.

And then everything went dark.

xxx

"No!" screamed Allura, lunging forward so fast that her knees created dents in the console. "No!"

The live feed of the interior of the Galra cruiser had flared red and then black while the outside shot of the ship hovering in space now displayed a giant burning mess of fire and scorched metal. Her ears were still ringing from the concussive blast that had echoed across the expanse but it had nothing on the horror flooding through her.

How? How had this happened? They had checked and double checked and accounted for every detail. How? How? This could not be happening. It could not. She blinked as though the scene might change but the image of the husk of the battlecruiser remained wreathed in flames.

Behind her she heard Lance moan long and loud and Hunk's broken sob match it. Shiro, who had been standing next to her, was shaking, eyes wide on the dual screen. A second later he reached across her and slammed his prosthetic down on the call button.

"Keith!" he demanded, voice cracking. "Keith! Pidge! Answer me!"

Only static crackled across the feed.

"No," Allura whispered, tears falling unchecked. "No..."

"Damnit Keith, answer!"

"Princess?" Coran's voice crackled across the in-castle intercom. "I heard an... explosion? Is everything all right?"

"No," she choked out as Shiro continued to scream and plead into the unresponsive communications. "No. It is not. The ship... the ship..." She drew in a deep breath. Composure. Breathe. Focus. "It exploded."

"...I'll be right up," Coran replied, voice deceptively neutral.
Allura turned then to Shiro, who was still desperately trying to get a response.

"Shiro." She place a slender hand atop his metal one, halting him from pressing the button and shook her head ever so slightly.

He looked at her and she sucked in a harsh breath at how broken he appeared in that instant. "They can't be," he whispered, eyes flicking from hers to the screen of the burning ship. "They can't."

"Shiro…"

"They can't be dead!" he burst out, yanking his hand out from underneath her's. "No!"

"This is my fault," came a whisper and Allura whirled to see Lance, huddled in Hunk's arms and looking so, so small. "I did this."

"Lance, no," Allura crossed the expanse in a matter of seconds, dropping heavily to her knees and wrapping her arms about Hunk to sandwich Lance between them. "No. This…” she swallowed thickly. "This is Haggar's doing. She—"

Allura broke off as ice filled her stomach. Haggar. This had been a trap, a diversion. Which meant that this nightmare was still not yet over.

"I'm going out there," Shiro announced, already grabbing his helmet. "I'll find them. I'll…”His prosthetic creaked dangerously.

"You cannot," Allura commanded as Shiro made to leave. "This was a trap," she continued as angry, grieving charcoal eyes turned on her. "Haggar—"

"I don't care!" Shiro screamed and in her arms Allura felt Lance recoil. "Keith is—"

"Shiro!" she barked back, feeling the tears begin anew. "Stop! Look!"

She saw the moment Shiro was able to see past his all-encompassing rage and grief and took in the trembling form of Lance and the visible tear-streaked face of Hunk, who was trying his best to hiccup back his own sobs. She knew how important Keith and Pidge were to Shiro. She knew how angry and desperate and lost he felt in this moment.

But he was hurting Lance with his words.

Not only that, but Shiro was not the only one who had just lost family. Allura blinked back more tears, and hid her face against Lance's back to try and muffle the grief swimming up her throat.

They all had. They had all just lost people precious to them on a mission she had authorized. Guilt threatened to choke her but she couldn’t. Not now. Now they were at war and this was not the time to grieve.

But… she could allow them a few moments. She had to because she was not capable yet of returning to her role of Princess. Right now she was just a girl who had lost her family a second time.

"Oh," Shiro whispered, face falling from anger to a mixture of guilt and sadness, and a few ticks later he was joining their huddled pile, wrapping his own arms about Hunk and Allura from the other side. "Oh, Lance. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's… this isn't your fault."

Lance sniffled, face still buried against Hunk. "But…"

"No," Shiro corrected gently, trying to speak around his own tears. "No. It's not."
"This was a diversion," Allura forcing herself to sound stronger than she felt. She still had the rest of her family to protect. She couldn't… she couldn't lose any more. She had to focus on that right now.

"We must—"

The ground rocked beneath them and a loud blast whited out their hearing for a second time. Alarms began blaring the next instant and the main screen flashed that there had been a breach on the second floor in the third quadrant of the castle.

Allura felt her breath leave her as the cameras adjusted according to reveal a hooded figure stepping through the broken wall and wave a hand to seal the hole with a flare of purple magic. Yellow eyes looked up directly at the camera before a burst of light sped off her fingers and the visual went dark.

"Haggar," she barely breathed the word aloud, as if it might summon the Druid to them.

She was on the ship. She was on the ship.

Lance shuddered again and Allura gave what she hoped was a soothing murmur, before she stood abruptly, expression hardening. Shiro joined her.

"Hunk," she commanded. "You and Lance go to the main hall. See if you can get any of the Lions to come back. And then… then you must leave."

Lance pulled his face free, revealing stained cheeks and still blurred eyes. "What?"

"The castle has been breached," Allura said, yanking on the skirt of her nightgown and ripping it down the side while shrugging off her shawl. "It is not safe. Get to the Lions."

"You c-can't," Lance stuttered. "Allura, Shiro, no. You… you can't fight her. " He couldn't lose them too and if they engaged Haggar… they would die. He could feel it. They could not beat her.

"I'm not fighting her," Shiro snarled, sadness giving way to burning anger and revenge, "I'm killing her." There was a dark promise in those words and any hesitation Shiro might have felt about taking a life – even one as poisoned as Haggar's – was gone. She had kil— she'd hurt Keith and Pidge. She was not getting away alive.

Despite the evidence, despite logic, Shiro still clung to the hope that they both still lived. He couldn't – wouldn't – believe the other. Not Keith. Not Pidge. And right now he could not afford to let himself be distracted by what had happened. There was nothing he could do, for as much as he wanted to board the other supply pod and race out there he knew he couldn't. Not with Haggar here.

No. He had to stay here, protect the family he still had le– no, protect the family that was aboard the castle. Not left. They were all still here. Keith and Pidge, somehow, somehow weren't dead. He had to believe that right now. He'd heard Keith yell Pidge's name. Keith had reacted in some way before the explosion. Shiro wasn't sure what could be done at that point but if there was a way Keith would have found it.

He had to have found it.

"Coran," Allura called down to the infirmary, but the advisor did not respond. Likely already en route back to the bridge. Which would… place him in Haggar's path. Allura could trace it as the witch steadily moved through the ship, a series of dead cameras in her wake.

"We must hurry," she said, ripping off the bottom skirt now to give her even more movement.

"Allura, you can't," Lance pleaded.
Her eyes softened as she met his. "I must." But she did not promise anything of more comfort. She could not offer that. Not when she truly had no idea how they were going to defeat a Druid.

Still, she pulled down a pair of nearly identical staffs, one capped in gold and the other in silver, from where she had stored them yesterday after Shiro’s request to remain armed at all times. The staff wasn’t quite as easy to carry around as the bayards so she had placed both hers and Coran’s on the bridge, assuming that was where they would be when things went wrong.

"Hunk, now," she ordered as both younger Paladins continued to sit, securing the gold one in her right hand holding Coran’s silver version in her left.

He met her gaze and while she could see the grief and fear she also saw the determination that had been rising steadily closer to the surface since this entire ordeal began and he gave her a slow nod. He would protect Lance and despite the circumstances Allura could not stop the swell of pride in her Yellow Paladin. He was hurting and scared, but he was no longer able to give into such things as a child might. He had grown. He had grown so, so much.

"Come on, hermano," Hunk murmured, rising to his feet and pulling Lance up along with him, the lanky boy stumbling slightly with vertigo and he winced at the movement. Allura frowned; his headache had not much improved it seemed.

"Allura, Shiro," Lance tried again, trembling even as Hunk wrapped an arm about thin shoulders. He couldn't let them do this, but he couldn't stop them either.

"Go," Allura said gently. "We will... we will contact you when it is safe."

His lip trembled in response and another bright tear slid down his face. Allura knew they did not have the time, but if this were to be the end... She crossed back to Lance and pulled him and Hunk into a tight hug, burying her own face against Hunk's shoulder.

Shiro was there a moment later, a sob reverberating through his chest as he joined in the hug, pressing a kiss to the top of Hunk's head and hand squeezing Lance's shoulder. "You're going to be okay," he murmured. "Both of you. Do as Allura says. Get to the Lions."

A new alarm sounded then, a piercing wail that indicated one of the emergency doors had just been opened. Haggar was moving closer and closer.

"Go," Allura repeated, stepping out of the embrace with great reluctance, but they had no more time. She turned to Shiro and he nodded back at her, also releasing his hold with one last squeeze to each boy's shoulder.

"Be safe," Hunk whispered to them.

It was just the two of them then a moment later, the alarm still screeching in the background. Another camera screen on the display went dark and Hunk gulped.

"Come on," he said, pivoting and turning Lance. "We have to go."

"We can't just leave," Lance weakly protested even as he allowed Hunk to steer him. "We can't, Hunk. She's here for me. Because of me, Pidge and Keith are... are..."

A sob swallowed his words. Dead. Dead dead dead dead.

Keith had been right. He should have listened. They all should have. Lance had been so sure that they were doing a good thing. Helping out a mom and her son, saving them from Galra's cruelty.
But all he'd done was get his family killed. It was his fault. All of this was his fault.

They should never have saved him.

He should have killed himself the first time. If he had then… then Keith and Pidge would still be alive.

They were dead because he'd lived.

It was his fault.

He became aware that Hunk was talking to him, voice pitched low and he tuned back in."—it's not, I swear it, but Lance we have to go. Lance, come on. Por favor."

Lance came out of the trance and took a stumbling step, knowing Hunk was right. Haggar was here and they had to go. He couldn't let Hunk die too. He had to try. For Hunk.

They'd already fallen into her trap after all. She'd successfully lured two Paladins away and – he skipped over their fate because he could not let fall back down that hole again lest he find himself back on the floor sobbing like he really wanted to because he'd killed Keith and Pidge – and left only two behind, plus whatever fighting force the Alteans had. And now they'd split up again so– he froze then, feet planted so firm that when Hunk took a step forward he nearly toppled him over.

"Lance!" Hunk exclaimed, his hand tightening on Lance's shoulder. "We have to go!"

"We split up," Lance gasped, heart leaping into his throat. Two teams inside the castle. One going to confront Haggar and the other, which would for sure include him, moving in an opposite direction.

But as he'd already thought, Haggar wasn't coming here alone. Theodek would have come with her too. He had sworn revenge and Lance had seen that unbridled rage firsthand. He would be here to take it.

And if Haggar was at that end of the castle then… Then it stood to reason Theodek was at the other.

"Theodek," he choked out, eyes darting about the hallway as though the Galran could appear at any moment.

Hunk paled beneath his tan. "What?"

"Haggar. She's another diversion," Lance said, nearly tripping over his words. "He's h-here Hunk. I know he is."

And while on some fronts the Galran would be easier to fight – he wouldn't be like Haggar using magic and teleportation to move about the field – it was still terrifying. Shiro hadn't been able to best Sendak on his own (although Lance still wondered if that fight could have ended differently) and Shiro was their best fighter.

Him and Hunk? They had no chance.

Zero.

"Lions, now," Hunk said, voice clipped.

"They're not online though," Lance argued even as he stumbled alongside Hunk with a new sense of urgency. He could tell that based on the lack of pressure on his mind. He could feel their faint presences still, a pulsing that still flared if he thought too hard on it, but they were not there.
How would Red and Green react when they found out their Paladins were gone? If they hadn't made the barrier in his mind would they have been able to save Keith and Pidge?

Would they still be alive?

His fault. It was always his fault.

He should have just died.

"Can you wake them up?" Hunk asked, cutting back into his thoughts and Lance realized they'd somehow made it all the way down the corridor without his knowing.

"Wake them up?" Lance repeated dubiously, tongue feeling thick.

"Blue came back when she felt you," Hunk said, turning them into a side corridor that led to the stairwell they needed. "Maybe you can do it again."

It wasn't a maybe, Lance realized. He had to do it again. Somehow. He focused on the sensation of the Lions presence, groaning as the headache expanded, pleading for one of them to wake up.

Nothing.

He was alone in his head.

'Por favor,' he begged silently, projecting the thought. 'Blue, por favor, te necesitamos. Red, Keith te necesitas. Por favor. Please. Please.'

Still nothing.

They had just stepped onto the staircase when another explosion sounded – and sounded close – and only Hunk's quick reflexes stopped Lance from falling down the curving structure although the resulting echo of the blast left his vision going in and out as the headache struck with full force.

"On, get on," Hunk knelt down as the ground gave another shudder and Lance stumbled against the broad back.

Lance wanted to protest – if Hunk was carrying him then he couldn't use his bayard – but Lance doubted he could walk a straight line right now and time was of the essence. He was holding them back with his slowness.

He was going to get Hunk killed too.

He awkwardly maneuvered himself onto Hunk's back, the jetpack and armor making his hold precarious, but Hunk grabbed his legs with bruising force and Lance hung on for dear life as Hunk started bounding down the steps.

"Almost there, almost there," Hunk chanted under his breath. Another blast sounded, even closer, and Hunk stumbled as the ground below them shook.

With a yelp he fell forward and Lance catapulted over his him, barely managing to tuck his arms up to protect his head before he slammed into the metal stairs and rolled, bouncing down the steps.

He couldn't contain the cry as while his elbows and knees took the brunt of the fall his forehead was dashed against the ground and he collapsed on his side when he reached the base, ears ringing anew and black spots dancing in front of his eyes.
"Lance!" Hunk's shout made him moan in distress as it aggravated the ache in his head. Hands descended, cold and impersonal in gloves, on his shoulders and pulled him to sitting although Lance slumped forward almost immediately as the new lower level corridor spun in a dizzying circle and he felt his stomach roll to match it.

"Lance, come on," Hunk sounded panicked and Lance wished he could tell him he was okay, but acid was tickling the back of his throat now and he closed his eyes, hoping it would help everything to settle.

"Okay, okay, I'm going to carry you, okay?" Hands were sliding beneath his knees now and Lance moaned again as pain flared up and he dully wondered if he'd broken something in the fall.

"I've got you, it's okay," Hunk murmured. "Up we go." Lance pressed his forehead against Hunk's chestplate as everything shifted and he swallowed thickly praying he wasn't going to puke. "Estás bien. I've got you." There was a teary quality to Hunk's voice now and Lance whimpered against the armor in both pain and guilt.

Hunk had taken barely two steps when there was a terrible screeching of metal and concussive blast that drove Hunk to his knees and Lance's brain rattled in his skull at the newest impact.

He could feel the bitter sting of smoke and he wrenched his eyes open, blinking against the dark gray cloud billowing out of what had once been an interior wall.

Lance coughed as unlike Hunk he had no helmet to filter out the smoke, but he had a terrible, terrible sinking feeling that smoke inhalation was the least of his worries.

A dark shadow was emerging from the cloud now, silhouette turning from black to purple with a pair of sharp yellow eyes that glowed with a predatory gleam.

"Well, well," Theodek stepped fully into the corridor, huge blaster at his side. "What do we have here?"

Chapter End Notes

So. This was a hard chapter to write. A lot of emotions from a lot of people because yup, I just blew up Keith and Pidge. Before y'all start screaming please note there are no major character death tag warnings on the story. Breathe, everyone. Breathe. That said, hehe, yay! Let the fun begin! We've got a Haggar confrontation between likely the Alteans and Shiro and Hunk and Lance are facing down Theodek.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on how this chapter went. Like I said, it was hard to write. This was easily the one I came back to the most of any previous chapter to make it feel right. Please let me know how you liked it! Thanks much! If you need a little start, you can say you liked _____ part because ____ or something as simple as ____'s line about _______ was your favorite. Little details that you enjoyed make an author super happy too; just let us know you're here, enjoying the story and appreciating our efforts! ♥

And thank you to all of those who left a review last chapter. I really appreciate it!
"Haggar!" Shiro bellowed, prosthetic already glowing purple at his side as he stalked down the corridor Allura had pointed him to. She had gone a different route hoping that she might be able to sneak up behind the Druid while her attentions were on Shiro. And Shiro was more than happy to play the bait.

He was practically vibrating, too angry to be scared at the idea of facing her. Tears kept trying to blur his vision and he blinked them back as he couldn't wipe them away with his helmet in the way.

It just wasn't possible. There was no way they could be gone. Not Keith; who he'd watch grow from a timid, hesitant boy to the fierce, proud warrior and then to a caring, supportive brother and opening himself to the idea of family at long last. Not Pidge; so young, still innocent despite the horrors they'd seen with a wicked sense of humor and burning passion in everything she did. They were too bright, too young to simply just be... gone.

And he could do nothing.

"Haggar!" he screamed out his rage, smashing his prosthetic through a wall and the hole left behind didn't make him feel any better. "Where are you?"

They could be there, floating in space and still alive, but air leaking out of cracked helmets, hurt so badly that they could be saved if they only got to a cryo-pod in time. They just needed someone to get them.

But they had no one to spare and Shiro gritted his teeth in pure frustration. If the Lions were operational maybe, maybe Red would be inclined to retrieve her Paladin herself as she had done in the past. But she wasn't. Shiro was holding onto the hope that Lance would somehow be able to convince one of the Lions to awaken and then he and Hunk could find Pidge and Keith and they would be okay and this ache threatening to drown him would disappear.

He needed to fight Haggar and beat her - kill her - quickly. Only then when she was eliminated and he guaranteed that the rest of his family was safe could he go on a rescue mission.

But to do that he needed the damn Druid to show herself. She should be somewhere in this corridor based on her trajectory.

And speak of the devil. His eyes narrowed as a strolling robed figure came into view, long purple hand trailing along the wall and sending sparks flying in every direction.

"Shiro," she greeted, thin lips widening into a smile.

He let out a wordless scream and charged her, hand flashing in a purple streak to take off her head. It would have, had she not teleported away as she always did, appearing directly behind him. But Shiro would not be fooled by such an obvious tactic now and he blocked her hit, sending the Druid back but she regained her feet without incident.

"Did you enjoy the show?" she asked amicably, easily sidestepping another wild punch. "I certainly
did."

Shiro growled and tried again, coming in low and trying to catch her from below. She merely flickered away with a laugh.

"Two Paladins down, two to go. But…"

She vanished to reappear directly behind Shiro, lips pressed next to his helmet. "I could never part with you, my Shiro."

He whirled around with a roar, but she was already gone and standing several yards away, his arm sliding harmlessly through the air.

She held hers open deceptively unarmed in front of her. "Wouldn't you like that, Shiro? To come back to me? To be my Champion?"

"Fuck you," Shiro swore around the vice squeezing his heart and the anger and grief warring for dominance.

"Perhaps if I were to offer a deal?" she asked, dodging his next attack with a cluck of her tongue. "You and my Lance come with me and I will leave what's left of your team alive. A generous offer, hm?"

"Your words are poison," Shiro snarled.

She chuckled. "I wonder where you might have gotten that idea. Tell me, how is my Lance?" A dark smile formed upon her lips. "I have missed him so."

"You'll never touch him again," Shiro promised, but Haggar merely laughed.

"Because you have done such a good job of protecting your team."

Shiro roared again, charging forward but this time activating the jetpack on his back and closing the distance in a tick. He thought for the briefest moment he might have finally landed a hit as Haggar let out a soft gasp, but with a grin she vanished and then it was hurt turn to gasp as fire seemed to engulf his back and he was sent clattering to the ground with a scream.

"I wonder," Haggar murmured, stalking towards him with a casual grace as he struggled to his knees, "what were the Red and Green Paladins to you, Shiro? Teammates? Friends? Family?" she sneered the last word.

"Shut up!"

"The Green one was quite the nuisance," Haggar smirked, shifting back on the balls of her feet as Shiro surged to his. "Thank you ever so much for offering her up. You have spared me the trouble. Although," she sighed, ducking underneath Shiro's swing and following up with a black ball of energy that sent him smashing through one of the corridor walls and into a large but empty storeroom. "I do regret that I did not get to kill her myself. I would have greatly enjoyed hearing her screams."

Shiro struggled painfully to his feet, breath coming in heavy pants. "Don't… don't you talk about her."

"Then the Red one?" Haggar said, stepping over the new threshold and into the room. "You seemed very protective of him."
Seemed. The word echoed and Shiro bit back the sob at the tense. Seemed. Seemed.

He really was dead.

Keith was dead.

"Touched a nerve, did I?" She shrugged, robe sleeves fluttering. "It matters not what he was, for all he is now is a corpse. If even that."

Shiro swallowed his tears and lifted his head, sparking charcoal eyes meeting luminescent yellow. "I will kill you."

She leered. "I would like to see you try."

Roaring out his challenge, Shiro leapt forward, the pain a distant memory in the back of his head. It had nothing on the agony in his heart and therefore it was not painful at all.

"Come, my Shiro," Haggar whispered as his prosthetic clashed against her purple and black wreathed arm. "Let us dance."

xxx

"Coran!" Allura whisper-shouted his name and to her relief the mustachioed man, still in his sleepwear as well, froze midstep ahead of her.

"Allura!" he called back just as quietly, rushing to her side and hands moving to cup both sides of her face. "You are unhurt?"

She tilted her head for just a moment, drawing comfort from his touch, before her eyes hardened and she nodded. "Yes. Here." She thrust his staff forward and Coran took it into his hands almost reverently.

"Pidge and Keith?" he murmured and she froze, feeling her composure fracture and managed a barest shake of her head, unable to voice it aloud. "Oh," and there was so much grief conveyed in the single syllable that Allura felt tears spring to her eyes.

"Lance?" he asked after a moment, face shuttered now.

"With Hunk," she swallowed thickly. "Heading for the Lions. Shiro is here, engaging Haggar."

As she spoke the ship shook around them and Coran reached out to steady her.

"And what of the Galran commander?"

"The Galran commander?" she repeated. Horror widened her eyes a moment later. "Oh, Alaraan. I… I did not even think…"

"He is with Hunk," Coran said, pressing a firm hand to Allura's shoulder. "We must believe in them. The Druid is our most formidable foe and we must focus on her."

"You are right," Allura nodded. Her eyes narrowed calculatingly. "Haggar will likely be expecting me. She will not be anticipating you. We will use that to whatever advantage we can."

She pursed her lips, steadying herself as the ground pitched again and she heard the dull sound of ripping metal from a corridor over. "I will go first, she decided, "and attempt to engage her with Shiro. When you see an opening…"
Coran nodded and patted his left robe pocket where a blaster rested. He'd picked it up from the emergency weapons vault in the infirmary (there were several in various locations around the ship) after Allura had announced an explosion. "I will take the shot. However, I do not think it will kill her."

"I will take care of that," Allura smiled without any joy. She hoisted her staff more firmly into her hand, the end glowing teal. "You just take the witch down."

Coran bowed. "Yes, Princess."

She turned, loose hair whirling behind her. "Then let us go," Her eyes darkened. "We have a Druid to kill."

xxx

She came to with a barely audible moan hissed out from clenched lips. Everything ached and trying to open her eyes only made the pounding in her skull beat louder.

What had happened?

Pidge tried opening her eyes again and this time kept them open, although there was not much to see. Just a giant, blurry piece of metal and she blinked at it in confusion. The floor? It was blackened in places and as she was becoming more aware it was hot and would have been burning her if she hadn't been… wearing her armor?

She blinked again and cast her eyes up.

Above her was space.

And fire and burning chunks of metal and acid smoke.

She jerked upright, screaming out as her left wrist flared with agony below her and she collapsed back down.

The ship. It had been a trap. Just like Keith had…

"K-Keith," she choked out. "Keith!"

No one answered.

Pidge grit her teeth and using her right arm only pushed herself up… and away as the lack of gravity pulled her from the piece of ship she had been lying on and she found herself floating a tick later in the middle of a wreckage field.

She groaned as every bit of her body flared at the new position, but she was already swiveling her head around, left arm clutched to her stomach. "Keith! Keith! Where are you?"

He had saved her, she realized as her dread grew. He had pushed her down to the floor, covering her body with his own from the explosion.

"Keith!" she screamed again, voice breaking.

She raised a trembling right hand to her helmet, but only static whistled in her ear. She had no doubt if hers was inoperable than Keith's was too.

Assuming it was even still there. Because there was not a hint of white and red armor in the expanse
of twisted, burning chunks of ship.

He couldn't have… he couldn't have…

"Keith," she tried again, voice but a whisper.

She activated her jetpack then, but only the right blaster kicked on and she listed dangerously sideways almost into the sharp edge of a piece of debris.

Carefully using the wreckage to push off she turned around, surveying the area even as her stomach threatened to rebel at the dizzying movement. She'd been blasted away from what had once been the Galra cruiser, at least a hundred yards from where what was left of its skeleton continued to smoke.

If… If Keith had been covering her then he would have been sent flying too, right? She completed another turn, looking for any sign of white.

And while she did not see it she did spot the castle, two clouds of smoke rising from opposite ends.

She did taste acid then.

"N-no," she gasped, choking back the bile. "No. Please, no."

Two clouds, two entry points. Haggar and the Galran commander, Theodek. No. No, no no.

She pressed her hand to the transmitter again, but only static burst against her ear. She took a hiccupping breath. They would know, of course. The alarms would have gone off when the castle was breached. They… they would stick together. They'd be okay.

She had to believe they would be okay.

But Keith was not okay.

If he was even alive.

She shook her head at that. No. She had to believe he was. She just had to find him.

Propelling herself once more she scanned every bit of space around her. Her infrared was still working, she noted, but all of the metal was too hot or on fire. It couldn't pick Keith out of that.

She bypassed around a larger piece and felt herself choke as Amalia's body, or, well, the top half of it, drifted by. The red gemstones had been blackened on one side and her mouth was open in a gaping scream.

Only the knowledge that if she puked the vomit would be in her facemask kept Pidge from expelling her stomach, but she turned away, pulling herself into a ball of comfort.

"Keith," she whimpered, eyes shut tight. "Pl-please. Keith…"

She looked in the direction of the cruiser. If… if he wasn't out here, as far as she could see, then it meant that… that he was still somehow aboard the ship. A new spout of fire and small explosion sounded as she watched. She refused to entertain the idea that he was in pieces like the alien. No. Absolutely not.

If he was in there then he didn't have much time. Not if it sounded like there were still combustibles aboard.
"I'm coming," she whispered, making the same promise she had when flying to his aid not even a week ago, awkwardly maneuvering as best she could on her jet pack.

She prayed that just like last time she wasn't too late.

xxx

Lance forgot how to breathe.

Theodek was here.

Behind him he felt Hunk tense and the arm that had been wrapped about his shoulders slid away, reaching for his bayard. Lance knew he should probably do the same but he couldn't move.

Theodek was here.

He thought he'd grown stronger; thought he would be able to face the Galran if he ever saw him again, but… but… He shuddered against Hunk, the action returning his captive breath but doing little else. His right arm was aching in remembered agony and he let out the most pathetic whimper.

Theodek's grin sharpened at the sound. "Hello, child," he nearly purred, delighting in the fear that stole across the human's face.

The Druid's plan had worked better than he had thought. The Paladins had indeed taken the bait and were now down two. Between the Galra technology, Haggar's magic and their small size in comparison to a battleship, the two had easily made it to opposite ends of the Altean ship, any blip they may have made masked by the explosion that rocked the ship.

Haggar had gone in first, knowing that her presence would draw Champion and they would send the Blue Paladin in the opposite direction, likely to escape via one of their Lions. Theodek was to wait three dobashes for Haggar to successfully draw the main force to her and then he was to enter from the other end.

Both were equipped with the results from the Druid's tracking spell and all Theodek had had to do was follow where it grew stronger, crashing through a few floors and then over a couple of corridors until now here he was, steps away from his prize.

His hand tightened on his blaster while his other reached for his preferred weapon, a large battle axe that could cleave through nearly anything, although was not quite as effective at blowing down walls as his cannon gun was.

"Stay back," ordered the larger human clothed in a set of white and yellow armor and now holding a large blaster type gun, although it was not quite pointed at him. Theodek spared him a glance but returned his gaze to his prize. There was no threat yet, if such could even be determined as thus.

"I have missed the sound of your screams," he smirked, receiving a flinch at his words and his smile widened. "I know how we can fix that."

The Yellow Paladin was moving now, carefully extracting himself from the smaller human and rising to stand, blaster in his hands. "I told you to stay back," he near growled, although Theodek could smell his fear as well and the way the hands shook ever so slightly on the cannon.

"What shall it be?" Theodek continued, taking a predatory step forward. "Slicing? Stabbing? Burning?" He chuckled, eyes drawn to the dark ring around the boy's neck. "Perhaps another collar for the Druid's pet?"
He saw the slender neck swallow thickly and the larger human actually snarled at that, the blaster whining to a charge. "One more step and I shoot."

Theodek laughed at that. "Were you going to let me go elsewise? Foolish. I am here for one thing and one thing only." He pointed his axe head at the sitting figure who to his credit did not flinch back this time although his eyes were still wide. "This child's head."

"For your revenge, right? For your brother?"

Theodek blinked in surprise at both the soft tones, no longer hoarse from screams, and the question posed. He frowned at the sudden change, for while there was still fear in those dark blue eyes, there was something else.

Pity?

He scowled at that. "You know my reasons. You took my brother's life and so now I shall take yours."

"For… for what it's worth… I am sorry." The words were quiet but they were sincere and Theodek felt his next step forward falter.

What?

"I didn't want to kill him," the human continued quietly, meeting his yellow gaze head on with a surprising strength.

"And yet he is dead," Theodek growled, finding his voice.

The boy very slightly inclined his head. "And I'm sorry."

And Lance was. He hated what Theodek had done to him, was still scared of what he could do, but that didn't make him any less sorry for the loss of his brother. Family was important, even amongst blood-thirsty Galrans.

He could feel Hunk tense behind him, bayard fully ready to fire, but he knew that they were no match for Theodek and as soon as Hunk tried to call for backup (if any could even come) then Theodek would be upon them.

If there was any chance, any at all, of talking the Galran back, he had to try. His strength was his compassion after all. If he could just get Theodek to see that… then maybe they made it out of this alive.

"I'm sorry," he repeated again, trying to push back the fear that was threatening to drown him as he met the piercing yellow eyes that were ever so slightly widened with confusion. "I… I can't imagine what that feels like, but… but I know it's beyond painful. Beyond…" a scarred hand reached up and lighted upon the ropy burn on his throat.

"Beyond this," Lance continued quietly. "If I could spare you that pain… I would do so," and he heard Hunk suck in a harsh breath. "So please… please, don't put another family through that."

As he held Theodek's gaze he saw the slightest softening around his eyes, the burn scar becoming less harsh on purple skin and he held his breath, not daring to believe that this might work. But the moment passed in a blink and rage hardened the Galran's face once more.

"You think pretty words can bring my brother back?" Theodek snarled, hackles rising.
"No," Lance tried to say but Theodek cut him off.

"Nothing can!" he growled. "Not your words, not your pain, not even your screams. Your death is the only thing I can offer my brother and so I shall have it." He hefted his axe forward as though to charge them. "It is over."

A giant stream of teal light punched through the air instead and Theodek was blasted backwards down the hall with a loud yell.

"Go go go!" Hunk yelled, somehow hefting the large gun to one hand and reaching down and hauling Lance up by under his left arm. Lance wobbled once he was upright, black spots dancing in his vision and a new ache stabbing into him from the tumble down the stairs.

He didn't have a chance to tell Hunk though as he was being pulled in the opposite direction of where Theodek had gone. Which, he realized, was where the Lions were. They were now going the wrong way.

"H-Hunk," he tried to gasp out but Hunk didn't stop and it was taking all he had to keep his feet somewhat underneath him.

"Shiro! Allura, come in!" Hunk was tapping on his helmet, awkwardly holding his bayard over his shoulder. "That Galran is here! Does anyone copy?"

He received no response and resisted the foreign urge to curse. Of course they couldn't respond. They were probably engaged with Haggar and fighting their own battle. Honey eyes narrowed even as nerves swam in his stomach.

He and Lance were going to have to this.

They were going to have to take down Theodek.

He'd had a moment of hope that Lance's sincere compassion – and how Lance managed that after everything Theodek had put him through amazed him beyond anything – would actually get the commander to stand down and forget his quest for revenge, but it was not to be. Still, he was glad in a weird way that Lance had tried.

If Hunk could just get him and Lance out of distance of Theodek they could lose the Galran in the ship's winding corridors and then attempt to doubleback to the Lions. That is, he sent a worried look over his shoulder as he practically dragged Lance along, if Lance could manage that long. The Lions had really done a number on his strength and that fall down the stairs – Hunk winced with hot guilt – had done him no favors.

"Here," he pulled Lance down a side corridor to a bunch of meeting rooms. He knew from his wanderings that the big one was connected to the kitchen. They could go through there and then pop out a whole corridor away from where they'd left Theodek.


The normally tan skin had an unhealthy pallor to it and Hunk brought himself up short as they entered the conference room, a huge table taking up most of it.

"What is it? What hurts?" he asked worriedly, loathe to put down his bayard and having to settle for running his eyes over Lance.

"Can't br-breathe."
"Okay, okay, it's all right," Hunk tried to reassure them both as Lance trembled in his one-handed grip. "Just breathe, in and out. We've got a few minutes. There's no way he—"

Hunk's words were swallowed by an explosion that opened a gaping hole on the wall just feet from the door as though its creator merely wanted to make a grand entrance.

The hulking Galran stepped through, a wicked smirk on his face. "Run, run little Paladins," he chuckled. "But there's no hiding from me." He tapped his wrist where a gauntlet covered the purple fur and Hunk had a sinking realization that they were being tracked somehow. To top it off a scorch mark covered his chestplate but otherwise he looked no worse for the wear from Hunk's cannon fire.

The larger boy gulped even as he maneuvered himself to stand in front of Lance, who had never looked smaller in just sweats and a jacket and still struggling to breathe.

There would be no running. He had to fight. Make a stand. Hunk could feel his own legs trembling but he steeled himself. He had no idea how he was going to take down this Galran, but he would die before he let him ever lay a hand on Lance again. That resolve might have scared him once upon a time but all it did now was give him strength.

"Excellent," Theodek dropped his own blaster to the ground and put both hands around the axe. "I see one of you is more than just words."

"Lance," Hunk said quietly, never taking his eyes from Theodek's form, "go through that door behind us. Get to the Lions."

Lance's breath hitched that had nothing to do with the lack of air. "Wh-what? No. Hunk, no." A shaking left hand came up to clutch onto the crease of Hunk's elbow. "No. I'm not—"

"I'm not asking."

The words came out harsher than Hunk meant them to be, but they were true. "Go. Por favor. I'll... I'll meet you there." He could not, would not, allow Lance to get hurt. The Lions were their best bet and if any of them could get them back online again he had no doubt it was Lance. Besides, if Haggar was occupied by Shiro and he had Theodek here it meant that Lance had a straight shot there. He could do it.

"Hunk, no. Please." The grip tightened even as Hunk released Lance from his. "No."

Theodek scoffed then. "As though I would let you leave." He turned his gaze to Lance, who met it, but barely. "Watch closely, child, and despair. For your weakness has just killed your friend."

And Theodek charged.

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I've gotta tell you, Theodek and Lance's talk did not go as I thought it would (I didn't think there was going to be a chat at all xD). But Lance insisted and I have to hand it to him, despite all the horrors and agony he has suffered by Theodek's hand, at his core...
Lance is nothing but compassion and love and he feels bad about what happened. I've had a few ask that if Theodek's brother had not been killed would he have been so cruel? I'm going with no. He does strike me as an overall violent individual who likes to hurt others, but to the extent he took with Lance? No. This was personal to him and he's still hurting. I can safely say though that Lance's compassion does not extend to Haggar. *She* has hurt and tortured and scarred him and does not have the luxury of being a grieving sibling. Nope, she's just creepy as all get out :p I mean look at her, taunting Shiro with Pidge and Keith's deaths. What an awful lady.

Since I had mentioned it as a possibility before, I wanted to clarify that Color will not be moving to bi-weekly updates. Last week was a test run to see if the fic warranted double updates and unfortunately based on the response it did not. Given the fact I know timeframe is finals for a lot of you and then summer break and plans this works out for the best anyways so no one falls too behind.

Also, tiny self promo, back and working on my commission stack. Lots of Lance whump and angst so if you're so inclined go give them a look and please do leave a comment if you enjoyed!

As always, if you enjoyed the chapter, please leave a comment. Talk about your favorite scene, character moment, overall impression, predictions, etc. They mean a lot to an author an I really appreciate them. Thanks everyone!
Chapter Sixty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was not difficult to locate Shiro. Allura merely had to follow the sounds of battle, sizzles and low explosions punctuated by sharp laughter.

Her fist clenched on her staff at the last sound. How dare she? How dare she laugh?

She would not be laughing when Allura was done with her. And if she had her way the witch would never make a sound again because she would be dead.

Coran was hot on her heels but like her moving absolutely soundlessly through the corridors. The laughter was becoming louder to the point where Allura could pick out words intermixed with the cruel cackle.

"—may have been a mercy compared to what the Galra would have done to a little girl like her. You should be thanking me, Shiro."

Allura's blood ran cold as Shiro let out a cry between rage and pain and there was the resulting whine of his prosthetic biting deep into metal.

There was a gaping hole in the corridor up ahead and Allura inched towards it, seeing purple light dancing inside.

It was clear who was winning and her stomach clenched. There were multiple copies of Haggar moving about the room, each armed with glowing purple and black spheres of magic while Shiro was lashing out and blocking as best he could.

He'd already taken several hits; armor blackened in spots and sporting a bleeding wound that had torn through his underarmor across his stomach, but it did at least not appear to be a magical injury. Still, it was not good and Shiro was clearly in pain and moving slower for it.

Allura did not announce her presence. It was not honorable but then neither had been a false call for help that had resulted in… She blocked the thought from her mind. Not now.

She picked out the most likely actual Haggar – the one hanging behind while her doppelgangers ganged up on Shiro, and swung her staff with all of her might.

To her utter shock Haggar caught the strike with a magic-wreathed arm and Allura stumbled forward with a yelp at the resulting momentum.

"Princess," Haggar sneered, shaking out her arm as though the hit had been nothing more than an annoyance. "So nice of you to join us."

Allura did not bother with a response, merely pivoting to bring her staff back up again, the runes carved into it glowing teal as they struck Haggar's magic once more. Her eyes narrowed. At least she had indeed found the real one.

She was about to follow up with a second attempt when her ears buzzed from the vibrations of her
"Shiro! Allura, come in!" Hunk sounded panicked. "That Galran is here! Does anyone copy?"

"Hunk!" gasped Allura, but she was unable to respond as Haggar swiped at her and she had to flip backward to avoid the strike. She heard Shiro let out a cry as one of the purple fires caught him firmly in the chest and he skidded along the floor, also unable to respond to the cry for help.

"No time for distractions, Princess," Haggar smirked. "Your opponent is me."

Allura hated that she was right. She tried once more to respond, to at least alert Hunk that neither she nor Shiro could assist, but once more she had to abort as a sparkle of black and purple light came for her. Coran would not have heard either as he had no earpiece in and she dared not alert the witch to his presence. He may very well be their only hope.

Still, it did not stop her from worrying. This Theodek sounded like a fierce opponent indeed and while she had great faith in both Hunk and Lance she had a sinking feeling that hope would not be enough to assure victory. She prayed Hunk managed to get them to safety somewhere. If anyone could get the Lions to return online she had no doubt it would be Lance and if he could only get to the hall turned hangar they may have a chance.

Allura ducked under Haggar's next strike but her staff this time collided with only air. She kept the momentum going and used it to strike one of the many clones that had converged on Shiro, driving the glowing end through the creature's head and it disappeared with a shriek and black sparks.

"Thanks," Shiro managed, his prosthetic finally honing in on one as well and it vanished in the same manner. He rolled to his feet and joined Allura back to back as the four remaining apparitions circled and Haggar stood several feet further away looking amused.

"Are you going to attack?" Haggar asked conversationally, spreading her hands. "I can feel your killing intent and yet here I stand, unharmed."

"You are that eager to die?" Allura growled.

"Not nearly as much as your Red and Green Paladins."

Next to her Shiro roared out, arm flashing as it dug deep into another clone and he turned wild, grieving eyes on Haggar. Allura held out a hand to stop him from a reckless charge as such actions would not win them this battle. To her surprise Shiro did stop, although he whirled away with a cry to dispatch another clone, easier and easier as their numbers dwindled and yet Haggar still did not look concerned.

"I will grant your wish, witch," Allura bit out, watching Shiro in her peripheral as now only one apparition remained and the two squared off, more evenly matched than before.

Haggar scoffed. "All bark and no bite, Princess. Show me."

Allura twirled her staff in front of her. "You will regret asking."

And with a scream of her own she charged into battle.

xxx

Pidge winced as she bumped into yet another piece of debris on her way towards what remained of the battle cruiser, broken left wrist crying out at the impact. She grit her teeth and pushed forward.
It was getting hotter, almost unbearably so even with her armor. Tongues of flame were still licking the darkness of space, even without oxygen finding so much fuel to burn that they showed no signs of being extinguished.

Pidge ignored the reality of what that meant for anyone trapped inside.

Keith was alive. She would accept no other outcome.

She had stopped calling out for him as her voice was lost to the crackling and low explosions that seemed to make the air about her thrum and every time she braced for the worst.

It had yet to come. But it was foolish to assume it would not as the fires meant fuel and fuel meant that there was still something to ignite.

She had to move faster.

It was hard though, with only one working blaster and despite all of her efforts she kept listing sideways, buffeted by the explosions and the groaning wreckage that floated about.

"Come on," she whispered at herself, right hand grasping a piece of debris and using it to propel herself more to the right. Almost there.

Her stomach rolled at what she might find.

She was mere yards now from the cruiser, which had listed sideways. The supply pod they had taken down was completely gone and the main door they had attached to was gaping and open, metal near red from heat, somehow still intact despite the carnage around it.

Idly she supposed that was why during earthquakes you were supposed to get to a doorframe. They really did have amazing support.

Her feet lightly touched down and she hissed at the sheer heat felt even through her armor. If Keith was lying here on this…

No.

No.

He was fine. He was going to be fine.

She carefully edged deeper into the ship, body as taught as a wire as metal groaned underfoot and underhand as she guided herself off the teetering supports.

"Keith?" she called out softly, activating the lights on her helmet and relieved when the bright light cut through the gloom that was otherwise only punctuated by the small fires. "Keith?"

She swept her gaze from side to side, taking in the twisted metal and sparking consoles. The floor up ahead had been completely ripped away and she could see the expanse of space through most of the ship.

"Keith?" The word came out more of a sob that time as no red and white armor was revealed.

If… If he wasn't here then… then…

"Keith, please," she pleaded, making her way further in and activating her boosterpack to propel her over the missing floor, not trusting the lack of gravity to do so.
The ship lurched again as she touched back down and Pidge gasped, throwing out her hands for balance.

Loose pieces of debris came angling for her and she maneuvered as best she could, relieved when only the smallest piece connected and thanks to the lack of gravity it wasn't even a hard strike.

Her eyes widened though as from the shifting a flash of white was now visible by the far console. She held her breath, not yet daring to believe as she turned her headlamp in that direction.

An arm. It was a white armored arm that connected to a torso hidden beneath a crushed console that was sparking madly.

"Keith!"

He did not respond.

"Keith!" She covered the distance in seconds, small hand alighting on the visible arm and tracing it back further, but the rest of him was buried beneath flaming rubble. She refused to entertain the notion that his head was anything but intact.

She had to pull the pieces off him, but it was easier said than done. She was not the strongest normally and with a broken wrist doubly so, but she was only one here and so she had to.

A glance at her left wrist told her that even under the armor she could see where it was twisted and her respect for all Lance had accomplished while sporting his own rose even higher. Her fingers still worked though, evidenced by flexing them, and she was going to need both hands.

She raised them to a piece of the console that had collapsed on Keith's head and pulled with all her might. The metal groaned and she felt the heat wash over her hands, not yet painful but about to be, but it did not move.

Shit. Shit shit shit. She released it with a groan of her own. She needed a better grip.

She needed to somehow splint her wrist.

Pidge looked around for something to use as a splint but her only options appeared to be more twisted, hot metal. Not good. She could convert her bayard into a knife but she had nothing to bind it and she also had no idea how to adjust the length so odds were she'd end up stabbing herself.

Think. Think. Keith didn't have time for her to think, damnit!

She pulled her bayard free anyways, but instead of the knife it transformed into her typical katar and her eyes widened. The grappling hook! If she could just…

Desperately she switched the bayard to her left hand, wincing as even the light weight made her wrist twinge, and pulled on the length of cord with her right. She had floated a bit away by that point from Keith and she hurriedly propelled herself back.

As she wound the cord around and around the visible arm, hating how it was so still even as she yanked on it, she knew this was going to hurt Keith. She prayed a dislocated shoulder that would likely result was the worst injury he would have, but based on the utter stillness and the fact that every visible teal light had gone out on his armor she knew that wasn't going to be the case.
Just let him be alive.

She chanted the mantra in her head as she finished securing the line, wishing she could have gotten it under his torso as well but only the one piece was visible. Giving it a tug the cord held firm and Pidge nodded to herself. All set.

Before she continued Pidge took a precious moment to place her hand over Keith's own and gave it a little squeeze, and even though she knew not to expect it her heart still clenched as he did not so much as twitch back. "I'm going to get you out," she promised quietly. "It's going to be okay."

Keith of course did not respond.

"Okay, Katie, you've got this," she encouraged herself, securing the bayard to herself by wrapping it twice about her own torso and then clutching it in her right hand. "It's going to be fine."

She activated her lone thruster once more, hovering gently. And then, leaning all of her weight forward, she blasted off.

Her ribs ached immediately in protest at the force but she knew they had nothing on the pain Keith was likely feeling as his arm was wrenched. But she could feel it working, metal whining behind her and she was inching forward ever so slightly.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, ducking her head down and trying to increase the thruster.

And with a crash and a groan Pidge shot forward like a cork so hard she smashed into the far wall, scream caught in her throat as her hands reflexively tried to catch her. Black spots danced across her vision and she felt acid tickle her tongue.

Whimpering, she curled up around her injured limb as though that could relieve the sheer agony radiating up her arm. It did not and she was wasting precious time.

Blinking back the tears Pidge turned to survey the scene behind her and this time the sob that worked its way up was one of joy.

Because Keith was free of the rubble.

She'd yanked him sideways out of the collapsed console, which without Keith to support it had crashed down as well but fortunately not on top of him again. His arm – she blanched – was indeed now absolutely dislocated, the entire shoulder bending at an angle human limbs were not supposed to go.

And yet, despite what had to be excruciating pain, Keith had not made a noise at all.

"No," she whispered. "N-no."

Pidge made her way back to him, sharp eyes peripherally taking in the blackened spots of armor all along his front, the pieces missing entirely on his right leg and revealing bloodied, ripped flesh through the black fabric. His face was her main concern though and it was blurred within the visor by blood staining inside the glass and several hair-thin cracks stretching across it. His eyes were closed and his face was completely slack.

"Keith?" she choked out. "Keith? Please… wake up." She lightly tapped her fingers on the helmet, but immediately stopped as one of the cracks widened.

"You have to wake up," she pleaded. "Please. Keith. You can't. You c-can't."
Because he could not have died protecting her. Not when he was the one who had been wary of this mission in the first place, when he had tried to tell them something was off. She should be the one lying there. Not him. She should have been able to save him.

Tears were blurring her own vision and she clenched her hands against his chestplate.

"Wake up!" she screamed hoarsely, slamming her right fist down. "Wake up! Wake up! Godamn Keith, wake up!"

And to her complete and utter shock on her next thunk down she felt something beneath the ruined armor.

A heartbeat.

Hand shaking she brought it to Keith's neck, pressing gloved fingers against it and trying to control her own shaking so she didn't mistake it.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

He had a pulse.

It was faint and slow but it was there.

She almost started crying again, but now was not the time. Keith needed help, not some weepy girl.

She straightened her shoulders. Okay. What was the largest injury that was causing the near body failure? He likely had a concussion, she could assume, by the blood inside the mask and the dark streaks under his bangs, but that wouldn't be fatal.

There weren't any giant protrusions sticking out of his front from being buried under the debris that would indicate severe blood loss although his right leg was pretty mangled.

She almost slammed her head in idiocy. His back. Of course. He'd tackled her from behind, which meant that his back had taken the majority of the explosion. She gulped, recalling how just a few days ago that same place had been a mess of burned skin from Haggar's attack.

But even then, he had not passed out. He hadn't been completely unresponsive like this. So… so how bad was it?

Grasping his right shoulder as best she could, not willing to touch the distended one, Pidge rotated Keith onto his side so she could take a quick peek.

She choked on her next breath.

For the entirely of Keith's back was a mass of blood and burns and ripped skin and the scent of roasted flesh rose up as she unearthed it.

Only sheer will kept her from throwing up.

Oh. It was bad. It was more than bad.

Severe burns, she'd say third degree, which despite the heat had only cauterized in some places and left the rest of the flesh ragged, took up the entirety of his back, not a patch of skin left untouched.

His lower half had fared slightly better, although the black cloth on the seat of his pants was blackened and charred and she could see a faint strips of red, bubbled skin from a few of the slits,
while his legs appeared for the most part all right, minus the completely twisted, mangled wound that took up his right calf.

He needed a pod. He needed it ten minutes ago.

It was dangerous to move him, especially with the cracked facemask. If that went then… then it was all over because humans could not breathe in space. He would suffocate within seconds.

But waiting for help was not an option either. Keith didn't have that kind of time and, the cruiser listed as a small explosion went off on the back end somewhere, neither did she. This thing could finish exploding at any moment.

She tapped at her comms again, static the only thing to greet her. It wasn't like any of the others could come to their aid anyway though. Not when she knew Haggar was aboard the ship and her stomach twisted at the thought of the witch finding Lance, of turning him back into that petrified, scared boy that they'd first found before she killed him when she found that his quintessence was blocked to her.

She shook her head. She couldn't think about them. She had to believe they would be okay because there was nothing she could do for them. She could help Keith though and that was what she needed to concentrate on.

Okay, steps. Steps were good. Step one, retrieve her bayard from his arm. She hit the release button and with a faint hiss the cord dissolved. Good. Now, rewrap it about Keith so she could use the lack of gravity to tug him along behind her.

Where, though, was the question. No, this wasn't going to work as there was too much debris to safely navigate that way. Pushing though, that still could work. She just needed to get him up.

"This might hurt," Pidge told him, voice high with a mix of hysterical laughter and tears. She maneuvered herself so that her toes were tucked beneath Keith's back and she bent down to grasp what remained of his chestplate as best she could. Then, she activated her lone thruster once more, causing her to rise up and Keith came with her.

He didn't so much as twitch.

She shut it off immediately once Keith was floating in the air of the mangled ship like some broken doll. And nope, she pushed that thought away as surely as she pushed gently against Keith's shoulders so he was lengthwise in front of her and his head somewhat protected up against her stomach.

It would be easier once they were clear of the ship, she decided, as she very, very carefully activated her thruster and used its momentum to send them both forward, but slower than she'd like so she avoided bashing Keith into any of the walls.

She calculated from what she'd observed earlier that they would have about a mile to get back to the ship.

A mile with one thruster, floating debris and a cracked face mask that could go at any second.

She hunched protectively over Keith's head as she steered him through the mangled doorway. They were not the best odds, not in the slightest. But she would take even a half percent a chance of success than the utter loss of failure.

It was a numbers game and Pidge excelled in numbers.
She was going to win and that was all there was to it.

xxx

Hunk had no idea what he was doing.

Well, okay. That was wrong. He was losing. He knew that much.

With a grunt he smashed into the conference table, dodging only at least second as an axe embedded itself into the wood before wrenching itself free with a shower of splinters.

But Hunk didn't have a second to breathe a sigh of relief as rather than pursuing him as he had been for the last several minutes, Theodek turned his attention in Lance's direction, who he had been ignoring the entire fight other than to make certain Lance did not make for the exit door.

Not that Lance would. Despite Hunk's order he knew Lance wouldn't leave him behind. That just wasn't the kind of person he was. Hunk both hated and loved him for it right now.

The Galran commander was brute strength, yes, but he was also fast and he swung his battle axe with a finesse that Hunk wielded kitchen knives. The Yellow Paladin had been unable to get even a single shot off and had been regulated to using his bayard as a blunt force instrument and shield.

He had managed to land a few hits as Theodek did not seem concerned with a defense, but despite the power Hunk knew was behind them they barely phased the Galran except to push him back. Still, he had to try. If he faltered then both he and Lance were dead.

And now Theodek was looking to Lance now, Hunk no longer a viable opponent or distraction.

Lance who was barely standing, exhaustion and pain pressing in.

Wearing no armor.

Defenseless.

Oh God.

"Lance!" he shouted out in horror, too far away to physically grab Theodek and the Galran too close to Lance to risk shooting with his cannon's wild barrage.

Oh God.

But he apparently needn't have worried.

Theodek let out a scream of pain and stumbled backwards, revealing Lance, pistol raised in a trembling left arm. And while he looked scared there was a determined cast to his face and Hunk did allow himself a small, relieved breath.

He was okay.

Thank God.

"You!" snarled Theodek, hunched over slightly and Hunk's eyes widened as he observed the shot had pierced the back of the Galran's hand and burned right through the glove; a perfect match to the scar that covered Lance's own.

"Stand d-down," Lance ordered shakily.
Hunk sucked in a harsh breath as the implication of what had just happened struck and struck hard.

Lance could have just killed Theodek. He could have killed him. The Galran clearly hadn't expected him to be armed – Hunk had actually forgotten Lance had his bayard again – and given the accuracy of the shot...

Theodek's hand could have been his head.

Even here, even now, Lance was showing mercy.

It scared Hunk more than it should have.

But that was a fear for another day. Right now he had to stop the Galran, had to protect Lance.

He wouldn't let him get hurt ever again.

He raised his cannon, arms shaky, but Theodek was angled too close to Lance to shoot and Lance could not take even a passing hit without the protection of armor. He slowly began to shift around the Galran commander in Lance's direction. It wasn't honorable to shoot while Theodek was distracted but Hunk frankly didn't care. Not when it was Lance's life on the line.

The commander seemed to realize the act of mercy too, but unlike Hunk it only seemed to enrage him more. "You dare show me mercy?" he snarled, shifting his axe to only his right hand. "Where was this mercy when you killed my brother?"

"Stand down," Lance repeated although he flinched at Theodek's words. Hunk inched closer. Almost there. His cannon whirred to power up.

"No," growled Theodek, moving to lunge. "I will have your head!"

Hunk saw the moment Lance pulled the trigger, the flash of teal illuminating resigned but resolute eyes.

He felt his stomach bottom out that Lance was being forced to make this call, ashamed that he hadn't been able to prevent it despite his promise. Something like this... it could hurt Lance as surely as an attack landing on him. Hunk could tell it was meant as a kill shot, the beam closing the few feet of space between the charging Galran and human in a blink.

But it was not to be.

Theodek reflected the head shot with his axe, and then took the second and third follow up strikes against his chest without hesitation, murder in his yellow eyes and a roar on his lips. Despite the volume Hunk still caught the soft, sharp inhale from Lance as he realized what was about to happen as the Galran closed the distance between them in seconds.

He was going to hit Lance.

Oh God. He was going to...

And Theodek was much, much too close to Lance for Hunk to take a shot of his own.

He had to stop him.

He had to protect Lance.

Hunk didn't think anymore than that. He just moved. If he could not be a sword than he would be the
shield. He was not going to let Lance get hurt. He'd *promised*.

A tick later he felt the battle axe bite deep into his flesh.

Hunk screamed in pain, Lance cried out in horror and Theodek roared, yanking back on his weapon and pulling it out where it had cleaved into Hunk's side and stomach, a trail of blood and pieces of shattered armor flying behind.

"Hunk!" screamed Lance as Theodek brought the axe back for a second strike and Hunk hated that he had created such a fear, but he would do it again in a heartbeat if it meant keeping Lance *safe*.

Swallowing against the fire that was pouring from his side, Hunk pivoted and this time caught the axe blade with his reformed bayard, metal on metal screeching and sparks flying. He nearly buckled under the force and the renewed agony, but pushed back, hitting the trigger of the fully charged cannon as he did so and then it was Theodek's turn to yell in pain as the blast caught him full on where Lance's shots had pierced his armor.

The Galran staggered backwards and Hunk dropped to one knee, vision whiting out for a moment as the impact jarred the wound and he felt blood gush; hot and heavy and he tried his best to hold the agonized moan inside.

"Hunk! Hunk!" Lance was kneeling next to him then, tears glimmering and his right hand scrabbling uselessly to grip anything for even in this moment of panic Lance had the sense to not let go of his bayard.

"You have to g-go," Hunk rasped, avoiding looking at his own wound. He didn't want to know. The fact he wasn't split in two was as good as he was willing to acknowledge right now, but he did not think he was moving from this spot. Not now.

Maybe...

Maybe not ever.

The ground beneath him was starting to puddle red. He heavily resisted the urge to vomit.

"Hunk, no! No. Get up!" Lance tried to pull him with what little strength he had and Hunk felt his heart shatter at the raw desperation. "Get up! *Por favor. Levántate!*"

Because Lance had done this, his hand trembling on Hunk's shoulder and bayard clacking in the other. If he'd just killed Theodek when he'd had the chance it would already be over.

But he *hadn't*. He *couldn't*.

Not without trying one last time to avoid any more death. Theodek's brother… Keith, Pidge…No more. No more bodies.

He didn't want to kill again.

But… he had really, really messed up. And now Hunk – and Keith and Pidge, he swallowed a sob – were paying the price.

He should have just taken the shot.

"Hunk, *please,*" he begged as Hunk's bayard, the only thing actually holding him up, shimmered away and Hunk slumped forward and more crimson gushed from his side.
Lance cast his mind desperately out to the Lions, seeking any hint of their presence. They needed help. But other than a spike in the constant ache of his head there was no response and he felt the familiar stab of uselessness strike deep.

Why could he never do anything?

"Lance, go." Hunk's voice was much too quiet, but high with pain.

"N-no. I won't... I won't leave you."

"Touching."

The words were a mere hiss and Lance looked up to see Theodek, dark blood staining his shoulder, crouched across the room and the large gun back in his hands and trained in their direction. Lance felt his mouth go dry. That was the gun that had blasted through the castle's walls as though they were made of paper.

"I told you did I not?" Theodek asked as the gun charged with a whine. "That your weakness would kill your friend?"

"Lance... go..." Hunk choked out and a sick line of crimson dribbled down his chin.

"No." It came out stronger than he felt and he shakily raised his bayard once more. His arm was aching from the recoil of earlier but it had nothing on the pain of seeing Hunk bleeding out in front of him.

He was going to stop Theodek.

Permanently. No more mercy. No more chances.

He was going to fix this.

But Theodek only chuckled as Lance trained the gun on him, kneeling in front of Hunk and feeling hot blood seeping into his sweatpants.

"Go ahead and try, child. It is already over."

Lance took the shot.

And it was swallowed by the discharge of Theodek's own gun, a roaring, sizzling barrage of purple light.

There was a mere tick to watch it approach, to know that this was it, that he had failed so utterly and completely and everyone was dead because of him, when a set of hands clamped down painfully on his shoulders from behind.

"I'm sorry," Hunk gasped, and then Lance found himself being encased in the tightest hug he'd ever had and twisted, knees squelching in the scarlet gore, so Hunk's back was now facing the incoming blast and Lance was shielded in his arms.

And the world exploded.

Chapter End Notes
I do like explosions, don't I? Nearly as much as impalement. Not sure that's what I'd call Hunk's wound though. A cleave, maybe? Yes. I like that. I cleaved Hunk :D And look, our precious cinnamon roll took a leaf out of Lance's book for the self-sacrifice department. Oh dear... But I rescued Keith (sort of) so like, still positives in here?

If you're still here, reading and enjoying the story, please do leave a review with your thoughts before you skedaddle. I'd really appreciate it. I think I may be killing some of you with the cliffhangers, so if you are alive and just chilling at the bottom of said cliff, please, give a wave. Reviews this week will be used as icepacks from my car accident yesterday as well so please, help me xD (apologies too to any comments I did not respond to; having some trouble with typing right now). I could use the extra love this week if you would be so inclined.
Chapter Sixty-Five

Chapter Notes

Warning note: This chapter is being tagged with graphic violence. It's been a while since we've had something quite this violent, hence a warning. Please be advised for some upcoming imagery and scenes. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ringing in his head was overwhelming, a high, sharp whistling that pounded over and over and over.

Lance groaned, but he could barely even hear that. His eyes were screwed shut but even then he could feel the world spinning around and his stomach rolled to match it.

He didn't have time to lie there though. Hunk was… Hunk was…

He forced his eyes open, taking in the blurry gray hues of the kitchen that they had been blasted into. Groaning, he tried to move but there was a heavy weight pressing on his lower half and keeping his legs pinned.

Hunk!

Lance felt it shift and relief burst through his chest. Hunk was okay! He craned his neck to look for his best friend, but found his eyes widening in horror instead.

Because while Hunk was moving it wasn't by his own hand. Theodek had lifted him by the neck brace of his armor like one would a wayward puppy, lip curled in detest, before he threw Hunk to the side where he crashed, unmoving. Crimson immediately began to spill out beneath him.

Lance desperately tried to scramble up, but his right hand gave way under him and before he could even so much as kneel he felt a clawed hand descending into his hair and digging into his scalp.

A low moan was torn from him as Theodek lifted him up, knees leaving the ground and all of his weight nearly dangling from the hold. His head pounded and his vision swam again, purple and gray and black converging in on one another.

"Well, well," Theodek grinned, giving him a shake, "looks like it is just you and me now, boy."

Lance weakly lifted his left hand and tried to scratch at Thodek's hand, but his blunt nails did nothing to the Galran and all he got was another shake that pulled reflexive tears to his eyes.

"Nothing to say?" the Galran sneered. "Fine with me. I'll just have you scream instead."

He threw Lance in the opposite direction of Hunk and he skidded some on the smooth kitchen floors. Theodek didn't even give him a chance to try and get up as a booted foot found is way under his ribs and he was punted further still, slamming into the island.
Theodek was taking his time approaching and Lance took the moment for all it was worth, frantically looking for his bayard as since he wasn't wearing his armor it hadn't dematerialized into its holster.

There! It was lying right by the hole they'd been blasted through. If he could just get to it…

A harsh chuckle broke into his thoughts and he realized Theodek had followed his gaze. "As though I would allow such a thing. No, child. You had your chance and you failed."

Lance didn't have a response for that. He was right after all.

He should have just taken the shot.

He still could though. He had to. He had to stop Theodek so he could get Hunk – his eyes shifted to where the larger boy was sprawled on the ground – to a pod. It couldn't be too late. Hunk couldn't be… he couldn't be…

As if summoned a soft, wet moan sounded from Hunk's direction.

"He lives?" Theodek sounded surprised. His grin sharpened. "Not for long. One moment, child, and then you shall have my undivided attention."

He turned then, heavy steps leading back towards Hunk and unsheathing his axe from where it had rested on his hip.

"No," Lance choked out, pushing himself to his hands and ignoring the pain the action caused. "No. Stop."

His words fell on deaf ears.

"Stop," he repeated, voice cracking as he managed to get to his knees and then, bracing his left hand against the island, and pull himself to a wobbly stand.

What it was going to accomplish though he had no idea. He was too far away to lunge at Theodek, for all the hindrance he would make, and his bayard was across the room and useless in this moment.

But Hunk was going to die if he didn't do something.

A low sob was torn from his throat at how pathetically useless he always was when it mattered. He'd already gotten Pidge and Keith killed. Now Hunk.

For all their talk about his compassion, his love, his desire to protect… how was it that he only ever hurt others?

His left hand clenched on the counter ledge, knuckles white. He glanced at it, knowing it wouldn't have the strength to land any sort of punch that mattered. But… his eyes widened as they took in what else was on the counter.

Knives.

The entire set was laid out on a set of towels, still drying from their failed use earlier on the weird vegetables.

Lance had never wielded a knife before other than to help out in the kitchen. He had no idea what each one's purpose was supposed to be the way Hunk did. The only thing he knew was that knives were sharp.
Sharp was good.

He grabbed the nearest one, a longer, thinner blade than the typical dinner knife and turned it in his grip. He had no idea how one was supposed to throw a knife, the closest reference he had from the movies, but it was going to be learning on the fly.

Taking one steadying breath Lance raised the knife, lining it up with the back of Theodek's head.

Was it honorable to attack from behind? No. Did Lance care in this moment? No. Absolutely not. Not when if he didn't then Hunk was dead.

The blade flew with the barest whistle through the air at the Galran, who had his axe raised now and looked ready to lower it in a final swing.

Just as arms made to come down the knife connected.

Not through his head, as had been Lance's intention, but the blade sunk into the back of his left shoulder through the armor and Theodek roared in pain, whirling to face Lance and for the moment Hunk forgotten.

Lance felt his knees quake at the sheer rage and hatred in those narrowed yellow eyes, but he was relieved. Hunk was safe. For now.

Now he just had to somehow get himself out of this too.

"You!" Theodek snarled, closing the distance between them in mere steps. Lance desperately picked up another knife – a large meat cleaver – and threw it, but with a jerky movement of the axe Theodek knocked it aside. Lance had just managed to close his hand around a third knife – this one serrated edges – when Theodek was upon him.

Lance threw his hands up to try and create some distance as the bulk of the Galran crashed into him and he was shoved painfully back against the counter, feeling the edge dig into his spine. That had nothing though on Theodek's claws that pierced into his shoulders through the jacket and Lance screamed as blood poured down his arms.

Theodek shook him, nails digging in even deeper and Lance tried desperately to pull back even though he had nowhere to go. The knife was pressed flat between both of them and he couldn't maneuver it free.

"I will make you beg for death," Theodek growled, breath hot on his face.

In answer Lance gathered his feet to him, weight being held in place by Theodek, and kicked out with everything he had just like in the cell to start his escape attempt.

It was by no means the strongest kick he'd ever launched, but it was enough as his shoed heels caught Theodek in his armor-less thigh and propelled him backwards.

The Galran grunted at the impact and Lance choked out a scream as the claws ripped themselves free. He collapsed to the ground without the support holding him up, but he couldn't stay there long.

Fighting back the pain he rolled to the side, smudged crimson trailing behind, and tried to get back to his feet. But Theodek was too quick and Lance was always, always too slow.

Before he'd managed to even rise to his hands and knees the Galran was there, knee slamming into Lance's back and shoving him to the ground with a cry.
Frantically Lance brought his left arm around, seeking to hit anything with the knife still clutched in it. But a crueler grip then his own closed about his wrist and squeezed so hard that he dropped it with a shriek and his hand was forced flush to the floor.

Theodek leaned forward, more weight pressing into Lance's back and he dully wondered if his spine was about to break, before the Galran picked up the knife, turning it once in his grip. Then with a casual shrug he brought it down through the captured hand.

Lance screamed. For one terrifying moment the kitchen was replaced with purple lights and even colder floors before Theodek's voice brought him back to the present and his head ached with renewed pain.

"Now this looks familiar," Theodek chuckled over the sound of Lance's low moan. "Yet it is missing something."

He leaned forward once more and wrenched Lance's right arm back to him, holding it pinned behind his back. Lance's breath hitched on the next sob as he felt claws trace lines as they ripped off the jacket sleeve and exposed the burn scar to the world.

No.

Not again.

He tried to tug his arm free, legs kicking out uselessly behind and in answer Theodek twisted it more.

"This, however, I do not care for," he growled, shaking the captured arm. "This resistance. This fight. You think yourself a Paladin now, child?"

"I… I am," Lance gasped out, whimpering a moment later as claws dug into the burn and he felt hot blood begin to drip. He was. He was.

Even if… even if all he did was let them down.

"No," Theodek murmured, breath ghosting across Lance's ear and he stilled his movements. "You are not."

Lance felt his heart beating out a timpani against the floor, pulse thundering so loud but even that could not drown out Theodek's words.

He was a Paladin. He knew that. Just…

Right now he was nothing more than the child Theodek claimed. Weak and helpless and useless to protect anyone. Not even himself.

"There," Theodek whispered, nearly nipping at his ear and Lance hated that he flinched from it. "Much better."

Lance whimpered low in his throat and felt tears stinging his eyes as Theodek traced his claws down his forearm. He strained his left hand against the knife pinning it to the floor, but red bubbled and he heaved out a sob as the edges cut deeper.

This was how it was going to end?

Another scream was torn from him as he felt Theodek slice into the scar and ripped the flesh open as he had done once before.
"Isn't this nice?" Theodek asked, a smile to his voice, as he continued to pull apart the wound and Lance thrashed below him to no avail. His wrist was twisted cruelly and Lance felt white-hot fire flare down the limb and the audible crack of bones being shattered once more.

His vision darkened for the briefest moment before it came back in full when Theodek twisted the now broken limb.

"Scream for me, child. Scream and despair."

Lance did so, hating every sound that was pulled from him. They were growing hoarser now but that did not seem to bother the Galran, who merely raked his claws against the gaping wound once again.

He could feel himself growing weaker with each tear, his own blood adding to the macabre mess of the kitchen. He cast blurred eyes over to where Hunk had fallen, true despair welling. For as soon as Theodek was done with him – leaving him clinging to a thread of life for Haggar – he would go to Hunk and finish what he had started.

Just like Pidge. And Keith. And probably Shiro and Allura and Coran, battling Haggar.

He'd killed them all.

But as he looked to Hunk's face he jolted with a start to realize that half-lidded eyes were gazing back at him.

"H-Hunk," he garbled out, the word lost to another shriek as Theodek set his sights on mangling his right hand even more and his thumb was snapped completely backwards.

No. He didn't want Hunk to see this. To see him so weak and pathetic and let his screams be the last sounds Hunk heard. No.

He choked back his next cry as his index finger broke.

Tears were dripping down Hunk's cheeks beneath his helmet and he met Lance's without hesitation. Lance held that honey gaze, unable to look away. It was the most comfort he was going to get.

But even so he found his attention drifting as a white light emitted to Hunk's right as his bayard formed next to him without a sound. It began to charge, but unlike normal only a single blaster was turning teal.

A concentrated shot.

Hunk shuddered ever so slightly, Lance's name on his lips before his eyes fluttered closed.

In that same instant his bayard launched a sizzling streak of light across the kitchen straight at Lance and Theodek.

Lance closed his own eyes and waited for the end.

xxx

This was not going as well as Pidge had hoped. She had thought once they cleared the ship it would become easier to maneuver Keith, but there was still a whole field of debris that lay between them and the empty expanse of space to the castle.

Pidge had re-positioned Keith so he was horizontal to her and was resting her broken left wrist as carefully as she could over his upper thigh and her right was secured around his far shoulder, holding
him to her body as best she could so she could protect his head, and she was pushing him forward.

Her jetpack gave another splutter and she swore below her breath. She had no idea how much time she had left before it went completely out and if that happened while they were floating in space… she gulped. She would have nothing to propel them with and they'd be stranded. Just like when the castle had gone haywire and she and Hunk had been trapped in Green's hangar, just a thousand times worse as Keith was dying and needed a pod stat. He didn't have time for them to be hovering out here.

That, and Pidge needed to get back into the fight. She had no idea what she could contribute, but injury wise she was only down her non-dominant hand and she sure as hell could wield her bayard with just her left.

After Keith was in a pod though. No matter what was happening in there right now she had to have faith that her family was holding their own and Keith was her priority. She was his only hope.

And that was a terrifying thought indeed.

"Come on," she pleaded, directing it at both her jetpack, Keith and herself, hunching protectively over Keith's face as they cleared a still smoldering piece of debris.

Behind her she heard a giant groan and she craned her head, just in time to see the Galran cruiser crumpling in on itself and the rising ball of blue and white flame that was going to explode one, final time.

"Oh fuc—"

And her curse was swallowed up by the blast.

xxx

Allura groaned as she clambered back to her feet, leaning heavily on her staff for a moment of balance.

She had known that Haggar was not an easy opponent. She had known not to expect to beat her on her own.

But she hadn't realized just how difficult even landing a hit was going to be.

"You okay?" Shiro asked quietly, sounding just as winded as she felt, but the tone was calm all things considered rather than the reckless grief of a few minutes ago. A fresh line of blood was dripping down his face where Haggar's spell had shattered his helmet and he'd had to yank the whole thing off to see clearly.

"We do not have time for this," Allura replied, eyes narrowing at Haggar, who for all the universe appeared to be lounging while standing. "Lance and Hunk…" she swallowed.

She had tried twice to contact Hunk while Shiro had stepped in to engage, but both quick attempts had received no response.

Allura prayed it was a situation similar to Shiro losing his helmet, but the curling in her stomach told her something worse had happened. She needed to get to them, but Haggar was playing with them like a cat to a captured mouse.

It was beyond infuriating.
The witch had even stopped creating clones, opting instead to deflect her and Shiro's attacks with her actual form and even then they had yet to deal her any significant injury. Allura had managed once to get inside her defenses with the staff, landing a strike to her left forearm while Haggar had been engaged with Shiro but it did not seem to have slowed her at all despite the fact Allura knew she'd hit hard enough to shatter bone.

Allura scowled, leaning forward slightly on slippered feet. If only she had had time to change herself into her armor. But she had made straight for the bridge and had not left it until… until everything had gone to pieces. Her left foot was aching from where she'd landed awkwardly on it to avoid a direct magic blast to her head and she wished again for proper fighting wear.

"I had thought this would be more entertaining," Haggar sighed, shaking her head. "I am disappointed to be proven wrong."

"We are not done yet, witch," Allura snarled, twirling her staff back into a two-handed grip.

"Aren't we?" Haggar clucked her tongue. "I bore of this fight." She brought both of her hands together and pulled them apart with a sharp crackle, black and purple lightning dancing at her fingertips. "I suppose it is time I ended it. Consider it a mercy; I will allow you to be reunited with your dear Paladins, Princess."

Allura bristled and Shiro growled next to her.

"But not you, my Shiro," Haggar said, turning her yellow gaze upon him. "You will return with me and become my champion once again."

Shiro felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle at her words and the absolute confidence in which she spoke them. His right arm twitched at his side and Haggar was drawn to it, a dark smile pulling up her lips.

"Oh, I could make you into such a champion," she murmured. "The likes of which the universe has never seen."

"He is already a champion," Allura growled out and Shiro started next to her. "One of the truest and most honorable I have ever known. He is not yours, witch, nor will he ever be."

"I suppose you consider him yours then, Princess?" Haggar cocked her head with an amused air. "What is he to you? Your attack dog? He is quite blood thirsty you know. A real monster, spawning nightmares even still."

Shiro couldn't help but flinch at the reminder of his time in the arena, still coming back in bits and pieces, but he knew she spoke the truth and he hated it.

"He is our leader," Allura bit back, standing tall and Shiro felt his own shoulders, slumped previously with exhaustion, straighten and a warmth burst in our chest. "And you, witch, are the monster."

Haggar merely chuckled. "If that was meant to wound me you are mistaken. I know I am a monster, Princess, and take your comment as the highest compliment."

Shiro tensed as Haggar shifted ever so slightly. "I tire of this banter. Let us end this so I may continue to where my Lance is waiting for me."

And without another word of warning, Haggar threw her hands forward and the black and purple energy leapt towards them.
Allura went to bat it away with her staff as she had been and Shiro ducked underneath the first pass. And while both successfully managed to do so, neither was prepared to come face to face with a small army of Haggar clones, each armed with their own glowing orb.

"Fuck," Shiro said elegantly.

Those were the last words spoken over the course of the next few minutes. Well, except for the grunts and short yelps of pain as despite their best attempts Haggar's attacks were connecting and they were unable to find the real one amongst all of the swarming clones.

Allura would block one sphere only to have a second from behind rise up and it was all she could do to make it into a glancing blow rather than a full on assault. Still, her left arm was throbbing with a blistering burn and it was slowing her movements, which allowed a second and third shot to collide; one glancing off her right leg and the other off her shoulder and the last one sent her collapsing to her knees as a shriek was pulled from her lips and her staff clattered away.

"Allura!" screamed Shiro, trapped between two Haggars himself.

The Altean groaned as a pair of boots stopped in front of her nose and she lifted her eyes up, meeting the sharp yellow gaze of who she knew had to be the real Haggar.

"This is the end, Princess." Haggar raised her hand, wreathed in pitch black lightning that Allura knew she had no hope of dodging.

It really was the end. Despair and anger and fear warred in equal measure but she kept her gaze steady, not willing to give the witch any satisfaction even as her stomach curved and Shiro's shouts and struggles grew more desperate.

"Farewell."

But Haggar never released her attack.

Instead, a high, sharp ear-splitting wail was torn from the Druid and she stumbled forward, tripping over Allura and crashing to the floor as well, purple light fizzling on the back of her head and a burnt, black hole showing through her hood.

And standing at the entrance of the room, was Coran, blaster light matching the flame burning in his narrowed eyes.

"Farewell," he echoed.

Chapter End Notes

I feel particularly evil this chapter. *settles back on throne made of bones* Excluding death threats or acts of violence upon my person, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter so drop a comment below and make the author happy. Please and thank you! And thank you to those who left a comment last chapter; you are beautiful, wonderful people.
Chapter Sixty-Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pidge supposed she ought to thank the explosion, really. Sort of. She glanced down at Keith's helmet, new cracks spider-webbing across and with one tap she was pretty certain the whole thing was going to cave in.

Okay, maybe she'd call it an acknowledgement and leave it at that.

On the plus the blast had propelled her and Keith head over heels in the direction of the castle and they might have an actual chance now at reaching it with the last bit of her jetpack.

On the huge negative the force, despite her best efforts to shield Keith's face, had created more cracks in his mask and if that went... well, she'd just be lugging a body at that point.

They were stuck hovering now as she wasn't certain if even the slight propulsion from her boosters would be too much for the compromised helmet.

What did she do?

"God damnit," she muttered, caught literally in limbo.

What would be the effects of space if she were to remove her helmet and cover Keith's face with it? Ebullism, hypoxia and hypocapnia would be the three most deadly. There weren't really many studies done on how prolonged exposure affected the human body, but she bet it wasn't good.

Besides, Keith had multiple parts exposed right now; his entire back and his right leg. She cast a quick glance at the leg, noting that although the flesh was beyond ruined and bloodied she didn't see anything that indicated any of the above symptoms. This could work, and the cryo-pods would likely (hopefully) be able to repair any damage that did occur.

Still...

She could hold her breath for about two minutes, barring the shock to her system from you know, space. So say she put it at one minute. Did she have enough fuel to propel her and Keith across the expanse in under a minute, find a door and enter the castle?

She bit her lip. Probably not. Not with only one working thruster. But... if she were to also burn up her oxygen tank she could create another temporary explosion and that should be enough. It's not like she'd be able to use it again anyway, not after she gave Keith her helmet.

Could she do this?

Realistically it was possible. A very low percentage though. She'd be generous and say she had a ten percent probability that this all went according to plan. Because her thruster could go out, the blast could not be enough or she inhaled space during said oxygen explosion. She could judge her landing zone wrong and she and Keith would be trapped outside the castle and die on the wrong side of the wall.
But if she did *nothing*, just waited for a rescue — which would come, eventually, because she refused to entertain the idea that Haggar and that Galran commander won — she would survive, yes, but Keith… Keith would not.

"Oh God," she whimpered, digging her fingers into Keith's arm.

She looked back to his face, obscured nearly entirely by the cracks and the dark blood, but she could still make out closed eyes and the utter lifeless expression that did not belong whatsoever on Keith.

She had done this. He had gotten this injured because he had protected her, saved her, instead of himself.

Now it was her turn to save him.

"Okay, okay. Step one: door. Need a door."

Because direction was important. Without it none of this was possible. The obvious choices were the two billowing holes made into the castle's exterior, but she would easily be sucked back out into space if she couldn't get to a close door location before her oxygen ran out. Plus, those were on the ends of the castle and she needed something more on her plane.

The hangars could work. She eyed where she knew the Green Lion emerged from. It was not ideal in location to the infirmary, but it did have the benefit of being on this side of the ship and she'd know exactly where to go from it. She nodded. Okay. Step one complete.

Step two, angle as best as she could in that direction. That one was done quickly as all she did was pivot slightly about Keith's prone form.

Step three, turn her oxygen unit into a bomb that she did *not* set off yet. Okay. That one was a little trickier.

Pidge unlatched her bayard and using the grappling hook connected herself to Keith as she was going to need both hands and didn't want him to float away. Once secured she tapped on her left forearm, wincing as even that touch sent shoots of pain through her wrist, but the schematics of her suit popped up and she heaved out a small sigh of relief. At least they were still functional.

Right hand flying through the holographic screen, she directed the oxygen flow to the thrusters fuel, set to activate the next time she activated the jetpack and she gave it eighty-five percent odds she didn't just blow up the jet instead. A calculated risk though.

Fourth step, somehow take off her own mask, detach Keith's and keep him from breathing in space, jam her own atop his head all while holding her breath.

Piece of cake.

She snorted. Yeah. Right.

"Come on Katie, you've got this," she coached herself. "Easy peasy."

She frowned then. If this failed her last words were not going to be 'easy peasy' like some kid. "Fuck you, Haggar," she said instead, "and fuck the Galra and Zarkon." She nodded. Much better. And maybe it could even act as a curse and haunt them for the rest of their lives if she didn't make it out. Yes. Good back-up plan. Come back as a ghost, which scientifically there was no basis for.

Then again, there was no basis for alien lifeforms and yet here, she was surrounded by entire solar
systems of species that Earth couldn't even fathom. Why—

No. Focus.

Time to do this.

She took one last inhale and exhale, steadying her nerves and encouraging her hands to stop their sudden trembling.

Go time.

She sucked in another deep inhale, feeling the air settle in her lungs to full capacity.

And then she moved, countdown already in her head.

She yanked off her helmet in record time, feeling the sting of space on her bare flesh and she winced ever so slightly.

Five seconds.

She placed the helmet on top of Keith's chest although it lifted within the second but for now it seemed content to hover. She wasted no time hitting the latches on Keith's helmet and lifting it off with a sharp tinkle of glass as the visor did give way.

Fifteen.

She jammed her broken left hand on top of Keith's mouth and pinched his nose shut while her right hand gathered the helmet and maneuvered it to the top of his head, ignoring the rivulets of blood and splatters of glass fragments. She was going to have to let go of his face for a brief second and she prayed the moment of space didn't destroy his lungs.

With as much finesse as she applied to her more delicate projects, Pidge shifted her hand and pushed the helmet with a pop over the bloodied hair.

Twenty seconds.

Already she could feel her lungs burning and she hated that she'd been right on the shortened timeline. Godamnit.

She draped herself over Keith's torso, and pressed her forehead into the burnt and bloodied cloth of his stomach, protecting her face as much as she could and praying they maintained a relatively straight trajectory.

And then she activated the jetpack.

It sounded like a V-10 engine had revved to start and she pressed her face harder against Keith as the sting of the force whipped her hair back and she could not imagine what exposed skin would look like at that resistance.

Pidge didn't dare lift her head until the propulsion faded, counting the ticks and fervently praying they were still on course.

Forty-five ticks in the movement stopped and she looked up. She'd have let out a breath of relief if she'd been allowed to, because they were at most twenty yards from the castle and the hanger door was just to the left.
Pidge spared one quick glance at Keith's face, but he remained unchanged, which she supposed was the best she could ask for at this point.

Keeping her arms wrapped about him, Pidge turned on her lone blaster and pushed as quick as she dared towards the castle.

Sixty-five seconds in and they had made it. Her head was starting to swim now though and she could feel blackness creeping in on the corners of her eyes. She forced it back. Not yet.

Trusting her bayard to keep her connected to Keith, Pidge reached forward and hooked her broken wrist through one of the protrusions on the castle while her right flipped open the circuit panel outside the hangar door. Her fingers tapped in the sequence as quickly as they could and she cursed herself for making it a rotating helix code for "safety" purposes but right now was just an extra hindrance.

Her lungs were burning now and she swore it felt like her face was starting to peel. It very well could be. The keypad was wavering in and out and the dark spots were growing more prominent.

She wasn't going to make it.

The thought paused her rapid keying and she felt a bubble of air burst from her lips before she pressed them firmer together, tasting copper.

No.

No.

Katie Holt was not a quitter. She hadn't quit believing when they told her Matt and her dad were gone. She didn't quit her search when she got caught and thrown out of the Garrison. She hadn't quit her new space family when they needed her.

She sure as hell wasn't going to quit now.

Eighty-five seconds.

Pidge forced her eyes to focus on the keypad and slammed her fingertips into it, entering the last half of the sequence.

And the pad glowed teal.

Better than that, the hangar door opened with a hiss, slowly lowering from the top. Pidge reached out and grabbed a hold of Keith's arm and as soon as it had come down enough to where she could squeeze them through the crack she did so, firing the very last bit of her booster fuel to propel them inside.

The sensors on the door recognized a breach and immediately began to close up behind them, cutting off space and the artificial gravity coming back on.

They dropped like stones.

Pidge didn't even register the jarring through her as her knees smashed into the floor of Green's hangar or how bad the fall had to have hurt Keith as he landed directly on his destroyed back, as instead she took large, gasping breaths of air.

Blood was on her lips and she choked on it as it spilled into her mouth from beyond cracked lips, still
sucking greedily in the artificial oxygen that filled the hangar. The black spots were beginning to fade now and something other than *breathe* was filling her mind.

Keith, it reminded her. Keith.

She crawled awkwardly the pace to him, holding her left hand to her chest as it was throbbing with renewed agony from the fall.

"K-Keith," she whispered.

Just like every other time though there was no answer and she raised a trembling right hand to his neck.

Please.

It took longer than last time, the space between the pulses larger now but there was still *something* there.

Not for long though. Not if she didn't hurry.

The littlest Paladin cast her eyes about the hanger for inspiration on how to transport Keith to the infirmary, as she was under no impression that she could actually carry him. They lit upon the hoverboard she and Hunk had been working on, but it was designed for standing and would serve her no purpose right now. Damnit.

Okay, what else?

For all of the tech scattered about her essential laboratory there was nothing *useful* for what she needed now and Pidge felt tears of frustration prick. There had to be *something*.

Tarp! She spotted the dark brown covering over her pile of spare parts that she had considered "cleaning up" to get Shiro off her back about picking up after herself. If she could roll Keith onto that she could tug him.

But the friction…Oh! The lubricant for the hoverboard pieces. If she coated the back side of the tarp in it she bet it would slide on the smooth castle floors. Okay. Good.

Now she just had to get to them.

Standing was harder than it should have been, the world spinning in a circle as vertigo struck and Pidge stumbled sideways before she gained some semblance of balance, remembering at last second to disengage her bayard so she didn't get tripped up. She doggedly walked to the tarp, pulling it off more slowly than she had time for but she was afraid she'd tip over if she tried anything faster.

Holding it secure under her arm she walked a little more steadily, each footfall reminding her that she had been involved in an explosion and each little ache and bruise restarting. She ignored them.

The oil was right where she'd left it and still plenty left. Taking it back to where Keith was she dumped her items on the floor and then upended the entire bottle on one side of the tarp.

Kneeling on it, she spread the substance with her right hand, left back to being cradled against her stomach to reduce as much movement as she could. Once she had smeared as much as possible she flipped it over and positioned it next to Keith.

Now just to roll him onto it.
And, she realized with a wince, she was going to need both hands.

How the fuck had Lance done all he had with one wrist not just broken but absolute shattered and distorted?

She grit her teeth and maneuvered herself to Keith's opposite side. "Suck it up, Holt," she scolded herself, licking blood-stained lips with a grimace. "Keith needs you. Deal with it."

Pep talk finished she positioned both hands on Keith - one on his shoulder and the other on the swell of his hip – and bracing her feet she pushed. To her great relief he rolled onto the trap, now lying on his stomach. Probably for the better, she figured, and her helmet was there to cushion his face from dragging.

Pulling herself back to standing, Pidge grabbed two of corners of the trap and tied a rough but sturdy knot around her waist.

Now she just had to walk. Simple. One foot in front of the other.

She took a first one, feeling the tarp dig into her stomach and sides, and then another. She knew the sting there was nothing compared to the pain Keith had felt when he took a fucking explosion to his back. Not even close.

Her plan though was working as despite the pressure she was having very little resistance as she moved, Keith gliding behind her like he was on a sled.

Thank goodness for small favors, the infirmary was on the same level as Green's hangar. About a good quarter mile away, but same floor. Probably about six minutes if she could keep up a steady trudge.

Lowering her head and squaring her shoulders Pidge decided she would make it in four.

And with another step of many to come she carried on.

xxx

Lance felt the heat from the cannon blast ripple across his neck, the skin of his captured right arm blister in the intensity, wrenched behind him as it was.

But that was the extent of his pain from Hunk's shot.

Theodek was not half as fortunate.

The Galran let out a shriek of agony that could not quite be described and Lance vaguely felt claws rake across his hand as Theodek's body was sent flying across the kitchen as the blast connected, hot blood splattering in his wake and dousing Lance's back.

He knew it still wasn't over.

Such a shot would have killed someone normal, but, as Lance had unfortunately learned Theodek was not quite normal. The commander was moaning and choking on pain, but the fact he was still alive to make such noises, complete with the sound of claws renting the kitchen floor, meant he wasn't down quite yet.

Lance needed to get up.

It was a hell of a lot easier said than done.
His right arm, broken and twisted and gushing, had landed next to his side, but as soon as he tried to shift it white spots danced in his eyes and he groaned low in his throat. Tugging at his left hand, still impaled into the floor, yielded a similar result.

He was stuck.

Tears of pain and frustration stung his eyes and Lance blinked them back. He didn't have time for them.

Hunk didn't have time.

Just the thought of his best friend, his brother, made his heart stutter. He needed to get to Hunk. To…

to…

Lance cast weary eyes to his left hand, stretched out before him and tethered to the knife. The handle of it had no hilt, not like the daggers Theodek had once used. If… If he pulled up with all his strength he could maybe lift his hand right through it. The hole was already there, after all. He just had to make it bigger.

He choked back his own sob as he twitched his left fingers, just that small motion sending rivulets of fire through his limb.

For Hunk.

He could do it - had to do it - for Hunk.

And he had to do it quickly as Theodek's moans were turning to grunts and eventually the Galran was going to be back on his feet and finish what he started.

Lance closed his eyes and took in as calming of an inhale as possible in this situation.

On the exhale he yanked his hand up with a much force as he could muster.

A raw scream was torn from his throat as his flesh shredded against the serrated edge and then the wound was forcefully opened even further as he dragged it up and over the handle.

A splash of his own blood spattered across his face and Lance choked as copper touched his lips and he gagged at the taste while starbursts imploded behind his scrunched eyes and he felt his equilibrium, even lying on the floor, take an alarming tilt.

But he was free.

And he had no time to lie here contemplating such.

Biting back the scream, Lance pressed his left fingertips flush on the ground and pushed off, trying to avoid putting as much pressure on the new hole. All it did was elevate his chest, arm trembling at the new weight.

He needed his right hand too.

Oh Dios.

For Hunk.

Moving his right arm from where it had flopped next to his side was nothing short of agony, but that still had nothing on when he tried to shift some of his weight to it.
With a hoarse scream he collapsed completely back down, the mangled limb not capable of supporting anything.

Okay.

New plan.

Lance threw all his weight to his left side, rolling his torso over his left arm and one exhausting second later he was on his back, staring up at the kitchen ceiling. A glance to his right showed that Theodek was struggling to get his limbs underneath him as well, but he was doing better than Lance, even with the gaping hole and dark blood streaming down his right side where Hunk's attack had connected and looked to have gone straight through him.

How was he still alive?

For contemplation later. Right now step one was get up and step two... step two was to neutralize the threat.

Lance struggled to sitting using only his core muscles, room spinning at the new vantage point. Despite the pain he forced his right arm to move and hold the jagged flesh against his stomach, knowing that if he passed out from blood loss it was all over. Still, it wasn't like this was going to do much but the position had come familiarly to him and Lance figured at this point it couldn't hurt.

He scrambled to pull his legs beneath him, each shift sending a new jolt through him. But standing was good. He needed to be doing that to do anything else. He got the balls of his feet flat on the floor and before he could overthink it Lance surged using only his own inner strength to standing, taking a staggering step as black flashed across his vision.

His eyes landed dully on the knife embedded in the floor but he knew he wasn't retrieving it. Not when he could barely grip anything again and he whimpered at the reminder of his mutilated left hand.

He needed a new weapon. He'd prefer his bayard but it was all the way across the room and he honestly doubted he was going to make it there on his shaky legs. Fortunately there were plenty others to choose from spread out across the towels on the counter only a few steps away.

He just needed to get there.

Before Theodek got back up.

To do so though meant turning his back to the Galran commander as the counter was in the opposite direction. It made every survival instinct scream at him but he didn't have a choice. And so pivoting Lance set his sights on the counter.

Every single step was torture. His body had had enough – the tumble down the stairs, the still constant pounding ache in his head from what the Lions had done, and now two destroyed hands, ripped open arm that he could feel saturating his shirt not to mention the sticky feeling all down his shoulders from Theodek's puncture wounds – but Lance forced it to keep moving.

He had to.

For Hunk.

He could hear the Galran shifting more now and he tried to quicken his pace, vision tunneling in on the counter. He had just reached a hand over, securing the closest knife against his fingers, when
claws dug into his already abused shoulder and he was wrenched backwards with a gasp.

Lance swung blindly as he was turned, the blade slicing along Theodek's arm but nothing so deep as to cause real damage due to his barely there grip. Lance was honestly surprised he didn't drop it.

Theodek, despite how much pain he had to be in, did not back down and bodily threw Lance away from him with a guttural roar and across the floor, the boy skidding a scarlet trail as he crashed against the kitchen table.

The Galran lumbered after him, one hand pressed to his freely bleeding side and steps heavy. "You… are dead… child," he gasped, the pained pauses not taking away from the ferocity of his words.

Lance scrambled somehow to a mockery of sitting, his own breaths coming out in a choked rattle and he'd have shaken his head to try and clear away the fogginess settling in except that such an action would likely just topple him over.

Fight. Fight! He made it to his knees, bracing one leg in front of him and leveling the knife at the approaching Galran for all the threat it offered. Based on Theodek's bloody grin it did not do much.

His right arm spasmed and nearly sent him back to the floor as he made the mistake of glancing down at it, spotting the sheen of white bone peeking up through the gore that had fully saturated his shirt.

Oh Dios.

He teetered but Theodek did not falter. A tick later the Galran was reaching for his throat with a blood-stained clawed hand and Lance acted on pure instinct, swinging the knife – long and thin this time – up through the air.

He missed.

He had only a second to process the empty space, the overbalance as his attempt sent him forward and into Theodek's lunging grasp, which latched about his throat and he emitted a wet gargle.

"I am done playing," Theodek snarled, blood and spittle flying from his mouth and adding to the already macabre canvas on Lance's face as he drew him closer.

Lance made another weak swing even as new spots danced in his vision as his lungs seized under the attack. This one was just as effective as the previous.

Meaning not at all.

And even worse. This time, as the blade skittered harmlessly over Theodek's armor, the resulting impact had Lance dropping it despite himself as fire laced along his hand and he couldn't maintain his grip and his choked cry had nothing to do with the stranglehold. Theodek kicked it away with a growl.

He'd just lost his last chance.

He was going to die.

Hunk was going to die.

Everyone was going to die because of him.
"Forget the witch," Theodek shook him, claws digging into the tender flesh of his throat. "Your life belongs to me."

And Lance could do nothing as Theodek slammed him onto his back, feet awkwardly tucked beneath his knees in the hold and the rest of his air near vanishing at the strike.

"This is the end, boy." Theodek's claws tightened even more around his throat and Lance's left hand fluttered weakly at his side, unable to summon the energy to bring it up to pull at Theodek's choking grip as if he'd have been able to do anything anyway.

This was it.

He was going to die now, Theodek's yellow eyes filled with such hate the last thing he was going to see. And even those were starting to blacken around the edges.

It wouldn't be long now.

But even as he thought that, as despair filled him as air left, he couldn't help but continue to struggle.

He didn't want this to be the end.

It couldn't be the end.

His left hand gave one last spasm and he jerked it outwards seeking what he wasn't sure, but it was better than doing nothing.

And to his surprise he encountered a knife pressed up against one of the table legs. His brain stuttered as he knew he saw Theodek kick it away just a moment ago.

Against the haziness pressing in Lance realized that this was not that same knife.

It was the knife he'd thrown that Theodek had deflected with his axe. The large cleaver.

There was no time left to think. Pain didn't even matter as he clenched his hand around the hilt, willing the last of his strength to the limb.

This was it.

And with everything he had Lance swung the blade up and towards the gaping, unprotected wound Hunk had dealt the Galran.

It cut through. And through. And further still, slicing into the flesh like butter except that this was a person and the relief Lance felt as the chokehold disappeared warred with absolute horror at what he had just done as Theodek's scream echoed around the kitchen and hot blood splashed across his hand and arm.

The blade came free with no resistance as it finished its track through the Galran and out through his front, slicing him nearly in two. Theodek collapsed to the left with a barely audible moan and Lance, outside of his gasps as he sucked in air, resisted the urge to be sick.

He'd just killed Theodek.

He'd killed him.

Yet even despite his revulsion his hand had not loosened its painful grip on the knife and he could feel blood squelching inbetween his fingers. How… how did Keith and Shiro do this? Be it sword or
hand how did they get this close, this personal, and hurt someone this way?

Lance’s stomach gave another heave and this time he couldn’t stop the acid from wrenching up his throat and he barely managed to turn his head to the side to expel it.

Over the sound of his retching he heard something else though.

A low, breathy whine of absolutely anguish.

Theodek was still alive.

Lance wasn’t sure how, but a moment later he was on his knees and next to the downed Galran, the floor all around him slick with dark purple blood and more puddling further and further with every labored breath.

Yellow eyes were half-lidded but they managed to focus on Lance with a laser-like intensity and Lance forced himself to hold the gaze.

"Kill me," Theodek rasped out, a trickle of blood falling from his mouth to drop backwards over his cheek.

Lance numbly shook his head, arm trembling at his side and the knife wavered in his grip.

He couldn't. Not in cold blood to an unarmed, injured opponent. He didn't want to kill again. Not like this.

Theodek let out a sound between a laugh and a gurgle. "Don't have m-mercy now, ch-child."

"N-no," Lance managed.

"Mercy would be k-killing me," Theodek wheezed. "Do it."

"I can't," Lance whispered and he hated that that was his answer. He should be able to kill Theodek, mercy or no. This Galran had nearly killed Hunk (still could have if he didn't get him help soon), had hurt and tortured him and had been about to kill him as well. There should be no hesitation whatsoever in that regard to deliver a final blow.

It would be a mercy killing too. Theodek wasn't going to live much longer and he was in insurmountable pain. Lance didn't like to see anyone suffer, even those he considered an enemy. He should end it. It would be the merciful thing.

But he couldn't. His hand had raised somewhat but it hovered and shook, unable to commit to moving further. It felt wrong. It was all wrong. If he'd had his gun maybe he wouldn't have hesitated so. But he didn't. He only had a knife, personal and close. Tears were stinging his eyes for reasons he couldn't fully explain and the scene blurred in front of him.

It would be justice to kill him. Mercy to do so. It was cruel to let him live like this. And yet... yet he couldn't do it. He didn't want to make that final blow. He'd done enough. It was enough. He would just back away, let nature take its course. That was his decision, his choice. It didn't feel entirely right but it didn't feel wrong either. Yes. This was what he would do.

Theodek shot out a hand faster than Lance could blink and closed it with a surprising strength about Lance’s own fist, claws digging in. But the intention did not seem, for once, to cause him pain, but to drag him forward and force the knife against Theodek's throat.
Lance's breath caught. "No," he whispered again, trying to pull back but Theodek only tightened his hold.

"I could not kill you," Theodek choked out. "But I will still have... my revenge."

"Stop!" Lance cried as he felt the blade sink into Theodek's neck and the Galran gasped as blood trickled down.

The commander's voice was quiet now but steady as his gaze bore into Lance's. "I will kill your sense of... of compassion, child. Your mercy."

"Stop." Lance pleaded as his hand was dragged further down despite his struggles and blood burbled out of Theodek's mouth as the blade sank deeper and the yellow eyes closed. "Please, stop."

"For you, brother," Theodek murmured.

And in a splatter of lifeblood Theodek forced Lance to slice open his throat.

Chapter End Notes

"This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper." So ends the life of Commander Theodek, described well by T.S. Eliot and my absolute favorite poem. So, Theodek ultimately dies by his own hand with major assistance from Lance and also a big assist from Hunk. I hope I did his death justice for you all; Theodek became a very complicated character (in a good way!) and his death I felt should reflect as such. He was a bad guy, no doubt, but he was also in a lot of emotional pain and trying to ease that ache the only way he knew how; through more violence.

But on a happy note, Pidge and Keith are sort of safe-ish, Theodek is dead so Lance is out of immediate danger (minus blood loss) and hopefully he can get Hunk help. We should probably check in with the others though, yeah? I believe I left us off with Haggar getting shot in the back of the head by Coran. Hmm...

All my love and thanks to the readers who take the time to leave a comment after spending the time to read the chapter. I write for you beautiful people and really appreciate your support. Thank you. Please do leave a comment below and show the author some love.
"Coran!" gasped Allura, heart thundering so loud she was amazed she even heard herself speak.

"Allura!" The calm, dark voice she had never heard from her advisor before was gone and replaced with a deep seated relief. But a moment later she saw his eyes widen in sheer panic. "Allura!"

The princess sensed more than saw something move next to her and that was the only thing that saved her from Haggar's magic-wreathed hand slamming into where her head had been a tick before.

"H-how?" she stuttered, coming out of her roll and awkwardly kneeling, right leg aching from the glancing blow of just a minute ago and Shiro quickly crossed the room to stand next to her, a comforting presence at her side. Coran had made the shot. Point blank in the back of the witch's head.

Her own words echoed back at her when Coran cautioned that a shot from a mere blaster was not likely to down Haggar. He had been right. Still, the fact she was back up already and moving did not bode well for what should have been a fatal hit.

"I must say, Princess," Haggar hissed, "I did not take you for the sort to shoot from behind."

"Honor left this fight long ago, witch," Allura growled back, accepting Shiro's flesh hand to pull herself painfully back to her feet,

Haggar inclined her head slightly. "True."

And with no further warning Haggar flickered out of existence.

"Dodge!" screamed Shiro, already ducking low and sweeping his glowing arm out in hopes to catch Haggar as she rematerialized.

But Haggar hadn't been aiming for Shiro.

Allura nearly met her end for the second time in a matter of minutes, only instinct and slight familiarity with how Haggar now attacked saving her as the Druid appeared directly behind her. She threw herself to the left, towards Coran, who was there and blocking the Druid's second strike with his own staff a moment later.

Haggar leapt back, rubbing at her wrist where Coran had connected. "You are more than you appear, advisor."

"I am whatever I am needed to be," Coran said evenly, leveling his staff at her.

A smirk pulled up her lips. "Quaint. However…" She snapped her fingers and the army of duplicates returned, all armed with glowing back spheres. "It is still not enough."

Coran twirled his staff. "I will be the judge of that. Come, witch. Let us end this."

"Gladly."
The melee started as it had before except this time Allura was missing her staff, which had rolled away to rest against the far wall. Gritting her teeth Allura went after it, ducking beneath one clone's strike and feeling the whisper of heat from another.

"Allura!" Shiro shouted to her, having seeing the issue already and had punched through both of the apparitions keeping him occupied and within a tick was at her back, intercepting another strike.

"Thank you," she gasped at the near miss.

He didn't quite offer her a smile but nodded and helped her to safely cross the room to her weapon. Coran, to his great surprise, was effectively holding Haggar back.

For every strike Haggar made the Altean blocked, either with his staff or sometimes with his arm. The robe sleeve had been burned away but the flesh beneath it looked untouched, and as Shiro watched he saw it turn a scaly dark green when Haggar struck it and he blinked, confused. He knew he'd taken a few hits to his head but…

"Shapeshifting," Allura told him, staff back in hand. "Coran can do it without thought on his arms. I though…" she winced. She was nowhere near as adept at any part other than being able to change her skin color, but not its composition like Coran could. She dearly wished she had worked more on that ability as having a thicker skin to act as a shield right now would be beyond a saving grace.

"Let's finish this," Shiro said.

Allura nodded. "Yes."

They had cleared out the grouping of clones Haggar had made, this batch weaker than previous. Despite the fact the Druid was still standing strong it looked like the shot had done something at least to her strength, the blackened mark on her hood that showed her silver hair peeking through a reminder.

It was also a reminder that she was not so easily taken down and they would need to proceed with caution. Even three on one now they were still at the disadvantage.

Allura and Shiro rejoined the assault without words, striking out in an intricate dance with Coran; Shiro going in close and the two Alteans parrying back with their longer staffs. But every time Shiro thought they might have finally broken through her defenses Haggar fought back and another wave of magic would strike them.

Shiro was limping now and pressing his flesh hand to his side where a swipe of her hand had embedded glowing lines, just like last time, but not quite as deep. Every step hurt though and he knew it was only a matter of time before his sluggish movements cost him.

Haggar had lost her permanent sneer, a thinner line drawn across her lips, but it was still not desperate, not fearful.

She was still on top and she knew it, even if she wasn't ending it as quickly as Shiro thought she wanted to.

Haggar had just pushed away Allura's staff, causing her to stumble forward and creating an opening that would be near impossible to pass up, when the witch's yellow eyes widened and rather than pushing her advantage she jumped back.

A low chuckle escaped her lips then, devolving into a full cackle that sent every hair on Shiro rising and he found himself frozen, cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck.
"What do you find so humorous?" Allura demanded.

The laughter cut off like a switch had been flipped. "Oh, Princess," Haggar sighed, shaking her head. "Things have just gotten quite a bit more entertaining."

For Haggar had felt the moment Theodek's quintessence had abruptly cut off, his life extinguished. She knew without a doubt her Lance had been responsible and her fingers twitched at her side and a smile stretched across her face. He would be in pain, she knew, his soul hurting at the act. And she would be more than happy to go to him and ease his suffering.

"My Lance needs me," she murmured aloud.

"He needs you dead," Allura snarled.

Haggar fixed a cold glare upon the Altean princess, all distorted warmth gone from her previous expression. "And we disagree yet again, Princess. For it is you who needs to be eliminated." Fire sprang to her hands, a longer, thinner column than before. "And by my hand it shall be done."

"That is my line," Allura growled.

Haggar flung herself forward and Shiro intercepted her first with a yell for Allura to stay back. There was something different in the air now, something crueler and colder. Haggar was no longer playing, no longer wasting time. She was serious.

And she seriously wanted to kill Allura.

Shiro gritted his teeth against the onslaught of Haggar's force, side screaming and he felt blood gush as he braced his feet. Coran was there then, staff angled like a spear but it sliced through air as Haggar vanished.

As one they all instinctually whirled to face around to face their backs with weapons already moving to block Haggar's predicable but powerful attack.

But no witch appeared in front of any of them.

Instead, Haggar appeared at Allura's unprotected back, in clear view of Shiro and Coran in their pivots.

"All—" both cried in tandem.

But it was too late.

Haggar plunged a glowing, crackling black wreathed hand into Allura and it exited out the front of the girl with a spray of blood and flesh in a macabre arc of confetti.

Allura did not scream. Instead her breath caught in her throat and all she managed was a choked sounding gasp as Haggar pulled her hand back to herself, the staff falling to the floor with a final sounding clatter.

"ALLURA!"

Shiro raged forward towards Haggar with a war cry while Coran skidded to catch his princess, who was collapsing to her knees with jeweled eyes already dulling.

"Behold your precious princess," Haggar sneered, flickering out of Shiro's range and to the hole in the wall several yards away.
"Haggar," Shiro growled, tears choking his voice and prosthetic glowing uselessly.

"Enjoy your last minute with her, Shiro. I'd take this small mercy for I will be back soon enough for you."

And with a last crackle of black lightning Haggar vanished.

Silence echoed in the room then, broken only by a low, agonized moan from Allura and Shiro found himself mechanically dropping to his knees next to where Coran was cradling the dying girl in his arms, tears streaking down his cheeks.

"Sh…Shiro," Allura coughed, blood trickling down her chin and teeth already stained red.

"Don't talk," Shiro ordered, voice thick. He turned desperate eyes to Coran. "The pods? Please? There has to be…"

But Coran shook his head. "Her wounds… Allura…” A tear dripped off his nose and pinged onto Allura's cheek.

For this was no mere stab wound or explosion. There was a gaping hole through Allura, organs destroyed in the blow and blood thickly pooling already around her.

"Not acceptable," Shiro snarled. "No. Save her."

Allura raised a trembling hand and Shiro leaned forward as she brushed it against his cheek and he brought his own flesh one up to hold it there. "L-Lance," she managed. "G-go… to him."

"Allura…"

"Go." She closed her eyes then, leaning back further into Coran's hold. "Pl-please."

Shiro caught Coran's grief-stricken eyes but he nodded. "Go. I'll… I'll watch over her."

Shiro nodded past the lump in his throat. He took Allura's hand from his cheek and pressed a kiss to it, the Altean version of a promise. "I'll be back. With Lance. And Hunk. Please don't… don't…” He pressed another kiss to it. "I can't lose you too."

Allura's response was a weak cough and a new line of red dribbled down her chin.

"I'll save them," Shiro told Coran, rising to his full height. "You save her."

And giving the advisor no room in which to protest Shiro whirled from the room, leaving the last two Alteans huddled on the floor.

"Oh, Allura," Coran whispered, bowing his head further over her as though it could protect her from the world.

He had failed in his promise to protect her. He had failed her. Alfor's daughter. His own in all but blood. He had failed her. And now she was dying in his arms.

"C-Coran," she whispered and he grasped her seeking hand in his own, pressing her knuckles against his cheek. Dull jewel eyes opened and met his own. "I am… I am so sor—" she choked then and all Coran could do was hold her close, his tears coming hard and fast now.

"No, Allura, no." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "No. You have nothing to apologize for."
She gave a soft murmur and turned her face so her cheek was pressed against the crook of his arm.

"Are you in pain?" he asked her quietly and she shook her head in the barest negative.

It wouldn't be long now.

Allura let out another wet cough and Coran brought his hand to brush against her cheek again, shifting loose curls away.

"C-Coran," she whispered, barely a breath now. "I'm... I'm sc-scared."

"I'm right here. I'm right here," he repeated, voice breaking. "I'm not going anywhere."

And that at least was one promise he was going to keep.

xxx

The knife fell away with a dull splash into the pool of blood that had formed beneath Theodek when the death grip on Lance's hand loosened.

He'd just…

He'd just…

He cast his eyes to the Galran's face, which was slack now although a trail of purple blood was still obeying gravity and trickling over his face. Lifeless yellow orbs peeked out from half-slitted eyelids.

He'd just…

Lance brought his blood splattered, mutilated hand back to his chest and pressed it there, as though that could calm the sobs threatening to choke him.

He'd just…

"D-dios," he whimpered.

He'd just killed Theodek.

But not from a planned shot. Not from a desperate swing.

No. Just like he had in life, Theodek had taken away his choice of how this ended. The taste of acid tickled his throat again and Lance gagged but it did nothing to alleviate the feeling.

He felt beyond sick.

But he didn't have time for this right now. Yes, Theodek was dead. No, it wasn't how Lance wanted it to be his stomach twisted anew as blood squelched between his fingers. But Theodek was dead. That meant...

That meant he could go to Hunk.

Hunk.
Just thinking of his best friend's lifeless form gave Lance the surge he needed to pull himself from his knees to his feet, wavering slightly at the change and as he glanced down fully now at the deceased Galran lying next to the kitchen table.

Hunk.

Get to Hunk.

He stumbled across the kitchen to where Hunk had fallen, the puddle of red even larger now and Hunk's face the slackness of unconsciousness but still the slight furrow of pain. Lance hated how relieved he was to see the latter because it meant Hunk hadn't... hadn't...

But what exactly was he supposed to do? Lance knew he wouldn't be able to carry Hunk on a good day let alone right now with two mutilated hands and his other injuries, not to mention the blackness pressing in again as his body reminded him that it only had so much blood to lose and his right arm was still dripping.

Blood.

Right.

He needed to staunch it for now. He could do that.

Before he made his way fully to Hunk, Lance made a detour to the counter, near collapsing against it as spots danced across his vision.

His left hand fumbled as best it could on the drawer that contained dish towels and he finally managed to hook a finger over the knob and yank it open. Gazing up at him were piles of freshly laundered towels, including the set Hunk had just picked up in yellow and orange stripes that he'd been so excited about.

It would be going in the incinerator after this.

Lance winced but hauled as many as he could out and pinned them against his chest, trying to not get any of his own blood on them before he forced himself back to Hunk's side, dropping to his knees without any sort of grace and the impact shuddered its way through him.

"Hunk?" he whispered, voice barely audible. "H-Hunk?"

No answer. Not like he should have expected one.

Lance set his pile to his side and away from the blood. He paused for the barest of seconds before awkwardly picking one up and lying it as best he could over his right arm, covering up the sheen of bone and watching with morbid interest as the white and gray pattern instantly darkened with red.

He tucked the arm up against his stomach, a low moan escaping at the new pressure, but he forced himself to keep it there. He had no way of knotting one around the gaping hole in his left hand but...

He eyed the smaller dish rags he'd grabbed. He could...

His stomach rebelled at the thought and his hand spasmed. But he needed to stop the bleeding, both for what remained of his clarity and to prevent as much contamination as he could to Hunk.

"Dios," he whimpered as he maneuvered one of the smaller cloths into his hand, letting it rest against his palm. And a tick later he pressed his fingers over and shoved the cloth into the hole he had ripped into his flesh.
A short scream tore out of his throat and he hunched over his hand as lights exploded behind scrunched eyes. Oh Dios. It was worse than when he'd pulled the knife through it. He let out another scream as his fingers pushed against the rag even more, packing it as much as possible into his hand.

He retched again even though there was nothing left in him, but his body needed to do something in the face of the pain he was causing it. He risked a peek at his hand and the sight of the once blue dish rag nestled inside made him gag once more. He didn't even want to think how damaged his previously working hand had been.

If he lived through this maybe he'd be winding up with two prosthetics. It made a slightly hysterical laugh bubble to his lips and he had a moment of lucidity that he was most definitely being affected by the blood loss.

Blood loss.

The reminder sobered him and as hard as it was he pushed what he could of the pain away so he could awkwardly pick up a pile of towels and shuffled on his knees to Hunk's side, wincing as more blood soaked into his already beyond stained pants.

Hunk was lying on his stomach and Lance knew he didn't have the strength necessary to turn him over, so he did what he could as he was. It wasn't hard to find the wound that had literally brought Hunk to his knees; it was the gaping hole of missing armor and shredded bodysuit that took up all of Hunk's right side and dug through his back and Lance knew too through his stomach on the other side.

That was to say nothing of the scorch marks and other fragmented pieces of armor and small visible burns from the blast that Hunk had taken on his back to protect Lance.

A sob worked its way out of him, but this time out of sheer fear and desperation as he pushed the towels down on Hunk's back and side and they welled immediately with crimson. Hunk didn't so much as twitch.


He couldn't lose Hunk. Not now. Not ever. This was his fault. It was his fault Keith and Pidge were dead. He would not allow Hunk to become a part of that tally. No. No. No.

The towels weren't doing enough though. He needed real help. Lance needed to get Hunk actual assistance but as he'd already determined there was no way he was moving Hunk on his own power. But…

He reached forward and hit the clasps that kept the helmet adhered to Hunk's head. It didn't look too damaged by the blast and if he could somehow reach Shiro or Allura…

Assuming that is, they were still alive. He swallowed thickly and shook his head. No. He couldn't think like that. With a soft pop the helmet suction undid and Lance eased it as carefully as he could over Hunk's face, still furrowed and with it now removed he could make out Hunk's shallow, wet breaths.

Blood was staining the corner of Hunk's mouth and Lance's stomach clenched with renewed panic as though he could sort of figure that there had to be some sort of internal injury since Hunk had been sliced through his stomach he'd somehow held out to a naive hope that it wasn't that bad.
He had been foolish to hope.


Lance maneuvered the helmet awkwardly over his own head, hands shrieking as he forced both to assist and he smeared bloody fingerprints all over the previously pristine white. A painful moment later it was done though and he tapped his left hand against it to activate the comms.

"Sh-Shiro?" he whispered. "Allura?"

No answer.

"Shiro? Anyone? Pl-please. Come i-in. Hunk is… Hunk is…"

Still nothing.

Lance didn't want to think of why they weren't answering. Because they couldn't be… they couldn't be…

"Shiro, please," he begged, bowing his head over Hunk. "Al-llura. Por favor."

There was no answer over the comms. Lance gave it a few more tries but there was only deafening silence from the headset and his harsh, half-sobs echoing and amplified inside. He yanked it off and the helmet rolled across the floor with a clatter.

Over the sound of the helmet coming to its final resting place there was another sound, footsteps, coming from the hallway. Lance wrenched his head in that direction, heart leaping into his throat. Someone was here. It was going to be okay. Hunk was going to be okay.

But no Shiro stepped into the room. No Allura. No Coran.

Instead it was a dark robed figure, purple skin pale in the dim lighting of the kitchen but yellow eyes glowing with a sick gleam.

"No," Lance whimpered. "N-no." It couldn't be. She couldn't be here. If she was here then the others… then the others…

"Oh, my Lance," Haggar breathed, a dark smile turning up her lips. "It is so good to see you again."

Chapter End Notes

Quick little Spanish recap; Lance essentially is first begging Hunk to wake up and that he needs him. He then tells Hunk it's all going to be okay, he's going to get help and he won't leave him.

Funnily enough, I had the whole Lance scene written first and then realized, oops, need to go insert Haggar back up there. Didn't mean to make such a tear jerker in the middle of the chapter (it was at least one for me, Dios, why do I always cry at scenes with Coran?) but there we go. Enjoy. Or cry. Or do both. I am.
As a PSA just in case you were unaware; comments are not kudos and you can post one more than once. Your author highly encourages if possible every chapter. :P Comments make an author happy and want to keep writing and lack of feedback makes an author sad. I was super excited about last chapter given Theodek's end, but not sure if it was the holiday weekend or what, but it was a very quiet response on this end and it was more than a little disappointing considering what I had taken as prior enthusiasm for his demise. Please don't contribute to making the author sad. This goes for all stories you read. Please leave a comment at the end to show your appreciation for the fic and the author's time. Please and thank you.
Chapter Sixty-Eight

Chapter Notes

Be sure to read author's notes at the end regarding the next update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They'd made it.

Four minutes and twenty-two seconds.

Pidge resisted the urge to collapse in the doorway of the infirmary despite the fact her legs were barely holding her up and her breath was coming in heavy, wet pants and she could taste copper once more on her tongue.

Not important.

Pidge, for all her skills, really had no idea how to calibrate the cryo pods. Everything was written in Altean and while she had gotten pretty good at translating parts of it relating to crystal and shield outputs the medical jargon went over her head.

Fortunately, Coran had been down in the infirmary to prep a pod for the injured Tloan.

Pidge thought of the corpse of the mother and the fact the son had likely suffered a similar fate.

He certainly wouldn't be needing it anymore.

Keith though. Keith desperately did.

She dragged him over to the pod, going to bite her lip and halting as both blood and pain registered at the action. Coran may have prepped it but she had no idea if the settings were correct. The Tloan had been double the size of Keith and an completely different composition too.

She didn't have much choice though. She was going to have to trust the Altean technology for now and once she left and found Coran – because he was alive, they were all alive, they were fine – he could adjust it accordingly. For now it was vital she get Keith into any pod at all.

But…

She glanced back at Keith's limp form and then back at the pod, upright and the base over a foot off the ground.

How did she get him into it?

Keith was the smallest member next to herself so if Pidge was going to be able to manhandle any of them he was her best bet. But he was a complete deadweight right now and her wrist, which gave another pulse at the thought, was in no condition to be grappling with him.

Godamnit, what did she do?
This couldn't be how it ended. They couldn't have gotten this far despite the odds only for Keith to die feet away. That was not how this worked, dammit!

"Think, think, come on Holt," Pidge cast her eyes desperately about the infirmary for inspiration.

A pulley system? No time. Heft him up somehow? She bent down, looping her arms under his armpits, but even that strain was too much on her wrist and she let go with a gasp, only having managed to hover his chest up a couple inches.

Tears stung her eyes at how absolutely useless she was right now when it mattered most. She had learned to live with her small size, acknowledged the short jokes and the fact she was going to forever be headrest for Lance. She knew her limitations and worked around them so they weren't. She excelled at climbing, her small stature could let her sneak easily through vents and narrow passages. She was a smaller target and her shield nearly covered her completely as compared to the rest of her teammates.

But right now she'd have given anything to be Hunk-sized because Keith was going to die because she was too small. That was ridiculous.

She needed someone to help her lift him up. But who? Where? She didn't dare use the intercom system to call for help just in case less than savory individuals showed up instead. She had the utmost faith in her team but…

A shudder shook her frame. Haggar and the Galran commander who she had watched ruthlessly torture Lance during the Kri Za Kri were here. In the castle. Her home. And they had blown into it like it was made of tissue paper, gaping holes on each side.

They would be fighting her family. Trying to kill them. She could not afford to distract them, not if her call for help made them pause and allowed for an opening. Not if they were fighting for their own lives.

No. She had to figure this out and then she had to go help them. Somehow. Her right hand clenched at her side. It still worked. She could still wield her bayard.

She was going to fight and she was going to make them bleed.

But before that she had to help Keith. And that led her right back to where she started.

A broken sob worked its way out of her throat as nothing still came to mind. She was the only one here and–

Her breath caught.

She wasn't the only one in this room. Keith was too. And if she could just wake him, get him to somehow stand past the absolute agony he would be in, he could get himself into the pod.

Pidge flew over to the medical cabinet that Coran kept fully stocked with things she had no idea as to their purpose. But she did know what the adrenaline shots looked like. She had found the medical emergency kit onboard Green and had taken the entire thing apart to ask Coran the purpose of each item.

There were bandages, of course, along with what she now knew where the Glornack seeds for pain relief. There were little cubes that when squeezed contained a gel for burns and a temporary adhesive to help clot a wound.
There had also been a long orange colored capsule that upon removing the cap showed a small depressor. Coran had explained, very serious, that it was a type of booster, designed only for emergencies if the heart was fading. It would give a burst of essentially adrenaline – he'd used an Altean term Pidge hadn't quite understood but the concept was the same – and could forcibly awaken and keep the recipient going for about half a varga. Too much though Coran had warned and the heart could stop instead.

He'd actually taken all of the shots out of the Paladins kits until he could properly test them for the correct dosage for humans, remarking that their bodies were frailer and likely did not need as much. He had not yet apparently finished his research as all of the shots were in the cabinet, labeled with Coran's elegant script, but foreign to Pidge's eyes. She didn't have much of a choice though and with shaking hands grabbed one and dashed back to Keith.

Where did she inject it? Epi pens she knew thanks to her mom went into the thigh. Did these work the same? She glanced at the capsule in hand but there was only unknown Altean words looking back.

No time to wonder. She yanked the cap off and positioned the vial against the back of Keith's thigh. Her hand refused to stop trembling as she moved her thumb to the depressor.

What if it was too much? What if she killed Keith right here and now?

Half the dose, she decided. And… and if that didn't work then she'd inject the rest. She just needed him awake – and in so, so much pain, she winced – to get into the pod. Not to fight. God no. And if Keith somehow tried to pull such a stunt…

Well, she would have to stop him.

But first she needed to wake him up.

And wasting no more time she pushed down on the capsule, halting its progress when the depressor had made it halfway down the capsule.

Nothing happened.

"Come on," she pleaded. "Keith, please. Wake up!"

Still nothing.

Did she inject the rest of it? She had to at this rate. What other choice did she have? If Keith didn't wake up then unless someone were to randomly stroll into the infirmary in the next minute it would be too late.

Her thumb shifted to press down once more—

Keith twitched.

Pidge froze.

"Keith?" she breathed.

A high keen of agony that should not ever come from Keith at all sounded and he twitched again. The cry grew louder as he shifted his head, still encased in Pidge's helmet, to the side, shoulders tensing beneath his damaged armor.
Pidge pulled the syringe free but otherwise hovered, heart in her throat, as Keith let out another noise that belonged to a wounded animal and not her friend. He was shuddering now, limbs spasming with the pain and she could make out a tear trekking out from beneath tightly closed eyes.

"Keith," she whispered, gingerly reaching out to place a hand on his upper arm of the undislocated shoulder. It shook beneath her. "Keith, please. W-wake up."

He was shifting, dragging his mangled right leg up towards his body and trying to curl around it, but the movement was stretching his skin, sending rivulets of blood and flesh cracking from the burns, all down his back.

He choked on his next breath, a barely audible whimper escaping tightly sealed lips.

He was in so much pain. She had done this. She'd gotten him hurt. And now she was making him suffer it all again.

But she needed him to wake up. She needed him to get up because if he didn't then all of this was for nothing.

She felt a tear make its way down her own face, stinging trail against her raw cheek, as Keith let out another raw moan, still lost to the pain.

"Oh Keith. I'm so s-sorry."

Her apology wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Keith choked out another sob, muffled behind the helmet.

Her hand squeezed on his shoulder, desperately waiting for his eyes to open, for some sort of clarity to return in the face of such agony.

But Keith just whimpered and spasmed beneath her light hold.

A new plan was needed.

Pidge released his shoulder and shifted her attention to the helmet. It wasn't latched on properly and she was able to dig her right hand beneath it, fingers brushing against Keith's cheek and he shuddered at the touch, eyes fluttering beneath closed lids. She pulled then, somehow shifting it over the blood-stained dark hair, and let it roll away on the floor.

"Keith?" she whispered again, pressing her fingers against his cheek. "K-Keith? Please. I... I need you to wake up."

His lashes fluttered.

"Please. Pl-please. Wake up."

And purple eyes, bright with pain and dulled with confusion opened. But they looked past her, unfocused.


His lips parted then, and more of a moan than a word he repeated, "Shiro?"

"Yes, Shiro. He needs you to get up. Can you do that?"
Amethyst orbs were tracking to her face and there was a spark of clarity beneath the pain. "Pidge? Wh-what…?" he trailed off as a low keening noise took over instead. Pidge rubbed her fingers against his cheek in the only comfort she could offer.

"Please," she repeated. "Keith, please. I need you to get up. Shiro needs you to get up."

Shiro? Keith repeated the name in his head. Why did Shiro need him to get up? Where was Shiro? What had happened? He couldn't think straight. There was too much pain. Everything hurt. Why did everything hurt?

"Keith, please," Pidge begged and her small hand brushed his cheek again. "Pl-please. Get up."

She sounded terrified.

Why was she so scared?

Was he scaring her?

If he got up would that fix it?

He twitched out his legs to do so, but fire raced along his right one and he gasped, choking on his next breath as red and yellow heat and light filled his vision. He scrunched his eyes closed, dully hearing Pidge calling his name above the roaring flames that had settled into his very bones.

But this was not the comforting fire of Red. This hurt.

Why did it hurt?

Something wet his face and he flinched back. But the drop had soothed a small ember and he was able to realize in that moment it had been a tear.

Pidge.

Pidge was crying.

Keith was making Pidge cry.

He had to get up. He had to fix this.

Even though he couldn't recall what this was.

He pushed his legs out again, pressing his feet against the floor, while he tried to brace his hands but his right collapsed beneath him with a new flare of agony. He ignored it, ignored the short scream that might have come from him, and focused instead on his left, palm on the floor and fingers flush.

And he pushed up.

Lightning seemed to strike then, hotter than any fire, all along his back and only sheer will kept him from falling right back down as he got his knees beneath him into some version of a crawling position. His vision swam, white blurring with red and brown and he closed his eyes against it, stomach turning.

Pidge's hand had left his face and he felt her arms encircle his chest from above. She was saying something but he couldn't hear it over the throbbing, pulsing torment that had filled his ears and the crackle of flames and lightning that he swore were waging a battle over his skin.
God, what the fuck had happened?

Why couldn't he remember?

That scared him more than the pain.

The fear though was already fading out, absolute agony taking its place and scattering the little clarity he had.

Pidge's muffled voice continued to say something and he latched onto it, an anchor in this storm of fire.

Up, she was saying. Get up?

Wasn't he already up? Maybe? Apparently not though.

He tried to focus again on his feet, the sensation of his toes digging into the ground telling him he was not actually standing.

Is that what she wanted?

He shifted his left leg, bracing it. His back flared again, white-hot, and he shoved it away. Not now. Now was standing.

Upon moving to his right leg though he felt it buckle beneath him and only Pidge's harsh grip, digging into his shoulders and sending rivulets of pain shooting through his right – and why was she hurting him? Why was she screaming too? For her own breathy wail was overlapping with his– kept him from falling.

He had to get up though. That was important. Somehow.

Keith swayed, balancing most of his weight on his left leg as his right one trembled and threatened to give at even the barest of touches. Pidge was moving then and he felt his left arm being lifted and a small body worming itself beneath it, tucked up against his side.

He leaned gratefully against her support.

She tried moving them, tugging against his arm to make him go forward.

Keith balked as the action made his vision white out, despite the fact his eyes were still closed, and he moaned, giving a barely there shake of his head.

"–ease," her words filtered in. "Please, Keith. For me. For Shiro."

Shiro.

Where was Shiro?

He tried to ask again but the word was a mere breath turned groan as Pidge bodily forced him forward. Her arm was then on his back and the groan turned into a strangled scream as flashes exploded in front of him at the touch.

He stumbled forward to get away–

–and collided with something cold and hard.
Over the sound of his own breathless gasps he could hear Pidge crying, apologies mixed in with her tears. She still hadn't let go though.

"Up," Pidge was saying now, pulling upwards on his arm. "Step up."

Step up? What? Step where?

He swayed, trying to open his eyes and look at what she wanted, but his eyelids felt so heavy. He felt himself start to sink down and even Pidge's hand digging into the white-lightning of his back couldn't summon up the energy to move.

"Up, Keith!" and her tone was less pleading now and more sharp. "Up! Goddamnit Keith, don't you dare! You stubborn asshole, step up!"

Beneath the harsh words though was the stark fear, the kind that made Keith's stomach twist. He clumsily lifted his right foot and felt it strike against the hard object he'd already crashed into.

"That's it, that's it," Pidge coached. "Come on Keith, a little higher. Almost there. Come on."

Her words were starting to fade again, lost to a pounding static. Still, he tried. If it was important to Pidge then it must be important to him too.

His foot slid over the edge of something and he halted, confused. A step?

Pidge was shoving against his back again and a strangled scream tore itself from his throat as pain pain pain overwhelmed everything else.

There was yelling and shouting and crying and he couldn't tell where his ended and Pidge's began.

And then half of it abruptly cut off.

It was jarring enough that his eyes flew open, his own cries dying in confusion and fear as something cold pressed against his face and space squeezed in on him.

He turned his head, seeking Pidge, and there she was, faintly visible through a shimmering glass and the white cloud of his breath.

Glass? Fog?

Cryo-pod.

She'd shoved him up and into a cryo-pod.

That… that made sense. He'd been hurt.

Why had he been hurt?

Why couldn't he remember?


Had that been just now? Before?

Explosion. Sound. Protect.

Keith's breathing spiked, the white cloud glowing thicker.
He remembered. He remembered. He remembered he remembered he remembered.


He had to get to them.

He had to… to...

Cold unlike anything he’d ever felt shot into him, icicles of pain that quelled the red and orange flames but turned them dark and bitter instead. It hurt. It hurt more than it should.

Something was wrong.

"P-Pidge," he moaned, lifting his left hand to press against the glass front. It wavered in his view.

He had to get out. He had to get out.

Ice was filling his veins, so cold it burned.

Out out out out out.

His legs buckled beneath him. Keith saw his hand slide across the glass, smearing a path in the foggy expanse, saw Pidge's eyes widen and his name on her bloodied lips.

And then he saw no more.

Chapter End Notes

And Keith makes a conscious appearance :) Ta da! And he's in a pod, although sounds like something might be a little wrong. Whoops. Guess those schematics weren't so great after all, Pidge.

I'm uploading this from Indy Pop Con so if you're here, come say hello! I'm at table 913 in the artist alley. If you mention any of my fics by name to me get a free Voltron button! Stick around and chat/spaz with me too ;p

As normal, Color will be going on a hiatus during the launch of the new season, which means we will come back in two weeks (this has spanned four new seasons guys. That's crazy xD). However, I wanted to offer the possibility of a chapter to be posted this coming Tuesday (given that this one was shorter than my normal ones and so too is the next one). I leave it up to you guys though; if the response is good for this chapter I will upload the next one in four days on Tuesday as a little bonus inside my normal new season hiatus. Otherwise will upload like normal on June 22 following season six. In any case, please do not post spoilers in the comments. Gracias.

So as always, please do drop a comment below before you skedaddle with your thoughts on the chapter/story. Thanks very much and see you... somewhere in the future ;D
Shiro stumbled down the hall, a blood trail in his wake.

His flesh hand was pressed against his stomach as though that could hold it inside, but the splattering of crimson that continued to drip told another story.

He gritted his teeth and kept going, even as the hallway narrowed and widened in front of him.

He had to find Lance and Hunk.

What he was going to be able to do when he did find them was another matter.

All he did know was that he was not going to lose them. He would not lose anyone else. His prosthetic clenched at his side with a creak.

He had lost so many already.

He pushed their faces away. Not now. He couldn't dwell on them right now. He had to first save Lance and Hunk. Only once they were safe could he give into the grief threatening to drown him.

He steadily made his way to the great hall where he'd told them to go even though he had a sinking feeling they had not made it there.

His fears were confirmed as he stepped into the open double doors and all of the Lions appeared, still in their spots from just that morning.

"Black," he whispered, voice still too loud for the space.

But there was no gentle touch on his mind, no sense of awareness. She, along with the rest of the Lions, was still powered down. Shiro swallowed back his curse.

He didn't have time to waste standing here. Haggar was out there gunning for Lance.

He needed to find them before she did. Before… before he lost any more of his family.

Turning around, Shiro made to return to the hallway but his body had other plans. His right leg gave a wobble and before he could stop himself he was falling, hard unforgiving ground rushing to meet him.

He barely slammed his hands out in time to catch himself and the resulting impact had him gasping aloud as pain rolled through him. He collapsed further, coming to balance himself on knees and trembling forearms.

A quiet *plip plip plip* sounded in the silence of the hall and Shiro groaned as his stomach spasmed.

He had to get up.

He had to save Lance and Hunk.
He had to be there for them.

"I'm here for you too, Shiro."

Shiro choked on his next breath as Keith's soft, sincere words from just an hour ago cut in.

*Here for you. Here for you. Here for you.*

But Shiro hadn't been there for him.

Instead he'd sent Keith and Pidge on a mission to *die*. He was their leader and he'd made horrible, horrible call.

One that he could never take back.

Why had they ever trusted him?

He'd told Allura he couldn't do this. He'd tried to back down but she had not let him. She had made him believe he was capable.

She had been wrong.

But it wasn't her fault. It was his.

*He was the one who was wrong.*

He was the one who was broken and messed up and *weak*.

"*You're the strongest person I know,*" Keith echoed.

Shiro didn't feel strong.

Strong was being able to protect those you loved. Strong was doing whatever you could in whatever capacity to make sure that no one else had to suffer.

Lance had understood that. Lance had taken the final plunge to save them.

*That* was strength and love.

Shiro…

Shiro was not strong. Shiro was *weak*. He had killed Keith. Killed Pidge.

He should have been the one to board the ship. As soon as Allura had vetoed his offer to go he should have known deep down something was going to go wrong.

It should have been him.

And now he'd killed Allura. He hadn't been strong enough to fight Haggar, to hold her back. He'd failed in everything that mattered.

What kind of leader was he?

"*You're already a great leader.*"

"I'm n-not," he whispered to Keith's voice inside his head. "I'm not."
A great leader would have protected his team.

He hadn't.

He hadn't at all.

Keith and Pidge were dead. Allura was dying. And Hunk and Lance…

"My Lance needs me," Haggar had crooned, smile twisting her face.

Lance was in trouble.

Haggar was going to hurt him. And once she discovered that she was cut off from his quintessence, that her prize was unobtainable…

She'd kill him.

She'd kill him and anyone else – Hunk – that might be in her way.

They were going to die.

And Shiro was just lying here and being absolutely useless.

He needed to get up. He needed to save them.

But how?

He hadn't been able to beat Haggar, to even really hurt her at all, when it had been three on one. What did he honestly think he was going to do? Stare her to death? Ask her to nicely leave?

Yeah. Right.

She had offered to deal with him before; he and Lance for what remained of the team. He hadn't taken it, knowing her words were poison dipped in honey.

Now he wondered if he should have at least considered. Hunk and Allura and Coran could have lived. He could have found a way to rescue himself and Lance at a later time.

He let out a weak sob.

Who was he trying to fool?

He couldn't have rescued them. He'd have been thrown into the arena when he wasn't being tied down to a table. And Lance… he'd either be dead when Haggar discovered the barrier or she'd have turned him into a project too. Or, he shuddered, a pet.

Because as obsessed as Haggar was with her champion, there was something different about her approach to Lance. He was not just a tool to her… he was a toy.

And here Shiro still was, being useless.

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

Shiro could feel the tight hug Keith had initiated with the words, the tickle of dark hair beneath his chin as he returned it.

He sucked in a harsh breath, tears pricking his eyes at the memory.
He let it out as he really listened to it.

Even now, when he was gone, Keith was helping him.

Lying here, listing all the things he had done wrong was not going to help anyone. He couldn't change what had happened.

But…

He could find a way to save the ones he still could.

He had no idea how to face down Haggar, but he would give it all he had.

Somehow, some way, he was going to stop her.

No.

Not just stop her.

He was going to kill her. He had made that promise and he was going to stand by it.

She was not going to hurt anyone ever again.

His hands clenched into fists, the prosthetic grinding at the force, and pushed himself to his knees and then to his feet.

He swayed as black spots danced in his vision at the elevation change and his body protested the movement and more blood dripped from his stomach, splattering the ground.

He told his body to be quiet and took a staggering step forward and then another, exiting the main hall and leaving the Lions behind.

He was going to find Lance and Hunk.

And he was going to save them.

No matter what.

The macabre trail of blood followed him deeper into the castle.

xxx

Allura still clung to life.

She had fallen unconscious a dobash ago, hand growing limp in Coran's own, and he had thought then it was over. But a wet, garbled breath had shaken her frame a moment later, blood trickling down her chin, and Coran's heart had seized again.

He dug his fingers into the back of her long tresses, holding her close as more and more crimson continued to stain the floor about them.

He had no idea how she still lived. Perhaps some part of her was holding out for some miracle that he knew would not come to pass. Perhaps it was her last sense of duty, to remain in this world for as long as she could, to keep him from being the last of their kind for just another dobash.

He clung tighter to his dying princess, his daughter, tears pattering against her dark cheeks and his
near silent sobs shaking them both.

He had lost near everything once. His wife. His son. He had been pulled back from that dark abyss by Alfor and the bright, innocent life of his newborn daughter. He had found new purpose, a new family.

Then Alfor had been wrenched away, his home destroyed, and he had only had Allura again.

But not quite. The five humans who fate had chosen to be the Paladins of Voltron had become family, each in their own way. He had grown to love them all, to open his heart once more and rejoice that the universe had seen fit to give him yet another immeasurable treasure.

And now...

Now he was losing them too.

Pidge. Keith. They were already gone. So young. Barely more than babes in Altean years, fighting in a war that he should never allowed. He should have put his foot down the moment they had arrived for no matter what fate had chosen it had chosen children.

And now those children were dead.

His own daughter soon to follow.

His shoulders hunched even further over Allura as though that could keep her here.

That was to say nothing of the rest. Shiro was wounded, not fatally, not yet, but he could not face the Druid alone, and yet that is what he had gone to do. The only ones unaccounted for were Hunk and Lance, but based on the witch's reaction something had befallen them via the Galran commander.

He clung to hope that somehow they lived, but it was a fickle thing. For he knew Hunk would do all he could to protect Lance, and the reverse was true as well. And Haggar... even if she were to encounter the barrier there was no telling what she would do when she discovered Lance's quintessence was cut off from her.

They could both very well be dead now. Two beyond gentle, innocent souls that should never seen the cruelty of the battlefield. Gone because they had failed to stop Zarkon ten thousand years ago.

Why must the young pay for the elders' mistakes? Why was the toll always so high?

Coran looked down at Allura's tear-stained face, a mixture of his own and hers. Her brow was furrowed, somehow still holding onto life.

He did not understand how. Her body should have given out by now, the amount of blood alone likely fatal, not accounting even for the organs destroyed in the gaping chasm that was once her torso. All he could do was be here in her final moments, whenever those may be, so she did not pass on alone.

Only then could he get up and rejoin the battle, for however much he was capable of.

Coran released a shaky breath and over the sound of his exhale he heard something else, something moving outside the room.

He stiffened, tightening his grip on Allura even while his eyes cast to his staff that had rolled away.

But it was no threat.
The noise was a morose squeak, followed by another and a light pattering of tiny feet.

The mice.

They appeared as a group at the destroyed wall, little Chulatt cradled in Platt's arms and Plachu and Chuchule supporting one another, tiny paws wrapped about each other's backs. Normally a spattering of pastels, their colors now looked even paler, Chulatt bordering on gray instead of light blue.

"Little ones," Coran murmured.

Chuchule chirruped softly, red eyes bright with tears. She and Plachu made it to the Alteans first and the two scrambled up Allura's legs. They both skirted about the gaping bloody hole, Plachu near wavering at the sight and Chuchule tugged him away.

They nestled themselves then over Allura's heart, curling up nose to tail. There was the briefest flare of white light and when it settled both mice were another shade paler. In his arms, Allura twitched.

Coran's breath caught.

They were sharing their lifeforce. Their connection to Allura, bonded for ten thousand years, had expanded in such a way that they were somehow capable of such a feat, sharing their own quintessence with their princess.

Platt had reached them now and squeaked quietly, unable to clamber up himself with Chulatt in his arms. Coran carefully reached over Allura and put his hand down for them to climb onto and then raised them up. Platt made a noise of thanks and settled himself and Chulatt next to their siblings.

"You cannot save her," he whispered, even as he reached out a finger and stroked it along Platt's back. No matter how much quintessence they gave it could not repair the damage. All it would do was prolong her life for a little longer.

Plachu raised his head and made a near hissing noise, as if denying the claim, before nestling his head back against Allura.

Coran felt tears anew prick his eyes.

It was all for naught. There was nothing that could save Allura now. If they'd had an Altean healer of days gone by they might have been able to–

Coran froze.

They did have a healer.

Him.

He possessed orange quintessence, the element of light and healing. But he had not had the ability to unlock it and thus it had lain dormant within him, just as the human Paladins did until they bonded with their Lions.

He had never pursued the healing arts – and had sworn off ever trying after Neleenia passed in his arms and he'd been forced to wonder the what ifs for while he could not have cured Neleenia of her disease he could have prolonged her life in that moment, could have saved their son, and if he thought on it his grief threatened to overwhelm him– and had concentrated instead of his many other talents.
And now…

Now he was presented with a near identical scenario: a woman he loved dying once more in his arms.

But this time...

His hand shifted to his robe pocket where he'd haphazardly thrust the rune circle Allura had sketched out just a varga ago with the intent to tap into his quintessence.

This time he had a key of sorts. A direction. It had been drawn to connect to a quintessence, to channel his own along the circle.

He could use it to connect to Allura.

He could *save* her.

With gentle haste Coran lowered Allura fully to the floor and thrust his hand into his pocket, pulling out the rumpled but still intact circle.

He could save her.

"Thank you, little ones," he murmured, voice thick with tears. They had bought Allura time, enough that he could attempt this.

He had no idea what would happen. He had no idea how to control it, to know when to cut it off so he did not drain and kill himself.

It did not matter. He would pour every last drop of his own into Allura if that is what it took. He would save her.

He would not fail.

Platt gave a squeak of affirmation and rose from his spot on Allura's chest. His fur was paler too then when he had first curled up, but his eyes were open and dark with strength. He nudged his siblings and with little chirrups they pulled themselves free and slid down Allura's hair to drop fully to the ground.

Once they were clear, Coran placed the rune circle above Allura's heart.

"Please, Alaraan," he prayed, hovering his hands above the circle. "Let this work. Let her live."

And Coran placed his hands atop the circle.

There was a tingle then, a sense of *something* filling him that he did not understand but it felt right. It was warm and bright and he closed his eyes, picturing a steady orange glow. He could feel it growing, his hands heating pleasantly and reminding him of stepping into a warm beam of sunshine on a chilly day.

He could see the orange now, just like the sun's rays, stretching out and faintly touching upon a fading soft pink. There was pain when they connected, a chasm that nearly knocked the breath out of him.

Gritting his teeth, Coran pushed all he had into that fissure.

He filled it with orange light, stoppering up every crack, turning the dull pink into a brilliant shade
that met his with a soothing caress.

It was still not enough.

He poured more in, feeling his own fading like the sun beyond the horizon.

He did not stop.

He could not stop.

It should have been terrifying, to not be able to cut off the flow of quintessence. But it was not. Not when it meant that Allura would live. He could feel that, feel her life force renewed.

He had many regrets in his life, but her death would not be one of them.

He could pass on with that.

There was one last weak ray of orange, sputtering against the canvas of pink. Coran felt his lips curl up into a smile.

This was right.

This was—

A sharp prick catapulted him out of the flow of light and the world around him returned to the dark grays of the storage room.

Coran saw through bleary eyes the outlines of the mice, gathered atop his hands.

They had… bit him?

It was his last thought before he collapsed.

Chapter End Notes

And lookee at that, the princess lives! Anyone see this little part coming (Coran is the element of healing!) or remember that rune circle (and spot him put it in his pocket)? Good thing Haggar showed up when she did, huh? Otherwise they'd have used it earlier to test on Lance's barrier and wouldn't have it to save Allura. And good mice. Good furry beans. Look at everyone get a role :D

I'd like to clarify from the notes last chapter that a "good response" does not mean quantity. The amount of spam comments I've had to delete this weekend has been more than a bit ridiculous and posting over and over as anon accounts to update and keyboard smashing is not considered supportive or kind or "good." It's rather frustrating, actually. The idea of a "good response" was based on the shortened timeframe to leave an actual comment in; not the amount of them. I'd much rather only get a couple sincere comments on a fic than twenty of the aforementioned.
This bonus update is not for those spam-type comments at all, but for the lovely individuals who left actual comments about the fic/chapter and the writing. Thank you for those. I hope you all enjoy this chapter as well.

As always, please do leave a comment below. I love hearing about what you liked best in the chapter and very curious to see the reactions to the awesome, gorgeous man that is Coran. I'll see everyone again on June 22 following season six. And again, please no spoilers in the comments. Thank you and look forward to hearing from you!
"No," Lance repeated, blinking rapidly as though that would make her go away. "You're... you're not here." She couldn't be here. He felt himself waver and the little strength he'd forced into his limbs seeped away and he crashed back onto his heels from the upright kneel at Hunk's side.

Haggar stepped more fully into the kitchen and he could see now where parts of her robe were torn, a few pieces burnt. She had most definitely fought the others.

But...

But...

But she was here and they were not. And that could only mean.

"No..."

"The princess is dead," Haggar said bluntly, a cruel smirk turning up her face, widening as she heard the choked inhalation. "Her advisor soon to follow. And..." her gaze turned to the large Paladin stretched out on the ground. "It appears as though that one will be joining them as well."

"She's not," Lance protested, but she could see the despair in his eyes. Oh, she had missed such a sight.

"She is," Haggar replied, making her way towards him with slow, purposeful strides. Not slow at all in the least from the number of blows rained down upon her. She resisted the urge to scowl then, still feeling the sharp, hot pulse of the blaster to the back of her head. If she had not layered so many enchantments over vital parts of her body she had no doubt that would have been her end.

Alas for the Paladins, she had come more than prepared. Years upon years of magic and quintessence surging through her body had parried the attack — although they had damaged her robe and that irked her more than anything — and while she was a little worse for the wear it was nothing she could not handle.

Her own quintessence stores were running a bit low from all of the apparitions and attacks she had launched, but... her eyes shifted back to her Lance, still kneeling behind the downed human and arms trembling at his sides. She knew how she could restore them and then some. She regretted that she would not be able to keep taking her Lance's quintessence as unfortunately he would be drained fully here, but even with that obstacle she knew he would be able to supply her for a long, long while.

And she would make every drop count.

However...

She could sense his life draining away as he knelt there and for all the fear in his eyes there was an exhaustion too. The commander had really done quite a number on him. He was lucky he was dead, she sniffed, or she may have killed him herself for this deliberate damage to her Lance. He'd been
ordered to contain him, not kill him.

That was her task.

She was almost to him when to her surprise he made to struggle to his feet and actually got the long limbs beneath him although he didn't present a threat at all, right hand and arm pressed against his stomach and his left hanging limp.

She quirked an eyebrow. "What is this now? You think you can fight me in your condition?"

He didn't answer her, lips pressed in a thin line. Honestly, Lance had no idea what he was doing. He knew he had zero chance against her normally and he was well into the negatives in his current state.

But…

But he had to try.

And then…

And then what, exactly, even if he did so?

Allura would still be dead. Pidge and Keith would still be dead. Hunk would… his eyes flickered briefly to where Hunk continued to lie, new blood no longer adding to the pool thanks to the saturated towels, but he'd already lost so so much and Lance didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

Haggar had said something about Shiro and Coran, which meant they were still alive. But whether that meant in any condition to help him was another story. And, Lance shivered, he had a sinking feeling they weren't for they would have never let Haggar out of their sights if they had been able. Coran would wind up dead too and Shiro would be dragged back to the Galra and it would be his fault. No. They weren't coming to help him now. He was on his own.

He was alone.

Just like before.

Except unlike before this time he was alone because he had killed the rest of his family. He hadn't protected them. All he'd done was bring them to Haggar and offer them up on a silver platter.

He didn't deserve to live.

Not now, not after costing the rest of his family their own lives.

He'd never wanted this. He just wanted to keep them safe and he'd failed.

And just like that he felt the fight leave him, exhaustion pulling on his limbs again and gravity pulling him down to the floor. He couldn't even muster up a scream as his destroyed hands and arm smashed into the ground. Just a whimper as pathetic as the rest of him.

A tear tracked down his cheek, followed quickly by another and he scrunched his eyes shut so he didn't have to see Haggar. See Hunk's still body, barely clinging to life.

Dios, he'd just wanted them to be safe. Had that been too much to ask for? He buried his face in his shoulder, muffling a shattered sob. Yes. Yes it had. And if he'd just been stronger he could have protected them.
But he was weak.

It didn't matter what they'd said. What they believed. Actions spoke for themselves and Haggar had been right. Weak, weak weak.

He'd hurt his family. He'd killed them.

There was nothing brave or strong or courageous about that. And now here he was, lying on the ground and offering no resistance as Haggar's footsteps stopped by his head and he let out another muffled sob. He was too tired to do anything else, the black that had slowly been creeping in making a new push and he welcomed it even as the other part of him rebelled against it.

If he died here then he really had failed them. They had died to protect him. He should honor that. He should get up and try to fight.

And yet…

He felt hollow inside, like he'd been scrapped raw and his body ached and cried with guilt and pain, both real and imagined. There was no one left to protect. And without anyone to protect… he no longer served any purpose.

He no longer wanted to live.

"Oh, my Lance," Haggar murmured. "Your color is fading."

Her voice sounded as though from far away and Lance barely had the strength to shudder as her hands lighted upon his right arm let alone pull the mangled limb away. All he could manage was a whimper as her hands ghosted across the ruined flesh.

"Not yet," she said softly. "You cannot fade from me yet, my Lance." Her grip tightened and he moaned low in his throat, knowing he deserved the pain but at the same time wishing it would just end. "Not until I have your beautiful blue quintessence. Here. Allow me to help you."

Fire and agony burst along his arm then and somehow Lance managed a hoarse scream and tried to jerk his arm out of Haggar's grasp, but she held on tight.

Lance recognized this pain though. Haggar wasn't actively trying to torture him.

She was healing him.

Such a thing only scared him more and he renewed his efforts to regain his captured limb, both harder and easier as the healing intensified in its power.

New black spots were taking over his vision now from the sheer torture disguised as treatment and a sob mixed with his raw scream.

Just when Lance thought it had to be almost over, it had to be, a new bolt of lightning snapped inside of his hand and his scream turned into a shriek and he felt Haggar press her weight against his back as he writhed on the floor.

White starbursts now were exploding before his eyes and his entire world was centered down to the feeling of a supernova going off inside of his hand and arm.

*Dios.*

*Dios* just let him *die.*
He stretched his hand out, seeking anything to ground himself with as the agony only grew hotter in its intensity and he could literally feel his nerves on fire and the scent of burning. Not flesh though. Almost like ozone and he didn't know if that was better or worse as his stomach heaved regardless.

His fingers dug into his palm, nails biting into the flesh and he felt rivulets of blood form and disappear in the same instant as Haggar's magic healed them instantaneously.

She was speaking but he couldn't hear her over the roar in his mind and the flames still crackling madly up and down his limb. He clenched his hand again and in that moment something other than agony registered.

His hand.

He'd just moved it.

He'd moved it. His fingers. His wrist.

What?

*Dios.* What had just…?

"—almost done," he distantly heard Haggar say.

She had healed his hand? Something even the cryo-pod hadn't been able to do?

How was that…?

Had she meant to do that…?

The worst of the pain was fading now from her treatment, which highlighted how normal his arm felt even though the rest of him still felt like it had been stabbed and clawed and blasted, which he supposed it had, and his head still ached, almost even more so now than before, but his hand… his wrist… his arm…

They were healed.

His breath caught in his throat as he felt Haggar's hand tighten on his arm but it didn't hurt. Not like it had.

Trembling, he clenched his right hand into a fist again. There was a stiffness to the movement and it felt shaky still, but it moved. It responded. He could feel each fingerpad as he pressed his thumb to them.

*Dios,* she had actually healed him and she didn't even know.

Then again, she was planning to kill him shortly so it probably really didn't matter to her.

"There," he felt Haggar sit back. "Your life is no longer in immediate danger."

She released his arm and it thunked back to the ground with a dull thump and Lance felt it. He was curling his fingers into a fist again – to what, punch her? – when her hands descended from behind to card into his hair and his entire body stiffened as cold horror ran down his neck.

"I missed you," she crooned. "Oh, my sweet Lance."

"No," he whispered, struggling to speak past the lump that had formed in his throat.
"No?" she repeated and her hand tightened ever so.

"D-don't touch me."

She chuckled then, a cold and dark sound. "I see some of your spirit has returned. Truly, I am grateful to see that spark. It means that I can now extinguish it again."

In answer Lance made to put his fully operable right hand on the ground to push himself up, but Haggar reacted quicker than his sluggish limb did and grabbed it by the wrist and twisted it behind his back just as Theodek had done but minutes prior. She, at least, did not snap it and merely held it there, a shooting ache in his shoulder at the angle.

"Come," Haggar rose to her feet and with her strength hauled him up by his arm and hair to his knees. "I wish to see your beautiful eyes."

Lance immediately scrunched them closed, even as he brought his mangled left hand up and back to try and strike any part of her. Haggar caught it as well and he moaned as instead of holding it by the wrist she wrapped her hand all about his.

"This looks painful," she remarked, squeezing, and at that Lance did cry out as he felt hot blood gush through the towel he'd forced into his palm. "Perhaps I should heal it too?"

As she spoke Lance felt pain sizzle over his hand and he could feel flesh trying to knit itself back together.

With the towel still inside.

Haggar laughed as he screamed out of both pain and panic. "You do not appreciate my offer?" she asked and he could feel cloth twining about with skin and tendons. He dry-heaved, tasting the sour swill of bile deep in his throat.

She abruptly stopped then although he continued to gasp, body quivering in her hold and tears decorating his cheeks.

"How beautiful," she murmured then and he felt her release his left hand to instead cup his cheek from behind, thumb brushing against the high arch. He shuddered but didn't try to shake her off as his left hand pulsed with renewed pain and his right was still twisted behind him.

She turned his head but his beautiful eyes remained tightly closed. Still… She rubbed her thumb again over his cheek, smearing blood of his own color and the darker purple that belonged to the deceased Galran commander with the tears. Beautiful. He was a masterpiece.

She stroked his face and reveled how he shivered in her grasp, but made no effort to pull away from her. She loosened her hold on his right arm and brought her own to wrap about him, still pinning it to his back but now in the form of an embrace and pressed her hand above his racing heart.

This close she could feel the quintessence that made him what she desired. It was distraught, she could tell, and there were patches marring its surface.

But it was still the most beautiful quintessence she had ever felt in her long lifetime. Pure and strong despite the pain and guilt etched into it. It was all that she ever wanted. And it was all wrapped up inside of a host that she had never felt such a love for. It hurt her to know she had to kill him. She did not want to. Not truly.

She wanted all of him. His quintessence. His life.
He was hers.

"I will make you an offer," her words ghosted past his ear and he shivered. "Are you listening?"

He did not answer her but she could tell she had his attention. She smirked and rubbed her hand over the bloodied cheek once more.

"Come with me. Willingly offer your quintessence to me. Be mine." He choked on his next breath and she nuzzled her face against his hair and ear.

"And in return," she continued, "I will leave this castle with no further damage. Shiro and the last Altean will remain alive. Why, I shall even leave the Lions. All I want is you."

Lance's breath caught again and without his permission his eyes opened because…

The Lions.

How could he have forgotten?

He cast his mind out again, desperately calling for them. But like every other time prior there was only a vague sense of static and a new pulse of pain.

They weren't going to come back online to help him.

But he didn't need them to. They… they had done something to his quintessence, right? Made a shield, a barrier, so Haggar could not get in. If she were to try and take it… what would happen to her?

"There are your pretty blue eyes," Haggar murmured and Lance slammed them shut again as he caught the barest glimpse of her yellow orbs just inches away and she laughed again. "So shy, my Lance."

There was silence then, broken up only by Lance's harsh breathing that he couldn't seem to get under control. His mind was racing just as quickly as he tried to remember every little detail that the Lions had said.

He had a barrier around his quintessence now. Allura had guessed that any attempts to interact with it if it was not herself or the other Paladins (a moot point as none of them had that ability) would have a negative backlash.

How negative though? Did it depend on the purpose? They had been going to have Coran attempt to interface with it. Would it have shocked him? Killed him? If it was forcibly handled would the reaction be worse?

Could he actually kill Haggar?

But if it didn't work then he'd just lost the one possible chance he had to save what remained of his family's lives. Haggar would kill them, he had no doubt.

But her words were poison. Could he actually trust her to leave them alone if he agreed to go with her?

No. But he did trust Blue. All of the Lions. And they had insisted his quintessence was safe, that they would protect it. He had to believe in that.

"You look like you are thinking," Haggar said, hand moving from his cheek to card back his bangs
and he hated how he shivered at the action. "Tell me."

Lance gave the barest shake of his head.

"No?" and there was something dangerous in her tone, her hand tightening in his hair.

"You're lying," he whispered.

And Haggar laughed. "You doubt my words?"

"You're lying," he repeated. "You... you won't let them go."

And he knew this was true. But more than that he knew he couldn't let Haggar see what he was really up to. Even now he could feel her prodding against his mind, seeking his thoughts herself, and it was taking all he had to keep her out, throwing up a mental wall of blue ice.

If he merely said no she would know something was off. He had done, would do, anything to protect his family. He'd have no reason to not take her offer if it had the chance to save them.

"I speak truthful," Haggar murmured, nuzzling her face against his and he shuddered again. "I desire only you, my Lance. Come. Be mine once more."

"N-no."

She sighed, heavy with regret. Lance had the fleeting thought her offer may actually have been sincere.

But no. He had to trust in the Lions. *They* would protect him and Shiro and Coran and Hunk. Not Haggar. Haggar wanted to use his quintessence for evil. To hurt others. To destroy the universe. He couldn't let her do that.

He had to trust in the Lions.

"Very well," Haggar said, her hand shifting back down to his face and splaying over his forehead.

His heart thundered in his ears.

This was it.

"I will miss you, my Lance," she said softly. "But," her fingers caressed his skin, nails lightly scratching, "you will live on within me. Together we will accomplish much in the name of the Empire."

He felt her lean forward then and a pair of cool lips pressed against his cheek. Without permission his eyes flew open at the distorted gesture, catching Haggar's gleaming yellow inches from his own and he found he could not drop her gaze.

Please let this work.

"You are mine, my Lance," Haggar murmured. Her fingers pressed almost painfully against his head, and there was the sensation of heat, growing in intensity. Lance moaned in the back of his throat as black lightning crackled. This was it. *Dios*, please let this work.

"And now," Haggar continued, yellow eyes boring into his own as the glow intensified, the pain dragging tears to run down his cheeks, "you will be mine forever."
Lance’s vision was filled with the snapping power, the sensation of an inferno raging in his mind and destroying the soothing blue shield he had constructed.

Oh Dios. Oh Dios.

He heard a raw scream echoing, faintly realizing it was his own.

It wasn't working it wasn't working it wasn't working.

Why wasn't it working?

Haggar’s hand pressed hotter, harder, and he screamed again – had he ever stopped? – as a new wave of flames and darkness pushed down upon him. Lance pushed back as much as he could, but his shield was shattering, mere fragments left now.

He couldn't stop her.

But just as the darkness was about to close in, drowning him in its endless abyss, there was a flicker of color. Blue and yellow and red and green and black, the last one softer around the edges then Haggar’s lightning and flames.

Lance’s breath caught, a gasp instead of a scream.

The colors burst like stars, spattering across the black canvas, a gentle warmth that spoke of love and protection.

The Lions.

Believe he could hear them whisper, roars echoing with power and love.

He did. With all of his heart.

This was it.

They were going to protect their family.

Lance could feel himself balancing on a precipice, light and dark clashing in a silent cacophony all around.

This was it.

He exhaled, taking the final plunge into the swirling colors.

And the world faded away.

Chapter End Notes

Lots of things a happening, huh? Lance got his right hand fixed, his left one ruined (mwahaha), Haggar tried to make a deal, that barrier activated after a bit of pain (yay,
pain) and now we're off the see the Lions. For everyone who has been guessing the Lions would "wake up" and join the battle... well, their giant metal bodies would cause severe structural damage if they rampaged around the castle but in the Astral Plane? Let's go :D

In regards to season six, still not posting anything here to avoid spoilers for those who have not seen it yet. You can find my reactions and comments on it on my tumblr, icypantherwrites and use the search box or tagged items for season six.

I don't really self-promote fics at this point (far, far too many xd) but I did start another chaptered Langst fic (nine chapters total) titled Hope: The Truest Treasure that publishes weekly on Mondays. If you're looking for some more Langst from me do go check it out and be sure to drop a comment if you liked it!

As always, please please do leave a comment with your thoughts on the chapter. I truly love hearing from you guys and your comments are what motivate me to keep writing. There were lots of things in here so would love to see which was a favorite(s) or what you're looking forward to most or predictions for what is to come. Thank you and look forward to hearing from you!
Lance was back in the Astral Plane.

But it was different from before. Before when he'd come here from Haggar's interference he had seen his quintessence stretching out in front of him; blue marred with the black, and he had been some sort of specter; there but not.

This time...

This time he was the quintessence and he had a form.

He glanced down, surprised to see that he was wearing his favorite jacket, although it was not the hunter green he was familiar with as it was instead as blue as the rest of him, his skin included.

And he was glowing.

Lance blinked at his hand but the glow did not diminish nor did the form vanish.

He was here. As himself.

And Haggar…

He turned around in a circle, floating and yet grounded, looking for any sign of her. But there were only swirls of colors – blue, red, green, yellow and black – looping about the space, encircling him completely.

He felt…

He felt safe.

"Blue?" he whispered and he could feel an answering roar inside of him.

Those colors were the Lions. They were the barrier.

But… what did he do now?

Haggar had sent them here to harvest his quintessence but there was no sign of her.

Had she already been destroyed by the barrier? No. He shook his head. There was no way she would go down that easily, not even putting up a fight.

She was here.

Somewhere.

He shivered, wrapping his arms about himself, the quintessence flowing like water over his skin. He was uninjured, he realized, blinking at his still scarred but otherwise intact left hand. The pain had near all vanished too, save for a steady ache in his head that he vaguely thought might be permanent.
It was a good ache though. It meant the Lions were there. That they were protecting him.

"Thank you," he said softly, the word seeming to echo in the space and there was a feeling of love then, so overwhelming in his mind that he near stumbled.

"Can… can you help me?" he asked, knowing that wherever they were they could hear him. "Can you help me fight her?"

Yes the answer resonated within him, numbers of completion, feelings of passion all wrapped up into the projection.

He turned around again, looking for Haggar. It's not that he wanted still really to face her but time was running out. He needed to beat her here so he could get back to Hunk. So he could still try and save one member of his family.

He directed his gaze then to the red and green spirals, trails of flame and twining vines nearly visible in the burst of colors.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to them, guilt settling heavy over his heart.

There was a whisper of confusion, a string of numbers pressing on his mind that he didn't fully understand but he could tell still that they were asking a question, unfulfilled.

"Pidge and Keith… they… they…"

Dios, he still couldn't say it. Saying it made it real.

He didn't want it to be real.

But he needed to tell them. They had given up their energy to protect him instead of their Paladins. And because of it…

Now they were dead.

It was his fault.

"They're… they're…" he swallowed thickly. "They're d—"

A harsh cracking rent the air, fissures appearing in the blackness of the Astral Plane beyond the border of his colored circle, cutting off his words. Lance hated that he felt such relief at the interruption.

It morphed immediately back to horror though as Haggar emerged through the rift she had created, features clearly visible despite the distance that separated them. Her yellow eyes were narrowed and a snapping sort of black and purple light fluctuated around her, striking against the colors with small crackles.

Lance felt sick as their gazes met.

However, he straightened his shoulders, pushing the twisted feeling away.

No.

He was in control here. He was done letting her walk about his mind. He was done letting her hurt his family.
It ended now.

"Blue," he whispered, not sure what exactly it was he was asking, but trusting his Lion to know the answer.

*My Paladin* came her reply, thrumming with power and love. *Lions protect my Paladin. Lions stop witch.*

There was an answering sense of power, the colors flaring with intensity around the barrier and Haggar's sharp inhale was music to his ears.

*Witch never touch my cub again.*

That seemed to be the cue as streaks of the colors broke off from the iridescent wall and Lance could see waveriing astral forms in them of the Lions, made up of their elements, and hear their battle cries.

Blue struck first, passing through Haggar and sending her flying backwards on a tidal wave with a short scream. Red was there then, fire crackling and meeting Haggar's black lightning with her own raw power. Yellow rolled the ground beneath their feet, upheaving and sending Haggar stumbling with a short cry.

She didn't get far as Green launched herself, pinning her down with trails of green light and then Black roared, shaking the very universe around them. The Lions vibrated with victory inside his head.

"No!" Haggar's shriek echoed above it all and there was a blast of black lightning that shot into the very heavens themselves and disintegrated Green's light and sent the other colors flying backwards.

The Lions *screamed* and Lance cried out with them as his head pulsed with sheer agony, lights of all colors flashing in his vision.

His legs buckled, sending him crashing to the ground.

The Lions went in again, striking hard and quick but more wary this time of the black and purple lightning that flickered about Haggar.

Lance could feel their unease at her power and here, connected as he was to them, he too could see why. It wasn't just energy that surrounded Haggar as he'd thought, or even magic. It felt like thousands upon thousands of quintessences, brutally forced together, wailing out despair as they were used as a shield against the Lions' attacks.

Haggar was not using her own quintessence. No. She was fighting with others instead, sacrificing them with little heed and amplified by her own dark soul and magic that burned a sick mixture of black and purple light at her core.

They were driving her back again, Red pushing against the blackness and bolstered by Yellow when there was a flicker of blue light from within the darkness that upon sight made Lance's stomach twist.

What was that?

*Wrong* he heard Blue whine, horror channeling down their link, and the cry was echoed by the other Lions, amplifying in its intensity.

Wrong?
Wrong! screamed Blue, her panic near tangible and Lance shuddered.

"Bl-Blue," he gasped, trying to reach out to her.

What was happening?

What was wrong?

She cried out again, recoiling away from Haggar, who pursued and struck at Blue's waves with the sick feeling light. Lance could only watch in terror as his Lion's astral form took but a step and then collapsed.

Something inside him broke.

"Blue!" he screamed, surging to his feet and racing to the very edge of the barrier. "Blue!"

The other Lions were surrounding their fallen brethren, snarling at Haggar but not moving to attack.

Lance could feel their fear.

The sick feeling grew.

"Blue!"

He slammed against the barrier but it held firm, keeping him separated from the Lions and Haggar.

There was a sharp presence in his mind, a commanded feeling of Stay! that seemed to come from Red while Black roared a desperate note and unbidden pictures of corpses, gaping black holes and blood stained water filled his vision.

Lance didn't understand.

He didn't want to.

He just wanted to get to Blue.

Haggar though was moving again, but she was not pursuing the downed Blue Lion. She was heading for the barrier. For him.

Lance choked on his next breath as Yellow pulled herself away from the group, yellow and white light rippling as she placed her bulk between Haggar and Lance.

And although he couldn't explain why he knew that if Haggar touched her then she was going to be hurt. Just like Blue.

Just like everyone else.

He only ever hurt his family.

"R-run," he begged, desperation growing as Red joined her sister while Green and Black stood guard over Blue, who was lying, so, so still.

Lance couldn't feel her anymore.

"Run!" he screamed, voice raw. "Please!"

They charged instead.
Haggar did not attack with her black and purple lightning. She raised the blue glow instead.

Lance wailed as that sick light brushed against Red and Yellow, sending them staggering to the sides and his head pounded, even as Yellow pushed herself up and came back for another pass, sending the ground rumbling ahead of her.

"No! No! Stop!"

She did. A complete and utter halt as Haggar drove a violet wreathed hand through her head.

Lance collapsed again.

Red bellowed, sending fire racing around Haggar. The flames turned black and Red shrieked as they turned on her, swallowing her up whole.

Agony exploded across his vision.

Haggar strode forward without any resistance now, passing the still form of Yellow and paused just outside the barrier. Lance could faintly hear Green and Black still in his head, growling and fierce but not engaging.

The rest of the Lions were quiet.

Gone.

They were gone.

Lance whimpered, curling up against the base of the barrier that still had not let him leave, hands clutching in his hair as though that could make the pain lessen.

It did not.

"I am impressed, my Lance," Haggar smiled, crouching down so she was more at his level and raised a black-wreathed fisted hand. "You are as always full of surprises. However," her lips twisted up even more, "so am I."

She opened her hand then and nestled in her palm was a glowing blue light, the color he had seen in the battle.

But inside the light…

There was a pitch blackness, tendrils creeping out like a disease.

It was tainted. Dark.

Evil.

Lance immediately understood the wrong feeling.

"No," he choked out

"Yes" Haggar whispered. "This is your quintessence, my Lance. Isn't it beautiful?"

How?

How had she gotten that?
What had she done to his quintessence?

"It is not much, a drop really, but I managed to take it from our first visit here." Haggar caressed the sick orb. "I have nurtured it well, amplified its power with my own. Do you see it now, my Lance? Do you see the power you could possess with me?"

Her hand closed about it, hiding it from view although not out of mind. "I admire your attempt to keep me away," she nodded at the barrier. "Truly, this is a masterpiece. However." She pressed her hand against the wall and it let out a sharp crack that Lance felt inside. "Such a creation cannot stand against itself. It would go against its very being."

She pushed harder and the barrier began to splinter away, Lance's own tainted quintessence destroying it.

"You are bonded with the Lions," she observed. "And as such…" A sneer twisted her features. "You are the weakest link. You will bring them all to their knees."

No.

No.

Yet even as he denied it in his mind he could not deny the truth. His quintessence was hurting the Lions.

*He* was hurting the Lions.

He'd done this.

"What was it I once told you?" Haggar smirked as Lance moaned, fisting his hands against his heart as he felt another crack go through him and felt Black and Green's shared pain as well. "There is no escape for you, my Lance. Not from me."

And with her words there was a final shattering both inside and out and the barrier dispersed in a whirl of colored light.

However…

Lance could still feel Black and Green in his head. They had not disappeared. Their connection had not been lost with the destruction of the shield.

What did that mean?

Was… was Blue still there? She had to be, right? Haggar couldn't have… have *killed* her. No She had to be.

He threw out his mind, seeking her, but pain pushed down and he broke off the search.

Haggar was there then, smiling down upon him with victory in her eyes.

"And now you are mine," she murmured, reaching out her hand.

**FIGHT!**

The feeling rather than the word flooded Lance's senses – passion and desperation and fear and hope all rolled into one – and he moved on instincts born of himself and the presences guiding him.
His hands shot out above him, pulsing with his own blue quintessence, and he pictured it like a wave; deadly and strong and unforgiving. And just like the first time in the mindscape where the ocean had struck, so too did this one and Haggar was pushed away from him with a short gasp. He wasn't even afraid of it, he realized, as the water bore Haggar away. It was his water. His quintessence.

It felt right.

Lance rolled to his feet, blood pounding and a roaring in his ears that he realized was Black and Green and…

His heart stopped.

"Blue?"

Her voice was quieter but it was there once more.

She was there

She was alive.

My Paladin came her whisper. Fight with Lions.

"How?" the word coming out a plea as Haggar pulled herself to her feet.

He heard their roars and their astral forms, all back on their feet – Blue, he breathed– charged for him. It should have been terrifying, these five mighty creatures bearing down, but Lance opened his arms as though to embrace them all.

They were there then, rushing into him and his head throbbed as it had just hours ago when all of the Lions had taken up residence and bursts of color seared his eyes. He staggered as he felt the power well up, so much, too much, inside of him.

Fight.

It was a command, a request, a plea, a hope, a call to arms and Lance clung to it against the maelstrom of other emotions and feelings and overpowering beings vying for a spot in his head.

Fight with Lions Blue murmured, her presence swimming to the front and letting him draw a full breath as she calmed the turbulence. Fight with… me.

The word was imbued with smiles and laughter, an echo of Lion loves 'me' dancing in his mind and the worst of the fear was blanketed beneath it.

Lance sucked in a breath.

He could do this.

They could do this.

"Together," he said quietly and roars of approval met it.

He felt Blue shift away and there was instead fire thrumming along his veins, filling his heart with a passion and tempered anger.

It felt different but… but not bad.
Lance let it come, seeing red sparks float about his still blue-wreathed hands. Red was not taking over his quintessence, she was not changing him.

She was merely using him as a channel.

An anchor, he remembered Allura using the word.

He was an anchor and they were the ship. Red the cannons, Green the rigging. Yellow was the hull, Black the sails. And Blue was the water keeping them all afloat.

Not an anchor, Lance reiterated, not in the literal sense. He was not pulling them down, sinking them. No. He was the helm. The direction.

And it was time he steered them forward.

Haggar was coming towards him, lightning crackling in her hands and being amplified by the blue glow.

Destroy he felt the Lions say. It was bad. Evil. Wrong.

It had to go.

"Red," Lance whispered, letting her primal instincts guide him into lifting his right hand, fingers splayed.

And fire blazed.

They were red and blue flames, mixed together as one with both his own quintessence and Red's.

Lance pictured the cannon, glowing with heat. And a small smirk coming to his lips despite everything, Blue laughing along with him at the pun, he ordered, "Fire."

Haggar threw her hands up as the flames whooshed at her, batting them away with a hiss and sizzle of her own power.

"You think this will stop me?" she called out, eyes snapping in the firelight. "You are weak, my Lance."

Lance ignored her words. He was not weak. He was not.

He never had been.

And he was not done.

"Green," he summoned and around his left arm green vines appeared, small blue flowers dotting their length.

Green calculated trajectories at him, odds and chances and Lance's mind reeled at the influx of information, not entirely comprehending but still understanding the meaning. Green took that as an affirmative and launched herself forward, seizing around Haggar's ankles, tripping her up while more climbed around and around.

Pain pulsed in Lance's head and Green screamed as black light ate into her vines, flowers shriveling only to come back and suffer the same fate.

But although there was agony it was not the same level of wrongness as before. The blue light was
growing smaller, fainter, and based on Haggar's shriek as Red's flames tried to light up the hand holding it she was losing her connection to it.

To him.

Just a little more.

"Yellow!" Lance cried and beneath his left foot he felt the ground shake, a fissure stretching out across the Plane and angling towards Haggar.

She stumbled as the ground beneath her erupted, a mixture of yellow stone and blue crystals, that sought to down her.

Yellow made another pass and Haggar had no choice but to dodge around it as a sinkhole split open under her.

"Blue!" Lance screamed and he felt his Lion roar like the ocean waves, a gushing rapid extending from his right foot and eating up the space between them in a mad torrent. She joined with Yellow in striking around Haggar, crashing down like a breaking surf upon the witch and sending her tumbling, only for Yellow's torn earth to send her back into the throes of water.

An image appeared in Lance's head then, a sun being eclipsed by a moon and the glowing black and white light that resulted.

It was beautiful.

It was the end.

"Black," Lance whispered, feeling the last Lion crouched in his head. "Go."

She needed no second bidding.

Black light sprinkled with blue stars rushed past him as though coming out of his eyes, her glow momentarily darkening the landscape. The power, the protection, imbued in this darkness though was so so different from Haggar's.

Black crashed into the witch with all the weight of the universe behind her, descending on Haggar's hand that was being immobilized by Green's vines and contained by Red's fire.

And in a blink Black had wrapped about the last bit of tainted blue and puls ed. Haggar screamed.

It was an inhuman shriek and Lance clapped his hands over his ears with a yell of his own as the world seemed to shake about them.

The Lions retreated from the writhing witch to rush back to him, swirling in a dizzying circle and leaving colored streaks behind.

They were rebuilding the barrier.

It was smaller, wrapped nearly flush against his skin, but it was there and it was strong and secure.

My Paladin safe now Blue purred, wrapping him up within her essence that had just moments ago been as unforgiving as a storm but was now as gentle as a spring rain. Witch never touch again.
Echoing purrs of the same comforted him, twining about like house cats around his ankles, filling him with their strength and love.

Lance sent back the same, knowing he could never say thank you enough for what they had just done for him. He caressed each color with his own, feeling the vibrations of contentment and love flow down their conjoined links.

The ache in his head was still there, still steady, but like before it was a comforting presence.

They were here, with him. Together they had stood against Haggar.

Together they had beaten her.

But as if summoned the witch staggered to her feet several yards away. Her hood had been thrown back, revealing wild hair and even madder eyes. Small trickles of black and purple lightning flickered at her fingertips.

"No," she hissed, taking a lumbering step forward. "No."

Lance tensed and immediately he felt the Lions' hackles rise.

Not quite beaten yet.

"No," she repeated, eyes sparking. "He is mine."

No came the answering roar, Blue's voice echoing across the Plane and Haggar drew up short. Not yours Blue growled.

Lance trembled at the sheer love and protection coursing from Blue, standing strong in the face of his greatest nightmare.

"You—"

Mine Blue declared, cutting Haggar off. Paladin is mine. Lion is Paladin's. Not yours. Never yours.

"He belongs to me," Haggar snarled. Lance was hers. She had found him. She had seen his power. She had cultivated it. It belonged to her.

And she would not lose it.

A ball of black lightning formed in her hand, the last of her power. Every drop of stolen quintessence, of magic, of herself she poured into it.

He would be hers forever.

She met his eyes through the iridescent barrier. Hatred and longing swelled up all at once as he held her gaze; the fear she craved masked behind a quiet strength.

She would break it.

And then she would make him her own. He would belong to her.

No came the echoing response that was the Blue Lion. And he never will.

Haggar screamed and charged.
She was coming fast, robe and hair flying out on a self-created wind.
She would be upon them any second.

Lance braced himself, hands clenched.

*Do not worry, my Paladin Blue* intoned, her words a caress. *All will be well.*

Lance’s hands smoothed out, trust taking up residence over the fear.

He trusted Blue, the Lions, with everything he had. He believed in them. In their power. And without his poisoned quintessence to usurp them there was nothing they could not overcome.

They would stop Haggar.

Here.

Now.

She would never hurt anyone again.

"I know," he answered simply, pushing every feeling he had behind the words.

He felt Blue smile and he returned it.

There was nothing to fear anymore.

Haggar crashed against the barrier screaming, violent black lightning striking hot.

Lance shouted.

The Lions roared.

And the Astral Plane exploded in color.

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**Chapter End Notes**

It wasn't exactly subtle, but everyone notice the particular positions of the Lions fighting with Lance? Ah hah. I'm pretty proud of it still.

So. Let me just say this was one of the hardest chapters I've written. Probably the hardest if we're being honest. There was so much riding on this moment. I will add that Lance will not be doing this kind of attack in the future; it's an Astral Plane thing only to bond with the Lions and their quintessences like that and I highly doubt (in this timeline) the Paladins will ever do battle on the Plane again. Going forward with what the Lions have done is all about the connection to them and sensing that and the others. Not turning Lance into Voltron himself. Promise (it'd be wicked cool though, wouldn't it? ;p).
Also, for those of you who are fans of the Shiro and Keith backstory in here I have added to my headcanon (re: canon now xD) fanfic of how the two of them meet to Keith moving into the Garrison. If that's your cup of tea it's titled *Stand Together Now, Carry On* and will be a total of three chapters. Be sure to give it some love if you read!

And back to *Color*, please do leave a comment before you go. I'd love to hear from you.
Something was wrong.

Pidge frantically ran her hands over the datapad on the side of the cryo-pod, trying to make some sense of the numbers and Altean words all while attempting to ignore the red light blinking and the way she could still see Keith twitching inside, brow furrowed and in clear pain although he had gone unconscious after a soundless scream. She wasn’t sure if that was bad or good. Probably bad. Very bad.

She’d had concerns that since the pod was prepped for an alien creature completely unlike their own biology the pod's calibration might be off, but she hadn't had much of an option. Keith either got in a pod or he died.

But she was starting to fear that she was killing him right now.

The pod should have iced over, hiding its occupant from view until the healing process moved along. Keith should have been comfortably suspended in an icy gel, his brain function halted by the deep freeze and completely at ease.

Clearly that was not the case.

She didn't think it was the adrenaline shot. Lance, their number one pod user, had gone into them in all manners; unconscious, wide awake and panicked – which she was glad she had not had to witness – and it was unlikely Coran adjusted the pod each time based on brain activity levels.

No, it had to do with body composition but she had no fucking clue what she was doing.

They called her a genius but right now she felt like the universe's biggest idiot.

None of it made any sense. She'd helped Coran before and knew how to initiate the sequence to start the pod, which she had done, but the settings leading up to that point? A big fat nothing.

God, she was going to kill Keith.

Tears stung her eyes and she hurriedly blinked them away before they could track down her face, which was aching even more with every breath and she hadn't dared look to see what the damage was. Based on the blood she could still taste every time she licked her lip it would not be pretty.

She cast her eyes about the infirmary again seeking some type of answer. An instruction manual maybe, somehow written in English or at least binary.

But nothing of the sort appeared.

Just the usual setup of the infirmary; exam table, cot, rows of cryo-pods, the medicine cabinet she'd already been in and the small storage room.

None of that was usef—
The pods.

A quick glance revealed that the pod Keith was ensconced in was not the one he'd been in a few days ago nor the one Lance had used.

Which meant…

She flew to the pod Keith had previously used, fighting the urge to worry her lip as the machine slowly powered on. A glance over her shoulder showed Keith still shaking in his, the cryo still not yet sealing him in.

"Hurry up," she snarled at the system. "Goddammit hurry the fuck up!"

She only resisted kicking it because her body was one giant ball of hurt and she knew doing so wouldn't actually speed it up.

Finally the panel glowed teal and Pidge pulled up the last diagnostic run window, knowing that translation at least thanks to all of the hacking she'd done of Galra systems, learning both the Altean and Galra equivalent.

She almost cried as it pulled up the previous settings. She still had no idea what each box meant but her eyes raked over the numbers, memorizing the sequence, in a matter of seconds. She raced as quick as she could back to Keith, hands shaking as she inputted the new numbers over the previous ones.

There were still some differences as she couldn't check every box, the system already engaged, but seven out of nine was better odds than before. She pressed the submit option, reprogramming the calibration of the pod, and prayed.

A tick later she saw Keith's movements still, his face slacken, and then frost stole over the cover of the glass and turned its contents dark. The blinking red light vanished and a steady teal indicator took its place.

Pidge's legs gave way beneath her in relief.

Thank God. It had worked.

She pressed her forehead against the cool metal of the pod, the touch both soothing and painful.

She allowed herself a minute, counting down each tick as she took in breaths and held them, trying to get her racing heart and trembling under control. Her hands fumbled into her armor pocket to pull out Matt's glasses, always a comfort.

They came apart in her hands, glass shattering away with a crinkle, the frames dented and one of the temples broken off. She shouldn't have expected anything less. She'd just been in an explosion after all and the heat alone would have been enough to destroy the lenses, let alone the force.

A broken sob was torn from her throat as she hunched over what remained of them. They were just glasses, but they were so much more than that.

She gave herself the last twenty ticks of her minute to mourn, to remember and to remind herself that they may be broken but she was still alive and it was she who was going to find her family, not a pair of glasses, before pushing the destroyed memory back into her pocket.

And when those moments were over she painfully pulled herself up and wiped her hand across her
stinging eyes.

It was time to fight.

She looked to Keith, hidden now, but safe. Healing.

"You're gonna be okay," she promised him.

She wanted to say she'd be here when he got out. She wanted to be the first to hug him, so tight maybe he'd have to go back in for broken ribs, and tell him thank you for what he'd done.

But she couldn't.

She had no idea what awaited her out there.

She didn't know if she was going to make it back.

Her heart clenched at the idea of Keith waking up, maybe a day later, maybe a week, and finding himself all alone. He'd leave the infirmary and find all of them, broken bodies and blood and death.

He could be the only survivor.

She could have just made him carry that unintentional burden.

She could fix it. She could stay here, wait.

But she couldn't do that.

She was a fighter. Not a bystander. She needed to get out there, to help her team.

Her team who probably thought she and Keith were already dead.

The thought froze her.

She hadn't even given such an idea a look but…

But how would it seem to the others? To see the ship explode? For them to not respond? To realize the entire thing was a trap, a diversion?

The others thought they were dead.

Pidge's legs threatened to go out on her again.

She couldn't even begin to describe the hollow ache that took up residence in her chest then; the utter horror and despair and grief that they must be feeling.

She had to get to them.

She had to let them know they were all ri—they are alive.

That they hadn't just lost part of their family.

But…

It did have an advantage.

If the Paladins thought they were dead… then Haggar did too.
A sharp grin turned up her lips and she picked up her bayard.

That bitch wasn't going to know what hit her.

xxx

Shiro was both grateful and admittedly terrified when his trek about the castle looking for Lance and Hunk came to an abrupt end as he felt dark magic and heard the crackling of power inside the kitchen of all places.

There was no other sound though. No screams. No crying. Not even words.

Shiro hated that he wished it had been so. At least then he'd have had some confirmation that Lance and Hunk were alive. That they were engaging with Haggar.

This dark nothingness? It was making every hair on him stand straight up.

His prosthetic whirred to life and the resulting drain made him stumble, barely catching himself on the hallway wall as the world tipped alarmingly.

He left a bloodied handprint behind.

Shiro knew he didn't have much left. The fight with Haggar had carried on too long and although none of her hits had been fatal they had not been scratches either.

That, and the anger that had been pushing him through was fading and taking up root was an all encompassing grief.


*Dead.*

And there was nothing he could do about it.

All he could do was try and protect those that remained. It was the only thing keeping him going. Save Lance. Save Hunk.

Kill Haggar.

Charcoal eyes burned beyond hatred. She was the reason his family was dead. She was the reason they were hurt. She was the reason any of them had gotten involved in this war to begin with because of what she'd done to him.

She was the reason he had been forced to kill.

Well.

His prosthetic glowed violent purple.

She would get to see her handiwork first hand.

Haggar was not leaving this ship alive.

Shiro welcomed the rekindling of the anger, letting it spur him the last few feet towards the kitchen where he could feel the power and see some type of flickering light coming from within.
This was it.

Still, he knew he could not recklessly charge in as much as he wanted to. He was at a severe disadvantage in both stamina and weapon against Haggar. In hindsight maybe he should have grabbed Coran's blaster but his aim was pretty shit anyway so he supposed it didn't matter.

Keeping his back against the wall, Shiro carefully peeked his head around the doorframe. The sight was not one he was expecting.

His eyes were drawn immediately to the flickering light, set up nearly in the middle of the kitchen, and made up of both harsh black tendrils and a flurry of softer colors, each wrapped about the individual creating them.

"Lance!" he gasped before he could stop himself.

But there was no acknowledgement to his outburst and Shiro realized that neither Lance or the witch could hear him.

Haggar and Lance were both kneeling, Haggar's turned in towards Lance and one of her hands splayed across his forehead. Dark power crackled there and beneath her hand Shiro could make out blood all down Lance's face; a mixture of red and purple, yet his expression was for the most part calm, despite the fact his eyes were wide open and glowing a bright blue that was flowing into the colors that surrounded him.

Haggar's though…

Haggar's face was twisted in a scowl, brow furrowed. As he watched she shuddered, face wrenching just a bit more and Shiro felt a vindictive sort of glee.

Shiro stepped fully into the kitchen, intending to make his way to the pair, but froze midstep. Because no longer hidden behind the wall he spotted Hunk.

And Hunk…

"Fuck," Shiro swore and he stumbled to the large boy's side, dropping to his knees next to the still form. Blood splatter jumped up at the impact to hit both his knees and land more on Hunk's already stained armor.

Shiro had never been squeamish but his stomach heaved. There was so much blood.

"Hunk, buddy," he reached out his shaking flesh hand, pressing it against the dark neck.

He was trembling too much to see if there was a pulse.

Shiro forced himself to take a deep breath and tried again, praying with all he had.

Hunk's life beat beneath his fingers, slow and shallow but still there.

He took in the saturated towels pressed up against Hunk's side, the helmet with a bloodied handprint too small to be Hunk's smeared on it, his bayard next to him and all of it compounded by the metallic scent of blood and death that lurked. Hunk had been like this for a while, he surmised. Bleeding out on the floor with Lance desperately attending to him and no one answering their calls for help.
Shiro's stomach turned and this time he couldn't hold it in and added its own contents to the already ravaged floor.

The action cleared his head though and some of the sick fear was pushed back. Hunk was alive, he reminded himself. He ignored the 'for now' that lingered.

He could still save him.

He just had to make sure Haggar wouldn't get in the way.

"I'll be right back, buddy," he murmured, pressing his hand against Hunk's head. "Hang on for me, all right?"

Hunk of course did not reply.

Shiro pulled himself back to standing and reactivated his prosthetic.

Time to kill the witch.

It was not honorable to engage an oblivious opponent.

Shiro did not care.

Haggar deserved death.

He would kill her.

He would kill her and she would never hurt his family again.

Well, what was left of them.

With a ragged scream he slashed his arm down at Haggar's head—

—and was blasted backwards by the black light, striking the far kitchen wall with a grunt.

He sat at the base of the wall, winded, and skin prickling with remnants of Haggar's magic.

Apparently he was not killing her.

Not yet at least.

He looked at Lance then, still frozen in whatever magic he and Haggar had gotten caught up in, blood soaked and ripped clothing telling only part of a story of what had happened in this fight.

Would Lance be the one to kill Haggar?

Shiro hoped not.

He didn't want Lance's heart to be hurt any more than it already had.

But as his gaze tracked past Lance to land on the inert form of a large Galran, he had a sinking feeling it already had been.

He did not need to get up and check. He intrinsically knew that the commander was dead, the large pool of purple blood and the fact the Galran appeared to be missing a good chunk of his torso from this angle lending proof.
Had Lance been the one to kill him? Had Hunk?

He should have never sent them away.

They should have stuck together. They’d played right into Haggar’s hands and he had been so blinded by grief, so determined to keep Lance out of the fighting, that he had instead sent him right into the thick of it.

What had he done?

There was no use wondering what ifs right now. Right now he had to save what little family of his remained.

Shiro shakily stood, blood rushing to his head and sending him staggering as vertigo kicked in. He stubbornly grit his teeth and pushed forward, angling towards the kitchen drawers for more towels.

He briefly entertained the idea of cauterizing Hunk’s side, staring down at his inactive prosthetic. It would stop the blood flow, keep what remained inside.

The shock from the pain could also kill him.

Hunk was in no condition to suffer that kind of brutality disguised as healing.

He needed a pod.

Shiro knew he could carry Hunk when he was at full strength.

But he was not at full strength.

He wasn't even at a quarter of it.

He also could not leave Lance behind with Haggar. He had no idea what was going to happen when the barrier fell away but he would not leave Lance on his own against the Druid.

Not happening.

He commandeered the rest of the towels that had been left behind in the open drawer, heart clenching at the sight of the blood splatter that covered some of them and the handle of the drawer.

Lance.

He looked back at where Lance was kneeling, slender form trembling slightly.

Shiro could picture the desperate struggle to open the drawer, hands slick with blood and no doubt beyond injured given what he’d seen of the Galran commander's particular brand of cruelty. Scared and alone and trying to save his dying friend while in so, so much pain himself.

It wasn't fair.

None of this was.

But Shiro would make sure that those that remained walked away from this. They would live.

And then…

Then he was taking them home.
Voltron was over now. Two fifths of the team was dead. Their princess was gone.

The war for them was over.

He would not force them to fight any longer. He would return, for whatever little he was capable of. But Lance and Hunk?

They were going back to Earth. They would be safe there. The Galra weren't likely to reach Earth in their lifetime, Earth set so far back in the system it barely registered as a blip.

And if the Galra did come…

At least they'd have had a chance to be with their families. To be as innocent as they could be in the face of the horror they'd been a part of.

Shiro owed them at least that much.

But first he had to save their lives. Starting with Hunk.

Shiro made his way back to the Yellow Paladin, who had not so much as twitched while he'd been gone. Hunk was lying on his stomach, revealing the back of his armor to be charred and cracked and the black of his undersuit not protected by it to be warped in such a way that Shiro knew it had adhered to his skin with heat, just as Keith's had done but a few days ago.

But that was not the worst of Hunk's injuries by far. That likely belonged to the cause of the blood that had seeped out from below him. Shiro couldn't see what the wound was thanks to the bloodied towels piled up against Hunk's side, but he was guessing some sort of stomach wound, lent credence by the trickle of blood that had dribbled from Hunk's mouth.

Internal bleeding.

Hunk really didn't have much time.

The best thing to do would be to try and seal as much of the wound as possible to prevent any further blood loss, Shiro decided. Hunk was already looking beyond pale and if he lost much more Shiro wasn't sure if getting him to the pods would make a difference.

He set down his pile of towels on a clean spot of the floor and made his way to Hunk, grasping him by his shoulders.

"Sorry, buddy," he said quietly. "Bear with me for just a tick."

And in as smooth a movement as Shiro could manage he rotated Hunk onto his back via his uninjured side and away from the blood puddle.

Hunk didn't make a sound despite the fact such a movement had to have hurt.

And oh.

It was bad.

It was very, very bad.

The towels had remained plastered to Hunk's side but the wound extended far, far past that, a gaping line spreading across Hunk's stomach and past his navel.
He'd nearly been cut halfway through.

Shiro knew it was only Hunk's insane stamina and size that had even let him come this far. Had such a wound been dealt to any of the smaller Paladins...

They would already be dead.

Shiro grabbed a wad of towels and layered them across the gash, trying hard not to look as red and pink glistened in the depths.

And now came the hard part. But he had to apply pressure, had to clot the wound as much as he could to keep what little blood remained inside.

"I'm so sorry," Shiro whispered.

And he pushed down.

Hunk jerked below him, dulled honey eyes flying open and a high keen torn from bloodied lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Shiro repeated, hating how relieved he was to see Hunk in pain.

It meant Hunk was alive.

Meant there was still fight in him.

Hunk's eyes rolled into the back of his head a moment later, but it was enough to calm Shiro's racing heart.

Hunk was going to live.

He was going to make sure of it.

Shiro piled on more towels all across Hunk's stomach and padded on his side, squelching the bloodied ones against the wound. Not sanitary but they were hopefully congealing somewhat at this point.

While he was doing that Shiro was trying to remember all the first aid he'd learned about trauma. Shock was a severe risk, he knew. You were supposed to keep the victim warm. He cast his eyes about the kitchen for something to be used as a blanket as he'd pretty much decimated their towel supply.

They landed on a folded yellow hooded sweatshirt set aside on the far counter.

Without a moment of hesitation Shiro got up and retrieved it, shaking out the material as wide as it would go and draping it atop Hunk and tucking the loose arm sleeves about his shoulders.

What else?

Elevate the feet to return blood back to the heart. Shiro collected the alien oatmeal container that had been left out and rolled it under Hunk's feet, propping them up about half a foot.

That done he knelt back down next to Hunk and took one of the blood-stained gloved hands in his own, squeezing it tight.

"You're gonna be okay," he murmured. "Just hold on for a little longer."
He looked over to where Haggar and Lance continued to sit.

They had not moved but in the few minutes he'd been concentrating on Hunk the lighting about them had. The colors were stronger now and a blue glow had completely enveloped all of Lance.

And Haggar's hand, the one pressed against Lance's face.

It was turning black.

There was a change in the air, the oppressive dark magic losing ground and taking its place was what Shiro could only really describe as love, fierce and protective.

"Lance," he breathed.

He was doing it.

He and the Lions were fighting against Haggar.

And they were winning.

Haggar's entire hand was blackened now, twisted and deformed like a wraith. Her face was pinched even further and the black lightning around her was flickering.

Shiro gave Hunk's hand one last squeeze and stood up, arm glowing at his side.

Something was about to happen. He could feel it.

Lance shifted ever so slightly, sitting just a little taller, while Haggar recoiled back, mouth opening in a silent scream.

The colors pushed harder against what little remained of the black lightning.

And then the barrier exploded.

Haggar was thrown backwards in the blast, hitting the wall with a sickening thud and a wretched scream and falling next to the deceased Galran.

Not dead yet then.

Lance remained sitting but slumped forward with a sharp gasp, right hand splayed on the ground in front of him and the light fading immediately from his form.

"Lance!" Shiro screamed and the dark head jerked up.

"Shiro," came a barely audible breath. Tears welled in ocean eyes. "Sh-Shiro."

Those eyes widened in a panic as they looked beyond him. "Shiro!"

Shiro had only a split second to turn, hearing the harsh whine of a blaster behind him.

Purple seared across his vision as a laser struck his raised Galran arm and he skidded backwards from the force.

Haggar had just shot at him.

Haggar had a gun.
The blaster in the witch's hands dwarfed her, clearly meant for the Galran commander, and she seemed to be barely holding onto it, blackened hand flaking away in pieces and agony clear in her yellow eyes.

The fact she was using such a thing meant that she was out of her own power.

Shiro's grin turned dark.

Game over.

Her life was his.

Haggar fired off a second shot and Shiro deflected it again with his arm, blood thrumming as he moved towards her like a predator stalking prey.

She was the weak one now.

Haggar was panting, her harsh breaths renting the air. Still, she did not look beaten. Her eyes were wild but they were narrowed, calculating.

She wasn't done yet.

But neither was Shiro. And a well placed hand through her chest ought to solve the problem of her continuing to live.

It had for Allura.

He pushed back that image, that despair, and let the anger fuel him.

"Nothing to say?" he goaded, pushing back a third shot. "How does it feel to be the losing one?"

She let out a cruel chuckle. "You are the one who has lost, Shiro. Three already dead. How many more precious family members will you lose?"

She cocked the blaster as Shiro roared out his rage, charging.

"Let's add one more."

And she turned the gun in Lance's direction.

Shiro moved without thinking, throwing his body in the way of the blast and raising his arm to intercept it.

He was only partly successful. The blast struck against his shoulder, pushing through the armor with a burst of hot agony and he screamed, Lance's desperate cry of his name the only thing louder, and he crashed into the ground, rolling and coming to a stop a foot from Lance.

Haggar was already fleeing, choosing escape over battle.

Shiro pushed himself up to follow her, to end her, but his arm collapsed below him as his shoulder flared and he couldn't stop the short scream that made its way out of his throat.

God fucking damn it.

She was going to get away.
"Shiro!"

Lance sounded panicked and he felt a hand descend on his good shoulder, trying to forcibly rotate Shiro from where he'd fallen. "Shiro!"

"I'm okay," Shiro grunted, needing to reassure Lance of that.

About a minute later he managed to sit up on his own power, coming nearly face to face with Lance. This close he could see the blood and tear streaks that marred his skin, the new tears shining in the dark eyes, the pain and desperation and relief and fear.

"Sh-Shiro," Lance whispered, lip trembling and just like that all of his rage deflated.

Let her run. He would hunt her down. He would make her pay for what she had done.

But right now he had something more important than revenge.

Shiro pulled Lance into a tight hug, not even feeling the pain in his shoulder, clutching the slender frame to him as though it was the only thing keeping him upright.

"I've got you," he murmured, feeling Lance's shoulders shake with sobs. "I've got you."

Next stop was the infirmary. Shiro didn't really know how to use the pods but Coran had to be up and about at this point and he could get them operational for Hunk and Lance.

All was silent then, a moment of something that passed for peace from the hell they had just emerged from.

And then a scream echoed from down the hall.

Shiro's heart stopped.

He knew that voice.

He breathed out, voice shaking with newfound hope and fear.

"Pidge."

Chapter End Notes

True to my word we have checked in with nearly all parties and look at that, someone finally knows that Pidge (at least) is still alive (for now ;p). Hearing her voice as a scream though has to be an odd version of comforting though. Having a lot of fun writing Shiro; he's such a giant ball of grief and anger and pain right now and Haggar is the reason why. That's right Haggar, you better run ;p

If you're in Chicagoland this weekend at Anime Midwest do drop by and say hi and spaz about Voltron with me! Table A6 in the artist alley (front row all the way to the far right).
As always, if you're still here and reading and enjoying the fic, please do drop a comment before you go. Hearing from you guys is the best part of writing for me. Thank you so much!
Chapter Seventy-Three

Pidge really didn't know where she had planned on going but the splatter of blood down the hall had given her a clear direction.

She wasn’t sure which way it was coming from; deeper in the lower level of the castle or heading towards the main living area of the kitchen and lounge, but she chose to follow it to the kitchen.

Whoever it belonged to was one of her family, as both humans and Alteans bled red. She tried to comfort herself with the fact that whoever it was had clearly kept up a steady pace as there was no large puddle anywhere indicating a stop and the fact they were moving had to be a good sign indeed.

But where were they going?

Her shock katar was gripped tightly in her right hand, left hanging in an impromptu sling made of bandages from the infirmary. It had been the only thing she'd paused to do, knowing that otherwise it would only get in the way and she could not afford any distractions.

She was keeping her pace slow and steady, both for stealth purposes and the fact any faster and she was afraid she might just tip over.

She was not as fine as she thought she was.

The rush of adrenaline had faded and she had not dared try to inject herself with one of the syringes for the temporary boost. With its disappearance she was more than aware now of the aches and bruises that littered her entire body, the way her right ankle twinged with every step and her head pounded.

She really just wanted to lie down and sleep for forever.

But she couldn't do that. Not until her family was safe.

The only sound in the deserted hall was the small breaths she wasn't able to completely muffle.

Which is why when she heard the hurried sound of footsteps she froze. Someone was coming.

Someone was coming fast.

The question was who.

She brought her katar up, finger hovering on the trigger that would send the cord out, and stood her ground.

They could come to her.

She wished her armor was fully functioning. Creating a holographic clone would be very ideal right now but she was a bit limited. She supposed it didn't matter as the stretch of hall she was in didn't have anywhere to hide or blind corners. Just the curve up ahead where the person was coming from.
She *really* hoped it was someone from her team.

But the figure that came around the corner was not dressed in Paladin armor.

"You!" gasped out Haggar, drawing up short and Pidge felt that sharp smile slide back on.

Element of surprise, check.

Haggar did not look good, Pidge thought, lighting on the hand that had somehow turned black and was literally flaking away, and the way the witch had rolled her shoulders, hunched over a large blaster she carried. The aura of power that normally wreathed about her was gone although her yellow eyes flashed with a wildness that was unnerving.

She was still dangerous.

And this time Pidge would not falter.

"Surprise," she snarled, and released her shock katar.

Haggar batted it away with the blaster, the prod diverting and striking the wall.

Pidge was already charging though, as fast as her legs could manage, and whipped it back, aiming for Haggar's feet. The witch jumped the cord…

And ran.

"Get back here!" Pidge shouted, as Haggar veered back the way she came and down one of the smaller hall offshoots.

Oh hell no. She was not getting away.

Pidge gave chase.

This was not Haggar's ship. There were no traps here for her to be wary of.

Just a witch to catch.

Haggar was still quick though, all things considered, and Pidge's ankle was screaming at her now to stop slamming it into the ground.

Pidge told it to shut the fuck up and move.

They were angling back toward the kitchens, Pidge realized, but on the adjacent hall that contained the main storage rooms for extra food supplies.

Pidge smirked. This hallway dead ended into the largest storage unit.

Haggar was trapped.

She slowed her pace then, readying her bayard once more. She wouldn't miss again.

But as she moved into the dead-end corridor lined with doors there was no Haggar to be seen.

Hiding in one of the storage rooms?

Pidge stepped forward, warier now. She couldn't afford for Haggar to sneak up behind her. She would check each room, she decided. The doors slid into the ceiling so there was nowhere for
Haggar to hide behind them. She would—

The floor rumbled beneath her and a sick sort of feeling crackled in the air.

Pidge felt her stomach plummet.

What the fuck was going on?

One of the storage doors further down the hall slid open and Haggar stepped into the hall, dark purple and black light sparking across her body.

Pidge's breath caught.

How?

How did she have this much power again?

"I had planned to simply leave this castle as it was," Haggar said, and her voice was smooth if still raspy. "But," she shrugged, "that was before I found such a bountiful store of life ripe for the taking."

Life?

She couldn't mean…

Haggar lifted her still purple hand and clutched in it was one of the space carrots. As Pidge watched it shriveled beneath her and a spark of light disappeared into Haggar.

Well fuck.

"It is not much," Haggar sighed, dropping the blackened vegetable, "but I harvested enough to easily destroy you." Her gaze narrowed. "I yearn to hear your screams, little girl."

For this child was the reason she had lost her Lance in the first place. First she had hacked her systems, then disabled her beautiful collar. And then… Power rippled over her one fist. And then the little bitch had taken her out.

Haggar would see her bleed, her insides coat the hallway. She could spare time enough for this. But a minute would be needed to rid the universe of this pesky Paladin.

Her blackened hand shook and Haggar bit back the wince, feeling it creep further up her arm. Things had definitely not gone as expected. The barrier the Lions of Voltron had created had shaken her but it was an obstacle easily enough overcome by using the drop of her Lance's quintessence she had morphed into her own to break them apart.

But then he had fought.

She had known he was strong; it was what had drawn her to his quintessence in the first place. But he was supposed to be broken. His mind has been in tatters when she had last seen him and it had been but a few quintants since they had been separated.

What had happened? How had he rebuilt his mind in so short a time? And not only rebuilt it but made it stronger than before?

It if hadn't been such a detriment to her own plans she would have been impressed. But rather than draining him of his quintessence and leaving him a blackened husk, he had drained her, forcing her
to use every last bit of her energy to strike and defend against the onslaught of the Lions of Voltron.

She should have retreated then, but her Lance's quintessence was so intoxicating she could not leave it behind. She had to have it.

She would still have it. Somehow. She would find a way to break through the Lions' protection, to crack open his mind and lay it bare to the darkness once more.

He would be hers.

The idea struck then, dark and delightful. Yes.

She would eliminate the Green Paladin and then return for her Lance. Her Champion was hurt and slow; he would be of little threat. She would collect her Lance and bring him back with her.

She would break him again; strip him away piece by piece until he begged for death, for release. And she would say she would give it to him, once he gave her his quintessence. For a willing subject would not be protected by any type of barrier.

But then she would do it again. And again. He would regret ever thinking he could escape her. No one escaped from her.

He thought he had witnessed horror? Had witnessed true despair?

Haggar's smirk widened. She had yet to truly get started.

"Come now," she raised her hand, lightning crackling, and stared down the girl, "let me hear your screams."

"I think I'll hear yours instead," Pidge snarled, forcing hot anger to combat the growing cold fear as Haggar had almost literally transformed in front of her; from weakened and exhausted to a being crackling with power and darkness.

But there was no one else here. And if she didn't stop Haggar there was no telling what she would do.

She had to fight.

She had to win.

And screaming out a battle cry, Pidge charged.

xxx

"Pidge!" Shiro gasped and Lance felt the name a whisper on his own lips.

How?

How was he hearing her?

She was supposed to be dead.

She was alive?

He trembled, new tears filling his eyes.
Pidge was alive?

He hadn't killed her?

Shiro released him from the hug, staggering upright.

"Shiro—" he tried to say, tried to get his own legs beneath him even though all of him felt like a leaden block and his head ached as he tilted it back to keep Shiro in his sights.

"Stay here," Shiro ordered, voice hard with a mixture of fear and anger. His eyes softened as Lance lightly winced. "Stay with Hunk. I'll be back."

"Sh-Shiro—"

But he was already gone.

Lance moaned low in his throat, the sound equally frustration and fear.

His body didn't want to move, each shift sending ripples of pain along his limbs. He felt like a used dishrag; wrung out and dry. The ache in his head had increased and when he tried to reach out it worsened.

"Blue?" he whispered, but his Lion was quiet now. They all were.

Lance forced himself to sit upright, the world spinning around him. It wasn't over yet. He couldn't give in now.

Not when Shiro was still fighting, when Pidge—

His breath caught again.

Pidge.

Pidge was alive.

Did…

Did that mean Keith was too?

Hope fluttered in his chest.

Pidge was alive.

Dios, she was alive.

He had no idea how. They had been in that explosion and… and there had been nothing left except flames and twisted metal.

But if anyone could survive something like that...

His stomach clenched though as the next thought worked its way in.

Pidge had lived.

But had it been because Keith had died?

He could easily picture it; could recall how they'd heard Keith scream out Pidge's name just as the
feed had exploded. Had he shielded her with his body? Had he taken the brunt of blast?

Was Keith still dead?

Lance swallowed back a sob. To have hope again and to have it taken away so quickly.

No.

He couldn't think like that. He had to focus on what he knew to be true.

Pidge was alive. Right now he was going to be thankful for that.

Although…

Although she sounded like she was in trouble. If Shiro didn't get to her in time…

His right hand, fully healed, trembled at his side. He needed to get up. He needed to help.

But his body would not move.

It wasn't just exhaustion, although that was pulling heavy on his eyes. His shoulders and back were weeping with blood from Theodek's claws, all of him feeling like one giant bruise and broken pieces. And his left hand. He didn't even want to look at it, feeling burning agony whenever he so much as tried to twitch a finger.

His legs still sort of worked and his right hand and arm were fully operational. Still, he knew at this point he would just be in the way. He would be someone Shiro would have to protect, an obstacle, in his fight.

Shiro was right. He needed to stay here.

But he did need to get to Hunk.

The mantra that had filled him from before pushed him forward once more.

Somehow he got trembling legs beneath him, aided this time by the fact he could put all of his weight on his right hand, and then he was standing, if barely.

The world around him spun and he took a few shallow breaths, fighting against the dark spots clouding his vision. Haggar may have healed his arm but he was still suffering the effects of blood loss.

Nothing so extreme as Hunk though.

His vision tunneled in on the still form a few yards away.

Hunk had been shifted onto his back and more towels looked to have been stretched across him along with a familiar yellow hoodie. Lance hoped it was somehow providing a comfort to Hunk as much as it had to him.

He staggered across the kitchen, falling ungracefully to his knees next to Hunk and moaning at the resulting pain that echoed through his body.

"Hunk?" he whispered, reaching out his right hand and touching Hunk's cheek.

He felt cool.
"H-Hunk?" he whimpered, lungs seizing.

He couldn't be. He couldn't.

He could not see Hunk's chest rising beneath both the armor and the sweatshirt so he focused his attention on Hunk's face, moving his hand to blood-stained lips.

There.

He felt a tiny breath against his hand.

Hunk was alive.

Barely.

This was his fault.

Lance curled up against Hunk's side, resting his head atop Hunk's chest and trying to add what little warmth he could, his right hand clutching onto Hunk's limp one.

"Lo siento," he choked out, burying his nose into the space between Hunk's chest and shoulder. "Lo siento. Por favor no me dejes. Lo siento."

His hand tightened around Hunk's. "Pl-please. Hold on. Por favor. H-Hunk…"

The area around them shook and a faint explosion sounded from further away.


Lance clung to Hunk tighter. All he could do was wait.

"Dios, por favor," he prayed. "Ayúdale. Ayúdalos. Por favor."

Please just let them live.

Please.

Tears stung his eyes and dripped onto the yellow hoodie.

All he could do was wait and believe and pray and hope.

So he did.

xxx

Pidge screamed, this time out of pain rather than anger, as one of Haggar's attacks cut across her arm and without her permission her bayard clattered away from her suddenly limp grip.

She had been fighting the witch for all of ten seconds, not sure what the hell she was doing, but knowing that if she did not stop Haggar here then bad things were going to happen.

But she was no match for a Druid. Not like this.

She lunged for her bayard, but another bolt of lightning seared the air and Pidge threw herself backwards to dodge it, landing on her rear and broken left wrist freeing itself from the sling and
smashing into the floor.

Black spots danced in front of her eyes at the sudden burst of pain and it left her gasping and frozen. She weakly scrambled backwards kicking her feet out to put distance between herself and Haggar, but it was ultimately useless as the Druid followed, a predatory gleam in her eyes.

"This ends here, little girl," Haggar smirked, raising a pulsing purple orb, the same one she had intended to use on Keith back on the Galra ship, above her head, and based on the widening of her smile the witch was well aware of the similarity.

Except this time Pidge was out of tricks.

She was going to actually die.

She stared up at the unforgiving yellow gaze, determined not to show the fear that was filling her. If this was her end... she would at least go out with the bravery of a Paladin of Voltron.

But as Haggar's grin widened she realized it was a vain last hope.

She was terrified.

"Get away from her!"

Pidge had barely had time to process the voice—Shiro, Shiro was here—before she felt the whoosh of air as Shiro leapt over her, trail of purple light from his arm glowing behind, and landed in front of her, a human shield.

"Shiro," she breathed, hope warming her.

But as she took in his form, trembling slightly and blood dripping steadily in little plops to the floor from a wound on his front, she realized he was literally on his last legs.

They needed to end this. They needed to end this now.

"Shiro." Haggar's voice was clipped, none of the amusement from before.

"I told you I would kill you," Shiro growled and Pidge shivered at the dark tone even as she got her own legs beneath her and rose to some modicum of standing, although without her bayard, down the hall beyond Haggar, she wasn't sure what she was going to accomplish.

"You did," Haggar said evenly. "And I told you I would be taking my Lance's quintessence. Which I indeed shall still do."

"You've lost, witch," Shiro snarled. "It's over."

"Is it though?" She inclined her head at him. "You tremble, my Shiro, while I," and she raised her glowing orb, "am just about to get started."

Pidge's eyes narrowed in on the orb.

Had it gotten smaller?

It had, she realized. And the lightning that had been crackling over Haggar's form had disappeared as well.

Haggar was down to her last reserves too.
They could do this.

"I will kill the girl," Haggar continued. Her tone darkened, "for the second time," and despite the situation Pidge smirked. Hah. That was clearly a sore spot. "And then I will retrieve my Lance. I wish I could take you too, my dear Champion, but never fear, I will return."

Pidge lost her smirk.

Haggar sounded so… confident. She looked confident, even with the orb smaller.

They needed to do something. Something fast because Shiro wasn't going to be standing much longer. She had to trip Haggar up, somehow, make her lose her focus.

An opening. She needed to make an opening.

Think think think damnit!

"You can't have him," Shiro growled.

"He is mine," Haggar hissed back.

"Hey!" Pidge interjected, relieved when there was no waver and Haggar turned her attention to her. Opening. There. She silently prayed Shiro realized the distraction and the anger building in her words was not even exaggerated as she poured her last reserves into this final stand. "Lance is not a thing, bitch. And he sure as fuck doesn't belong to you."

"Why you—"

Shiro took the opening.

He launched himself forward without even a yell, just movement. Haggar blocked, barely, but the orb fizzled out at the contact.

Roaring, Shiro pivoted and brought his arm back for another strike and Haggar met it with a scream of her own. Pidge dashed forward, past the two interlocked combatants, and dove for her bayard.

She heard Shiro yell just as her hand closed around it, the hallway shake with a muted explosion, and turned to see him being shoved backwards, the whole front of his armor cracked and blackened. Haggar sent another smaller blast his way and Shiro screamed as it struck his stomach where the bloody wound she'd witnessed earlier was and he collapsed to the ground.

He didn't get up.

"Shiro!" Pidge cried, scrambling to her feet and shifting her bayard back into the shock katar. "Shiro!"

Haggar had turned her sights back to her, a new sparkling black and purple orb in hand and nearly the width of the hallway although it was much thinner as though stretched.

There was still nowhere for her to dodge.

Pidge gulped and raised her bayard although she knew such a thing would be useless at blocking. If she could land a hit though, connect the prod with Haggar and shock her like last time…

She wrenched her arm back and sent the grappling hook forward with all of her will, channeling Lance's perfect aim, right at the witch's head.
Haggar shifted the glowing orb to intercept it and lightning raced from it down the cord.

Pidge screamed as she was instead shocked and dropped her burning hot bayard to the floor, quick enough to prevent any major damage thanks to her glove, but now she was completely disarmed as Haggar skidded her foot on the cord and sent her bayard down the hall behind her.

Oh God.

Oh God.

Haggar stood towering above, just paces away, with her attack hissing and spitting and the violent glow from it matching the gleam in her yellow eyes.

"Now," Haggar smiled darkly, "die."

And a glowing purple hand plunged out the front of Haggar's chest.

Just like Allura, Haggar did not scream. She let out a breathy gasp, her attack fizzling out in a crackle of black flames, and blood arcing out of her mouth in a torrent of dark red.

Shiro was behind her, flesh hand grasping her shoulder and prosthetic through her, his own eyes alight with a smoldering fire.

"Die," he echoed, voice hoarse and low.

Haggar turned her head ever so, her bloodied lips pulling up into a faint smile as she met Shiro's gaze. She supposed... if this was to be her death then at least it had been by her Shiro's hand. By her hand, so lovingly affixed to her champion.

She raised her blackened hand, settling it about the still glowing prosthetic in her chest, and caressed it gently, flesh flaking away to bone, and heard Shiro suck in a horrified breath from behind.

She smiled softly. Let her gift him one more nightmare.

"My..." she whispered, holding tight to her creation as she exhaled her final breath, "...Champion."

Shiro shuddered as he felt Haggar go fully limp, her death rattle a mere hiss, and he yanked his arm back through her chest, spraying ichor and gore about the hallway and sending the scent of burnt flesh wafting.

Her body fell with a soft thump, face down to the floor.

Shiro collapsed behind her, prosthetic hissing as Haggar's blood sizzled on the heated metal.

And then he threw up.

"Shiro!"

He barely managed to deactivate the prosthetic before Pidge was there, her arms wrapping about his neck and pressing the crown of his head against her chest. She was shaking, trembling so much that it was a wonder she hadn't fallen over.

He reached up and pulled her flush against him with a little squeak, burying his face into her shoulder.

Pidge was here.
Pidge was alive.

He chose to focus on that for the moment instead of what else had just happened.


He couldn't stop.

She had been dead.

He thought she had been dead.

And if she were here then…

Then…

As if reading his mind Pidge's arms tightened about his neck.

"Keith," she breathed and his heart stuttered.

"He's alive," she continued. "He's alive, Shiro. He's gonna be okay."

Shiro sobbed, tears coming hard and fast.

Keith was alive.

He was going to be all right.

He felt like his heart had just been forcibly shoved back together and he welcomed the pain from it.

They were alive.

But…

But Allura was still…

And Hunk…

He needed to get to Hunk before it was too late.

Pidge felt the tensing in his shoulders and she released her near stranglehold. She kept her eyes firmly on Shiro's tear-stained face. He held her gaze, the darkness from earlier gone although there was still a fear.

"Hunk," he gasped. "He needs a pod."

Lance probably really needed one too but he hadn't seem to be in immediate danger. Not like Hunk.

"Where is he?" Pidge asked.

"Kitchen." Shiro was already rising unsteadily to his feet, swaying. Pidge didn't feel much better.

"But I can't… I c-can't…"

There was no way he was going to be able to move Hunk to the infirmary. He needed Coran and his strength, but the advisor was probably still with Allura.

Because he wouldn't leave her alone while she was dying and that meant she still had to be alive.
Shiro clung to that as faint a hope as it was.

She just couldn't be dead.

"I have a tarp," Pidge cut into the newly rising despair. "It's in the infirmary. We can roll Hunk onto it, pull him. You'd just need to lift him into the pod."

Shiro nodded. He could do that. He'd manage.

"I'll go get it," Pidge offered.

"No," Shiro interrupted. "No. Go… go to the kitchen. Lance… he needs to see you."

"He's okay?" she asked, voice small.

Shiro gave a tight smile. "Yeah. But…" He reached forward and pulled her into another hug. "We thought you were dead," he whispered into her hair. "We all thought…"

And the hollow ache Pidge had felt came back with a vengeance. So they had thought that.

And Lance…

Oh God.

Pidge knew without a doubt he was blaming himself.

Oh God.

She nodded against Shiro's chest. She would head to the kitchen.

But.

She realized Shiro hadn't said a word about Allura and Coran.

They… they were okay too, right?

She was almost afraid to ask, but she needed to know.

"Allura?" she whispered, the name for some reason heavy on her tongue. "And Coran? They're okay too?"

Shiro's grip tightened. "Go to the kitchen."

Oh no.

Truth by omission.

"Sh-Shiro—"

"Go to the kitchen, Katie," Shiro repeated, voice breaking. "Please. Not now."

Oh God.

She didn't push though. Not when she felt that doing so would shatter what little there was still holding Shiro together.

"Okay," she whispered. "Hurry back?"
"As quick as I can," Shiro promised. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and dropped his arms. "Now go."

Pidge hurried away, heart heavy with grief she could not give into yet.

Left alone in the hall Shiro looked down at Haggar's sprawled body. She was dead.

Dead.

The word reverberated in his mind.

Dead.

For so long she had been there, a threat, a horror an enemy.

And now she was just… gone.

He should have felt nothing but relief.

But…

He shuddered, wrapping his arms about himself in a hug that brought no comfort.

She may be dead.

But the nightmares she had left behind…

They were still very much alive.

Chapter End Notes

The end.

Haha, just kidding ;p It is the end of the main action though and the invasion arc. Just some final healing and recovery and time to process up ahead. But you know me, it'll take at least a few chapters (cough, seven apparently) ;p And so, as you can see, I did decide on killing Haggar. I still love the idea of her getting away, plotting ways to get her hands on Lance and drive him to such an edge that he gives in to her (she underestimates him; Lance won't ever give her what she wants although if she'd had the thought to grab a hostage in Pidge or Hunk… possibly a different story ;p) but alas, I decided to give our team some closure on that front. I owed it to them. And Haggar will still stick around in her own, nightmare-inducing way. Lovely. I do hope you all enjoyed her end!

Also, apologies if I did not respond to your comment last chapter. I got a bit overwhelmed between work, the convention and then getting sick and just decided to start blank slate this week. I will aim to do better. Thank you so so much though to those who left them. They really helped me get through the long weekend.
Please drop a comment before you go. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the chapter!
Lance jerked his head up from Hunk's chest as he heard rapid footsteps approaching.

They were too light to be Shiro's.

Dios, was it Haggar? His breath quickened. He knew he should have grabbed his bayard from across the room. Stupid stupid stupid.

What did he do?

His right hand clenched into a fist, nails biting into his palm.

A shadow crossed the doorway of the kitchen…

And then Pidge appeared.

She looked awful, face reddened and peeling and streaks of blood highlighting her cheeks, while her armor was dinged and damaged and she was clearly favoring her right leg and her left arm was hanging limp but…

Pidge.

He made a choked sounding gasp of her name.

Pidge.

She was here.

She was actually alive.

Pidge's eyes widened as she caught sight of him and she threw herself across the kitchen.

"Lance! Lance!"

She didn't quite plow into him but it was a near thing as she threw her arms about him and Lance barely caught himself before he tipped over. Her hold hurt and he could feel a new trickle of blood descending from her grip but he didn't care.

Pidge was here.

He swung his right arm about her, a hysterical laugh bubbling to the surface, and bowed his head over hers.

"Keith is alive," she blurted out, wasting no time. It was the right call as whatever tension remained disappeared in an instant and he practically slumped over her with a shaky sob.

"Shiro is too," Pidge filled in as she became the only thing keeping Lance up. "He's okay. We're all gonna be okay."
She cast her eyes to the side where Hunk lay, face pale beneath his complexion and blood bright on his lips.

"We're all gonna be okay," she repeated softer.

She felt Lance shake his head. "A-l-llura," he hiccupped out.

Oh.

So she had been right.

She had never wanted to be wrong so badly before.

She rested her head back against Lance's chest, feeling his arm tighten about her waist, his hand digging painfully into her undersuit.

She stilled.

His right hand.

His right hand that a few hours ago hadn't been able to so much as move a finger on its own.

She jerked back, Lance releasing her from his grip, and grabbed the retreating hand in her own.

The scar was still there, stark white against his mocha skin, and the burn took up his entire forearm, easily visible as his jacket and shirt almost up to his shoulder had been ripped clean off.

But his hand… as she held it she could feel it trembling but not with that unconscious waver and the fingers curled slightly over her own.

"How?" she breathed.

When she looked up though Lance's eyes were shaded. "Haggar," he whispered after a second.

"Haggar?" she repeated, glancing back down at the healed hand.

Lance just shook his head, biting his lip. Pidge didn't push.

But oh.

She should probably tell him.

"Haggar is dead."

And based on Lance's sudden choking breath that may not have been the best way to do it, but it was out now.

"She's dead," Pidge said again, watching as emotion after emotion crossed Lance's face.

"How?" he managed after a moment, glancing down at her hand holding his. Pidge hadn't…?

"Shiro," she said simply. "But," her gaze narrowed, "I'd have done it. If he hadn't. If I could have."

"Pidge…"

"It wasn't like last time," she told him. "And even if it had been… She's done too much to our family, Lance. She's hurt too many people. And I couldn't let her do it anymore."
She sighed, rubbing her thumb over Lance's palm. "But… I am glad I didn't have to. That Shiro…"

She closed her eyes in remembrance of Haggar's final moments, her sick caress and address to Shiro, and the way Shiro had gone from avenger to horrified in a matter of seconds.

It wasn't a memory she would be forgetting any time soon and Shiro she was certain would never forget it.

Damn that witch.

But, she took a calming breath, it was over now. Haggar was dead.

Only memories could haunt them now and Pidge would take those any day over the real thing.

"Where is Shiro?" Lance asked quietly.

"Infirmary. Getting a tarp to move Hunk to a pod."

Pidge still wasn't sure how they were going to start the pod, but it sounded like Coran was still… still alive. Hopefully he could do it. Otherwise, she could put him in the pod Lance had previously been in where at least the numbers lined up with human biology, and hope for the best.

"Keith?"

"In a pod," Pidge murmured, and hopefully healing all right after the initial scare. "He'll be okay. He… he protected me in the explosion. I thought…" She swallowed. "He's going to be okay."

Lance inclined his head and turned back to Hunk.

"Can you help me keep him warm? It's… it's not good." His voice broke and Pidge squeezed his hand with a nod.

"Of course."

She went around to Hunk's other side, mindful of the large puddle of blood that made her stomach turn over, and laid her head down over Hunk's shoulder and saw Lance cuddling in on Hunk's other side. She could see damp patches on the yellow sweatshirt that covered Hunk's upper half that had nothing to do with blood.

"Oh, Lance," she whispered.

He sniffled and rubbed his head against Hunk's barely moving chest.

"Thought I killed you," he barely whispered.

And Pidge hated that she had been right again.

"This wasn't your fault," she said quietly. "You know that, right?"

He shook his head. "She came after me."

"She came after all of us," Pidge countered gently, sliding her hand up to rest in Hunk's dark hair and move through the locks, offering what little comfort she could to both of them.

"The Lions were offline because of me," Lance continued voice barely audible, either not hearing her or ignoring her comment. "If they'd been there then… then…"
"Who knows what would have happened," Pidge said. "No use wondering what ifs. We're okay. We made it."

"Allura didn't," came the sob. "My fault."

"Well maybe she did," Pidge fired back. "Haggar thought she killed me and Keith too, huh? Did you see Allura die?" her voice caught on the last word. "Did you?" she pressed.

"N-no."

"Then… then let's believe she's alive."

Pidge could ignore Shiro's omission. Maybe it had been that Allura was hurt, badly. Maybe he thought she wasn't going to make it.

But Allura was strong. Pidge believed in her.

Somehow, someway, they were all going to make it out of this.

She sighed, a new wave of exhaustion crashing down, but she pushed through it. Because if Lance lost his way now, if he gave into the despair that was threatening to drown them all, then she knew they weren't going to make it out. He was their heart, their light.

They needed him to shine.

"Allura is strong," Pidge said quietly. "You trust in her, don't you? Just like you trust in all of us?"

"Yes."

And the word sounded more assured then and Pidge smiled.

"Then believe in her," she whispered. "Believe in our family. Not Haggar. Not her lies."

All was quiet for a few moments and then Lance quietly called her name and she gave a tired hum in response.

"Gracias," he murmured. "Pidge… I... thank you."

Her words had rekindled the light inside of him, stoking embers into a warm glow. She was right. Haggar was a liar. Just because she had said Allura was dead did not make it true. He chose to believe in hope over despair, in the power of love over hate.

They were all going to get through this.

One way or another.

xxx

Shiro went as quick as he could to the infirmary, a new sense of adrenaline lending him strength to save the rest of his team.

He would do anything to make that happen.

He'd had the faint hope that he would find Coran in the infirmary, Allura inside a pod and somehow okay.
But there were no Alteans to be found. Just one cryo-pod in use, its glass blackened with frost. Shiro still rushed over to it and pressed his bloodied glove up against it, taking comfort in the bite of cold.

"Keith," he whispered, bowing his head to rest on the glass. "K-Keith."

He knew he didn't have time for this. Hunk didn't have time, rather. But he needed a moment to just breathe, to reassure himself that although he could not see Keith that he was in there, that he was healing and he was alive.

Alive and not dead.

How they had survived the explosion Shiro had no idea, but he had never been more grateful.

Not dead.

God.

It had been so close.

Still so close.

Shiro pulled himself away and picked up a corner of the tarp. He needed to hurry. He could feel his strength flagging – little sleep from the previous night not helping matters at all – and it was only a matter of time until his body could not be pushed any further and he collapsed.

Hunk needed to be safely in a pod before that happened.

Where was Coran?

Shiro couldn't acknowledge the flutter of hope in his gut that said because the advisor had not returned to battle – and Shiro knew he absolutely would – meant that he was still with Allura because she was still alive. But the fact they hadn't made their way to the infirmary squashed it because Allura's only faint chance had been a cryo-pod and Coran had not pursued that.

Shiro felt his stomach bottom out. Had Coran taken a fatal strike and he'd been unaware? Was he down there dying too?

He felt like crying.

He needed to check on Allura and Coran, needed to get Hunk into a pod, needed to assess Pidge and Lance (for while they were both conscious and somewhat moving that did not mean they didn't need medical treatment immediately), needed to sit down, needed to breathe, needed to scream—

He took a shuddering breath.

Hunk first. The rest would follow.

Get to Hunk.

He made his way to the kitchen, praying that Hunk was still alive to be put into a pod.

There had been so much blood.

The scene he came upon was heartwarming in the most bittersweet of ways; Lance and Pidge pressed against Hunk with their heads resting on his chest looking like they could have fallen asleep in a cozy pile if it hadn't been for all of the blood and the pain and fear etched into their faces.
They were so young.

Both weakly picked their heads up at his footsteps and Shiro gave them just as weak of a smile.

"Hey," he greeted softly. "Can you guys sit up for me? We've got to get Hunk on the tarp." He dropped said tarp to the ground and Pidge was there a moment later, smoothing it out, while Lance merely sat back, a new tremble to his form from before.

Shiro wasn't the only one on his last legs.

He wanted to ask what happened inside the barrier but he held his tongue for now. None of them were in the right state to be rehashing what they had just gone through. What mattered was that Lance had come out of it all right. Everything else right now was just an unnecessary detail.

As carefully as he could, Shiro lifted Hunk up from underneath his arms and pulled him backwards onto the tarp. His shoulder cried where it had taken the blaster shot and Shiro grit his teeth as he felt it gush anew.

"Shiro," Pidge gasped.

"I'm fine," he bit out, pulling Hunk all the way to the top. The large boy didn't so much as twitch. Shiro tried not to think the worst.

"Come on," he instructed, grabbing hold of the edge of the tarp and pulling, relieved when it slid without resistance on the floor even with Hunk's weight. Just a tug on his shoulders but nothing he couldn't handle. "To the infirmary. All of us."

He needed to go check on Coran and he was half-tempted to send Pidge, who while clearly exhausted was moving about as well as he was, but he blanched at the idea of her finding Allura, her entire stomach blown out.

No.

He didn't want her to see that.

Pidge helped Lance up from the floor, nearly falling down herself, and placed her right hand around his lower back as much to comfort him as to try and support him. She could feel him shaking upon just standing and she wasn't sure he was going to make it all the way to the infirmary.

They made a sorry procession, she thought, Shiro doggedly towing Hunk and smearing the blood trail that he'd left from earlier, while she and Lance moved as slow and awkwardly as a pair of zombies.

But they were alive.

That was what mattered.

She glanced up at Lance's face, his lips pressed into a thin line, and one of the only spots on him that did not have blood splatter besides his eyes, which were a dulled sort of blue.

She knew all of the purple blood marring him was not his own but the rest… was it just his? Or Hunk's too?

She was afraid to find out.

What had happened to them all?
She had seen the dead Galran, the commander, in the kitchen, and Lance had clearly engaged with him at some point as evidenced by the purple splatter. Had he been the one to kill him? Had Hunk? Shiro? Who had fought Haggar?

It made what happened to her and Keith almost seem like a picnic. At least out there their biggest enemy had been the void of space and possible secondary explosions. It hadn't been leering eyes and sharp teeth and words that could cut deep.

And she had no doubt words had been said. Haggar liked to talk. The Galran commander had shown a flair for the dramatics.

What had they said?

"Hey," she squeezed her fingers against Lance's side, and tired eyes dragged themselves to her. "It's going to be okay."

Lance managed a small nod.

They made it without incident to the infirmary and Pidge hurried over to the cryo-pod Lance had used a few days ago. "I have basic schematics," she said, hitting several buttons, "and I can start the sequence but I don't know how to calibrate it to reach that point."

"I do," Lance said quietly. A ghost of a smile tugged up his face. "Coran has been showing me since I'm cleaning them all the time." His expression turned a touch rueful. "And in them."

"Good," Shiro said, opening the glass door. "You two get on that. I'll get Hunk in."

Somehow, he added silently. He wasn't sure he could even lift Pidge at this point.

To lighten the load he set about unclasping Hunk's armor, the chestplate lifting easily thanks to the fact it was no longer connected at the back from whatever had caused that level of damage. An explosion?

He pulled off the arm braces next and then the shoulder pads. Lance joined him silently a moment later and set about unclasping the footgear. Shiro took a doubletake as the hand cradled to Lance's stomach this go around was his left while his right, and yes, he was not imagining the large burn scar on it, was the one that was deftly undoing buckles.

Later, he told himself. Hunk first.

Between the two of them they managed to remove all of it save for the utility belt, which was just below the gaping wound across Hunk's stomach and Shiro didn't dare touch it in case it was holding something vital inside, and they kept the immediate blood-soaked towels where they were congealing against the undersuit and dumped the rest in a macabre pile atop the tarp. Lance very gently eased Hunk's orange headband free, clutching it tight in his fist with a look of regret before carefully putting it on one of the counters and out of the way.

"Ready," Pidge said a tick later. "I… I think it should work. Coran can adjust it later, right?"

She put the name out without inflection and Shiro gave a hum of affirmation, confirming that it was indeed Allura that was their missing puzzle piece as to the safety of their family.

Shiro took a deep breath, crouching down alongside Hunk. He could do this. Hoist him up into his arms and in the same movement lift him high enough into the pod and get the door closed before he tipped back out.
His back and shoulders were already protesting.

But his discomfort was nothing compared to the pain Hunk was in.

Shiro shifted his arms underneath Hunk; one under the bend of his knees and the other against his upper back. He took one last deep breath and then surged upwards, his calves crying out now too.

He would have over balanced if Pidge hadn't been there, catching hold of his elbow and Lance placing his good hand against Shiro's by Hunk's legs and pushing up with all he had.

Grunting, Shiro shifted Hunk so his feet went into the pod and then shoved upwards with all of his remaining strength so Hunk went vertical. Lance was there and slamming the door a tick later and Shiro collapsed against the still clear glass, panting.

That was it.

They really needed to get horizontal cryo-pods.

Pidge was at the control panel and a few ticks later the glass frosted over, blacking out Hunk's form. Pidge let out a deep sigh of relief as all of the buttons this time glowed teal and blue. Whatever she and Lance had set up it at least seemed to be in the right direction, rather than whatever it was she had initially subjected Keith too.

She glanced at the other pod currently in use, still dark. She had no idea how to read the Altean numbers on the pods to give an accurate turnaround of when the occupants would come out but she had to guess at least a day for each of them, maybe more.

Probably more, she amended. Both had suffered very near-fatal injuries.

At the reminder of injuries her right ankle gave a sharp twinge and Pidge took that as an invitation to sit down, right where she was standing, with a none too graceful oomph.

"Here, drink," and a water pouch was thrust into her line of sight connected to Shiro's prosthetic a minute later. She took it gratefully and dragged down a swallow.

Lance had been given one too although he was merely holding his, back propped up against Hunk's pod and gazing in the direction of Keith's, something unreadable in his expression. Pidge shifted over to sit next to him and he gave her a small, exhausted smile, as she laid her hand against his leg.

Shiro finished his own pouch from the medical supplies in a few quick squeezes, tossing back a glornack seed too as he knew he wasn't making it into the pods for a while. He slowly moved over to the cabinets and dragged out two of the light but still warm blankets. On second thought he grabbed another and carefully shook it to put over his own shoulders.

He knew that both Pidge and Lance needed actual medical attention but he was not the person capable of doing so right now. That would be Coran and he needed to get him. Blankets though were both comforting and could help ward off the chill that he could feel settling into him.

He jerkily offered the blankets to them and Lance reached up – right hand, again, and Shiro couldn't fully see his left as he had it tucked against him but there was something strange about it that he could not focus on right now – and accepted them, with Pidge's help placing one over their legs and spreading the other out to mostly cover both of their shoulders.

"Stay here," Shiro said tiredly, already heading for the door.
"Where are you going?" Pidge's voice had risen slightly in pitch and Shiro wished he knew how to take away all of her fear.

"To get Coran."

That was all he said and he hated how he saw Lance bow his head and Pidge's lips thin at who it was he was not getting. Neither said anything though and for that Shiro was thankful. He couldn't offer false hope or reassurances.

Even though he was still praying for a miracle himself.

He trudged like an old man from the room, hand trailing along the hall wall to keep himself upright. The stairs down to the Alteans' level was the hardest and Shiro ended up taking a hard sit in the middle of the flight when his vision wavered.

He was nearing his limit.

Just get to Coran.

He reached the hole in the wall that Haggar had made and peered in, expecting to see Coran sitting with Allura in his arms.

But both Alteans were on the floor.

"No," he gasped, stumbling over the uneven hole and into the room. Coran couldn't be…

A series of quiet squeaks caught his attention and he swerved his gaze towards the sound.

The mice.

All four of them were curled up on Allura's chest, and all of them were definitely more washed out than he remembered. But while they looked exhausted they looked happy.

The large one, Shiro couldn't recall his name at the moment, patted his large stomach and looked pointedly down from his perch.

Shiro followed the gaze towards Allura's stomach.

Smooth flesh greeted him.

Blood was still in puddles around the floor, bits of gore and innards too. But Allura's stomach was a smooth pane of brown, several shades lighter than normal though and with a puckered line around the edges.

What?

The mice were squeaking again and he looked to them once more. The small pink mouse, almost a satin color now, was standing atop a piece of paper. Shiro blinked at it.

A rune circle?

And atop the rune circle was a pale hand that connected back to Coran, clearly unconscious but still breathing.

Coran had…
Coran had healed her.

Shiro remembered his desperate words to Coran as he dashed off in pursuit of Haggar. Save her.

"You did it," he whispered, tears once more stinging his eyes and this time he let them. "Coran, you…"

They didn't look to be in any immediate danger, and a check of both of their pulses showed them to be strong, if fast (although Shiro had no idea what was normal for an Altean) but the fact it was there and fierce against his hand was enough relief for him.

Shiro decided to leave them there. He was in no condition to carry them and they would be fine. He did maneuver Coran to lie down more comfortably and pulled Allura away and out of the blood puddle.

He draped his blanket over her, feeling a slight pink highlight his cheeks, as now that the danger was past he was more than aware that she was wearing almost nothing; her nightgown shorn just past her thighs, the entire middle missing and where the rune circle had activated the top of her gown had disintegrated away and he realized the mice had been strategically placed to give her some modesty.

Now his ears were pink and he swore he heard the mice laughing at him.

Coran's pajamas – and the fact they had fought a battle for their lives in night clothes was amusing now, in a dark, dark away – had fared slightly better although both arm sleeves were entirely gone from his morphing of his skin and taking Haggar's attacks head on. Shiro still wished he'd brought two blankets.

He looked back to the mice, who had clambered atop the blanket and nestled back down.

"We're in the infirmary," he told them. "All of us. Keith and Pidge too," his voice cracked still with the sheer relief of that statement. "Can you tell them when they wake?"

The tall skinny one gave an exact Garrison salute and Shiro idly wondered if it had been Pidge or Lance that had taught him that.

"Thanks," he nodded.

He was even more tired going back up the stairs and to the infirmary, but his heart felt lighter and his steps the same.

They had all lived.

Somehow, against all of the odds, all of them were going to walk away from this. Haggar and Theodek were dead. They could never hurt them again.

A soft, warm smile filled his face, sweeping away the pallor of exhaustion.

His family was safe.

Chapter End Notes
And Shiro *finally* knows Allura is safe. Aww. Time to go spread the good news :D Lots of reunions and feel good moments here. I'd love to hear what your favorite was; please do drop a comment before you head out. I really appreciate it!

Also, I'm hanging out at Kitsune Kon this weekend (Kimberly Brooks, your autograph is mine! I'm so excited!) in the artist alley so drop by the table and say hi if you're in Green Bay! Otherwise, hope to see you in the comments! Winkwinknudgenudge Gracias! (it's been a long, long week over here, guys. Hearing from you would make it much, much better, truly).
Chapter Seventy-Five

Lance felt fear churn in his stomach when Shiro returned without Coran, but he forced it back upon seeing the peace in Shiro's expression that had been missing this entire time.

"Coran is fine," Shiro said quietly, "and so is Allura."

There was a few moments of stunned silence and then—

"Allura?" Lance breathed, voice thick. "She's alive?"

"Yeah, buddy," Shiro sank down in front of them, legs thanking him for the break. "She is. I… I don't entirely know how but Coran did something. He healed her. She… she's going to be just fine."

Lance was crying, shoulders shaking, and Pidge's eyes were bright. Shiro leaned forward, pulling them both into his arms.

"We're all okay," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of Pidge's head, nearly doing the same to Lance and changing course at last minute to rub a circle on his back instead. "We did it."

They remained like that for a while – could have been minutes, could have been hours – but Shiro released them when his shoulder could take no more of the hold and sat back, soaking in both of their tear-stained, blood splattered faces.

"You both need to go into a pod," he told them.

Lance shook his head though, biting his lip.

"Lance," Shiro said sternly, if tiredly. "I know you don't like them but—"

"I can't," he whispered. And he held up his left hand that he'd been hiding against his stomach.

Shiro blanched and Pidge sucked in a harsh breath.

For not only was there a hole that seemed to go from palm to the back of his hand there was a blood-soaked dishcloth infused inside of it, fibers and flesh pieced together like a bad sewing project.

"Oh God," Pidge moaned, averting her eyes.

Shiro very, very gently took Lance's arm by the wrist and turned the hand over, confirming that the hole did indeed go through. His own stomach was turning but he forced it down and looked towards Lance, who had his eyes down.

"Lance, buddy, look at me," he ordered gently and dark ocean orbs rimmed with tears lifted. "We will fix this, all right?"

Lance hiccupped out a sob.

"Pidge?" Shiro turned to her. "Anything preventing you from going in a pod?"
"I don't think so. Um, I did sort of have almost a minute and a half of facial exposure to space. But my lungs feel fine," she added hurriedly. "My face just feels... raw."

Shiro stared at her, unblinkingly.

"What?" Pidge demanded, going to cross her arms, wincing, and thinking better of it.

"Pidge..." Shiro swallowed, not sure how to say this. "Human lungs... in space... you..." She should be dead. More than dead. A human body could not be be exposed like that in space; trying to hold her breath should have killed her, that amount of exposure should have killed her... a lot of things should have killed her, and yet here she was, standing without any apparent injury from the ordeal other than raw looking almost sun-burned cheeks.

She shrugged and winced again. "Maybe space is different here? I mean, we aren't anywhere in the Milky Way galaxy and the components could be different." Her lips pursed. "The Galra ship did burn for an abnormally long amount of time, which would indicate oxygen or something like it in the atmosphere. Maybe from the planet? It is giving off cloaking rays it could be there's something else to it than a frequency dampener." There was a faint glimmer popping into her eyes, a desire to study and dissect and know, and as relieved as Shiro was to see it he was more than happy to accept whatever anomaly this quadrant of space had given them and focus instead on getting Pidge into a pod. He told her as such and asked if she would show him and Lance the start sequence so they could get started.

"What about you?" she countered. "You need it more than me."

Shiro shook his head. "I'm not going in one until either Allura or Coran are back up. I'm not leaving you guys alone like that. I'll be fine until then."

Pidge did not look entirely like she believed him and Shiro couldn't blame her. He knew he must look a wreck. He felt like one too. And as much as he wanted to hop into a pod and wake up feeling whole again, put aside the mantle of adult for a little while, he couldn't do that. Not yet.

"Pidge, please," he pleaded, hoping it didn't come off as desperate and tired as he felt. "I'll feel better once you're in a pod."

And he could tell that she was in clear pain despite how much she was trying to hide it. Her left arm was in a tattered sling for starters, so either her arm, wrist or hand were hurt, her face was a mess and there were plenty of dings and burns to her armor indicating she had indeed been in an explosion.

Besides, he knew that Hunk and Keith, by the sound of it, were going to be in the pods for quite a while and if they could get her healed up and out of them within half a quintant and have someone at full health that would be ideal. Allura looked to be fully healed herself but there was no telling how her stamina would be and Coran the same.

And Lance… Shiro glanced at the ruined hand. That alone once they managed to somehow free the cloth was probably going to take at least half a day to repair the fine damage, and to say nothing of the mental exhaustion he was suffering from waging a mind battle against Haggar. Shiro didn't know how long he would need to be in one but it was going to be for more than a few hours, of that he was certain.

"All right," she agreed quietly. "Lance, can you help me set it up?"

Shiro helped them both to their feet and ushered them over to a third pod next to Hunk's. Between the two of them they agreed on some sequence and Pidge instructed Lance on how to initiate it once
she was in the pod.

She allowed Shiro then to help her unclasp her outer armor and pull it off, stacking it as neatly as they could in one of the corners, and then she pulled on one of the cryo-suits over her underarmor. She reverently removed the broken glasses, placing them on the counter.

"Pidge…" Shiro whispered, looking between the destroyed frames and her shadowed face.

"It's all right," she murmured. "It's fine. They're… they're just glasses." She flashed Shiro a watery smile. "Promise. I'm fine." All he could do was nod and make certain that the glasses were pushed safely back so no one could accidentally knock them off and damage them further.

Before she went into the pod though she pulled Lance into as tight of a hug as she could with her one arm, burying her face against his chest, bloodstained jacket and all, and he returned the embrace just as tight.

"Love you," she mumbled against him and in return she felt Lance give her a little squeeze.

"I love you too," he whispered, breath tickling her ear. "I'm… I'm so glad you're okay."

"You too." She gave him another squeeze.

Shiro was up next and he pulled her to him, gently but firmly, and pressed one hand to the back of her head. "Thank you, Katie," he said quietly. She sent him an inquiring look and he huffed out a soft laugh. "For everything. For being there when we needed you most. When… when I needed you most." For when Keith needed her was said silently and Pidge gave him as tight a hug as she could manage.

"Thank you, Shiro," she murmured. "For... for everything." For saving her. For killing Haggar. For protecting her from having to do so herself.

He ruffled her hair, a gesture so normal she felt new tears well up.

It really was over.

Minus everyone getting into pods. And then the inevitable emotional and mental aftermath and breakdown. She almost envied Keith; he was going to have almost no recollection of anything.

Pidge clambered into the pod and gave a thumbs up to Lance. He didn't return it but did give her a small smile and Shiro closed the pod door. A few ticks later it frosted over and she was lost to sight.

Shiro shifted to Lance's side and put a gentle hand on his back, wary of the bloodied marks on his shoulders, but even there Lance winced but still leaned into the tender hold.

He'd come a long, long way, Shiro thought with pride.

"How about we get cleaned up?" Shiro suggested gently. "See what we can do until Coran gets up?"

Lance gave a small nod, in that moment looking so young.

Shiro gently steered him out of the infirmary and to the bathroom just next door. It was a small thing, toilet and sink taking up most of it and Shiro gestured for Lance to sit atop the closed toilet lid while he rummaged in the cabinet under the sink and pulled out some spare hand towels.

He pulled off his one glove and then ran one of the towels under the faucet, water warm.
"Here," he held it out gently to Lance. "For your face."

Lance gingerly took it in his right hand, water streaming from the damp cloth to mingle with the red blood all over his hand. He dutifully lifted it up and dabbed at his face, wincing at even his own touch.

Shiro left him to it for the moment and set about stripping off his outer armor and dumping it in the hallway, feeling immediate relief as the heavy pieces were shed.

Getting his chestplate off was harder than normal thanks to the gunshot wound in his shoulder, but he managed with relatively little expressions of pain, trying to keep it to a minimum so as not to spook Lance.

He took inventory of himself as he wet his own cloth, rubbing it first vigorously over the prosthetic and watching the dark red that had cooked on with the heat swirl down the drain. The most major concerns were the gunshot wound, although it being a laser had cauterized the blast so it was bleeding very little unless he strained it, and the gash across his stomach that had yet to really stop bleeding although it had slowed. He dabbed as much as he could around it and then pressed another towel across it, intending to get bandages from the infirmary once they'd scrubbed up.

He had an assortment of smaller bruises and cuts littering him and exhaustion was cutting like a knife, but otherwise he was mostly okay. Until a pod was ready nothing resting and trying to get some sustenance in him couldn't hold off.

He looked over to Lance to see how he was faring and felt his heart constrict as Lance was still rubbing at his face, but not hard enough to actually remove any of dried splatter. His eyes were staring but they didn't seem to be seeing anything, his hand moving mechanically in the same small circle.

Shiro had known it wouldn't be so easy.

"Lance," he called gently. When that yielded no result he lightly tapped Lance's knee and called his name again. Ocean eyes blinked and refocused on him. "Hey. You with me, buddy?"

Lance's lip gave a barely perceptible waver.

"Hey, hey," Shiro murmured, rubbing his thumb over Lance's completely blood-soaked pants knee and trying hard not to think about the first part. "Estás bien. It's okay. We're all okay."

"I k-killed him," Lance choked out. His eyes drifted to his washcloth, which Shiro could see had dark purple imbued in the light tan threads. "I killed him, Sh-Shiro."

Shiro closed his eyes. He'd been afraid of that. But it was just like the last time and Lance would realize that too. With some time.

"He left you no choice," Shiro said cautiously, relieved when Lance gave the tiniest of nods.

But then…

"He m-made me."

Shiro did not like the sound of that, the way Lance's eyes were filling with a horror he could not fully identify.

"Made you?" Shiro repeated, hating how his gut clenched that had nothing to do with his wound.
Lance shook.

"He… he…" Lance broke off with a choked sob, shaking his head.

"Shh, it's okay, it's over now," Shiro said, trying not to let his own unease show. "Let's get you cleaned up now. You'll feel better. We can talk after, all right?"

Lance whimpered out a possible yes.

Shiro took the washcloth from an unresisting hand. "Lance?" he asked quietly. "Would it be all right if I washed your face?"

Because Lance was doing a terrible job of it and Shiro did not see it improving. But this wasn't food goo; it was blood and it needed to come off.

Lance inclined his head.

Shiro re-wet the cloth, rinsing out what little blood there was, and made sure it was comfortably warm, and then very, very carefully lifted it to Lance's cheek.

Lance flinched at the contact, his eyes scrunched closed. Shiro placed his other hand at the base of Lance's neck from behind to hold him steady.

"It's just me," he murmured, scrubbing firmly but still as gently as he could. "I would never hurt you."

"I know," came the tiny response. "But…"

And this time it was Shiro's turn to sigh out an, "I know."

"Lo siento."

"You don't need to apologize," Shiro retorted kindly. "I know. I understand. It's okay."

Lance trembled the entire time as Shiro cleaned the blood and dried tears from his face, but other than the initial recoil he held steady. It both amazed and warmed Shiro to see the level of trust Lance was showing despite all that happened not even an hour before.

"You're doing great," he encouraged. "Almost done."

And a minute later he was, Lance's face free and clear of the brutality it had witnessed. Shiro wished he could do something about the ring of bruises that were beginning to show around Lance's throat, a second necklace of pain.

"Can we get your shirt and jacket off?" Shiro asked. Both were beyond ruined, the right arm sleeve entirely missing on both and jagged cuts covering both shoulders. Based on the amount of blood that had soaked into the material there Shiro knew the injuries below were somewhat serious.

Lance nodded his consent and Shiro opted to cut them off rather than try and force Lance to move his arms or slide the material over his left hand that he was still avoiding looking at. He left Lance for a minute alone to dash back to the infirmary and grab a pair of medical scissors as well as a few rolls of bandages and a jar of salve that was good for numbing. He would be applying that liberally to his own wound once he had the chance. Another blanket too as he had the feeling Lance was going to need it.

Lance had not moved an inch in the time he was gone and Shiro wasn't sure if that was good or bad.
Shock, he decided, as Lance was staring blankly at the floor. He was honestly surprised it had taken so long considering all that had happened. He was having a hard time processing it all too but right now focusing on Lance and reminding himself again and again that they were all going to be okay was pushing him through.

"Lance," he tapped the boy's knee gently and was relieved when after a few seconds that tired gaze lifted to meet his. "I'm going to cut them off now," he explained. "Ready?"

Lance gave a small nod. Shiro worked quickly, slicing the jacket layer first down the front and then the shirt. Pulling them open on Lance's front revealed a chest mottled with bruises and, Shiro pressed lightly earning a low hiss, broken or at least badly bruised ribs.

He had Lance pivot slightly on his seat and more carefully cut through the back of the jacket and then through the material on the shoulders and down the length of the left arm.

He winced as he pulled it away, the long-sleeve shirt clinging a bit with dried blood. Lance moaned but held still as Shiro pulled it off in pieces, revealing deep claw marks gouged into Lance's shoulders and upper arms and stretching into thinner scratches down his back. More bruises there as well.

His expression darkened as he lightly washed away the blood and blotted at the wounds. He for one was not upset in the slightest that the Galran commander who'd done this had met his end.

Although he wished Lance hadn't been the one to do it. The circumstances surrounding it sounded… wrong.

Once Lance's torso was cleaned Shiro offered up the salve and while he put it over Lance's back and shoulders Lance rubbed it in on some of the bruises on his chest and stomach.

It was working, Shiro smiled, as he felt Lance relax ever so as he wound bandages about the claw marks. When he was done Lance looked like he had on a vest made of bandages but Shiro was pretty proud of his work, if he did say so.

"Pants next," Shiro instructed, the bottoms honestly having more blood soaked spots than clear ones at this point.

In answer Lance carefully stood and Shiro left him to it, going about slathering the cream and bandages on his own bare torso.

Lance tugged at the drawstring, still unsettled by the fact he was doing so with his right hand. The pants practically fell off with a wet plop, weighed down with so many fluids. They'd soaked through the fibers too, his legs, particularly his knees, stained red.

Most of that was Hunk's blood.

Lance wavered.

He'd have tipped right over if Shiro hadn't been so fast, catching him around the shoulders and guiding him back to sitting on the toilet seat.

"Hey, it's okay, it's okay," Shiro comforted, kneeling in front of him and hands lightly resting on Lance's upper arms to keep him steady. "It's okay."

"H-Hunk's…" Lance got out, throat closing up.
"And Hunk is going to be just fine," Shiro transitioned. "He's in a pod and he's healing and he's going to be okay."

But it wasn't just that.

"Me," Lance whispered. "Because of m-me, he…"

And Shiro realized that this time Lance wasn't speaking on overarching blame that because of Haggar's obsession with his quintessence the team was in danger and he was at fault. No. This was more personal.

"He protected you," Shiro said gently.

"Because I was stupid," Lance choked out. "I should have…" He should have taken the shot. He could have killed Theodek with one strike, ended it before Hunk had acted as a human shield.

Shiro tapped his bloodied knee. "Hey. None of that. You are not stupid."

"But—"

"No," Shiro said firmly. "You are not." His tone softened. "We're a family, Lance. We will always protect one another. Hunk got hurt, yes. But does he regret it? I'm going to say no. You got hurt protecting all of us before. Do you regret it?"

"No," Lance whispered. "But… but it was different, Shiro."

Shiro didn't interrupt except to pick up another washcloth and incline his head at Lance's knee, still seeking permission. Lance gave a tiny nod and Shiro began to lightly scrub away at the blood there but said nothing else, waiting for Lance.

Lance swallowed. "I could have killed him. Theodek. But I… I shot his hand instead." He lowered his head, unable to look at Shiro. "I didn't want to kill anymore. I thought… I thought…" He broke off with a little sob. "I was wrong. And he… if Hunk hadn't…"

Shiro was trying to piecemeal the broken account together, and understanding dawned within a few seconds. "Hunk took a hit meant for you," he said cautiously and based on Lance's cry he was right. "The cut on his stomach?" he clarified and Lance confirmed it.

Silence reigned for a few moments until Shiro got up to rinse out the cloth and start on Lance's other knee.

"If you had taken that hit," Shiro said quietly as he knelt back down, "you would have died."

Lance's breath caught.

"Hunk had the best chance of surviving a wound of that nature and he knew it," Shiro continued, recalling his observations. "I don't know the circumstances surrounding it, and it's up to you if you want to talk to me about it all right now, but I do know that Hunk would do anything to save you Lance, just as you would for him. You're brothers, right? Hermanos?" He put out the word he'd heard the two call each other fondly.

"Sí," came the whispered response.

"Hunk lived," Shiro said, "and he's going to be just fine. Focus on that for me, okay? We all are going to be okay. We will get through this."
He blotted Lance's legs dry and then pulled off the equally bloodstained shoes and socks, tossing them all along with the pants he freed from Lance's ankles into the bathroom garbage that was now overflowing with Lance's jacket and shirt and his own upper underarmor.

Lance was only dressed in his boxer shorts now and was shivering slightly, but he was all cleaned up. The only untouched part was his left hand – Shiro averted his eyes from it as his stomach twinged – but it did not seem to be bleeding and would hold until Coran could advise.

Time for the blanket now.

"Shiro?"

"Hm?" Shiro asked, in the process of grabbing said blanket shaking it out. He draped it over Lance's bandage covered shoulders, tucking it around and settling the loose folds in Lance's lap.

"Are you okay?"

Shiro's breath caught, but then again, why was he not surprised?

"I'm fine," was his automatic response but Lance reached out his right hand and latched it around Shiro's wrist, grip tight.

Blue eyes stared at him and there was a distinct absence of the hollow fear and guilt that had filled them before. Shiro's own words came back to him then, his observations following their talk in Blue. Lance healed best by helping others. His feelings of compassion and love outweighed anything else, even his own fears and doubts.

"I'm not so fine," Shiro amended. "But not now, okay? Let's get back to the others and find you something to wear first."

Lance shivered at that and Shiro reached up to tuck the blanket more firmly about him.

"Okay," he agreed quietly and released Shiro's wrist with that promise.

They made it back to the infirmary without trouble and Shiro helped Lance settle down on the floor in front of Hunk's pod with a few more blankets and the two pillows from the cot. He wished they hadn't move the couch back out now as it would have been incredibly nice to have.

There were a few spare cryo-suits but he knew the material was rather stiff and lacked that comfort feature. Lance though, after a few minutes of Shiro opening up every cabinet, had said he was fine as he was, the one blanket pulled tight about his shoulders and clutched in his right hand and another across his legs.

Shiro had admitted defeat, not willing to leave the infirmary and go across the ship to their rooms, and had joined him with a blanket over his own shoulders and another water pouch for the both of them.

"You need to drink that," he said as Lance merely held this one in his hand as well.

"I know."

He made no effort to drink it still.

Shiro plucked it from him. "Close your eyes," he instructed and Lance raised an eyebrow, the closest he'd gotten to something other than sad smiles and that timid fear. Shiro welcomed it. "Trust me," he
grinned and Lance snapped them shut immediately.

The water pouches were cold, stored in the infirmary’s cooler. Lance had just barely started to drink again and it was limited to hot drinks. Of course a pouch of cold water, not even room temperature, would not be welcome.

Shiro activated just his hand for a moment and held the pouch above it in his other hand. He turned the purple glow off and handed the now warm to the touch pouch to Lance with a soft command to open his eyes. "Here. It's just hot water but…"

Lance first flushed with a shade of embarrassment but then gave a shake of his head and turned to Shiro with a soft smile that brightened his eyes. "Gracias, Shiro." And to Shiro's relief he took a sip and then another.

They sat together quietly, exhaustion pressing in. Lance slumped sideways and rested his head against Shiro’s left shoulder and in response Shiro brought his arm fully around him and tugged him in closer. Lance breathed out a small, contented sigh and Shiro smiled down at the dark head.

He thought Lance might have fallen asleep for how quiet he had become, his breaths near even against his neck, when he spoke although the word was barely audible. "Haggar?"

Shiro stiffened. He hadn't expected Lance to want to talk about her so soon, but then again it made sense. Shiro had confirmation she was dead while Lance had whatever Pidge had probably told him.

"Dead," he said just as quietly.

"Are you okay?" Lance repeated from earlier.

And here, huddled beneath blankets and Lance a warm presence at his side, Shiro was. He nodded as such. "I will be," he voiced aloud. "I just…" He swallowed thickly himself. "I'm glad she's gone," he managed.

Lance gave a small nod of agreement. "Me too. But… but you had to…"

Shiro sighed, closing his eyes. "I know. I… I wasn't in a good place back there. I know I wasn't. I was so… so angry." He shuddered. "I felt… I felt like…"

Not like Shiro. He hadn't been Shiro there with his desire for revenge. Shiro protected others out of love, would only take that final step if no other alternative was presented and even if he did in the name of justice he did it for that, to protect people.

But that had not been what he had done. He had aimed to kill Haggar, even when she was defenseless to him while she and Lance had waged some type of mental battle, had gone after her not with a desire to protect but a desire to kill.

He had not been Shiro then.

He had been—

"Champion," Shiro breathed, hot tears stinging his eyes. "I…"

Lance wormed his right hand into Shiro's prosthetic on his shoulder, closing the metal fingers about his own.

"You're not him," Lance said quietly, but firmly. "You're not a killer, Shiro."
"I wanted to kill her."

Lance huffed out a laugh that wasn't humorous at all. "I… I think we all did. Pidge even said… she said she'd have done it. If you hadn't. I think… I think even I might have…"

And Lance realized as he said it that it was true.

If given the opportunity…

He would have killed Haggar.

He had committed to killing Theodek after all, and had made several attempted shots that had they connected would have been the end. He'd hoped too that the barrier, the Lions, would be enough to destroy her.

But Shiro shook his head. "It was different," he murmured. "I… I didn't just want her dead. I wanted her to suffer. You heard me," he hung his head. "I was not… not myself."

"You were scared," Lance counter gently. He understood that feeling. It had washed over him when Theodek had turned to go for Hunk and he'd thrown that first knife without hesitation. "That… that doesn't make you a killer. It doesn't make you… him. Champion." Shiro shuddered at the title and Lance squeezed the prosthetic tighter. "This," he tapped his fingers on the metal, "doesn't make you a bad person. It doesn't make you hers. Just… just like I'm not. We're not hers. We're us. We… we don't belong to anyone." And as he said it he realized how true it was. Shiro had said something similar to him once, right after he'd been rescued, but to hear it now, to hear it and to know it was true...

They were not hers.

Shiro's breath caught and he choked on his next one. Just like last time Lance's words were unlocking something inside him. He took in a full breath on the next inhale, it feeling lighter than any before.

They were not hers.

"You're Shiro," Lance continued, voice soft. "Our leader and brother and… and the most amazing person in the universe. You're our champion."

"Thanks, buddy," Shiro managed past his clogged feeling throat. "I… thank you, Lance." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of the dark head, freezing a second later as he realized what he'd just done as Lance's shoulder's stiffened against him.

But Lance untensed a moment after and snuggled up more against him, pillowing his head now on Shiro's chest, an answer more than any words could provide. Shiro relaxed too, although he pulled his arm off of Lance's shoulders, as Lance seemed to have no desire to let go of his hand, and settled it between them instead.

"You are amazing, Lance," Shiro said quietly, giving their hands a squeeze. "And don't deny it," he added as he felt Lance's chin shift to refute his words, "you are. You really helped me." And he was being completely sincere. Talking with Lance always seemed to do that and he could not fully express how grateful he was for it. But he could try and at least return the favor. "Will you let me do the same?"

"Can you just… hold me?" Lance asked after a few moments, cheeks darkening at the request but Shiro only squeezed his hand in reassurance.. "I… I don't want… not yet." He didn't want to think
about his hand, about Haggar or Theodek. He didn't want to think about how close he had come to losing Hunk and talking about what had happened in the Astral Plane felt too big to speak about just now.

"Come here," Shiro answered, patting the space between his legs and Lance needed no second urging, none too gracefully clambering over his left leg and settling down, back pressed flush against Shiro's chest. Shiro adjusted the blankets over them and then looped his arms about the thin shoulders and rested his chin atop Lance's head. "This okay?"

"Gracias," Lance murmured, already closing his eyes. He felt safe here, wrapped up in Shiro's arms and his warmth at his back. For at least a little while he could pretend that everything was all right and forget about the still unknowns lurking.

"Get some rest," Shiro said quietly, pressing another kiss to the top of his head. "I'll be right here."

Lance gave a sleepy mumble. Within the minute his breathing had evened, exhaustion winning the battle against everything.

Shiro's own eyes drooped and within moments he too was sound asleep, drawing comfort in Lance's steady breaths and the weight against his front.

No nightmares visited either of them.

Chapter End Notes

I had a few readers way back asking for more one on one Shiro and Lance. Here you go! I've been giggling and holding this in as I knew it was coming up at some point. Sleepy boys, everyone is getting rest and cuddles.

If you're still here reading and enjoyed the chapter please do leave a comment below. I'd really love to hear from you! Thank you so much to the beautiful souls who left one last chapter; I super appreciate it!

(Also, please no season seven spoilers. I like to be surprised, please and thank you!)
Coran came to with the odd sensation of something wet and yet dry pressing on his face and the more obvious one of hands roughly shaking his shoulders.

"Merlerghgh?" he mumbled intelligently. Blinking open heavy eyes he was greeted with Chuchule sitting on the very bridge of his nose, turning him cross-eyed as he tried to focus on her. She bent down, licked him – and that was that weird sensation – and then scampered off with a chirp.

"Coran!" and that sound was decidedly more articulate than his own. Allura, his brain settled on. "Coran!" A hand tapped against his cheek. "Coran, please, are you awakening?"

Coran’s brow furrowed as he tried to recall why he felt like he’d been trampled by a heard of crucoocrans.

"Coran!" the hand tapped more insistently. "I command you to wake up." And although the words were authoritative there was a plea behind them, a fear.

It all came back in an instant.

Coran surged to sitting with a gasp, but the move left his head reeling and sense of balance non-existent and he’d have toppled right back down had a pair of slender but strong arms not wrapped about his shoulders. He could hear Allura shouting his name but it sounded as though very far away. He closed his eyes, concentrating on taking deep breaths. Just a dobash to collect himself.

Allura saw when Coran's eyes closed, his chest heaving with a breath, and she stopped shouting his name directly into his ear. He was awake, she reassured herself. He just needed a minute.

She worried though as she saw the barely there flicker of his orange quintessence hovering directly above his heart and nowhere else. He had nearly had a fatal depletion and she clutched him just a little tighter.

The mice had filled her in on what had happened, their mental chatter what had awoken her.

She had never expected to wake again. She was more than aware that she had suffered a fatal wound from Haggar. Her last moments were hazy but she recalled asking Shiro to save Lance and Hunk and he begging her not to die. Coran had been there, holding her, and reassuring her with soft words even as he cried until she could not remember drifting off.

Yet she had come to to not only find herself alive but fully healed, the only reminder of what had happened a giant scar that took up residence across a large swathe of her stomach and she assumed had a match on her back where Haggar’s hand, she shuddered, had plunged through her.

The mice had helpfully explained what Coran had done as well as themselves and Allura had gathered them all to her, crying tears into their pale fur. They had literally given her time of their own lives, the most selfless thing a person – or a mouse, in this case – could have done. She could never repay them, but squeaks all around had told her that they only wished for her to be all right and that was payment enough.
She had cried so much Chulatt's fur had turned crusty with the salt.

Coran too had nearly given his life, only the mice's interference to break the connection halting him before he gave over all of his quintessence and made that fatal sacrifice. She had hugged them all again for saving him, the closest thing she had left to a father and as dearly loved as her own.

The mice had then relayed that Shiro had come down and the threat was over, but they knew little else save that all of the Paladins were gathered in the infirmary. All of them, they emphasized. Allura had cried again. Keith. Pidge. They had made it. They all had. Her family. They were all going to be all right.

Allura wanted to go to the infirmary right away and see them all for herself, but she was not leaving Coran to wake on his own, and doubly so once she saw how low his quintessence levels were. He was technically in no danger so long as he did not try to use them again, and without a rune circle he could not, but worry had kept her rooted to his side.

She had taken the blanket left to her from Shiro and draped it over Coran. She was a bit chilled herself, but the mice had been quick to nestle in her hands and she had been warmed by their concern. Coran had finally begun to stir about fifteen dobashes ago and after repeated callings of his name and the mice assisting by licking him he had come to and now here they were.

"Allura?" Coran murmured, voice thick. His jewel eyes pried themselves open and lifted to meet hers, already lined with tears. "You are… all right?"

Because he had no real idea of what had happened once he activated the rune circle. He had just prayed and hoped wherever he was channeling his quintessence to would be enough.

"Yes," she whispered, "Yes. Thanks to you. Coran, you saved my life."

"I could not lose you."

"Nor I you," she bent down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "And yet I did. You nearly drained yourself."

He let out a tired chuckle. "I admit I had not a clue as to what I was doing. I believe the mice stopped me before I could do so."

"They did," Allura smiled at the creatures who had repositioned themselves on her shoulders. "They saved us both." She gave Coran's shoulders a squeeze. "Are you up to moving? The others are waiting for us in the infirmary."

Coran's expression turned from relieved to grieved. "Who?" he asked quietly, dreading the answer. Others was plural so at least two of them had made it through this tragedy, and he prayed it was all three that had remained.

"All of them. All five Paladins of Voltron."

Coran blinked.

All… five?

"Pidge and Keith," Allura smiled, tears reforming in her eyes. "They survived. I do not know the extent of the injuries but they are all alive."

Coran couldn't help the noisy sob that burst out of him and the waterfalls streaming down his face.
Allura patted his shoulder and let out a tiny undignified *oof* when Coran sat up on his own power and pulled her into a tight hug that she returned in kind.

He could scarcely believe it. Somehow, against all odds, all of them had made it through.

He sobered a moment later though. "Haggar?"

"I do not know," Allura admitted. "I am hoping we will find more answers upon rejoining with the others. But I imagine at the very least she is not a threat at this moment."

And that was good enough for Coran.

"Then let us go," he said, going to rise to his feet.

Vertigo took hold before he even made it to kneeling and only Allura once more prevented him from faceplanting.

"You are not walking," she informed him. "I will carry you."

"Princess," he protested. "That is not necess-ary!" his voice rose in pitch as he took note of the state of Allura's dress. Or, rather, undress.

"You used to give me baths," she reminded him, holding up what remained of her nightdress across her chest to prevent anything from showing although it did not negate the fact her entire stomach was exposed and her dress was barely hitting at her thigh. He caught what might have been a glimpse of a scar on the expanse of skin but he had already averted his eyes before he could confirm.

"That was different," Coran mumbled, muffled as his arm had plastered itself across his face. "Very, very different."

Allura laughed, a sound so bright and light, that Coran found himself chuckling too out of just the sheer joy that they could do so in the face of all that had happened.

Still, he was relieved when she took what he'd realized was a blanket thrown over him and secured it, calling out a, "I am proper now, Coran," and he tentatively opened his eyes to see she had wrapped the blanket like a towel about her and tucked it in securely.

"Very good," he cleared his throat.

"Now let us see about a lift for you, hmm?"

"Princess, please, I can walk—"

Allura had already bent down though and scooped Coran into her arms as though he weighed no more than an infant.

"This is highly unbecoming of a Princess," Coran sniffed, moustache twitching as the mice used his face as a walking zone to settle themselves on his stomach. "Carrying your advisor like this."

"But you are not merely my advisor," Allura said quietly. Her grip tightened on his shoulders. "You are family, Coran, and beyond dear to me. Please. Allow me to do this small thing after what you have done for me."

Coran could not argue with that and so he did not try.

There was a blood trail leading to the upper level, one that both intrinsically knew belonged to Shiro.
The fact that he had apparently been well enough to come down and leave a blanket and message for
the mice though reassured them that he was not suffering a fatal wound.

Hopefully.

Allura traversed slowly, careful of both Coran's weakened state and her own as although she had
been healed, both her stomach as well as all of the other injuries Haggar had dealt, she felt tired.

When they arrived in the infirmary several minutes later both shared matching fond smiles at the sight
of Shiro and Lance sound asleep in the room, Shiro slumped over in a sit and Lance snug in his
arms, the latter's head lolled and compressed a bit on Shiro's shoulder.

"Aww," Allura gushed, for the moment choosing to ignore the bandages she could see peeking out
and how absolutely exhausted they both were and focus on the actual action.

Shiro wasn't as asleep as she'd thought as a bleary charcoal eye cracked open in her direction. It
blinked slowly before Shiro jolted to sit straight up, Lance letting out a sleepy mumble as his pillow
shifted.

"Allura!" he whisper-shouted, eyes wide, even as he readjusted to tilt slightly back so Lance was
settled comfortably again, arms still snug around the slender boy. "Coran!"

"Shh," she smiled back, stepping both her and Coran over to him. "How are you?"

"How am I?" Shiro sputtered, voice low. "Allura! You—"

"I am fine." There was more to it though and her eyes grew soft as they met Shiro's. "I am fine," she
repeated. "Truly."

She frowned as she drew closer, seeing the shallow cuts and bruises he had not covered along with
the huge swath of thick bandages she could slightly make out from beyond Lance that Shiro had
wrapped about his middle and shoulder. Lance as well had numerous bandages that the blankets did
not entirely obscure. "But you are hurt. Lance too."

"Lance can't go in the pods yet," Shiro said quietly. "And I couldn't; not yet." He looked guiltily at
her then, a look she was not entirely familiar with on Shiro. "I'm sorry, Princess. I haven't checked
the defenses once or—"

"Shh," she cut him off again. "You were looking after our family, Shiro. And besides," her
expression turned more grim, "had we been attacked anyway we are not in any condition to launch
an effective counter attack. We would have been… what is the Earthling phrase, sitting dorks?"

"Ducks," Shiro absentmindedly corrected. "But Allura—"

"I am fully healed," she interrupted. "I will check on the status of our cloaking and shields. Despite
Haggar's entry our position has not moved outside of the planet's atmosphere so our signals should
be cloaked still. I will doublecheck and make sure all shields are operating at whatever strength left in
the interim. But…" she hated to ask when Shiro looked so worn but it was necessary to know.
"Haggar?"

"Dead. The Galran too."

Both Alteans sucked in harsh breaths.

"The Galran is in the kitchen," Shiro continued, wincing at the thought of their secondary gathering
place now beyond splattered with blood and pain. "Haggar is in the storage hall adjacent."

"Alaraan," Allura breathed. She looked to Lance's sleeping form. Had he…?

Shiro read her mind as surely as the mice and added quietly, "Lance killed the commander. I don't
know the details but… it was messy. I killed Haggar."

"Are you all right, my boy?" Coran asked from his perch, casting appraising eyes over him. The
bandages wrapping about his shoulder were from an injury he did not recall him receiving in their
earlier fight, but more than that it was the exhausted lines to Shiro's face. He knew the battle between
the witch and Shiro would not have been easy, in more ways than one.

To his surprise though Shiro nodded. "Yeah. I… I think so. Lance," he cast his gaze down to the
dark head, "helped me. We talked. And I… I feel okay."

And both Alteans believed him, sending him small, relieved smiles, and that being enough for right
now.

Coran brought them back to a query he'd had as soon as Shiro had spoken. "Why can Lance not go
into a pod?"

In answer Shiro shifted and placed his hand about Lance's left wrist and lifted it very carefully up.

"Oh Alaraan," Allura moaned as she took in the sight. "What…?" She knew though as soon as she
saw it. Haggar.

Damn that witch.

"But his right hand," Shiro settled the left back very carefully against Lance's leg where it had been
resting under the tented blanket. "It's healed."

"Come again?" Coran blinked.

"Haggar healed it," Shiro repeated. "I don't know why. But I saw it myself. Lance… he has full
mobility now of it. It's completely healed." He let out a bitter laugh. "She healed one only to ruin the
other. Irony at its finest, huh?"

"I will take a look at it in just a few ticks," Coran said. "But first, Princess, could you assist me over
to the pods? I wish to make sure they are functioning correctly."

"Of course," and Allura crossed the stretch of space.

"Keith," Coran identified the first pod, bringing a shaking hand out to reach for the keypad. He
cursed the tremble still to his limb but if what Allura had diagnosed was correct he was indeed
suffering from severe quintessence depletion and only time could restore it. He was just going to
have to power through as best he could.

Coran flipped through the screens slowly. He could see how there were still some settings for the
Tloán he had programmed it for – he lowered his eyes for a brief moment in respect for that life that
had been lost – but most had been overridden.

He was well aware of both Shiro and Allura's eyes boring into the back of his head as he worked, no
doubt waiting for a diagnosis as he read through what the pod scans were showing.

It was not good.
"He appears to have suffered major burns over the majority of his back," Coran interpreted quietly. "No doubt from the explosion. They are much worse than his previous foray here, I am afraid. They should heal, but it will take time. His right leg appears to have suffered multiple fractures and heavy burns as well and there are contusions and smaller cuts over the majority of his body along with a very badly dislocated shoulder."

"God," Shiro whispered, clutching Lance slightly tighter to him. He'd assumed it would be bad given the fact Pidge had apparently first brought Keith to a pod rather than he rejoining the battle, which Shiro had no doubts his stubborn younger brother would have attempted to do.

He still couldn't believe they had survived. It was a miracle.

"I'm going to estimate about three quintants," Coran continued, "possibly even half a movement." He brought his jeweled gaze to Shiro's horrified one. "But he will be fine, Shiro. I promise."

Shiro breathed out. Not fully though. Not yet. Not until the rest of his family was accounted for.

Coran tapped Allura's arm. "Onwards, Princess."

He could hear her smile, as tight as it was. "You are enjoying this."

"Now that you have insisted you take no offense, yes, yes I am." Still, he was aware his voice sounded weary and his arm was visibly trembling from the small movements.

"Coran, are you all right?" Shiro asked as Allura brought him to Hunk's pod.

"I am perfectly peachy, my boy."

"He used nearly all of his quintessence," Allura spoke over him. "To save my life," she said quieter. "He is as exhausted as Lance was following our trip to the mindscape, but his body will restore it in due time. He needs rest, but…"

But there was no real rest to be found right now.

Coran meanwhile had his attention solely focused on Number Two's pod, his expression grim. The number output indicated that nearly thirty percent of the human's blood had drained. Much more and Coran knew he would have died. As it was his body was already displaying symptoms of hypovolemic shock from the amount it had lost and it was only likely due to Hunk's size he had managed as long as he had.

That was to say nothing of the injury itself, slicing over halfway through his stomach and disrupting the organ and exposing his innards to outside elements and contamination, along with signs of also being in an explosion, of some sort although not to the extreme Keith's had been, but still enough to melt the underarmor in places. Coran had a sad feeling both boys were going to end up with some scarring on their backs as the cloth had not been removed prior to going in and the healing would be working around it.

But, like Number Four, Hunk should make a full recovery and his vitals were ticking towards stable. Coran relayed this to the other occupants of the room, quietly adding it would be a minimum of a half movement, three quintants, but more likely four until he was ready to come out.

Number Five was almost a breath of relief compared to her fellow Paladins. She had a broken left wrist which would heal with no problems, along with a spattering of bruises and small cuts all about her, and very light burns on her right hand. Her lungs were the largest concern, inflamed, along with her face and when Coran murmured in confusion Shiro had mentioned Pidge saying something
about breathing in space. Ah.

Still, whatever she had inhaled would not cause any long-term effects and her face should heal with no scarring whatsoever. Number One had let out a deep sigh of relief at that.

She also shouldn't be in the pod for more than another five or so varga, Coran estimated. It would certainly be a boon to have another perfectly healthy member outside of Allura up and about, but based on the scene Number One had described he wasn't sure he wanted her really about the castle. He had no doubts the young girl had seen enough horror already.

Coran had insisted then that Allura bring him over to Shiro and Lance and she had acquiesced, lowering him carefully down to the blanket pile and making certain he was capable of sitting on his own power before letting go. Coran was both embarrassed and touched by her care.

"I am going to report to the bridge," she said, adjusting her blanket turned dress. "I will be back in no longer than thirty dobashes, I promise."

"Allura—" Shiro tried but she cut him off.

"I must assure some measure of safety," she said. "You understand the necessity."

"Yes," Shiro grumbled, but he didn't have to like it. The last time he'd seen Allura she had been dying and he had been begging her to live and now she was going to go stroll around the castle turned battlefield on her own.

"Shiro," and he had no other warning as Allura gently lifted his hand from where he had it resting lightly against Lance and lifted it to her face, pressing a kiss to it. He felt his face turn pink. "I promise I will return safely."

Shiro managed a nod.

Allura shifted her hand then to lightly cover Lance's right, propped up on his thigh. She gave it a small squeeze, face unreadable, before she stood. She turned her attention to the mice, who had settled themselves on Coran's legs. "I will communicate to the mice if there is trouble and they will alert you. But I promise, I will return soon without incident.

And with a whirl of her blanket she strolled quickly out of the infirmary. The mice squeaked and scurried off Coran's leg to curl up instead in the blanket nest, out of the way but still watchful.

"You saved her."

Coran startled slightly at the comment before he inclined his head. "I did."

"Did… did you know you could do that?"

"No," was a barely there whisper. "I did not. I had believed…"

The two men shared a moment of silence for the what could have been. If Coran hadn't possessed orange quintessence, if he hadn't had the rune circle, if the mice hadn't donated some of their own life force through their connection…

Allura would have been dead.

"I know you know this already, but thank you," Shiro said, voice thick. "I'm sorry I snapped at you too."
"Shiro," Coran placed a hand on his knee, "there is no need to apologize. I more than know how you felt. And thank you to yourself as well. You have ended this nightmare for us all."

"It's not over yet."

Coran followed Shiro's gaze to Lance's left hand. "No. No it is not. But let us see what we can do, hmm?"

He carefully eased the hand out by Lance's wrist, the boy shifting slightly at the movement, but so exhausted he remained asleep. Coran was thankful. He already knew this was not going to be pleasant later and Lance needed all the rest he could.

Ignoring the fused cloth for the moment, Coran examined the actual wound, noting that the hole was much, much larger on top of Lance's hand than the palm although it did go all the way through. A knife, was his guess, although both wounds were larger than a mere stab would have generated.

Lance had pulled against it, he summarized. Meaning that it had likely been embedded. His stomach clenched at the brutality of the Galran commander for he knew without a doubt it had been he who had caused the initial wound.

The top of Lance's hand though was torn open, even with the botched healing job. Almost as though something had burst out of the skin.

The knife hilt, Coran realized faintly. Lance had dragged his hand up and over whatever blade it was that had held his hand hostage. The kind of pain, the mental fortitude to do such an action… Lance had been beyond desperate to inflict such a wound to himself. It physically hurt Coran to think of how scared he must have been and he regretted that he had not been there to save him from it.

But he would save him now. Somehow.

The rag had been jammed into the wound, likely, Coran thought given the bloodied kitchen towels he was spotting in a pile on a tarp, to try and prevent blood loss and also possible contamination if Lance was trying to tend to Hunk, as he was certain was the case. It would have been a painful move all in its own but the witch had somehow gone and fused parts of the cloth to Lance's hand.

Coran honestly was not sure how to quite remove it. He didn't dare try and let it disintegrate in the cryo-pod as the pods were more likely to heal the flesh atop it and seal it in. That, and based on the cut of the injury…

Coran's eyes shuttered. Lance had likely torn through several ligaments in his hand and with Haggar's interference and twisting it was not something the cryo-pods would correctly align. She had indeed healed one of his hands only to destroy the other.

Tragic irony indeed.

However…

The pods might not be capable of saving Lance's hand but… Coran was pretty sure he could attempt to do so. If he could somehow regenerate all of Allura's missing organs and flesh then redesigning a hand should be a simple enough matter.

Although, his head swam, he knew he was not capable of such a feat right now. Any attempt to use his quintessence would more than likely kill him. He also still needed a way to remove the cloth first, but every option he could think of involved high measures of pain for the boy he considered his son.
But there was no other way.

He relayed his thoughts to Shiro, who looked at him with sheer awe.

"You could do that? Fix his hand? Could you…” Shiro made a quick glance at his own prosthetic and Coran's heart clenched.

"I'm sorry, my boy," he said gently, placing a still shaky hand on Shiro’s knee. "I do not believe it works it like." For while he had in a sense created pieces of Allura, the wound had been fresh and her body had been cooperative and eager to restore it. It had been a wound that needed healing and his quintessence had responded to it. Shiro's arm was long, long gone and Coran had healing quintessence, not one that was regenerative.

It would not work.

Shiro let out a sad sound mixed with laughter. "I figured. I just…"

He looked down at the metal limb again, too easily able to picture Haggar speared on it, her last words a sick caress and use of his moniker. Even though he had come to terms with the title in some ways, it did not mean the horror and memories were not still there.

"Perhaps myself and Numbers Two and Five could fashion you a different model though," Coran mused. "We had considered as such for Lance should his hand be lost… I am certain we could find a way to replace yours, dear boy."

Shiro had to admit he'd considered the idea. An Altean prosthetic to take the place of his Galran one. But he shook his head. This was a part of him now, for better or for worse. That, and he knew it would not be a simple matter of simply removing his arm like a part of a machine; it was fused to him through Druid magic and as powerful as Coran's healing abilities apparently were, they were not going to be able to fix this. Not if they couldn't even separate the cloth in Lance's hand.

And, to be honest, he had no desire to go back under the knife so to speak, even if it was among his family. The idea of being laid out on a table, unconscious and unable to fight back, shook something deep inside him and he knew it was going to be one of those demons that he might never fully destroy.

"Thank you for the offer, Coran," he said quietly, "but…"

Coran squeezed his knee, no more needing said.

"Let us get some rest," Coran instructed after a few moments. "When the princess returns we can set you into a pod—"

"No," Shiro interrupted. "No pod. Not until Lance is…” Because he refused to leave him until Lance's hand was set right, until that pain and terror was over as much as it could be. He knew Coran and Allura would be there, but, his arms tightened around Lance, while he hadn't been able to protect him before and be there for him in his fight against both Theodek and Haggar, he could certainly be there for him now.

Coran nodded. "Very well. Still, let us all lie down. I know you are exhausted, Shiro. It will be some time until I am able to use my quintessence again anyhow and we may as well take advantage of the time to let our bodies recuperate."

Saying so he tilted sideways and landed somewhat uncomfortably on the pile of blankets, but was too tired to stretch out and find a better spot. Shiro more carefully maneuvered Lance to lying down
and made sure the blankets were snug about him, before settling himself along Lance's side, flesh arm draped loosely over Lance's torso in a light hug.

Now that he was lying down the exhaustion from before seemed to double and Shiro moaned softly, closing his eyes.

"Sleep," Coran intoned from Lance's other side, his own voice suggesting he was just about to do that. "The mice will stand guard."

A few proud squeaks sounded and Shiro felt his lips quirk up.

Lulled by Coran's already reverberating snores and the steady rise and fall he felt coming from Lance, Shiro allowed himself to fully give into the welcoming darkness.

Everything was going to be all right.

He could just feel it.

Chapter End Notes

How long can Icy drag this fic out for? Watch me. ;p Haha, in all seriousness, we are very close to wrapping up now. I just want to make sure I don't rush through this "recovery" section because although Haggar was the Big Bad and she has been defeated, this fic has never been about just defeating the villain. It's about family and coming together and supporting one another and we still have quite a bit of that to go (and more gorgeous man, who am I kidding? ;p). I'm excited to finish this journey out with them and all of you.

That said, the update schedule is shifting next week due to season seven. Normally I would skip a week but I *really* wanted to finish publishing this fic by the end of August so Color will still update next week, but on Wednesday, August 8 instead. I do hope to see you there and please, as always, no season seven spoilers now, then or the update after. Thank you!

Please do leave a comment on the chapter if you've enjoyed it. I love hearing from you. Thanks so much to everyone who left one last chapter; I appreciate it so!
Allura stared at her reflection in the mirror, hands tracing along the rough ridges that made a distorted circle across her stomach. A turn and glance over her shoulder revealed nearly the same on her back.

She smiled at the marks before dropping the tunic shirt she had pulled on. She would wear them proudly for they were a stark reminder of Coran's love and all they had pulled through. Still... she pressed a hand to her stomach, feeling phantom pain as the memory of the witch driving her hand through her, the desperation and fear and failure she had felt as she lay dying in Coran's arms.

She had almost died. More so than when she had faced down Zarkon and awaited the final blow. If Coran had not been able to miraculously tap into his own quintessence and heal her...

She shook her head. No. She must not dwell on such things. She had lived. Her family had survived. And Haggar was dead. Those were what mattered and she would not allow Haggar's taint to mar the act of love that had saved her. She lifted her chin, jeweled eyes narrowing into a mask of determination.

She would be all right.

Allura quickly finished dressing into long leggings and sturdier shoes than her dressing gown flats. The castle may be safe right now but after the earlier events she realized there was no replacement for good footwear.

She had hurried to the bridge after leaving the infirmary, adrenaline pounding as she had tried not to anticipate the worst. They had assumed if Haggar came after them she would be operating without Zarkon's permission, but what if she had been the first force and there was an army of ships waiting now for a signal to attack?

But her worries were unfounded as upon reaching the bridge none of the other proximity alarms had gone off and there was not a single signal to indicate another ship. The only one registering still was the smoldering hunk that had once been a battle cruiser, although its heat signature was fading as it burned itself out.

Allura had spared a brief moment in silent mourning of the mother and son who she knew without a doubt had not made it out of the explosion. Tears stung her eyes at the memory of Amalia, so desperate to save her son.

They had just wanted to go home.

She had brushed the tears away and gotten back to diagnosing the castle. The two entry points made in the breach were of concern. Haggar's had been in a hallway but she had sealed it back up behind her with some type of forcefield that had dissolved now. Allura activated several of the interior doors to close in that section of the ship and keep it contained.

Theodek had entered in one of the empty hangars and then torn through the interior wall further into the castle instead of using the door. Her gaze narrowed. Galrans always had to be so destructive. She had sealed off a good portion of the castle from his escapades as well. They would need to repair the
holes from the outside sooner than later, but for now the castle would stand.

The planet continued to cloak the majority of their signal and Allura doublechecked to make sure they were not broadcasting their location. They were still as hidden as could be, although again the burning ship on the outskirts was a bit of a beacon. There was nothing she could do about it though and wormholing away would not be advisable as for the most part this location had been secure.

She'd paused then. How had Haggar found them?

She had a sinking feeling it had something to do with Lance. She did not understand Druid magic. Perhaps the witch had used Lance's blood or... Her face had paled. His quintessence. Lance had told them he'd seen it in the Astral Plane and had felt Haggar pulling on it. He would not know if the witch had actually managed to obtain anything, not with as broken and damaged as his essence had been.

It was over now, she reminded herself. Haggar was dead. No one else had means to locate them. They would be as safe as could be for now.

She'd gone to her quarters then to change as running around in a blanket and barely there nightgown was not going to assist her in any way. She grabbed the bag of dagiko candies from her dresser as well. She knew she really ought to go to the kitchen and grab something of more sustenance – they no doubt needed it – but after what Shiro had briefly described she did not yet want to traverse there.

In addition to the candies she had gathered up the bowl of raisins from the bridge, leaving the cooled and congealed oatmeal behind. But it was something.

The mice had sent her images of Coran, Shiro and Lance sound asleep spread out on the blankets, and she had smiled, relief filling her. She knew that they still had some hurdles to overcome from all the damage Haggar and Theodek had wrought, but at least for a moment they were all able to find peace.

The lounge had remained untouched by the fighting and so had the path from it to the infirmary. Allura had taken advantage of that and shifted two of the couches into said medical wing along with all of the blankets and pillows she could find. She had returned to the main hall to collect the cushions and to see the Lions, but they had remained quiet in both physical form and her mind.

She had still reached out, placing a slender hand on Blue's paw and whispered her thanks to the Lion. She knew without a doubt that they had helped Lance; even without knowing any details of what had occurred that she knew. She sent a quiet prayer for them to come back soon and had left with her collection of cushions.

Despite her earlier protests when all of the Paladins had attempted to camp out around Lance's pod, this time around Allura had no qualms about setting up camp in the infirmary. It was a safe place, a healing place. She also would not deprive any of them from being able to keep watch on one another as they healed, as it sounded like both Keith and Hunk would be in the pods for several quintants. She may as well make it as comfortable as possible.

She had lifted Coran onto the cot, her advisor not even twitching at the movement, and she had taken the quiet moment to brush back his hair and press a kiss to his forehead. She owed him her life although she knew Coran would not see it in such a way.

She had not dared move Shiro, who had a protective arm over Lance and looked relatively peaceful all things considered, and did not move Lance for the same reason.
Instead, she had settled on one of the couches with the tablet she had grabbed from the bridge and once more checked the status of the castle, feeling restless. The mice had curled up in her lap, falling asleep within the dobash, and their peace had transferred to her somewhat so at least the apprehensive feeling that she needed to be doing something had faded.

She too felt exhausted even though a self-check had shown her quintessence levels operating at full capacity and not an injury left unhealed on her. It was not a physical ache though, but a mental one. A glance at the clock had revealed it to be just after 1000 hours. It did not seem possible.

Three hours. Three hours had been all that had gone by since the proximity alarm had gone off. It felt like days.

Allura reached a hand up to her brow, massaging it slightly. She could certainly go for a nap herself but despite the alarms set she knew it was not wise. That, and she wished to remain vigilant in case one of the slumbering males about her awoke. Lance in particular.

Her gaze traced what she could make of his form, mostly hidden beneath a blanket and then blocked from view by Shiro. All she knew for certain was that Lance and Hunk had engaged with the Galran commander and that Lance had been the one to kill him. But there was much more to what had happened over the course of the battle.

Haggar, she knew, had intercepted Lance at some point given the fact she had healed – and that still boggled her – his right hand and then, her stomach rolled, done that to his left. She dearly hoped Coran had an idea on how to reverse the damage. But otherwise she knew little of what had occurred outside of her own fight with Haggar.

Allura spent the next two hours in a tense vigil, unable to fully relax with all of the questions swirling in her mind. She checked the cryo-pod statuses ever quarter of a varga, letting the relief that each pass indicated healing and calmed her thudding heart. By the near end of the first hour Pidge’s pod had even begun to slightly lighten and by two Allura could make out the shadowed form of the young girl.

Coran’s quintessence levels were coming back steadily too, backed up by both the medical scanner and Allura’s own checks. She had very carefully looked at Lance’s, not surprised when the scanner indicated they were low; not as drained as Coran’s but close.

Given that Lance as a human could not – or, at least had not been able to, she really had no idea all that the Lions had done and what he was capable of now – actively use his quintessence the way she could or Coran had with a rune circle, and most certainly not in a physical way unless he was formed with Blue in Voltron, she could infer that Lance had engaged in a mental battle with Haggar likely in the Astral Plane. She sent another silent round of thanks to the Lions for watching over Lance and their protection. Had they not created their barrier she was certain the outcome would have been tragic indeed.

She was finishing up another round around the infirmary, idly sucking on one of the candies, when she heard the smallest of moans coming from Lance and Shiro’s direction. Lance was waking up, twitching slightly and in clear pain. Allura was not surprised given his injuries and wished he had managed to remain asleep for a while longer until Coran was once more awake.

"Lance," she called gently, kneeling down next to him. "Lance." He shuddered, face scrunches. What was that phrase Hunk used to calm him? "Estás bien," she murmured, reaching out a hand to settle carefully atop his upper left arm. "Estás bien, Lance."
Ever so slowly his eyes blinked open, hazy with confusion and pain. They focused on her after a few seconds and he mumbled, "Allura?"

"Hello, Lance," she smiled, brushing her thumb up and down his bare arm.

His eyes widened. "Allura!"

She was here. Alive. Shiro had said she was all right but seeing her for himself was different. "Allura," he repeated, eyes stinging. "You're…"

"I am all right, truly." Her eyes traced his face, taking in the still furrowed brow and the sheen of pain "And yourself? Are you all right?"

"I'm…"

What did he say? As he became more and more awake he was becoming aware of how much he hurt. His left hand was pulsing with a muted agony and the rest of him felt sore and achy. Breathing hurt as his broken ribs protested and his shoulders stung from where he knew claw marks had gouged deep.

There was also something warm pressing against his side and a foreign weight across his stomach. His breath hitched.

"Shiro," Allura answered to his reaction, squeezing his arm. "I can shift him—"

"No," Lance interrupted, surprised by how desperate it came out. "No. He's…" Now that the warmth had been identified as Shiro, Lance did not want him to leave. He felt safe, all things considered, with Shiro right there. A physical guard to keep the nightmares away, to remind him that his family was okay.

"Are you in pain?" Allura switched her line of questioning. "I can obtain a glornack seed if you would like."

And Lance would like that very much, but he shook his head weakly. He had barely managed to get down a few sips of water even after Shiro had warmed it for him and the idea of trying to swallow anything more made his throat constrict.

"Just… stay?" he asked, hoping it didn't sound as needy as it came out, but Allura merely smiled and bobbed her head.

A moment later she was carefully arranging herself to lie down on his other side, effectively sandwiching him between herself and Shiro although she remained on her back, her hair a fluffy white pillow behind her. She readjusted the blanket covering him but kept her hand atop it on his arm, continuing to rub soothing circles with her thumb.

"You're… you're really okay?" Lance asked, voice small. "She said you had…"

"If it had not been for Coran then Haggar's words may have indeed been truth," Allura said quietly. "But he and the mice saved me."

"But you could have died."

Allura did not pull her punches. "Yes. However," she turned slightly, propping her head up on her hand to meet his eyes, "none of what occurred here was in any way your fault, Lance." Based on his flinch and his eyes shifting away from hers she knew she had once more hit that dorblang on the toe.
"Haggar came after all of us," she continued softly.

"Because of me."

"Because of me," Allura corrected, and dark ocean eyes looked to her in confusion. "I put you, all of you, into the line of fire when I asked you to be Paladins of Voltron. I exposed you to Haggar in this fight to protect the universe. If there is blame to be found then let it rest upon my shoulders."


"Then I ask you, how is it yours?"

Allura gave a sad sort of smile as Lance's eyes widened. Her point had been made.

"The only ones at fault are the Galra Empire for forging this war. Not yours. Not mine. Theirs." She squeezed his shoulder. "No matter what happens you must remember that."

And Lance understood that. He did. But it did not make the hollow ache in his heart lessen that because of Haggar's obsession with him he had endangered them all. He thought he'd gotten Pidge and Keith killed. Allura and Hunk too. They had nearly died trying to protect him.

Just…

Just as he had done for them.

"We are a family," Allura continued. "We will always protect one another. That love and hope is what gives us strength, what brings light to the darkness of the universe. And you, Lance, you are our heart." Her hand shifted to rest atop his chest. "And we will protect you as you have protected us."

Lance felt a tear trek its way down his cheek, followed by another and then another. Allura made a soothing shush and he felt her arm shift to wrap about him just above Shiro's. He shook in her hold, turning his face to press into her shoulder.

"Shh," she murmured. "It is all right. We are all going to be all right."

She continued to hold Lance until the soft sobs had run their course. "Sleep," she whispered as his eyes fluttered, exhaustion and pain weighing heavy although she knew her own heart felt lighter and hoped his was the same. "We shall be right here when you awaken."

That was all Lance needed to hear. He was still hurting but the aches had dulled somewhat in the face of sheer fatigue and Allura and Shiro's warm, comforting presences. He felt a little better too, as although they had insisted time and again that he was not responsible for Haggar's actions, hearing how Allura had tried to shift the blame to herself and realizing how wrong that was made him realize that he could not hold such fault to himself either.

He still felt guilt. They had gotten hurt because Haggar had come after him. But…

But it was not his fault.

He released a heavy, freeing breath and a moment later they evened out into as close to deep sleep as his body could manage.

Allura turned her head, voice still low but slightly raised with a hint of amusement. "How much did you hear?"
For she had felt upon lying down next to Lance and draping her arm over him the slight tenseness in Shiro's and noted that his deep inhalations had halted.

"Sorry," came the low reply. "I didn't mean to——"

"Shiro, please, it is fine," Allura cut in. "Do not apologize."

There was quiet then for a moment before Shiro spoke. "What you said… Thank you. We both needed to hear that."

"It is true for us all," Allura said softly. "Myself included." For she had approved the correspondence that had set off the trap and explosion and this entire nightmare. Even consoling herself with the fact had they not fallen for Haggar's trap the witch would certainly have gone with an alternate plan did not lessen the fact that she had sent two Paladins — two children — nearly to their deaths.

She sighed, carefully sitting up although she kept a hand resting on Lance, so she could more easily see Shiro. Despite the few hours of rest he still looked beyond weary, dark circles under his eyes and shouldering the same burden of leadership and guilt that she was trying to lessen herself.

"You need a pod," she told him. It would not help with the lack of sleep but it would go a ways still to assisting once he was free of the pain that she knew he was in.

Shiro shook his head, slowly sitting up too and wincing as his neck ached from its less than ideal position. "Not until Lance goes in one first."

He outlined then that Coran had offered to attempt to heal Lance's hand and Allura's eyes had widened. It could work, assuming they had some way of removing the fused material. But it would be vargas still until Coran was restored enough to even try such a feat and even then she had great concerns as to how it would deplete his strength once more. But it was their best chance of giving Lance back full motion of his hand, of returning what Haggar had stolen from him.

She said as much and then followed up with an order for Shiro to return to sleep.

"You're tired too," he countered.

"I am not injured," she retorted. Neither commented on the fact she had most definitely the worse off of the two of them just a few hours prior. "Please. Your body needs the rest. I have brought in several couches as well that I think you should take advantage of."

Shiro turned his head around, eyes widening at the sight of said couches and even more blankets and pillows awaiting use.

"Lance," he protested weakly, gesturing at the sleeping boy lying between them. He couldn't just get up and leave although his back was begging for him to please make use of the cushioned surface.

"I shall watch over him," Allura assured. "And you will be just there."

"But——"

"For me?" Allura broke in.

Shiro let out a low chuckle. "I guess I can't say no to a request from a princess." His eyes lowered back to Lance. "You'll stay with him?"

"I shall not leave his side."
With a few more assurances and coaxing Shiro finally stumbled to some form of standing and over to the couch. He collapsed upon it with a grateful moan, feeling the cushions sink below him. He rolled over onto his back as his stomach was protesting the extra weight and fumbled one of the many blankets open.

He was asleep before he could even think to grab a pillow.

xxx

Shiro awoke to a gummy, thick feeling in his mouth and murmured voices. The first he swallowed against and resolved to get a water pouch upon more fully waking up. The second he was eventually able to place as Allura and Coran, although they were speaking too softly for him to pick out words.

Too comfortable to move for the moment and still in that pleasant haze between sleeping and waking, Shiro took a mental inventory of his aches and pains, noting that they were most definitely still there but it was a dull throb more than a shooting one. He was still tired but his head felt clearer and that was a definite plus.

A lazy roll of his head towards the rest of the room revealed that all of the pods were still in use, although Pidge's had given way to a dark teal light and the white of her cryosuit nearly glowed against it. His eyes tracked to the clock above the counter and he blinked at it in disbelief.

He'd fallen asleep for two more hours.

Lance still appeared to be sleeping himself but Coran was awake, both him and Allura sitting on the floor next to Lance, an assortment of loose papers about them. Shiro focused in on one and inhaled sharply.

Rune circles.

At the noise both Alteans turned, greeting him with tired if sincere smiles. "I am sorry," Allura apologized. "Did we wake you?"

"No," Shiro said truthfully, pulling himself with a low groan to sitting, body protesting the action. He looked back at the circles. "Are you…?"

"I have been attempting to create a circle that focuses on a particular element," Allura explained, holding up one sheet. "Coran does not have the energy to heal all of Lance's wounds and we wish for him to focus his efforts on just his hand. I believe this one," she gave the paper a shake, "will work best but…" she bit her lip. "I am not knowledgeable in the drawing of such runes to guarantee it will work as we wish."

"Worst case you can just have the mice bite me again," Coran said cheerfully. A series of indignant squeaks sounded and Allura translated that the mice would prefer to avoid such a plan.

"Outside interference seems to be enough to break the link, so worst case I can remove you from the connection with a pinch," Allura said. Her lips quirked up. "Or perhaps yank on your moustache."

Coran's hands flew to his face. "Don't you dare," came the muffled exclamation and Shiro was surprised when he heard himself laugh. It was a small thing, but it was so much more than that.

His expression sobered a moment later though. "Did we find a solution to removing the… the cloth?"

"Yes." Coran's voice had lost all of its humor. "I have an agent that should dissolve the organic fibers
of the cloth, but not do the same to Lance's flesh. But given how twisted it appears to have moved into his hand…" Coran swallowed. "I will have to cut through some of his hand to make sure the agent reaches all bits of cloth."

Cut through…?

Shiro's stomach clenched.

"We were debating just now how to go about it," Allura said quietly. "Coran thinks it wise to awaken Lance and numb his hand as well as we can with the salve. I wish to let him remain unconscious for as long as possible and pray he stays that way during the procedure."

Coran shook his head. "He needs to be awake." He swallowed. "At least to start. Believe me…" His eyes drifted without permission to his own prosthetic. There was nothing worse than waking up to unimaginable agony and have no idea what was happening as Haggar had enjoyed doing to him. The memories were pressing in more steadily now and he clenched his eyes shut as though it could block them. Not now. Later, he promised himself, but not now.

Shiro sighed. "I was afraid of such. In that case we have elected to allow him to sleep and proceed once he has awoken on his own. His body needs the rest."

But as if summoned by her words Lance twitched and Coran, who had been brushing his thumb over Lance's right hand, which Shiro noted had a vein valve attached, stilled. A moment later he blinked open sleepy dark eyes with a little mumble.

They focused first on Coran and Lance's lips curved into a small smile. "Coran," he whispered.

"My son," Coran whispered back, giving Lance's hand a squeeze. Shiro should really have seen that one coming as Lance's smile softened even more and he felt his own do the same. "How are you feeling?"

"Mhmmm." The worst of the pain had dulled, Lance realized, although he still felt like he could fall back asleep at any minute. His head was hurting the worst and he could feel small bursts of almost static in his mind, but when he tried to focus on them they hurt more. His face scrunched up as a particularly sharp lance went through him and he stopped trying.

"We have something very important we must discuss with you," Allura said, drawing Lance's attention and being blunt and to the point. "It is about your hand."

Lance stiffened at the reminder and although it didn't hurt any more he was suddenly more aware of how wrong his left felt.

"We believe we can fix it," Allura continued, "however…" She swallowed. "However we must first remove the cloth. And to do so we may need to… cut part of your flesh."

Oh.

That…

That sounded like it would hurt.

Lance chose to focus on the first part. "Fix it?" he repeated. "All… all of it?"

"I possesses orange quintessence, the element of light and healing," Coran said quietly. "I have never been able to use it before despite…" his other hand pressed against his chest where Lance knew a
necklace with wedding rings hung and it was his turn to squeeze Coran's hand. Coran coughed. "Well. We have discovered I can tap into its properties with guidance. I healed Allura and I believe I can heal your hand."

"He did not just heal me, he saved my life," Allura corrected gently and Coran bowed his head. "I believe in Coran with all of my heart that we can do this."

"Me too," the words passed by Lance's lips quietly but with strong conviction. "I... I trust you, Coran. I'll... I'll be okay."

"That's my boy," Coran squeezed his hand.

They explained the process to Lance, who grew a few shades paler beneath his tan when Coran showed him the pair of nearly knife-like scissors that would be going into his hand to cut apart the fused skin. But he could do this.

Rather than having him lie on the exam table, which Lance was doing his best to ignore and just grateful that seeing it hadn't prompted anything other than a quick shudder, Allura had brought over a low table like the one Coran had used for his hand massage for him to put his hand atop.

Lance dearly wished this was another hand massage.

Under the bright infirmary lights the sight of brown flesh meshed with cloth fibers looked even more sickening. No one had yet asked how he had obtained such an injury and Lance was glad. He knew he'd have to explain eventually but right now he was trying as hard as he could to not think about Theodek, because every time the name crossed his mind he could feel a hand forcing his to draw a knife and see yellow eyes go dark.

No.

He couldn't think about it.

Lance hadn't asked, but Shiro had settled right behind him and Lance had practically migrated into his lap, two strong arms wrapped about him and Shiro's chest rising steadily and bringing a calm to the situation that Lance severely envied.

Allura was armed with a pair of tweezers and the solution that would dissolve the cloth while Coran was rubbing his hand with as much of the numbing salve as possible. Lance could report that it was indeed working but he knew once they really started digging in the topical relief would be short-lived.

"Ready?" Coran asked him, placing his left hand firmly atop Lance's wrist and pinning it to the table. He looked a little green around his moustache but his hand and gaze were steady and Lance managed a nod.

"We're right here," Shiro murmured, and Lance felt his chin settle atop his head, a reassuring weight that was a comfort over any previous fear. "We've got you. It's going to be all right."

Lance managed another tiny nod, scrunching his eyes closed. He didn't want to see.

"Allura?" Coran called softly. A moment later Lance felt something cool being poured over his hand. It tingled, like little bubbles, but it didn't actively hurt.

"Top layer of cloth is clear," Coran said. "Lance, lad, I'm going to have to make a cut now."
Lance swallowed and nodded, eyes still closed, and Shiro's grip tightened about him.

"We are going to attempt to do this all in one go," Coran continued. "If it becomes too much though just say the word, understand?"

"Kay," he breathed, high and reedy.

Coran made a cut and Lance choked back a cry. It was followed quickly by another and he moaned, turning his face to bury it against Shiro's arm.

The process continued, interspersed with the sensation of the fizzing, which was more painful now against raw flesh, and then the cold bite of metal going into his hand as Coran dug deeper and deeper and there was the tang of copper in the air as blood welled up. Lance could feel it dripping down and out of his hand.

Lance tasted acid and forcefully swallowed it back. He did not want to puke on Shiro.

Shiro kept up a steady stream of soothing noises the entire time although Coran and Allura remained silent, fully concentrating on their tasks. Lance didn't ask them to stop. He wanted it over. He muffled his cries and occasional shrieks against Shiro, reminding himself over and over again that they were helping him. And he felt the smallest measure of pride in himself that not once did their arms and hands turn into monsters or nightmares.

Not even ten minutes later Coran was murmuring "last one" and there was a final, cruel snip deep inside his hand and Lance sobbed, both in pain and relief.

"You did so good, brave boy," Coran whispered, and Lance felt his upper arm squeezed. "It's over. It's all right."

He hated that the only thing he seemed capable of doing was crying harder.

Coran still had his wrist pinned to the table with his other hand because despite that part being over Lance knew there was still more to come. There was a crinkle of paper and he felt it settle atop his hand.

"Coran, are you certain you are ready?" Allura sounded worried and for the first time since this operation had begun Lance opened blurred eyes.

Coran wavered in front of them, looking paler than normal and he had the faintest tremble about him.

"I am certain," he said. "This must be done."

"C-Coran," Lance stuttered and the jeweled gaze met his. "I…"

He didn't want him to get hurt. Not for him. He could wait a little longer, the pain wasn't that bad.

"Lance, my son," and Coran squeezed his arm again. "I swear to you I will be all right. Please, let me do this for you. I do not like to see you in such pain."

Lance sniffled and gave the barest inclination of his head.

"I cannot say if this will hurt or not," Coran cautioned him, taking his hand from Lance's shoulder and hovering it over the rune circle, which was covering up the gore of Lance's wound. "But it will hopefully be quick."

"I trust you," Lance repeated from before, and the words bolstered him as well as Coran, his
expression becoming lighter.

"Then I shall begin."

And without further ado Coran touched his palm fully onto the rune circle Allura had drawn. At once he felt a rush of warmth, a burst of something inside of him and he heard Lance gasp, the sound more surprised than pained. Coran did not dare look up to check.

He could not physically see his quintessence but he could feel it, feel the gaping chasm in Lance just as he had with Allura. He pushed himself to fill it, picturing the hand whole once more. His own energy began to flag, the light giving way to weaker rays, but he kept at it. Just a little more, he was certain.

There was a sharp pinching sensation on the back of his own hand and Coran jerked backwards with a breathless yelp. Allura stared down at him, armed with her tweezers.

"Did… did I…?" Coran panted, Lance's hand still obscured by the circle.

Allura lifted it and Coran slumped in relief. The scar was still there, a white starburst on the dark skin, and there was a new line now, more pink that cut across it, but there was no jagged hole.

"Lance," he gasped, turning his attention to the boy who was staring with wide eyes at his hand and trembling in Shiro's hold. "Lance, can…?"

Lance tapped his index finger on the table. He followed up with all of them before lifting his hand tentatively into the air and closing it into a fist.

"C-Coran," he whispered. That was the only warning any of them had as Lance practically launched himself from Shiro's lap and wrapped his arms about Coran, sobbing.

Coran felt incredibly shaky himself, nearly tipping over at the impact, but he brought his own arms tight about Lance and hugged him for all he was worth, pressing his face into the dark hair. "My son," he whispered, rocking them both.

It had worked. It had actually worked.

Lance felt Allura join in the hug and then Shiro, a tight press of warm bodies all around him but he felt absolutely no fear at the proximity or the hands that were near his face.

He felt loved.

Completely and utterly loved.

He still couldn't fully hold back the moan though as Shiro's arm pressed a little too heavily against the still ragged wounds on his back.

"Pods now," came Allura's no-nonsense tone, although there was a joy and relief tingeing the words. "No arguments."

"None here," Shiro choked out. Even Lance gave a nod. After all he'd been through the pods and their tight enclosure hardly even dinged enough to scare him. Not with his family all gathered around.

Allura insisted Coran lie down and had carried him back over to the cot when he had protested. She had then assisted Lance into moving still weak limbs into a cryosuit and Shiro did the same, wincing
at the pull to his shoulder that was now reminding him it really, really hurt and his stomach was rebelling too. The glornack seed had completely worn off.

Allura slid over to him once Lance was dressed and grabbed the empty arm sleeve to assist. Shiro felt his face redden as Allura made quick work of pulling his hands and arms through the material as though he was a child, but he could not summon up the strength to insist on doing it himself and he knew that just as he had wanted to remain awake for Lance to comfort him, this was Allura's way of doing the same.

Coran had already inputted the sequences for both Paladins and it was just a matter of starting them once they were in the pods. Lance hung back for the barest of moments before he squared his shoulders and climbed into the one next to Pidge, Shiro on his other side.

"Are you ready?" Allura asked him, hand poised on the glass front to close it. "Coran estimates only about three varga."

"R-ready."

Before she closed the door Allura reached in and took one of Lance's shaking hands in her own and pressed a kiss directly atop the scar. "I will be waiting for you," she promised and he managed a small smile.

A tick later she closed the door and initiated the sequence within the next breath. Frosted air covered the glass and Lance was lost to sight for a healing sleep.

Shiro was practically lounging in his pod, head tilted back on the cold surface. "You are comfortable?" Allura teased.

"I'd be more comfortable if these were horizontal," Shiro countered.

"A design flaw we are going to look at most certainly," Allura assured. She looked at the console. "Approximately eight varga for yourself. Are you ready?"

"I can wait," Shiro said, shifting forward a bit at the number. "Just until Pidge is—"

"Rest," she interrupted him. "Pidge will be out within the varga and Lance not too long after. We shall be just fine." Her tone softened. "You have done enough, Shiro. Rest."

He sent her a rueful smile. "By order of the princess?"

"By order of the princess," she grinned. And before he could come up with a response she closed the door and initiated his healing sequence.

Allura stepped back and looked at all five pods in use that her family were healing in.

All that was left to do now was wait.
And off to the pods all the precious beans go. Physical recovery, more emotional recovery, we are on the road to absolute recovery here. ❤️

That said, I hate to bring anything up this late in the game, but guys, last chapter was... disheartening. The consensus seemed to be "yay, recovery, can't wait!" but it's been very quiet the last couple chapters, last chapter in particular. I know you know the story is finished and I'm super anal about my update schedule and won't veer off of it, but that doesn't mean I still don't really appreciate and look forward to your comments and support. In the case of any fanfic, if you are enjoying it please leave the author a comment; it's our only way of knowing you guys like the fic and are appreciative of our time and efforts. It's free to do and only takes a minute or so (depending on how much you'd like to spoil us with a long comment) and I can guarantee takes a shorter amount of time than writing the chapter/story took the author. Please give your authors support so they feel inspired to keep writing. As many of you know from Tumblr I am going on hiatus (whether it's permanent or not remains to be seen) and while not the sole reason for the break I can say that things like this were definitely a part of it.

TLDR the above, please leave a comment to show your support to authors for their efforts. And also please, no spoilers for season seven. Thanks and hope to hear from you! Enjoy the new season too!
"I still can't go in the kitchen."

Lance's quiet admission echoed about the large hall and he felt Blue send a wave of reassurance to him, wrapping him up like he was in a blanket.

"It's pathetic," he sniffled, rubbing a hand across his face where sticky tears clung. "Even Pidge is helping and I... I just... I feel useless, Blue. They're all working to fix the castle and I just... sit in the infirmary."

It's not that he couldn't do work. He had been fully healed and the only new scar had been the one from Coran healing his left hand and restoring it to full functionality. His body was as good as it was going to get. And yet...

In his defense coming out of the pod had not been pleasant. The Lions had come back online while he was healing and as soon as he had returned to his own consciousness they had been in his head and so, so loud. He didn't remember much except the sensation of falling and his screams and the panicked shouting of Pidge.

His head had felt like it was going to explode; a tumult of water and fire and pressure and growth and the vacuum of space. He had not even been able to summon words in the face of such agony and it was only Allura's interference, a calming pink cloud descending, had allowed him to draw a breath.

It had still hurt.

They had given him a sedative he found out later and put him into a forced sleep for his own quintessence levels to rebound and give him a better chance at combating the Lions' power.

Apparently he'd been kept knocked out for the majority of the day as when he had awoken Shiro had been out of his pod and snoring lightly on the other couch. Allura had been there within seconds, asking quiet permission to connect to him, and after his nod she had taken his face in her hands and pressed their foreheads together.

She pushed away most of the ache that had begun again, blanketing it with her own quintessence. For now she said she would continue to do so until they could find such time to address what the Lions had done as at the moment the safety of the castle was taking precedence. Lance understood and thanks to Allura he was alone in his own mind again, except now when he had ventured to see Blue and had been beyond relieved when her voice had not pained him.

He had clung to Pidge once he had awoken for the second time, whispering apologies to her that she had refuted, insisting once again that none of this had been his fault. And he knew that, Allura having cemented the idea for the final time, but he still felt awful that it had happened. That he'd come so close to losing her. That he had ultimately been the reason why Haggar had attacked them and Pidge had been caught up in that explosion.

No one was talking much about what had happened in their individual battles. There seemed to be some silent consensus to wait until everyone was out of the pods for a full debrief unless someone really wanted to talk about something.
That was fine with Lance. Just knowing they were all safe, that Haggar and Theodek were dead and not coming after them ever again, was enough for him right now. He wasn't even sure where to begin. He had tried that first time with Shiro in the bathroom about Theodek but even the thought of what had happened in those final moments made his throat close up.

Did he start with trying to talk Theodek down? How he had failed to take a shot and nearly gotten Hunk killed? About Theodek’s death? Haggar? The Astral Plane? The Lions?

It was too much.

They deserved to know.

He just… couldn’t. Not yet.

He’d learned little details from them though, even if they weren't very specific. Like how Pidge had rescued Keith from the exploded ship after he had saved her life. How Shiro and Pidge had faced down Haggar at the end and Shiro had killed her, although he knew nothing more than that.

Some things were spoken about a bit more freely. Coran's new healing abilities, the mice and their role in prolonging Allura's life. The little creatures had been getting a lot of extra love from the entire group, even if all they really had to offer was food goo and what remained of Allura's candy stash.

Coran had quietly speculated that the mice had likely cut their life force in half, but he had no idea as to how long a space mouse who had bonded with an Altean over a ten thousand year period was supposed to live anyway. The mice were not upset with their decision and were as cheerful as ever, putting on little shows to Allura's immense delight and other than their new paler tones none the different for what they had done.

But mainly they had been focusing on looking forward. And that had meant repairing and cleaning up the castle.

Lance had tried to help.

By the time he had awoken from the sedative induced sleep Pidge had quietly relayed to him that both Haggar and Theodek’s bodies had been collected – Allura and Shiro, respectively – and they had been thrown into the exhaust incinerator. Lance had been beyond relieved as he had no desire to see either one ever again. He didn't need that sort of closure of gazing at their dead bodies.

Upon learning of that, he had gone with Pidge in the direction of the kitchen, thinking it would be all right and he could help prepare something light to eat because apparently no one else had attempted cooking and they had been eating candies and raisins as their new food groups. Besides, Hunk always said something hot to eat and drink was comforting and since Hunk wasn't here to do it… Lance would just have to step up in his place.

In hindsight they should have told Allura and Shiro their plans to do so, only holding it back as they wanted to surprise them with something good after the two had returned to the infirmary, a hollow sort of resolution in their eyes from disposing of the bodies.

Because they discovered upon their jaunt that the kitchen had not been cleaned yet of the blood and gore.

Lance had frozen on the threshold as his eyes had been drawn to the dark spot where Hunk had collapsed, the stain nearly dried at this point but stretching out in a large pool as though to indicate how close he had come to bleeding out.
They'd tracked then to the knife, still embedded deep in the floor, and he had heard Theodek's cruel laugh and felt phantom pain burn his hand as he stared at it, recalling twisting and writhing as the Galran had taunted him and proceeded to break apart his right hand.

Lance had vomited, nothing much to throw up at least, and collapsed in the doorframe. Pidge had dragged him backwards, so much stronger than him, he recalled thinking, and practically curled atop his lap as she hugged him, whispering that it was all right. It was only her butchered use of estás bean instead of bien that had given him the jolt from the sick memory and he had clung to her, not able to move.

Shiro had found them nearly twenty minutes later when, as after they hadn't returned from what he thought had been a bathroom trip he had grown worried, and had carried Lance back to the infirmary, cradled like a child.

Lance felt like one.

They hadn't actually forbidden him from going to the kitchen then, but it had been a strong suggestion he avoid it until it had been cleaned and Lance hadn't argued.

He'd been terrified though of another memory being triggered by other locations of the castle that he had hunkered down in the medical wing and hadn't left the vicinity of it since except now when he had finally gone to great hall so he could talk to Blue. It was pathetic and he felt awful about it, even though they had assured him it was all right and someone needed to keep watch on the pods (even though both Pidge and Coran had tablets with the status, but Lance appreciated them trying to make him feel better and tried not to look at it as pity).

Perhaps he'd have felt physically better and then more capable of helping had the Lions not taking up such a strong residence in his mind, as even with Allura's interference they were still there and causing an ache, sometimes colors flashing in front of his eyes that had him groaning aloud and tipping over as his balance was disrupted.

But he couldn't blame the Lions. Not really. It was his own memories and fears holding him back, not the Lions' power.

The most he had been able to assist with was tidying up the infirmary in the mornings as everyone had taken to sleeping there rather than going to their own rooms. As comfortable as the couches were Lance actually preferred the blanket nest as he could wrap himself fully up in it and he'd been relieved and grateful when Pidge had said the same and he'd found her curled up against him each evening.

He'd also spent more time than should be allowed cuddling against Shiro, sensing when he had grown tired or a memory was pushing in on him and had merely sat with him, sometimes holding tight to the prosthetic and other times wrapping Shiro up in a side hug as much as he could. Shiro hadn't wanted to talk, but he had held onto Lance too.

Coran had been extremely tired and lethargic, not surprising Allura had noted given he had nearly drained his quintessence twice in a matter of hours, and his body was taking extra time to recuperate. Still, Coran even in that state was more useful than a fully healed and functioning Lance, as he had been running shield diagnostics from the cot, working with Pidge on how to best shore up the damaged exterior walls of the castle, and of course keeping watch on the pods.

All Lance had been able to do was keep him company, sitting with him and letting Coran regale him with stories of the Paladins of old; nothing so recent that it would set off any memory. Coran had seemed more than happy to tell his tales and Lance had appreciated the distraction, although he had
fallen asleep in the middle of one story leaning on Coran's shoulder. He felt bad about it but Coran had seemed touched rather than upset his audience had conked out and had simply pressed a kiss to the top of his head when Lance had awoken and tried to apologize.

Lance was better with those. He still didn't do so well with touches to his face, but the gentle kisses that Shiro and Coran had taken to placing on his crown and then Pidge's tentative fingers carding through brown locks when he had curled up, head on her lap, as they watched Hercules again, had been soothing. He had felt her smile and joy and had returned the favor later, playing with her hair and twisting it into little braids to pass away some of the downtime. The fact that he was capable of doing so still amazed him and he found himself glancing particularly at his right hand, flexing fingers that a few days ago had been incapable of doing anything. He just… he hated that it was Haggar who had restored it.

Allura had seen his braiding skills and had demanded with airs of both Altean royalty and a playfulness that made him go pink that he do hers as well. Besides, she had argued, it would be good practice for his hand as despite the healing it was still slightly stiff, and she had a lot of hair for him to work with. The mice too had gotten in on the fun and Plachu had shown surprising actual skill.

It had become their routine each evening for him to pull her hair into twists and braids and all of the other designs his sisters had made him learn. He had such nice hands, Rosie had always argued, he may as well put them to good use. Lance didn't mind. He loved spending time with his sisters and given how much he loved his own hair carded he understood.

And in that quiet time Allura had spoken gently to him of stories of Altea. Of the Lions and their lore, to try and better help him understand the presences that had taken residence in his head. She told him about her own experiences in bonding with them, in learning to control and manage the link, and with Blue's assistance she would help him do the same.

Lance treasured this time with the princess. A few weeks ago he would never have thought honestly the two of them could have such an intimate conversation or have been so physically close; Allura poised between his outstretched legs and oftentimes leaning back to use him as a pillow after he had finished, without it being awkward or stiff and yet here they were. He found a smile rising to his face every time he thought about it.

He felt closer to all of his teammates, his family, now, and he was certain they felt the same.

He just wished he could do more for them. The kitchen was a no-go, the engineering and tech talk went over his head, and he got dizzy so quickly and suddenly from the Lions when Allura's cloud started to wear off that he had been given restricted access to only the current floor as they could not trust him on stairs. As soon as everyone was up and about Allura had promised she would help him temper back the Lions, but for now he had to wait. Lance had tried on his own but any attempts only made his head ache more.

They were going on the end of the fourth day now since the morning of the attack and Coran had happily reported that both Hunk and Keith would be ready to pop out by that evening; Keith around dinner hour and Hunk likely right before they retired for the night.

However, four days had not been kind to their uniforms. They should have suspected as such as Lance's clothes had barely held up after one day. Four had been pushing it.

Keith was still in what remained of his armor as Pidge had not had the time to take it off of him, but otherwise he wore nothing, while Hunk only had on his utility belt at this point. Coran had rigged blankets around the lower half of the pods to preserve their modesty and they had blankets thick and waiting on standby for when they emerged, with Pidge and Allura already having agreed to exit and
give them some space.

Coran had already cautioned that both were going to be beyond exhausted, reminding them once again that the pods could not restore the sleep cycle, so once they were both settled and out of the pods it would be straight to bed and they could talk all together in the morning. Lance actually liked that plan and had his own plans to snuggle against Hunk and never let him go while apologizing for all of the stupid errors he had made intermingled with thank you for saving his life several times over until he ran out of breath.

It was approaching towards dinner hour and Lance was going to head back soon so he would be there when Keith awoke, but for now he had found a small measure of comfort in talking to Blue. Her presence was like a gentle spring rain and it soothed away some of the hurt from the other Lions.

He had felt her guilt that their actions had caused and were still causing him such pain, but he had assured her she had nothing to feel sorry for. He had gone around to each of the Lions in the hall, petting large feet and quietly thanking them for what they had done for him. The resulting purrs and mental responses had been both soothing and painful in his mind. It came to a halt when Black had projected a giant black hole with the feeling of STOP, so loud that Lance had cried at the pulse, but the other Lions had somewhat withdrawn behind Allura's quintessence then; still there but no longer quite as strong. Lance had sent Black a quiet thank you and received a more gentle caress and an image of soft starlight.

Not pathetic Blue cut into his thoughts of all he had told her. My Paladin not useless. My Paladin help others very much.

Lance snorted self-deprecatingly, leaning back against her leg from his seat on her paw. "I don't think you heard what I just said, Blue."


For Blue had seen what her Paladin could not still seem to grasp; how his love and compassion healed the others. His very presence was a soothing balm to them, a reminder of love and light and laughter.

She pushed such thoughts back to him, replaying his role that he had told her about in comforting his family. My cub help family she told him, shoving at his quintessence with her own to get her point across. My cub heart of family.

Blue sensed the moment her feelings were finally fully accepted, the brightening of her Paladin's quintessence around her, and she nuzzled it and then bent her actual head and nuzzled him with her nose, earning a squawk of laughter and "that's cold!" She did it again just because, laughing with her own delight when her Paladin turned the tables and rubbed his face against her nose.

"Thanks, beautiful," he whispered, placing a soft kiss on the cold metal. "You know me." And was that ever the understatement of the year. He sighed. "I just…"

My Paladin need talk with Paladins she told him. No more silence.

"You're right. And I will. We're… we're having the debrief tomorrow morning. But I'm…" he trailed off and Blue waited patiently. "I'm scared," he said quietly. "I messed up so much. Blue. I don't… I don't want Hunk to hate me. If I'd just taken the shot he wouldn't have been… he wouldn't have almost…"

Blue snorted at that. Yellow's Paladin loves my Paladin. Never hate. My Paladin knows this. My
Paladin need not fear. She wrapped her quintessence about his again. All will be well.

Lance’s eyes welled with tears at the sheer love and reassurance Blue was flooding him with and he managed a nod. He knew that. He did. It was… it was just harder than he thought to shake off those feelings of doubt that had plagued him for so, so long.

Red's Paladin no hate either Blue added as she sensed her Paladin's thoughts drift. All will be well, my cub. No fear.

He patted her paw and Blue felt the last of the dark tendrils slip away. Good.

"I should get going," he said. "Keith'll be out soon."

Go to Red's Paladin Blue said, giving him a mental nudge as he still made no move to get up. Lion see my Paladin later.

"Okay," he whispered. "Thanks, Blue." He paused still, then quietly added, "I love you."

Lion loves my Paladin she responded back, giving his quintessence one last caress, filling him with all of the love and pride she had for him and feeling his own returned in kind.

He gave her paw one last rub and then slid down with a soft thump to the floor before he hurried out of the main hall and back towards the medical wing.

Pidge and Allura and the mice were sitting on the floor outside the door when he arrived and all sent him matching grins.

"Coran said in the next few minutes," Pidge told him. She looked beyond giddy and Lance couldn't blame her. The waiting had been brutal on them all but Pidge in particular had been chomping at the bit for Keith to awaken, rivaling even Shiro's eagerness.

"See you in a few then," Lance smiled, trying to quell the sudden nausea taking root in his stomach.

Listen to Blue, he told himself as he entered the infirmary. Keith wasn't going to blame him for the trap. For almost dying.

At least…

He really, really hoped so.

"There you are," Coran draped an arm about Lance's shoulders and steered him towards the pod where Keith was now fully visible. "Just another couple dobashes." As he spoke there was a sudden beep and Coran's smile widened. "And a dobash now. Number One, ready?"

"Ready," Shiro said, looking how Lance felt; a mixture of excitement mixed with a faint green tint. Coran had assured them that there was no lasting damage and Keith had escaped with only a few faint scars; a patterning across his lower back from the explosion and a thin line on his calf where the worst of the wound had been – his skin was very durable for a human, Coran had remarked. Still, there was that lingering fear that could only be reassured by Keith actually waking up.

In Shiro's hands was a large blanket, easily double the size of the Altean towels. Coran had said it was very important to warm Keith up, especially given the amount of exposed skin, and it would act as both that and a cover until he was able to get dressed in something other than plates of armor. A pile of clothing was waiting on standby for such a purpose.
The pod gave a hiss and the door opened, icy air making Lance shiver even in his own hooded jacket. Keith tipped bonelessly out and Shiro caught him within the blanket, making quick work of wrapping it about him and clutching the hard-edged bundle of Keith and his armor to him.

He was completely still.

Lance's heart leapt into his throat. He'd been told he had been the same way when he had emerged following his rescue, but to see Keith like this...

"Keith, lad," Coran lightly tapped the cold cheek as Shiro rubbed his hands up and down Keith's shoulders to generate friction. "Time to wake up."

A moment later a pair of hazy amethyst eyes blinked open. Lance hugged his arms about himself, nearly shaking with relief.

"Keith," Shiro whispered, voice thick.

But Keith didn't seem to be aware of them yet. Instead there was a wild, desperate fear taking the place of the tiredness and he twisted and turned in Shiro's arms, ensconced hands scrabbling against Shiro's chest and a low keen being torn from his throat.

Coran had warned this could happen. Keith could very well come back to where he had left off and given what had happened and what they knew that would place him directly in the middle of an explosion screaming out for Pidge.

"Hey, hey," Shiro murmured, taking point. He tipped his head down, pressing his forehead against Keith's. "Keith, buddy. It's okay. You're okay."

Keith headbutted him.

Shiro gamely held on even though stars were bursting in front of his eyes.

"Keith, lad," Coran tried, but Keith snapped his head back, clipping the Altean's jaw.

"Pidge is safe!" Lance blurted out.

Keith stilled. Shiro and Coran held their breaths.

"Pidge is safe," Lance repeated, approaching carefully and placing a hand on the blanket covered shoulder. "You saved her. She's okay. You're okay."

Keith blinked again and this time there was a beginning state of clarity in those dark orbs. "Pidge is…" he rasped, "safe?"

"Yeah, buddy. You saved her," Shiro murmured. "She's okay. We all are."

"All…?"

Keith's gaze was clearing more and more and he looked at Shiro, a whisper of his name on his lips. He turned his head then and Lance gave him a weak smile, Coran behind him and his hands resting on Lance's shoulders.

Tears were beginning to brighten his eyes and his lip was quivering in a way that Lance had only seen the one time before on Keith.

"You're okay," he whispered. "You're all okay."
"We are," Shiro pressed a kiss to Keith's forehead. "Promise."

"Wh-where's…?"

"Hunk's still in a pod. Pidge and Allura are in the hall," Shiro said quietly. "To give you a little privacy."

Keith frowned. "Privacy?"

"Yeah," Lance chimed in, keeping his tone light although right now all he felt like was near crying himself, relief warring with guilt and still that tinge of fear. "Let's just say the pods don't like clothes."

"Don't like…"

Keith's face turned cherry.

"Not to worry, my boy," Coran clapped a hand on Keith's back. "As you can see by Number Two's pod your modesty was indeed preserved."

The flush vanished almost instantly as Keith's gaze was directed to Hunk's pod, focusing not on the affixed blanket but the unconscious figure inside. "Hunk is…?"

"He will be just fine, coming out a little later today," Coran assured. "Now let us get you warmed up and dressed, hm? There are a few lovely ladies waiting to see you."

Shiro hovered like a large mother hen the entire time as Keith changed, waving off offers to assist, relenting when Shiro's face had fallen and allowed him to help unclasp pieces of the armor.

Coran had stood by waving his scanner and humming below his breath with the readings. Lance had stepped back out of the way, feeling like he was intruding as Shiro grasped the back of Keith's neck and pulled their foreheads together. Neither said anything but slowly the tension had drained from Shiro's frame and Keith's had softened until he was wrapped back up in Shiro's arms.

A loud banging noise outside the infirmary had Lance jumping and the others' heads swiveling over. "Hey!" came Pidge's muffled shout. "What are you doing in there? We want in!"

Shiro chuckled and Coran called out for just another dobash while Keith's entire face had lit up with a soft smile at hearing Pidge's voice, demanding as it was.

She really was okay. He remembered very little and no one had yet (understandably) filled him in but he had never felt such fear as he had when he realized it was indeed a trap.

However...

"The aliens?" he asked quietly as he pulled his jacket on. "Did they make it?"

Shiro bowed his head and Coran uttered a soft, "No, my boy, I am afraid they did not."

Haggar's last two victims. Although… she had nearly had several more. Her bait had been perfect and they had fallen for it, compassion winning out over caution.

He glanced then to Lance, who was holding his arms about himself and looking smaller than he should. Keith desperately wanted to see Pidge but he had something that needed done first.

In a few short steps he'd crossed the distance between the two of them and after only a second of hesitation wrapped his arms tightly about Lance's middle and pulled him into a hug.
"K-Keith?"

"It's not your fault," Keith said hotly and based on Lance's sharp inhale he had called it. "And I'd do it again. We're Paladins of Voltron. We save people."

"Keith…"

Slender arms tightened about him then with more force than Keith had honestly been expecting.

"Lo siento," Lance whispered.

"No apologizing," Keith mumbled into Lance's shoulder.

A wet sounding chuckle. "Gracias. I…"

Another loud thump sounded. "I went undercover as a boy for months!" Pidge near bellowed, patience having run out. "I have seen it all and I am coming the fuck in!"

Lance gave Keith one more squeeze and released him, just as the infirmary door slammed open, revealing Pidge, eyes bright.

She practically launched herself across the room and Keith caught her, only to overbalance at the force and both of them crashed to the floor. Neither seemed to care as Pidge latched her hands into the front of his shirt and he hugged her tight.

No thanks were needed between the two of them. Keith had no doubts he was only alive because of Pidge, fuzzily recalling her screaming at him to get up and shoving him into a cryo-pod. He clutched her tighter.

"Keith."

Allura's soft accented tones cut into the air and he felt her hand descend on his shoulder. He picked his head up from where he'd buried it in Pidge's hair to look at her.

Her eyes were swimming with guilt, agony painted on her face. She had made the final call to authorize the rescue even though he had been against it. She had nearly sent him to his death. Keith found he didn't blame her at all.

"I already told Lance," he said, voice hoarse. "It's not your fault either. We save people. If… if we don't, who will?"

Allura made a little choking noise and Keith found himself sandwiched between her and Pidge. That was apparently the cue for a group hug because they were suddenly all there and rather than feeling smothered by all of the attention Keith soaked it in, unable to stop his tears even though he was smiling.

"All right, all right, break it up now," Coran said after a few moments. "We discussed this. Number Four needs to eat and then rest. Four days in a pod is no easy feat on the body."

Based on the low groans from around him but the removal of hands and arms where they had latched onto his jacket it was indeed something they had previously discussed. Keith found himself swaying though as all of the support disappeared, head suddenly heavy.

Four days?
God. They must have been so worried.

Strong hands caught him and he found himself being propped up against Shiro. "I've got you," he murmured.

Eating was apparently a constitution of food goo – "none of us can cook alien food, all right?" Pidge had explained vehemently when Keith's nose had wrinkled – but a welcome cup of tea. Lance quietly informed him as he ate that Shiro had attempted to volunteer but had been vetoed down within the second.

Keith laughed probably harder than the comment warranted but it felt so good to do so.

Once he was finished eating Shiro had scooped him up, ignoring Keith's half-hearted protests that he could walk even if the room was going hazy around the edges, and deposited him on a couch that had made it back to the infirmary. He'd been tucked in with a series of blankets including one of Lance's quilts.

Coran had told him he was likely to sleep through until the morning hours as his body was running on near fumes. Keith had hummed, already nearly asleep in his cocoon. The last thing he recalled was Shiro pressing a kiss to his forehead and then welcome darkness.

xxx

It was nearing 2200 hours, or midnight in castle standard time, but despite the late hour everyone in the infirmary was still awake save Keith, who true to Coran's prediction had fallen into a deep sleep that no outside noise was affecting.

Some were more awake than others though. Pidge was nodding off, propped up against Lance's back and Lance too was slumping forward more and more. Allura and Coran were faring the best, not needing as much sleep as the humans, while Shiro had taken to pacing around the room.

A sharp beep had tired heads jerking up and Lance breathed, "Hunk," surging so fast to his feet that Pidge toppled over behind him with a yelp.

"Out we go," Allura said, offering a hand up to Pidge who took it with a quiet thank you. The two exited to once more await until Hunk was decent, the mice perched between both their shoulders.

Coran was armed with the blanket this time. Lance wished it was him as he wanted to be the first to hug Hunk, but he was well aware that even with both hands working again he was not strong enough to hold up Hunk's full weight and he wasn't so selfish as to have Hunk's first movement out of the pod be a faceplant.

The door slid open with another cold burst of air and Coran neatly caught Hunk with a strength Lance severely envied, a large blanket identical to the one Keith had been enshrouded in wrapped tightly all about him. Coran nodded his head at Lance then and he had pressed himself up to Hunk's side, hugging him from around while Coran kept him steady.

"Hunk?" Lance called, his voice thicker than he'd planned upon. Shiro's hand descended on his shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "H-hunk? Hermano? Despierta. Por favor."

Honey eyes half-lidded with sleep raised and Lance called out to him again. Hunk turned his head slowly in his direction, blinking.

"Lance?" Hunk mumbled.
"Hunk," Lance repeated, pressing his face against Hunk's blanket clad shoulder. "Hunk."

"Lance," and Hunk sounded more awake now. "L-Lance!"

"Easy, easy," Coran soothed as he felt Hunk's heart thud against his hand as he continued to rub heat back into the large boy. "Everything is all right."

"Th-Theodek," Hunk gasped, eyes darting about the room in search of the alien. "He…"

But he was no longer in the kitchen. He was not lying on the ground, summoning every last bit of strength to him to form his bayard as Lance's broken screams sounded above cruel laughter while every breath sent agony racing through him.

It was over.

And Lance was…

Lance was right here. Alive. Whole. Safe.

Hunk let out a sob and somehow Lance was suddenly in his arms and Coran was behind him and offering support. Hunk was grateful as without it he'd have been on the floor.

"You're okay," Hunk choked out, squeezing Lance to him and eliciting a sob that matched his own. "You're okay. You're okay." It was as much a reassurance as it was a plea.

Lance buried his face in the crook of Hunk's neck in answer, trembling just as much. Hunk just hugged him tighter, never planning to let go.

Hunk hadn't known if he was going to survive his wound, knowing without a doubt it was fatal. And more than that, he wasn't sure if Lance was going to be there when he did, and that hurt more than all of the axes in the world.

He had no idea if his last shot had connected as he'd passed out just as he heard the cannon go off. He didn't remember anything after that until just now.

What had happened after?

His gaze lifted from the top of Lance's head to see Shiro next to him, one of the heavy hands also rubbing against his arm. Coran he knew was behind him. And lying on the couch directly across…

"Keith," he whispered, staring.

How…?

"We're all okay." Shiro told him quietly, pressing a kiss to the top of Hunk's head. "Keith and Pidge too. They survived the blast."

Hunk felt his knees give and rather than try to hold him up Coran guided him gently to the ground. Lance went with him like a clinging koala bear.

Speaking of…

"Where's Pidge?" Hunk asked, "and Allura?"

"Just outside the hall until you get dressed," Shiro told him, sinking down to his haunches so he wasn't towering over. "You up to doing so or need a few more minutes?"
Hunk opted to wait a few minutes, cuddling Lance to him and breathing in the faint scent of spice from Lance's hair and willing his heart rate to calm down, which had spiked when Coran had revealed he'd been in the pod for just shy of four and a half days.

"You're really okay?" Hunk asked Lance quietly.

"I should be asking you that," Lance mumbled against his shoulder. A sob shook him. "I'm so sorry."

Hunk immediately knew to what Lance was referring to. "No," he said gently but firmly. "No. Don't apologize for that. I wouldn't expect you to be any other way, hermano."

"But you almost died," Lance said, voice small. "If I'd just taken the shot…"

"We don't know what would have happened," Hunk said quietly. There were too many variables involved. Maybe the shot had killed Thedoek and Hunk had remained uninjured. Then, if they had crossed paths with Haggar, perhaps she'd have struck him down in an instant as he was in her way. There was no way of knowing and Hunk had no desire to run the numbers and predictions. "Let's just… focus on now. Okay?" He squeezed Lance. "Te quiero, hermano. I'm glad you're all right."

"Te quiero," Lance whispered back.

Only once Lance had stopped trembling and Hunk felt the barest bit of strength and balance returning did he move to getting dressed, not as proud as Keith to not accept assistance as his limbs still felt like a tub of food goo.

Once he was snug in his own comfy clothes and sitting back down in an apparent nest of blankets with Lance pressed up to his side did Shiro go to open the infirmary door.

Pidge raced in, Allura following quickly but more demurely behind, and crashed into him and Lance and Hunk found himself with a lap full of Pidge a moment later, her arms hooked about his neck like the koala he had likened Lance to just a moment ago.

"I'm okay," he repeated for her benefit. "You're okay?"

"I am now," she whispered, voice thick. Hunk cuddled her and Lance both a little closer.

"Hunk," Allura placed a hand atop his head, ruffling his hair. Hunk freed one of his hands and moved it to hold Allura's with a gentle squeeze, saying more than words could. Allura tightly squeezed it back.

There was a gentle quiet then, the peace they had all been fully waiting for… And then it was broken as a loud yawn split the air from Pidge and Hunk found himself mimicking it and then Lance.

"Contagious," Shiro yawned himself and there was a note of alarm from Coran at this revelation.

Shiro was quick to assure him it was a human myth.

Although, as they all let out another round of yawns Shiro did wonder if there was truth to it.

Coran tried to press a bowl of food goo upon Hunk but sleep was calling stronger. He honestly felt like he could sleep for a week. Allura offered to move him to the other couch or the cot, but Hunk had mumbled that he was fine right here, already lying down in the mess of pillows and blankets, Lance curled up nearly on top of him and using his stomach as a pillow. Hunk had no plans to move him.
Pidge snuggled herself into the spot between Lance's torso and Hunk's legs, using Lance as her own pillow. All three were sound asleep within the minute, a lightness to their expressions and a faint, soft smile on Lance's lips.

"They look like a pile of beroti puppies," Coran remarked fondly.

Allura shook her head with a small smirk. "You forget, Coran. Beroti litters are a minimum of seven pups."

He caught her eye with a twinkle. "Then we shall have to correct this. Number One—"

"Already ahead of you," Shiro cut in, crossing over to them with Keith draped in his arms. The smaller boy didn't so much as stir as Shiro arranged him on Lance's other side and then settled down himself, angling his body so his head bumped Hunk's and his legs extended to rest along Lance's back.

"This is quite an excellent team bonding exercise," Allura remarked, lying down next to Keith and using his stomach for her own pillow, although after a second of trying to make it more comfortable, Keith completely unaware of her, she grabbed one of the many pillows and propped it atop him. The mice raced off the princess and burrowed themselves into folds of blankets all about with delighted little squeaks.

"You are mistaken, Allura," Coran said, draping a blanket over her and then placing one over Shiro and arranging a few as best he could over the others, made difficult due to them all lying about one another. He nearly smothered Chuchule who gave him a chirrup of faked indignation and then pointedly curled up in Keith's hair and pulled the locks about her like her own blanket.

"Coran's right," Shiro chimed in sleepily. "Not a team exercise."

She let out a soft laugh of delight as Coran completed their pile, propping a pillow atop Hunk's legs and curling himself about Pidge and Lance from the bottom.

"Family," Allura murmured, the word both heavy and light at the same time.

"Family," Coran echoed with the most tender of smiles.

"The best family," Shiro said quietly, propping himself up on an elbow to survey their pile.

And as it should be, Lance was firmly in the middle.

Their heart.

The one who had brought them all together and shown them that they were more than just a team.

Shiro smiled.

A family indeed.

Chapter End Notes
This was supposed to be the last chapter (minus the epilogue) but it ran away with me. Gosh dang it! (I'm just not ready to be done, you know?). Anyways, I blame my desire to have a cuddle pile. I have never written a full one (had five out of seven in a small cuddle pile back in *If the World Should Freeze*) but nothing quite so elaborate and gosh dang it, this fic calls for a cuddle pile. That, and plenty of time to process and come together and I can't rush anything to save my life.

As always, please leave a review if you enjoyed the chapter! I'd love to hear from you! Talk about your favorite section, line, overall comment, etc. Please give the author the warm fuzzies just as this cuddle pile has hopefully done for you.
Lance awoke to the soft sound of light laughter.

Allura, his mind supplied, and the answering deeper chuckle was Coran. What were they laughing about?

He blinked open his eyes, vision obscured momentarily by Hunk's back – Hunk, he breathed, hands already tangled in the fabric of his shirt and he tightened his grip anyways – so he focused on what he could make out. There was a weight on his stomach and a glance of his eyes down picked out Pidge's mused hair. There was another warmth at his back and across his chest that upon slightly turning his head he made out was Keith.

He blinked at that.

When had Keith gotten here?

Something was pressing down on his head too as he shifted it up and they revealed themselves to be Shiro's knees. Shiro was here too?

He pushed his own feet down and heard a slight *ooof* that sounded a lot like Coran.

Was everyone asleep on the floor?

He tried to maneuver himself up but Keith's arm tightened about his chest and Pidge's hands dug into his stomach where she apparently had them resting beneath her head.

Okay. Not moving apparently. That was fine. He was quite comfortable anyways. Besides, he had nowhere he needed to go. Right here, snuggled up with his family, in one big sleepy pile was perfect. Because once they all awoke…

His hand tightened in Hunk's shirt.

They were going to talk about everything that had happened.

He swallowed heavily. Was he ready? Not entirely, but Blue was right. They did have to talk. And once he'd told them everything he knew he would feel… lighter, he supposed. This wasn't quite the same as the cloying guilt that had wracked him when he was keeping secret from them his attempt to kill himself. They all vaguely had an idea of things that had happened, although he had been completely mum on the Astral Plane, only acknowledging Allura's question of if the barrier had worked with a small nod. He hadn't mentioned eventually it had worked because the whole reason it hadn't was that he'd apparently let Haggar nab a bit of his quintessence and *that* still sent his stomach rolling.

"Lance?" Allura's voice sounded soft above him and he pulled his face free from where he'd buried it against Hunk's side, to see her leaning somewhat over him. "Ah, I thought you were awake," she smiled. "Stuck?"
"Apparently," he managed a small smile. "It's fine though. I'm—" Pidge's hand dug into his stomach as she twirled – "comfortable," he finished with a wheeze.

Allura hummed, hiding a laugh. "Very well then, I shall leave you to it. Coran and I are off to start some tea and breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Lance repeated, hoping his alarm was not quite as prevalent. Because Coran? So far he had one edible dish to his name and Lance knew they were out of the fruit – they were low on a lot of supplies, actually, but only Coran and Pidge seemed to know why and they had yet to say anything to the group – that was used to make it.

"Just your standard delicious food goo," Coran replied, and Lance felt him shifting by his feet and then rising to stand, joining Allura in looming above. "Unless you were putting in a request for a Paladin breakfast?"

Lance's face scrunched up and both Alteans laughed. Pidge stirred a bit again and the noise and about a minute after the two had made their exit she shifted further, stretching and clubbing Lance in the face with a small closed fist. Lance let out a soft ouch, more amused than scared by the fact his face had just been touched because somehow, it wasn't scary at all when the perpetrator had no idea that they'd done it, and he especially had gotten better with Pidge's small hands by his face.

That though had Pidge jerking awake with his name on her lips and his ouch turned back into a wheeze as her hands pressed on his stomach as she flipped herself around, finally coming to land on her own front and spread across him like a blanket.

"Hi," she grinned, as judging by the lack of reaction from Lance he wasn't actually retreating and she could proceed as normal.

"Hi," he gasped, her elbows digging into his chest now just above where Keith still had a solid arm flung over him.

"Looks like our pile grew," Pidge remarked from her high vantage point.

"Coran and Allura I think were part of it too," Lance told her. "They went to get tea and food goo."

"Guess that means we should start waking people up, huh? Wouldn't want them to miss delectable food goo."

Lance's eyes widened in alarm as Pidge set her sights past him to land on Shiro.

"Pidge, wait," he hissed as she moved to scramble up him like he was some jungle gym. "Don't wake Shiro!"

"I'm already awake," came the dry reply. "Just too comfortable to get up."

"I used to know that feeling," Lance said, tone light and Pidge stuck her tongue out at him, drawing a chuckle from Shiro and Lance felt the knees that had been pressing against the top of his head move and then Shiro was sitting next to them, hair mused and looking nearly as relaxed as Lance had ever seen him.

Pidge noticed it too and said as much.

Shiro's flesh hand rubbed the back of his head. "I am. I'm… I'm just really happy."

"Yeah," Pidge murmured, glancing about the sleeping pile of her family, all here and all safe. "Me
"I also really have to pee," Shiro announced, getting to his feet with a sharp crack of his back. "So I'll leave you two to wake everyone else." His expression grew a bit more serious then. "Be careful with Keith. He... he might lash out. But I think you'll be fine."

Shiro really thought so too. For one Keith was not armed with his knife, but more than that it was the way he was holding onto Lance. His grip was secure but not that almost desperate one that Shiro had witnessed him cuddle his blanket to him, as though he was afraid it would leave. He couldn't make out much of Keith's face, squashed as it was against Lance's shoulder, but his brow was smooth.

Still, he felt it only fair to call out a warning in case Keith did instinctually still swing out, in which case Lance would likely be getting a second smack to his face. It was good practice though, Shiro thought. He'd heard how Lance had reacted to Pidge's unintentional hit and being as Keith's would be in the same vein if it happened he didn't anticipate any problems. He knew Lance had had some setbacks immediately following the attack and the aftermath, but he had made strides forward once more in the four days of healing and peace afterward.

Keith was in good hands. Shiro nodded to himself as he headed out the door. This was a needed step for everyone involved.

"Lash out how?" Lance called after the retreating back and got a wave in return. "Shiro!"

"Dibs on Hunk!" Pidge grinned as their leader disappeared. And before Lance could protest she'd pushed herself up and flipped over Hunk's back.

Lance sighed without any actual heat and turned his head towards Keith, of which he could only make out part of his mullet and then of course the hand.

"Hey," Lance tapped his own fingers atop Keith's. "Sleeping mullet. Wake up." Keith's only reaction was to tighten his fingers where they were entangled in Lance's shirt.

New plan. Lance shifted his one arm down and was able to lightly sink his elbow into Keith's side, Given Shiro's warning he didn't want to do anything more drastic.

At that Keith made a sleepy sort of mumble. Lance tried it again. After the third time the mumble had turned into a more displeased groan and there was something that sounded like a very drawn out "what?" said into Lance's side.


Keith ignored the tone as he slowly awoke, confusion reigning although he didn't let it show. Last he remembered Shiro had been carrying him to the couch and now he was... on the floor? Next to Lance?

He blinked open sleep-crusted eyes, a navy shirt greeting him that he realized must be Lance's.


"Isn't it?" and he could hear Pidge's grin. "And I thought I was the clingy one."

"You still are," Lance told her and Keith felt him shift. And he felt that because he realized he had completely thrown his arm about Lance and was clutching at him like he normally did his bedding. Keith's face flamed and he was glad it was hidden. Against Lance. His face grew hotter.
"Do you want me to pull him off?" Hunk offered.

"Nah, he's fine," and Keith felt Lance's hand pat atop his own. "I know how post cryo-pod exhaustion feels. I'm actually surprised you woke up so fast, Hunk."

A loud grumble sounded then and Hunk laughed sheepishly. "My stomach won this morning. Speaking of… breakfast?"

"Allura and Coran went to get goo," Pidge informed.

"Ugh, no," Hunk groaned and there was the shuffling noise of Hunk climbing to his feet. "Absolutely not. I am not letting the day start with that."

"Um… Hunk?" Lance's hand stilled where it had been tapping out a rhythm on top of Keith's. "The kitchen is… um…"

Keith frowned at the hesitation. The kitchen was what?

What had he missed?

"I'll be okay," Hunk said gently. "It... it is cleaned up, right?"

"Yeah," Pidge chimed in, voice also low. "Good as new. Well, not the one wall," and Keith felt Lance flinch, "but otherwise, yeah. But, um, how about I go with you? Just… just in case."

In case of what? What was in the kitchen? Keith hated being out of the loop.

"Sure, I'd like that. You good here, Lance?"

"Yup, perfectly peachy."

"We'll be back soon then," Pidge said. "Tell Shiro where we went?"

"Roger."

After their footsteps had faded away Lance tapped his fingers a little stronger atop Keith's hand. "I know you're awake," and while the tone was light there was the slightest waver. "You okay?"

Keith slowly released his grip, sliding his arm back to himself and then rising to sit up, Lance sprawled out next to him looking an odd mixture of relaxed and tense. "What happened in the kitchen?"

Lance winced and Keith realized perhaps that hadn't been the best way to ask.

"Sorry," he muttered. "That was stupid."

"I'll give you a pass," Lance attempted a smile. "Post cryo brain mush." His eyes cut away then though and he let out a small sigh. "We're doing a debrief, I'm guessing after breakfast," saying as much that he wasn't going to talk about it now. Keith nodded. Fair enough. Lance's eyes swung back a second later to meet his. "You okay though? Really?"

"I think so," Keith said slowly. "I don't really remember much. But… I think so."

"That is very convincing," Lance teased, but he seemed to be in slightly better spirits and sat up himself, running a hand through his hair and making it stick up even more.
Keith stared.

Because Lance had just used his right hand. And it had moved and responded without any sort of
tremble.

Lance seemed to guess what Keith was thinking and let out a sort of sad sounding chuckle. "Yeah.
Hand is fixed." He swallowed thickly. He may as well try and start talking now as the debrief was
indeed coming and coming quick. "Haggar," the name stumbled off his tongue, "she was good for
something at least."

Keith blinked, looking at Lance's hand and then to the downturned face. And without even thinking
about it he reached over and yanked Lance into a none too graceful hug, nearly tipping the taller boy
sideways. Lance went right with it, hands coming up to grip at Keith's arms with a quiet sniffle.

"I'm glad you're okay," Keith said softly.

"You too," Lance whispered. "Keith… we thought you were dead. You and Pidge. We… I…" his
grasp tightened. "We thought…"

Keith just hugged him tighter.

That was the scene the others walked in on a few minutes later; Shiro hair damp from a quick
shower, Coran carrying a tray of teacups and tea, while Hunk and Pidge had an assortment of
random toasted breads, jellies and a melon that had survived the purge. Hunk had no idea what
happened to their foodstock and he knew this wasn't much, but it was something different from food
goo in any case and he'd needed the few moments of buttering the bread to calm himself as he
puttered around the kitchen.

Pidge had been correct in that everything minus the hole Theodek had blasted in from the conference
room had been cleared. Hunk didn't remember a lot of his time in the kitchen except for when he'd
heard Lance screaming as Theodek ripped apart his hand – he hurriedly shoved that memory to the
wayside as his stomach twisted – and so while the kitchen had clearly been a battlezone that had
deeply affected Lance – Pidge had told him quietly about their attempt to go there and how Lance
hadn't set foot in the place since – he had been okay.

Well, as okay as any of them were.

"You guys all right?" Shiro asked quietly, settling down next to Keith, who released Lance from the
hug after one last squeeze.

"Yeah," Lance rubbed at his eyes. "Fine."

"Eat up, Paladins," Coran cut into the growing silence with as much pep as possible. "Otherwise I
shall see to it that the mice get your toast and jam and you their food goo."

"Hell no," Pidge yelped and Shiro's tired, resigned sigh of "language" had Lance snickering and just
like that the atmosphere moved back into something lighter.

Too soon though for Lance's liking the last crumbs were being eaten and the plates cleared by happy
squeaking mice. He knew this was for the best, but…

His hands clenched in his lap and Hunk sitting next to him, placed a calming hand on his knee and
gave it a squeeze.

"So," Shiro said, looking around the circle they had made in the nest of blankets and pillows. "It's
time we all talked about what happened. That said…" he met each pair of eyes about the circle, "this
is not an interrogation whatsoever. You can share whatever you feel comfortable doing so. I've
found," and he turned a gentle smile towards Lance, "that talking about things that are bothering you
can really help." Lance returned it tentatively.

There was quiet then, broken only by the sound of soft squeaks as the mice battled over the piece of
toast next to Allura. Lance hated that he could feel his breathing start to pick up. Who was going to
speak first? Should he say something? He wasn't really ready yet to—

"I'll start," Keith blurted out and Lance nearly sighed with relief. "I don't have much to say though," he admitted.

He told them that he remembered being in the Galra cruiser and the instant he had realized something
was indeed off when the alien had said "she" instead of "he" in regards to Coran. "I dove to cover
Pidge," he said quietly. "Tried to draw my shield but it all happened too fast. Just remember fire and
screaming."

Pidge picked up the story haltingly then, sharing how she had come to outside the wreckage of the
ship and realized Keith must still be inside. She had hugged herself then, whispering that she had
seen Amalia's body and hadn't known if Keith was still alive. But she had to try and had managed to
make her way there where she'd found him buried under the console.

Keith had gotten up then and crossed the circle to sit next to Pidge, squeezing in between her and
Allura, and she had latched onto his hand as she continued her story, describing how she had
managed to free him. She'd whispered how badly he had been hurt, how his helmet visor had been
cracking, and she knew she didn't have much time.

What she didn't say was how terrified she had been, scared that she was too late, that he was going to
die and she wasn't going to be able to save him after he had saved her. It didn't need said aloud
though and Keith had pulled her into a tight hug, whispering a thank you into her hair. Without the
cover of glasses, which Pidge had taken to carting around in a small case, her eyes had
shone with bright tears undisguised.

So she'd maneuvered him towards the castle but had run into a problem as she didn't have enough
fuel to make the distance. So, she winced, gingerly touching her cheek, she had given Keith her
helmet to connect to his oxygen tank and had used what remained of hers to propel them to the
castle.

She'd finished her story by explaining that she had hauled Keith via a tarp to the infirmary and then,
sending a guilty look in his direction, how she had pumped him with adrenaline to wake him up and
get him into the pod, which she had had to recalibrate after she realized it was hurting Keith instead
of healing him.

"I… I think I remember that," Keith said slowly, placing now Pidge's desperate cries of get up.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "You were in so much pain and—"


"Only because you were able to save mine," she countered. "Which you needed to do because I
didn't listen to you when you said you thought it was a trap."

Allura coughed lightly, drawing their attention. "None of us listened," she said softly, guilt coloring
her words. "I cannot apologize enough to either of you. I made the decision to send you—"
"And I already told you, we'd do it again," Keith cut her off. "That's what we do, right?"

"Yes," Allura replied softly. "But Keith, I should have still listened to you. The Red Lion chose you for many reasons, but one is indeed your sharp instincts. You alerted us that something felt wrong and we did not listen."

Keith shrugged uncomfortably. "It was just a feeling."

"I shall be taking your feelings into high consideration going forward," Allura said. "I know it cannot negate what has happened here, but I shall strive to do better to listen, even if it to advice that cannot be fully explained."

Keith inclined his head in her direction and Allura's shoulders untensed.

"So, um, after I got Keith in the pod I went to find you guys," Pidge said. "But I found Haggar."

"I'm going to cut you off there, kiddo," Shiro said gently. "Just for a little bit, if that's all right. There are some missing pieces I want to fill in before we get to… to that."

Coran placed a steadying hand on Shiro's shoulder and he shot the advisor a grateful look. "Guess it's my turn then," he said. His palms were suddenly sweaty and there was a knot forming in his throat but Shiro pushed past it. He hadn't even gotten to the worst part yet.

Shiro started with how he and Allura had gone to fight Haggar when they realized she had boarded the ship, sending Hunk and Lance to the Lions in an effort to get away from the castle. He had encountered Haggar on his own and the two had fought, although he chuckled without humor at the word.

"It was less of a fight and more of a beatdown," he said quietly, and Lance threaded his hand into Shiro's flesh one. "I couldn't land a hit. I was so… angry." He glanced up, catching Keith's eyes before they drifted to Pidge. "I thought you had died. And Haggar… she rubbed it in. If she had actively been trying to kill me I would have died. But she wanted me to come back with her. Tried to make a deal if Lance and I went with her she'd leave the rest of you alone."

"Shiro," Lance murmured.

"Of course her words are lies," Shiro continued. "Still. If Allura hadn't come I… I'm pretty sure Haggar would have incapacitated me."

"I came with Coran," Allura picked up the tale. "But he remained waiting in the hall to surprise Haggar."

She told of how she and Shiro had fought Haggar, how she had heard Hunk calling for help against Theodek and shot him a despair-filled look. "I truly regret not realizing Haggar's ploy to separate us yet again. You and Lance were in terrible danger and we were unable to assist."

"Not your fault," Hunk met her eyes. "Lance figured it out, but even still…" He shook his head. "We couldn't get to the Lions. We got cut off before we could really even try."

Next to him Hunk felt Lance tremble at the foray into their part of the battle, but Allura steered it back to her own for the moment. Hunk reached over and drew Lance to his side, thumb rubbing small circles on Lance's shoulder and he leaned into the touch.

Allura said Coran had found an opening in the fight and had taken a shot at Haggar, point blank in the head. Every head had whirled to face Coran, whose normally genial expression was gone and a
"Sorrowed, hardened version had taken its place.

"You… shot Haggar?" Lance repeated, voice small. He hadn't even had any idea that Coran could use a gun, let alone with such a shot. It was what he should have done to start with Theodek. Regret still burned deep no matter what Hunk had said.

"Yes," Coran said simply. "But it was not enough."

"It did injure her," Allura clarified, "but Haggar's spells and defenses were strong indeed. Still… we thought we might have had a chance. But then…" her hand went to her stomach. "Haggar… she…"

Allura found herself struggling for words and to her surprise found Keith laying a tentative hand on her shoulder in a show of support.

"Thank you," she murmured, placing her own on top of it.

"Haggar attempted to kill me," Allura finally said. "She utilized our reaction to her teleportation habits and surprised us. She… she would have succeeded had Coran not…"

Allura very carefully grabbed the hem of her tunic and lifted it. Keith and Hunk were the only ones who had not known of the wound, but neither Pidge or Lance had seen the resulting scar. The flesh was still shades lighter and she was not certain it would ever darken, and surrounding it was the raised ripple of scar tissue.

"Allura," Hunk breathed and next to him Lance sucked in a harsh breath.

"Coran healed me," she said softly, "and the mice offered up some of their own lifeforce to prolong mine." At the address all four of the small creatures arranged themselves in Allura's lap, nudging against her legs. She lifted her eyes to the group, letting the shirt fall back down. "It is only because of them that I am alive. The wound should have been fatal."

"You can heal?" Keith turned to Coran.

Coran lightly inclined his head. "It appears so, lad. Although only with the aid of a circle; I cannot do it on my own. We were beyond fortunate such was at our disposal."

"You're okay?" Hunk asked Allura quietly, searching her face.

She nodded. "Yes. I admit, I…" her hands twisted in her tunic, "I am still somewhat shaken by what could have happened. But it is in the past now and I am looking forward."

There was a moment of tender silence then, horror at how close Allura had yet again come to death, how easily a life could be extinguished, but how no matter the odds they pulled through. Relief and joy were the results that mattered.

"Haggar escaped then," Shiro continued after the silence. "And I went in search of her. We knew she was heading for you, Lance, but we didn't know where you were at that point." He trailed off. None of them knew any part of really what had happened in the interim of Shiro stumbling upon the kitchen.

Lance took a deep breath. This was it.

"We encountered Theodek," Hunk said softly and Lance sent a silent prayer that Hunk had started them off, "in the hall. After," he winced, "we sort of fell down a staircase." Lance winced too at the reminder. "Um, he didn't attack right away and Lance…" his eyes drifted down to the dark head
leaning against his shoulder, although he could feel the tension even in such a relaxed pose. "Lance tried to talk him down."

"It didn't work," Lance murmured.

"But you tried," Hunk interjected. "It was… it was the right thing to do. Besides," his voice lowered, "we knew we weren't much of a match for him."

Hunk explained then that they'd taken off running, hoping to loop around through the conference rooms and double back through the kitchen towards the Lions, but Theodek had been capable of tracking them. How, Hunk said, he still didn't know but Lance winced and Allura had a sinking suspicion her thoughts about quintessence were correct. But Lance did not offer and she did not pry.

Hunk had fought Theodek, mostly blocking him, but he'd found himself losing quickly. Theodek had turned to go after Lance and… Lance had shot him and once more tried to convince the Galran to stand down.

"Shouldn't have done that," Lance shook his head as Hunk relayed Lance's attempts for mercy. "Stupid."

"Lance," Hunk said, a warning note on his tongue but Lance just shook his head again. Hunk could say what ifs and pose other scenarios, but the fact was his reluctance to kill again had nearly killed Hunk. There was no going around that.

"Lance," Allura called gently, "look at me."

Lance shook his head, keeping his eyes down. He didn't want to see the disappointment there.

"Lance," her voice was firmer now but still gentle, "look at me." He hesitantly raised his eyes across the circle to meet hers, but there was no judgment to be found. "Your decision to show mercy is not 'stupid'. Such a choice is what makes you you, Lance. I would not want you any other way."

"But…"

"Sometimes though we do have to make decisions that we do not care for," Allura continued, softer and Lance flinched. "But I wish dearly that none of you were never in such a position where the act of taking another's life must be the outcome for your own safety. It is something we will have to address going forward if…" she cut herself off with a slight shake of her head. "But Lance, there is no blame to be found in your actions. Please, do not dwell anymore on it."

Lance managed a nod.

Hunk picked up the story again, voice carefully blank even though Lance could feel his slight tremble, as he told of how Theodek had charged for Lance and Hunk had dived in front, taking the blow. His hand made its way to his side, where a thick scar rested just above his hip and wrapped across his stomach that the pod had not fully been able to diminish. Theodek had blasted them and Hunk quietly said that was pretty much the end of his part.

Lance swallowed as he felt eyes turn to him. He had to speak now.

"Lance," Shiro said gently, sensing his hesitation, and placed a hand on Lance's shoulder, "you don't have to talk about anything if you don't want to."

"No," Lance shook his head. "N-no. It's fine. You… you should know."
And he knew, once it was all out, he would feel better. He just had to push through. So he did. Lance spoke of how Theodek had targeted him, but once realizing Hunk was alive had gone for him. So Lance had thrown knives – poorly, he sighed – to try and stop him. It had drawn Theodek’s attention, but… Lance found his fists clenching to try and stop the shaking as he whispered out how Theodek had hurt him, had pinned him down and ripped open his arm, taunted him that he wasn't a Paladin.

Shiro shifted closer so he could more fully wrap an arm about the slender shoulders beneath Hunk’s arm and he exchanged a look with Hunk’s honey eyes over Lance’s bowed head.

"I thought he was going to kill me," Lance choked out. "It h-hurt so m-much…"

"Shh," Shiro soothed, pressing a kiss to the top of Lance’s head. "It's okay now. It's over. But I think that's enough—"

"No," Lance whispered. "I have to…" He swallowed thickly. "I have to." He had to get it out. If he stopped now then he didn't know when he would find it in him to speak again and those memories would twist his insides until he did.

"I woke up during that," Hunk put in carefully, "to Lance screaming. I… I was able to summon my bayard and aimed it at Theodek. I passed out though and didn’t… didn't wake up until last night."

Lance picked it up from there, saying the blast had indeed hit Theodek, sending him flying. But it didn't kill him. So… so Lance had yanked his hand off of the pinned knife to free himself and go back for another weapon.

"You… you pulled a knife through your hand?" Pidge repeated, eyes wide. "That was why... the towel…"

Lance whispered out a sí. "Had to stop the bleeding. But before that…"

Before that Theodek had caught him again and Lance hadn't been able to get a good hit in. He'd been thrown to the ground, Theodek saying that he was going to kill him even though he wasn't supposed to. He'd tried then to strangle him, but Lance had found one of the knives he'd thrown earlier and he… Lance flinched. He'd cut through the wound Hunk had made.

"He died then?" Hunk asked, voice small.

But Lance shook his head and it was Shiro's turn to wince. He made me, Lance had said of Theodek's death, unable to voice what had happened at that point.

"No," Lance's reply as barely audible. "He didn't." He whispered out that Theodek had asked him to kill him then and Lance had refused, even though he knew it would be a mercy at that point from the injuries. But he… he couldn't do it.

Shiro did not like where this was going.

"He grabbed my hand," Lance continued, visibly trembling now. "And he… he…" He raised one of his hands then and brought it up to his throat. After a second he made the barest motion to draw it across. Allura inhaled sharply and Keith and Coran cursed.

"He made you do it," Shiro repeated, the words hollow.

Lance's shoulders shook. "I don't… I didn't… he was dead, but… But I didn't…"
"That was beyond cruel," Allura murmured, simple but heartfelt. "I am so, so sorry, Lance."

Lance hurried on, not pausing any longer on it because his stomach still rolled at the memory. He got up and retrieved towels to try and stop some of Hunk's bleeding, casting his eyes to Hunk's side as well. He'd put one into his hand too and over his arm, knowing contaminating blood was unsafe and he was feeling faint at that point. He'd helped Hunk as much as he could and then called for help, but none had come, understandably as everyone else was fighting or... he looked to Keith and Pidge, Keith still holding an arm about the girl, presumed dead. Everyone winced.

He'd heard footsteps then and thought it was help, but...

"Haggar," Shiro filled in and got a short nod. "Oh, Lance..."

Haggar had told him Allura was dead, Lance said, and with her being there he knew the others weren't going to come to his rescue. He hadn't been able to fight, too hurt and exhausted and weak, the word bitter on his tongue. And he'd... he'd given up. Collapsed right there and hadn't put up any sort of fight.

No one interrupted him although by this point their circle was shrinking, everyone pressed up as much as they could get around him and Keith and Pidge's hands were on his knees, Coran's touching his arm and Allura bumping his knees with her own.

Haggar had healed him then. He couldn't remember all the details but something about fading. Allura had quietly inputted that he sounded as though he was near death and if he died then so did his quintessence. It was an action Haggar took to make sure he remained alive.

She had put her attention on his right arm where Theodek had ripped it open. But she'd done more than that. Lance had realized it when he had been able to clench his right hand and discovered she had actually fixed it completely.

Druid magic was indeed something, Coran had murmured gravely.

She'd also "healed" his left hand, infusing the towel into the flesh. Hunk made a choking noise and after a minute they'd resumed when he got managed to convince his stomach not to heave out breakfast. Coran had fixed that though, Lance added, later. It was as good as it had been, and he demonstrated by stretching it out in front of him, although Allura captured it between her own and made no move to let go and Lance did not wish for her to.

Haggar had then tried to make him a deal to take him and Shiro back with her and leave the others, although Lance still didn't know why. Pidge had filled that part in, glancing at Coran for confirmation, that Haggar had probably hoped to use Lance as a battery as had been the original goal. "She was really obsessed with you," Keith said, disgusted.

In her negotiations though Haggar had mentioned the Lions and Lance had recalled the barrier. It was still untested but he had a feeling if he could get Haggar to try and take his quintessence then that something would happen.

And he'd been right. A small smile tugged up his lips. It had been painful to start, but they had eventually ended up in the Astral Plane and the Lions had been there, protecting him. They had made a barrier and it was beautiful.

Haggar had shown up and the Lions had attacked, Lance trying his best to describe the beauty of their astral forms; white and colored light swirling with their element, and he'd thought they were going to win. But Haggar had pushed them back with what he later learned was a piece of his own
quintessence, tainted though with Haggar's own.

"How?" Pidge's hand tightened on his knee. "When did she…?"

"The first time we went to the Plane," Lance said quietly. "I didn't know though. I swear." He looked up at Allura, eyes shining. "I swear I didn't know."

"I do not doubt you," Allura said, squeezing his hand. "You fought bravely there, Lance. Haggar was only able to take that drop because of how wounded you were, that is all. It is not a reflection whatsoever on your own strength and will."

"That's how she tracked us, isn't it?" Pidge asked quietly and she hated Lance's harsh inhalation.

"I believe it so," Allura said.

"Lo siento, I'm so sor—"

"Lance, lad, stop," Coran intervened. "It is not your fault, my boy. Please, believe that."

"She hurt the Lions with it," Lance whispered. "She hurt Blue. I thought… I thought she killed her. She took out Blue first, then Red and Yellow." He could feel the recoil from both Hunk and Keith at the mention of their Lions. "She broke the barrier and came after me. But…" he Lance recalled the feeling of fight and relayed as such, about how he had summoned a wave and shoved Haggar away.

"That's our Blue Paladin," Coran murmured, squeezing Lance's arm and drawing a small smile.

The Lions had come back then and, Lance said with a small grin, they'd formed their own version of Voltron, each of his limbs taking on the chosen element and placement of their Lion. They'd pushed Haggar back, destroying the tainted quintessence, and she had been on her last bit of energy then. She'd attacked in one final show and Lance had awoken then in the kitchen with Shiro standing by.

"That's amazing, Lance," Hunk whispered, awed.

"It didn't kill her though."

"It still severely weakened her," Allura said. "You had her on the run."

"She would have run too," Shiro came back in. "I'd made it to the kitchen at that point. Found Hunk and tried to staunch the bleeding a bit more. I couldn't get to Lance or Haggar; they were in some type of forcefield." He let out a low laugh. "I tried though. I was going to kill her where she sat. I know it isn't what a Paladin should do, but—"

"I would have done the same," Allura cut in, voice firm, echoed by Keith. "Do not beat yourself up for such actions, Shiro, not over her."

Shiro inclined his head, feeling the last stirrings of rage-filled guilt quell. He said how Haggar had managed to shoot him and had taken off. He chose not to pursue, remaining with Lance.

But then… then they'd heard Pidge yell and Shiro had gone after her. They hadn't known if it was a trap, but hope had burned strong that somehow Pidge was alive.

Shiro and Pidge took turns then explaining what had happened; how Pidge had chased Haggar but the witch had restored some of her flagging quintessence by draining the last bits of life from the produce, which might be funny a few weeks out but was echoed with a quiet horror right now. Haggar had gotten the upperhand and Pidge had been cornered when Shiro had arrived. Pidge acted
as a distraction and Shiro exchanged blows with Haggar, who was still very weak. But Haggar had gotten around Shiro's defenses and come after Pidge again, who admitted with a flush that she'd lost her bayard for the second time in that fight, and was defenseless.

Shiro though... Shiro had come up behind Haggar and... ran his arm right through her.

"I don't want to talk about the details," Shiro said quietly, eyes lowered, and he found Coran's hand back on his shoulder and Pidge placing one on his knee in knowing. He had no desire to remember her final words to him, her sick caress. He wanted to forget. Maybe someday he'd find the strength to come back to them but right now he just wanted to focus on the fact she was dead. "But she died," he continued. "After that Pidge went to the kitchen, I got something to transport Hunk to the infirmary, and everyone who could got into pods. And that's about it."

Silence reigned in the aftermath of the retelling. Layers of horror were stacked upon bravery and hope and a sense of finality that it was actually over. It still didn't seem quite real, especially to Hunk and Keith who had barely been awake for a few hours between them.

"So what now?" Keith asked after a moment.

Shiro let out a heavy sigh. "I... I need to talk to you all about that. About your future."

He caught Allura's eye and she gave him a gentle nod. He had her support. When he had told her of his decision she had frowned in protest. "They are not children anymore," she had told him quietly, "they are Paladins, Shiro."

"I know. I know. But they've suffered enough, Allura. I can't put them through this again. I can't see them hurt anymore."

Her eyes had tracked to where Pidge and Lance were curled up with one another in the blankets in front of the occupied pods, dried tear tracks on both of their faces and her expression had saddened. "You are our leader. I will support your decision in this, but if they do not wish for this outcome then I will not force it upon them."

"Understood."

"I believe," Shiro said slowly, "it is time all of you returned to Earth."

"...what?" Pidge found her voice first and it was the flattest Shiro had ever heard.

"I will stay," he continued, "but... but what's happened recently is something none of you should have ever had to go through. You'll be safe on Earth and—"

"No," Keith's tone was hard. "No."

"Keith—"

"You can't make me," and there was a waver to it now, a sheen to Keith's eyes that made Shiro's heart clench. But this was for his own good. His safety. "Shiro, I won't."

"Keith," Shiro tried again, reaching out and getting his hand slapped away. He tried not to give into his own slowly clogging throat. "Keith, this is for the best."

"How can you say that?" Keith demanded, voice cracking. "Shiro there's nothing for me on Earth. You're my family." He blinked, realizing what he'd said, and repeated it. "You guys are my family. I..."
"What he said," Pidge near growled, and it was her turn to have an arm about Keith and Lance had taken Keith's hand in his own, nearly getting broken fingers from the desperate grip on the return. "And I'm not leaving without my dad and Matt. Hell no. Fuck no."

Shiro turned towards Lance and Hunk, but he was met with the same resolute if heartbroken stares from the others.

"I miss my family," Lance whispered. "I want to go home so bad. But Shiro... I can't. Not yet. Not until everyone in the universe can go home too."

"What they all said," Hunk said. "Shiro, look, I know you want us to be safe, but..."

"But this isn't how you do it," Pidge finished. "And besides, you send us to Earth and what? Expect us to just move on? Go back to normal knowing what's out there? Knowing you and Allura and Coran are in danger? I'll say it again. Fuck no."

"We're a family," Lance squeezed Keith's hand. "We stick together. No matter what."

"Guys..." Shiro looked around the circle, but the same determination was reflected from every set of eyes. He glanced to Allura and she gave him a small, knowing smile.

"You heard them, my boy," Coran said, patting Shiro's shoulder. "We are a family. We are all in this together."

"I just want you to be safe," Shiro choked out. "All of you almost died and... and..."

"But we didn't," Keith countered, although his tone was gentle. "We didn't, Shiro. That's what is important."

"The Lions chose us," Hunk said, voice strong with a conviction that had grown so much in the past week. "They chose us to save the universe. We can't turn our backs on them. Not now. Not until there's peace again."

"We know what the Galra are capable of," Lance added quietly, scarred throat bobbing as he swallowed thickly. "We can't let them hurt anyone else. Not when we can do something about it." He never wanted anyone to suffer the way he had. The way Shiro had. He had no idea how long it would take to free the universe from Zarkon's control, but what he did know was that its best chance was Voltron and his family.

Shiro's eyes were misting. "When did you all get so wise?" he choked out.

"You must be rubbing off on us," Pidge teased, and just like that the weight was gone as Shiro laughed, wet, but real.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, looking around the group but coming to rest on Keith. "I'm sorry for asking that of you."

"We understand," Keith said softly. "But you're our family, Shiro. And we aren't going anywhere."

At that Shiro pulled Keith fully to him then and planted a kiss on his forehead, Keith flushing pink but leaning into the hold.

"This calls for a group hug," Coran announced and he was delighted when a smile lit up Lance's face. The fear that Haggar's distorted touch had created was nearly faded away.

A moment later they were squashed somehow even more together, arms about one another and
heads clunked together, smiles and tears and laughter combining into one harmony.

It was the sound of a family completely at peace.

And it was the most beautiful sound in the entire universe.

Chapter End Notes

Just one chapter (the epilogue) to go. Gosh. Can you believe it? I can't. Dios. The end is here.

But haaaa, it's me so do I ever stop? No. No I do not. I'm currently re-writing the first 20-ish chapters of this fic and hope to have it all finished by next week Friday when the story officially ends. Nothing has changed to where the current storyline is affected, but let's just say it's practically a brand new (and much, much improved) version and I'm very proud of it. Just a little note for those of you who have expressed interest in re-reading Color once it finishes.

On that note, before you go this chapter pretty please do leave a comment. I'd love to hear your thoughts and reactions. Favorite part, line, moment, character interaction. Please feed the author. You only have two more chapters to do so and she loves to hear from you!
Two days later…

*Breathe* Blue instructed. *Listen.*

"Trying to," Lance said through gritted teeth. Allura had removed her quintessence shield from him and he was exposed once more to the might of all of the Lions crowding in his head. It was very noisy and somewhat painful, making it hard to concentrate.

*Make own shield* Blue told him.

"*How*?"

"*Water,*" Allura chimed in. Her hands tightened on his where she was holding on, acting as an anchor – *good practice,* Blue had told her – to Lance and the Lions. "I create a shield with clouds, yes? Use your own element."

"*Tried that,*" Lance admitted. "*It didn't work.*" He had summoned up a wall of water like a tidal wave in his mind, but it was too… fierce. Violent. He didn't want to hurt the Lions after all.

Allura hummed in thought. "*The sky is vast. Perhaps picture something like that to distance yourself from the Lions' input?*

"*Distance?*" Lance repeated. Allura might have the right idea. He imagined a beach then, golden sand stretching out till it met the shore where dark blue waves rolled in. The ocean was endless until it met the horizon where it then split into the sky, another expanse of blue.

He put himself on the shore, water lapping at his toes, and pushed the Lions all the way to the horizon.

The clamoring in his head immediately ceased and Lance shuddered out a breath.

The only voice still present and loud was Blue, as she was the ocean waves and she twined about his ankles like the water, gentle and soothing.

*Excellent job, my Paladin* Blue purred, nuzzling his quintessence with her own. *Perfect.*

"*I think you mean purr-fect,*" Lance corrected her and her laugh reverberated through him even while Allura groaned at the terrible pun.

"*Hey,*" Lance cracked open his eyes to look at the princess. "*It's— Allura! You're pink!*"

"*And you are blue,*" she told him with a smile. Lance glanced down and confirmed that yes, he was indeed glowing blue.

"*How…?*

"Since you are connected to the Lions you are connected to the Astral Plane," Allura explained. "It is
not like when you were in the Plane where you could actively merge with the Lions as you did, but because of that bond you can see quintessence in its pure form."

"All the time?" Lance gulped.

"When you wish it," Allura said. "Although to view another's outside of yourself you must be physically connected to them. Like so," she bobbed their joined hands. "Watch," and she pulled her hands away. "See? You are no longer—"

"You're still pink."

Allura blinked. "What?"

Lance's voice shook as his hands trembled in the space between them. "Allura, you're still glowing."

No fear, my Paladin Blue spoke then. All is well.

"I do not understand," Allura admitted, looking up to the Lion that was crouched next to them. "How is it that Lance can see quintessence outside his own?"

Because Black Lion can Blue answered and my Paladin bonded with Black Lion. Lions part of my Paladin now. Barrier part of him. Stronger than Princess' connection. Much stronger.

"Can he actively use it?" Allura asked, and Lance was grateful one of them was still capable of speech. His stomach was rolling at this newest reveal and what it meant for him. "His blue quintessence?"

Like Lion can? Blue questioned. Water and ice powers?

Lance choked. What? He was going to become like an actual superhero?

The thought was both terrifying and amazing.

No Blue said and Lance was a mixture of relieved and disappointed. My Paladin's body not capable of such. Not Altean. Not magic.

"So he can sense the other Lions and view quintessence at will because of his connection to all of the Lions and particularly the Black Lion," Allura said slowly, "but he cannot actively tap into the elemental nature of the blue quintessence unless he is merged with you as before, correct?"

Correct. Lance felt Blue nuzzle his quintessence again, worried, and he leaned into it, willing his heart to stop its thumping. My Paladin all right?

"Yeah," Lance managed. "Yeah. That just..." He took a deep breath. "So what do we do now?"

My Paladin must learn how to sense Lions. Communicate safely. Blue turned her head to face Allura. And princess must learn control. How to be anchor and pilot.

"How do I turn it off though?" Lance asked, voice small. Because Allura was still pink and he was still blue and as pretty as the glows were he didn't want to be stuck like this.

"When I disengage I picture my quintessence evaporating into wisps," Allura told him. "Is there something similar you might be able to try?" She placed a gentle hand on Lance's knee. "The connection will always be there, Lance. Do not attempt to sever it. Just... cover it."

Cover it. Cover it.
How did he cover it?

He had already pushed the Lions from the beach to the horizon. So maybe if he pictured something with his beach setting… He brought up an image of a seashell, a pure white thing with gentle edges like ocean waves, that had washed up on the beach.

He took a deep breath and envisioned the next wave that came upon the shore to cover it, pushing dark sand up and over, burying it until it was re-discovered by a curious ocean.

The glowing light disappeared in an instant.

_Purr-fect_ Blue smiled at him, sounding out the word as he had and he laughed in sheer delight and Allura's bright laugh joined his.

He grinned at her and she returned it, pride and love shining from her jeweled eyes.

"Let us do this," she said, "Together."

"Together."

And Lance knew they could.

xxx

**Twenty-one days later…**

"I killed a child."

Shiro's voice was heavy, thick. Keith did not interrupt except to squeeze Shiro's flesh hand where they had entangled them.

True to Shiro's word he had begun to open up to Keith about his time in the arena and as Haggar's project. The memories had been coming harder now, faster, as if they had been waiting for permission, for a safe place to be discussed. They had devoted two nights a week, although sometimes more if Shiro really needed to say something urgently, for Shiro to talk and for Keith to listen and be there.

They would go to Shiro's room, turn off all the lights save the emergency ones as Shiro had found it easier to talk in the near darkness, sit together on the floor and Keith would support Shiro through whatever new demon had been dragged into the light.

Keith knew that Shiro was talking to the others too, particularly Lance and Allura. A month ago he might have felt… not betrayed, but hurt, because Shiro had been all he really had and he would have thought they were stealing him away. Now Keith was just grateful Shiro had such a support network to be there for him. _He_ was grateful that he too had such support. Just knowing that if he did ever want to talk about anything, they would all listen. They wouldn't judge.

Keith hadn't been aware he had been suffocating until suddenly he wasn't.

Now it was time to return the favor, to remind Shiro that no matter what he had gone through he was no less than a hero in their eyes. That what the Galra had done and forced him to do did not define him. That it was okay to not be the leader. It was okay to be hurt and scared. They loved him no matter what.

And Shiro's memories scared Keith, he'd admit it. But they needed released and he was going to be
there for Shiro as Shiro had always been there for him.

"I didn't want to," Shiro continued quietly. "They'd tried to make me do it before and I refused. But
that child… they…” his voice broke. "They destroyed him. Tortured him to death right in front of
me. He… he kept crying for his mom."

Keith pressed his forehead against Shiro's arm and squeezed his hand tighter.

"I couldn't… I couldn't let another go through that pain. I knew they would do it again. So I…” His
prosthetic clenched, metal creaking. "Right through his heart. One blow. Instant death. I… I don't
think he felt anything."

His shoulders trembled. "They put his body in my cell after. To… to keep me company." Shiro
shook his head then, barely noticeable in the low lighting. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't—"

"Shiro, talk to me," Keith interrupted, his own voice thick. "Please. It's okay."

Even though nothing about this was actually okay. What the Galra had done… what they'd forced
Shiro to do… It was revolting.

"He was there for days," Shiro whispered. "The smell…” He shuddered. "They fed him to one of
their beasts, eventually. Got to watch that too."

Keith shifted his arms then to hug Shiro around the side and Shiro let out a shaky sigh, returning it.
"No more," he said quietly. "I can't… no more. Not today."

"Okay," Keith murmured. "Okay."

And in the quiet darkness they held each other.

xxx

Twenty-seven days later…

"You are all set," Coran smiled. "How does it feel? I made a few modifications based on… well, I
made some changes. The double-layered panel on the undersuit I was worried might be a bit stiff, but
it is much more durable to blade attacks now."

"Good," Lance said, twisting in the uniform. His voice wavered a bit though and he swallowed
thickly, the armor heavy on his shoulders and not just from its weight.

Coran's expression softened. "And how do you feel?"

"A little sick, to be honest," Lance admitted. "Coran, I… I don't know if I'm ready."

The last time he'd worn armor…

Well, it had been when he was captured.

Having his bayard back had been one thing. To be fully suited up again, to be a Paladin of Voltron,
was entirely different.

Coran's hands descended on his upper arms and squeezed below the armored plate. "You are more
than ready, Lance," he said gently.

"What if I let them down?" Lance worried his lip, meeting jeweled eyes. "What if I mess up again?
"There is nothing you can do that will ever let us down, dear boy," Coran cut in. "You are our heart. And we believe in you with all of ours."

Lance blinked back hot tears.

"Come, let us put the helmet on and complete the look," Coran said, bustling over to the last piece of armor. He looked to Lance for permission and Lance inclined his head, Coran's hands brushing against his cheeks before the helmet was settled atop his head and pulled down.

Coran made a sound of approval. "There," he said, standing back. "Take a look at yourself."

Lance pivoted slowly to the large mirror that Coran had set up in his dubbed "uniform department." His eyes widened as he took in the figure staring back; blue and white Paladin armor near glowing. He stood up a bit straighter and sent the reflection a small but sincere smile. It grew as he formed his bayard, switching it from blaster to pistol and then back.

"There he is," Coran said proudly, meeting Lance's eyes in the mirror. "There's our Blue Paladin."

xxx

Thirty-six days later…

Lance stood on the edge of the shore, letting the water skim his toes while Hunk stood right next to him, a steady, comforting presence while the others were further back, supporting him but letting him have space and some measure of privacy.

He could do this.

He just had to take a step.

Just one.

His feet remained rooted on the soft sand.

He had been getting better and better with water. Showers were still shorter than they ever used to be, but he was capable of taking them on his own now without Hunk or even Shiro and Keith on stand-by in case he collapsed. He had even been able to close the curtain about two weeks ago and while it had darkened the interior of the shower stall it had been manageable.

The faucets didn't startle him anymore and he could ingest liquids at any temperature again, although in small sips rather than gulps. Choking was still a lingering fear he hadn't been able to entirely shake, but as long as he was careful he hadn't done so since nearly inhaling a milkshake Hunk had made courtesy of Kaltenecker and then heaving it all over the floor when he found he couldn't breathe.

He'd made it into Allura's tub twice, the first time nearly passing out from holding his breath even though the water hadn't risen past his hips, but he had gotten willingly into a body of water, with Hunk and Shiro on standby for all of the five minutes he'd forced himself in.

The second time had gone much better. Allura had volunteered the mice to hold soap bar races and having something to concentrate on – and mice on soap bars was hilarious – was helpful indeed. Hunk and Pidge had joined him in the water to help referee the matches while the others were a very engaged audience – Keith was surprisingly, and yet not, really into racing and had been a very vocal
fan – and Lance had had so much fun the fear had been forgotten.

Hunk had been so proud he'd baked a cake for the occasion, claiming it was for Plachu who had won the tournament, but given the fact he insisted Lance get first piece they all knew who it was really for.

But an ocean now? That was sort of a big step.

The ocean planet they had docked on had beaches that highly resembled Earth's, except they were more orange than golden sand and the waves tinting towards purple. Allura had asked Lance before they'd come down if he wanted to try a larger body of water and he had been feeling confident and determined then, bolstered by all of his recent successes.

Now that he was here though it was a bit more daunting than he thought it would be.

"¿Estás bien?" Hunk asked quietly.

He wanted Lance to find his love of the ocean again. So, so badly. And like the shower sometimes Lance just needed a chance to see how capable he was. Hunk knew Lance could do this. But he would not push him, literally or figuratively. Lance needed to come to this decision on his own.


Without a moment of hesitation Hunk wrapped his own about it and gave it a squeeze.

Lance took a deep breath and let it out. Just a step. And then another.

He could do this.

"Okay. Estoy listo. Vamános."

And he plunged one foot forward, toes squelching into the sand and water immediately flowing over his skin. It was cold, but not ice cold. Chilled. The sun however was shining brightly and was warm, just as Hunk's steady hold was.

Next step.

Lance pushed through the gently rolling surf, the water moving from his ankle towards his knee and then licking the hem of his swim trunks.

He kept going.

The water rose higher, hitting his navel now. Only then did he stop as it lapped higher up his chest, rising higher still when Hunk shifted next to him and sent ripples angling at his neck. He flinched at the spray but stood his ground.

Hunk said nothing but Lance knew he was there. They stood silently, the sun beating down from above and the chill of the water turning comfortable.

Nothing else happened. Just the quiet sound of the waves rushing over the beach and the chopping noise as they smacked upon one another in the actual ocean.

The ocean wasn't for standing in though.

It was for swimming.
Lance took another steadying breath, gazing at the expanse of water. He could feel Blue in the back of his mind, fainter from distance but thanks to the created barrier still always a light presence even if he could not speak to her. He could feel her love towards the water, her excitement and desire to become a part of it.

He had been like that too.

He still was.

It was time to hammer home that Haggar had not won; she had not taken his love of the water.

"Hunk," he said quietly. "I'm… I'm going to dive under."

Hunk's beaming smile without a hint of trepidation warmed him from the inside out. Hunk believed in him.

Lance believed in himself too.

Hunk released his hand and Lance took one last steadying breath, holding it in tight.

This was it.

And he dove.

He didn't go deep as the water was barely five feet high at this point, but he did go under.

And unlike the churning chamber Theodek had tortured him in the water here was calm below, just as an ocean should be. There was no salt either and Lance's eyes didn't sting in the least as he took in the underwater landscape of sand and larger pebbles that glittered below the purple waves.

It was beautiful.

He struck out, propelling his body forward and feeling the currents move past him, hair waving gently in the movement.

It felt natural. Peaceful.

It felt right.

Lance felt his lips quirk up into a closed-lip smile as he gazed about the underwater landscape.

He was home.

He came up about a minute later, not willing to push his luck, popping out like some dolphin and an arc of water streaking out from his flying hair. Around his gasping for air he grinned at Hunk and just like that Hunk's entire body relaxed and Lance found himself swept up into a bone-crushing hug a moment later.

That was apparently the cue for the others as Lance heard them break into the water with delighted shrieks and yelps.

Lance laughed in sheer delight and dove back under the cresting waves.

xxx

Sixty-two days later…
"They're so ugly."

Keith's hands tightened on the plum-like fruit he'd been inspecting, eyes flicking over to the alien girl who had made the comment, her friend nodding along.

"Can't believe he hit on you," the friend said, voice high and reedy. "Please. Like you'd go for that. Those scars are hideous."

Keith's fingers sank through the fruit's soft flesh. He glanced up fully then, hoping that it was only his unnaturally good hearing that was picking up the cruel comments, but nope, Lance's shoulders were tensed next to him and a dark flush was creeping up the back of his neck, past one of the scars that had generated such a comment.

Lance had been trying so hard to come to terms with the scars, particularly the burn ones wrapped about his neck and taking up his entire inner right arm. While in Paladin uniform they were entirely covered, but in just Lance's casual clothes? The ropy burn necklace and his scarred hands were on full display and the tail end of the mark on his wrist that his shirt didn't entirely cover.

Appearances were important to Lance, more than Keith knew they'd ever be for most of them, and he knew Lance had debated gloves for his hands and a scarf of some sort to hide his neck, but he had taken the brave plunge and chosen to keep them visible. They were a part of him, right? he'd told them with a tight smile. He need to learn to live with them.

He was trying to get back to a sense of normal. And for Lance that meant flirting with the pretty alien girls. He'd been building his confidence back up, but every situation had been in full armor and not a single mark visible. This was the first time he'd gone for it while out and about in normal clothes, testing out his (very lame, Keith thought) pick-up lines while they were at a marketplace and picking up supplies.

But some people, while beautiful on the outside, were clearly beyond ugly on the inside. Like the two girls making snide comments about Lance, moving to describing and shuddering about the scars on his hands and clearly aware based on their smirks that Lance could indeed hear them.

Keith growled. Fuck them. He would fix this himself.

He had barely shifted, reaching for his knife, when a dark, scarred hand clamped down on his wrist.

"Don't," Lance's voice was pitched low, both in warning and to hide the thickness of beginning tears.

"Lance—"

"They're right." Keith had to strain to hear him. "They are ugly." He raised his eyes to meet Keith's, a smile that didn't reach his overbright eyes. "Let's just go. Please."

Keith didn't want to. He wanted to make those aliens regret their comments but Lance didn't want a scene. And he didn't want to make this any worse for Lance than it already was.

He gave a curt nod, dropping the mutilated fruit back into the bushel and turned to follow Lance from the stall.

"Hey!" the alien cried. "You have to buy that!"

Keith narrowed a glare so hot that the girl took a step back. "It was rotten." His hand went to his knife and she gulped although he didn't unsheathe it. "But you? You're even more so."
And Keith stomped away, although his anger died away as he took in Lance's drooped profile waiting for him.

"Don't listen to them," he ordered.

Lance let out a light laugh that only sounded sad to Keith. "Already forgotten. Come on, we still need to get fruit for the list."

Lance didn't try to flirt again.

xxx

Seventy days later…

"You named it what now?" Lance stared at Pidge with exaggerated horror.

"Muerte Verde."

"Are you trying to kill it on purpose?" Lance hunched protectively over the small plant he'd helped Pidge pick out following a brief mission on a planet that specialized in horticulture. The one they'd chosen was a green succulent that the shopkeeper had promised only took a little water to upkeep, perfect for someone like Pidge. "What kind of name is that? How did you even learn that word? I didn't teach it to you."

Pidge's Spanish lessons were going all things considered rather well, although she was horrible at suffixes and remembering the feminine and masculine terms. He had been selecting different categories of vocabulary to teach her and while colors had just happened he most certainly hadn't taught her how to say death.

"I asked Hunk," she shrugged. "I needed more creative insults to yell that Shiro wouldn't scold me for every time."

"You are incorrigible," he told her.

"Ooh, big word, bonita boy."

Lance shuddered. "There are so many things wrong with what you just said. However," he preened, "yes, I am a 'niño bonito,' although face it, I'm more guapo than anything."

"Nah, I'll stick with bonOH," Pidge emphasized the correct ending with a grin and Lance stuck his tongue out. Her face sobered. "You are though, Lance. No matter what anyone says."

His own expression dimmed. "Keith told you, didn't he?" He shrugged after a moment. "It's fine. Really."

But his hand had gone to his throat, subconsciously covering up the scar.

"You don't like it," Pidge said softly.

Lance's eyes cut to the side. "No," he admitted just as quietly. "But… It is what it is. Not like I can get rid of it."

"Hypothetically, if you could, would you?"

"I… I don't know," Lance said after a few moments. "I'm… I'm trying to accept myself. And that means accepting this," his fingers tapped on his throat. "I'm trying not to see it as what… what
Haggar did but what I overcame. A battle scar, right?" His lips turned into a rueful smile but fell a moment later. "But… but if I could? Yeah. I would."

Pidge took one of his hands in her and gave it a squeeze.

Lance smiled at her, more sincerely then, and squeezed it back.

xxx

**Eighty-four days later…**

"Ha!" Lance cheered, dancing nimbly away as he landed a strike against Shiro's chest, getting in past the normally iron-clad defense. "Take that!"

"You should save the celebrating for later," Shiro told him, smirk on his face.

"Yeah? Why's—"

Lance cut off with a yelp as his legs were swept out from beneath him and he hit the training mats hard.

"You might get *tripped* up."

Lance blinked up at Shiro before he moaned, covering his eyes with his sweaty arm. "You did not just do that."

"Do what?" Shiro asked innocently. Lance lowered his arm and leveled a glare. "I really have no idea," Shiro shrugged. "Perhaps I should *takedown* some notes?"

"I will hurt you," Lance groaned, even as he accepted Shiro's hand up. "Those are awful."

"Says the self-proclaimed jokester," Shiro teased.

"My puns are funny," Lance retorted. He sighed then. "Fine, okay, those were really good. I'm just jealous I never got to use the tripped one before."

"You'd have to actually trip someone first."

"Ouch, burn, Shiro. You're really mean."

"Does it make you want to go for another rematch?"

"I'm actually pretty wiped," Lance admitted.

"No sweat," Shiro said. "Even though, you know, we're both really sweaty."

"Shiro, *Dios* help me I really will hurt you. You're taking the whole space dad dad jokes thing too far."

Shiro only laughed and after a second Lance joined him, even as his ribs protested the shaking.

Shiro had been helping him with his hand-to-hand combat after Lance had expressed, somewhat embarrassed, that he'd like to improve upon it. Shiro thought it was a great idea and he and Allura had actually been holding training sessions for all of them, but he always made sure Lance got a one-on-one slot with him.
Today had been an actual staged fight for Lance to practice some of his new moves, but, like normal, Shiro did not go down easy. Take that back; he didn't go down at all. It might have really bothered Lance in the past – feeling that he was the weak link, that he wasn't good enough, why wasn't he getting this? – but he knew better now and Shiro was a great teacher. He had landed a hit strong enough to knock Keith down in their last group practice to his great delight so he knew he was improving.

"I'm really proud of you," Shiro told him as they exited the padded training room. "You've really come a long way."

"…yeah?"

"Yeah," Shiro reached over and ruffled his sweaty hair and Lance was beyond pleased with himself when he only swatted the hand playfully away.

He had come a long way indeed.

xxx

One hundred and twelve days later…

"Are you sure you're ready, hun?" the six-armed alien smiled gently. "We can do this another day if aren't."

"I…" Lance swallowed thickly. His hand touched his throat, tracing the ropy scar. "I…"

"Can you give us a minute?" Hunk asked the alien. "Please?"

"Of course. Take all the time you need."

"Lance," Shiro's voice was gentle, "do you want to do this?"

They were all clustered in an alien version of a tattoo parlor, the work here done with tiny lasers rather than needles. Absolutely painless, the tattooist had said, with only a numbing tingle left behind that would dissipate in a few varga.

They were there to cover up Lance's neck scar.

The problem, they'd come to realize, was not that the scar existed. It was that it was clearly a scar created by torture. Others realized that too. Even if aliens weren't looking at it with horror they were looking at it with pity, and that had been the case with every planet they had visited when Lance was not covered up by his Paladin undersuit.

Unfortunately it was not something that was ever going to stop and each time it happened, despite Lance's insistence he was fine, his shoulders had hunched a little more. He may have been coming to terms with it and what it meant, but that didn't mean he had to like it. It didn't mean it wasn't a blow to him every time someone whispered or tried to sell him something to cover it up with.

Lance was strong. They all knew that. He had shown them time and again just how strong he was.

But even strong things can break.

It had come to a head at a dinner with the heads of a kingdom they had assisted a week before, all of the Paladins dressed in flowing robes provided by the hosts. Lance had been strutting about like a peacock in his blue version and had turned his sights on one of the lord's daughters, who had been
fawning over him just hours before when they'd come out of the Lions after quelling the threat.

She had seen the scars – all of them on display in one form or another – and while she had not turned cruel like the girls at the fruit stand she had become polite, turning her attentions onto a flabbergasted and quickly becoming enraged Keith in which Shiro had to step in before any punches could be thrown.

Lance hadn't left the party, putting on a brave face and reminding himself that it was a part of him and to accept it, but the whispers had circled. Allura had been asked, rather loudly, by the somewhat inebriated lord what had happened to disfigure her Paladin so and that had been the final straw for Lance, who had ducked away back to the ship, Hunk following.

Perhaps if they had asked the same of Shiro's scar things may have been different. But while large and prominent, Shiro's mark was not the same. It, to his revulsion when he'd asked, had been called attractive. Girls love a battle scar, the lord's daughter had explained, after he'd stepped between her and Keith and she'd set her sights on him instead. When Shiro had stiffly told her that Lance's was the same she had frowned in disbelief and inquired as to how exactly, someone got such a scar like that in battle. Shiro had shrugged her off and gone back to the ship as well, seething with disgust.

The others had followed, even Allura, who had been frostily polite in her good byes. They'd all crowded into Lance's room where Hunk had already been, curled up on the bed with Lance and holding him as he had cried. Self-inflicted scratch marks had covered Lance's throat as though he'd tried to claw it off.

Lance had sobbed out that he was being stupid and he was fine and he didn't care, but it was clear that he did. He'd tried to convince himself that he didn't care what others thought of him or what they saw. He accepted himself. He wanted to accept himself.

But he couldn't lie about it anymore.

And, if he was honest, he hated it too. It wasn't pretty. He thought it was ugly. It was hideous. And as hard as he tried to see it as a battle scar, as something to acknowledge he overcame in the face of torture, he was more often reminded of the pain and fear he'd felt each time the collar had lit up, burning and sizzling his skin and mingling with his screams. Those nightmares and memories would never fully go away.

Coran had been the one to carefully suggest a tattoo. Plenty of Alteans had them, he explained, as some chose to carry their Altean markings to other parts of them and when you had a child, he'd swallowed then, hurrying on, it was custom to give yourself their colors as well.

There would not be any tattoo that could completely cover up the scar, but they could transform it into something else, something not so obviously a mark of torture.

And so here they were, at a highly reviewed shop in which the proprietor actually specialized in cover-ups for slave trade victims. In order to not make this all about the neck scar Hunk had volunteered to get a tattoo himself and Keith had said he wanted one too.

Then Pidge had wanted one and Shiro had balked because there was no way he was letting her get a tattoo, but then Allura had said she was also going to get one and told Shiro it was a "rite of passage" in Altean culture and gave Pidge the go ahead herself. Lance had been near tears and had clung to Hunk's arm at the show of solidarity.

To Shiro's relief and surprise, none of them had chosen to go for some large giant back tattoo or arm sleeve. Instead, Hunk had the artist laser on a small yellow version of Voltron's symbol on the
underside of his left wrist. Pidge had requested the same in green.

It had started a chain reaction as Keith had gotten red and then Lance had tentatively volunteered his own arm and gotten one in blue. Allura had requested one in pink and Coran had jumped in and gotten an orange version.

And Shiro, despite his own reservations, had gamely handed over his arm for a black symbol. Hunk had grinned and said he'd known Shiro would get on board; it was why he had gotten it on his left wrist so they could all match. Between Shiro's metal prosthetic and Lance's burn scar a few right arms were out of commission. Shiro had knocked him over the head with said prosthetic grinning all the while.

Doing that had been the right move as the atmosphere had gone from a pre-surgery vibe to relaxed and fun. The owner had even brought out drinks – a sort of chocolate and strawberry smoothie – and refreshments while they waited on each other.

Hunk had stopped the tattooist after he finished Lance's symbol in blue before he started on Shiro's, whispering something into the alien's ear. There had been an assortment of raised eyebrows as the tattooist pulled Hunk and Pidge to the side, inking something else onto their wrists just below the Voltron symbol.

Lance had started crying when he saw "WWLD?" permanently added to their skin and despite his protests – that such a mentality had almost gotten Pidge killed – they'd held him and reassured him that they still stood by the message, by Lance's compassion, and they were proud to wear them.

But their Voltron symbols were all completed now and it was time for the big one.

"I… I don't know," Lance whispered to Shiro's question. "I… I want it gone, but…"

It felt like a weakness. He had been trying so hard to accept his new appearance and push past the dark memories and this seemed like a cop out. A step backwards. It was like telling Haggar and Theodek they had won. That he was weak.

There was a murmuring then and some inhalations and Lance belatedly realized he'd said that last bit out loud. He felt his face flame.

"Lance," Hunk murmured, squeezing a scarred hand in his larger one. "Hermano. You are not weak. Doing this does not make you weak. This is you making a decision. You had no choice in getting that scar but you have a choice now. Doesn't matter what it is. It's your choice and whatever it is it's the right one. Understand?"

"Sí," Lance hiccuped.

"Number Two I think summed up all of our thoughts," Coran said, placing a hand on Lance's shoulder. "It is entirely up to you, my boy. What will make you happiest?"

"…I want it gone," Lance said, voice small.

The tattooist came back then, gentle smile and an even gentler touch as one of his many hands tilted Lance's chin back to expose the scar more fully.

"As you know it won't hurt," the alien said, "but it will tingle. Hold as still as you can for me. It will not take long." Lance swallowed heavily and gave the barest of nods. The tattooist hummed and began.
"It looks beautiful, Lance," Allura said quietly as the artist swiveled the stool Lance was perched on to reach the side of his neck, the faint buzzing of the laser the only other noise in the room.

"It really does, hermano," Hunk said, voice thick. Not even twenty dobashes later the tattooist was holding up a mirror for Lance to look, stepping back with a fond smile as Lance’s breath caught and tears filled his eyes.

Lance had requested ocean waves. The tattoo did not so much as cover up the scar as it worked with what was already there; taking the ropy lines and turning them into ocean foam and ripples, all dark lines that blended with the burn and complimented Lance’s own tan tones and working over the worst of the reds into a tinted brown. It was both a reminder of what he had overcome at the Galras' hands and a testament to the fact that despite how hard they had tried to turn his love of water into a fear he had taken it back. It was still a scar but Lance had transformed it into his.

"Gracias," Lance whispered, trembling fingers lighting upon the crest of a wave. He looked up to meet the eyes of the alien who had created it for him. "Gr-gracias."

"It was my absolute pleasure," the tattooist said. His voice grew more serious, if not softer. "However, it is I who should be thanking you for all you have done to protect this universe. This," one of his hands came to rest atop Lance's own on the scar, "is the mark of a strong heart."

Allura smiled gently and placed her own slender hand on Lance's chest above the rapidly beating heart. "It is a beautiful, strong heart indeed."

xxx

One hundred and twenty days later…

"Great job team!" Shiro sounded over the comms. "Let's bring it in."

"I could go for another round," Lance grinned, even as he directed Blue towards the designated landing zone where Allura and Coran were waiting for them with a picnic lunch following their training on the empty planet they had visited. "Right, Blue?"

*Lion ready* Blue rumbled, mischievousness in her tone. *Lion wish scare Red Lion again.*

"Ugh, no," Pidge groaned. "No more. We surrender."

Lance could feel Green's agreement and he grinned, sending back a push of a flashing one hundred, which was his code for being awesome to the numbers oriented Lion along with a bit of smugness. She and Pidge had been so convinced with their cloaking they would be the winners in this game but Lance and Blue were the winners by a landslide.

Like, one hundred to forty being the second highest score.

Oh yeah. He felt Green's sigh but a flash of approval and congratulations.

They had been practicing stealth maneuvers, using the planets tall rock spires to play a giant game of Lion hide and go seek with everyone seeking each other and tagging one another with the Lions tail cannons that Hunk and Coran had rigged to shoot different colored washable paints.

Most of the Lions were covered in a bevy of blue splatter.

In addition to stealth it had also been great practice for Lance to practice his sensing abilities in more extreme circumstances and separating the signatures from one another. And he had to pat himself on
the back, he'd done a pretty good job. He'd lost Black a few times; she and Shiro more adept at using
the Plane to distort the signal and there had been a few instances of where the Lions had overlapped
and Lance had gotten confused, but ultimately it had been a success. He'd even gotten better at
individually reaching out to the Lions to "talk" to them, although he kept it to mostly simple ideas to
avoid being overwhelmed as it often left him with a headache, Black especially.

"Good job, Lance," Keith said as Red touched down next to Blue. "You really got us." Red and
Keith had the least amount of hits next to Green and Pidge due to their speed in getting out of spots
when found, but Blue and Lance had gotten the jump on them once and watching the Red Lion leap
into the air like a startled cat had had Lance and Blue both in stitches. Getting pegged by Yellow
while they floated out in the open had been so worth it.

"Thanks, Keith," Lance chirped. He didn't rub it in like he might have before at having actually
usurped Keith in something. They had come so much further from that; their rivalry completely
friendly now with good-natured ribbing and challenges. It made Lance's smile widen even though no
one could see him.

"I made a special something for the winner," Hunk said, Yellow coming in with a rumbling thump
on Blue's other side. "I thought it was going to be Pidge so they're peanut butter flavored."

"I am wounded, Hunk," Lance grinned, no offense actually taken as despite his new ability he hadn't
thought he'd be able to counter Pidge's cloaking as well as he had. "Yellow, be a dear and give your
 Paladin a smack for me." He channeled the thought to the Yellow Lion and was rewarded a second
later by a pulse of glee and Hunk's loud shout as Yellow shifted the arm rest to give Hunk's arm a
swat.

"Lance!" Hunk sounded only amused though.

The comms went silent then as the Paladins began to exit and head for the food. Lance remained
sitting in Blue for a moment longer, trying to calm the slow headache that had been building from
using the connections for so long.

*My Paladin all right?* Blue inquired, wrapping her quintessence about his with a loving caress.


"You're very biased," Lance told her, patting the top of the console as he stood.

*Not biased if true.*

Lance just laughed, sending a wave of affection towards his Lion that Blue wholeheartedly returned.
"I'll see you again soon, Blue. Time to go see what delicious concoctions Hunk and Keith made for
us today."

He patted the console one last time and headed for the exit ramp, helmet already off and resting
against his hip.

As he exited out of Blue's mouth onto the ramp he gazed down at his family from his higher vantage
point, soft smile lighting his face.

He had yet to release his connection to the Lions and so the scene below was awash in different
colors of quintessences that shone against the gray, rocky landscape.
Coran was a brilliant orange, currently working with Hunk, shining golden yellow, to unfurl a large blanket while inquiring as to what rituals exactly to follow for this "picnic" that Hunk had devised for their lunch.

Keith was a burning red and pushing away Pidge, covered with a snapping, inquisitive green, who was trying to get into the large basket after the dessert treat Hunk had made with her in mind.

Allura's soothing pink was a quiet presence as she stood by while Shiro, starlight black glimmering, handed her plates and utensils to set out while the mice waged a game tug-of-war with a dropped spoon by their feet.

Lance raised his own hand, covered in a pulsing blue wave, and held it to line up with the other colors.


Lance looked again at his own blue. Haggar had fought so hard to take it, to distort it into darkness and shadows.

But she had failed.

Her darkness had nothing on the colors that made up his family; their warmth and love and support.

Haggar had tried to make his color fade away.

She had only made it shine brighter.

Lance descended the ramp then and went straight to Hunk, pulling him into a tight embrace that Hunk returned wholeheartedly, not even questioning it. Coran was there then, holding tight to both of them and then Pidge was wriggling her way in and Keith hesitated for the barest of moments before he latched his arms about Pidge and Lance. Shiro and Allura joined in, completing the group hug.

Everyone was laughing and smiling and positively glowing with their colored quintessences mingling all about, lunch momentarily forgotten in light of the impromptu group hug.

Because they could feel it too, Lance knew. They could feel the love and strength in their bond. The pulse of the heart that drew them together. The warmth and support and the knowledge that no matter what happened, no matter what life threw at them, they were in this together. They were a family.

And their colors shone bright indeed.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot I can say here but I'm going to keep it short(ish) and sweet (unlike this chapter, Dios, but everyone wanted a final one-on-one with Lance and I couldn't refuse them). Color has been… beyond what I ever imagined. It may have started from my desire to have a dark whump fic, but it has become so so much more than that. It became a story of acceptance. Of love. Of family. Of support. It has touched me in a
way no story I've written has done before and I know it has resonated deeply with some of you as well. It seems unbelievable to me that it has come to an end, but all things must.

Thank you to all of those who have supported me on this journey. Whether you've been here since the beginning or you joined up in the middle or towards the end, thank you. Thank you for your love. Most especially for your comments, which are what kept me going. Special thanks to those who have been here nearly week after week without fail with a comment to brighten my day. I know who my "regulars" are and believe me, your constant support through this saga has been appreciated more than I can ever say.

And so, one last time, I ask that you please leave a comment below. Doesn't matter if you're reading it at the final publish date or a year from now, I will see it and greatly appreciate it. Comments are truly the best way to tell an author thank you and that you appreciate their time and efforts. As you may have guessed, Color has certainly taken quite a bit of time and effort. Nearly 430k words will do that.

Color may be over but I'll still be around-ish. Feel free to subscribe to me or check me out on tumblr, icypantherwrites, for what I'm up to.

Thank you all so much again. I look forward to hearing from you one final time.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!