Summary

Keith is about as far from human as it gets. Issue is, he doesn't remember that, or anything, really, not since he was somewhere between ten and eleven and all of his memories left with his mother in a car crash. And then comes the voices and Garrison and things that he feels he should know, and things really start to go downhill very fast.

Or: Amnesia's a bitch, and Keith's life is a rotating carousel of bad choices and he's pretty much done with it anyway.

Notes

Right then. Welcome to this thing. No clue what this is, but it's pretty neat by my standards. I hope to god this turns out okay, but I won't make any promises.

Here's the original prompt: http://darkscaleswriter.tumblr.com/post/147128472683/voltron-legendary-defenders-galraalteankeith

I don't own Voltron, nor this original idea, and sorry if I cannibalized the prompt, but the
muse wants what it wants.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by One Who Fights by DarkScales
A Hybrid is born amid fire and ash and death.

His father pilots the fighter ship, trying to evade Zarkon's forces and simultaneously keep from killing his wife and son with too many risky maneuvers. The mechanic, a Ceryllian, is in the co-pilot seat, filling in for Hybrid's mother. One of the prisoners they rescued, a lanky medical officer of the Altean Order, helps her through it, delivering the child safely and efficiently.

Thace Ne ignores his wife's strangled screams as best as he can, executing a hairpin turn and firing off a shot at the still-adjusting fighter that chases them. Koga Reir holds her son in her arms, tracing the lightning shaped Marks under his eyes that tell of his heritage, before taking hold of the Quintessence around them and twisting.

It's refreshing, after a long nine months, to finally have the Quintessence at her fingertips once more.

With a jerk of her head, the mechanic springs out of the pilot seat and runs to the nearest control panel, running damage check. She settles down in the co-pilot seat, still holding her child, swaddled in the ancient, scarlet robes of the High Order, and her long fingers tap against the controls with practiced precision.

The smooth lines under her eyes burn silver as she wraps her protections around the ship, her head held high. In her arms, the Hybrid's Marks flicker between gold, lavender, and crimson, and he is largely silent. Thace reaches out a hand, claws sheathed and amethyst fur bristling with excitement. His ears flick backwards, and Koga touches the back of his hand gently, guiding him up to touch the back of his child's head.

Thace laughs, a deep, baritone sound, and Koga smiles. “What are we going to name him?” His voice is hoarse, just as it always is after escaping a firefight, but there's an extra buzz of excitement and thick, watery sense of tears under it. He's a rough mountain, eroded into something smooth, polished, beautiful, under Koga's relentless tides.

Koga traces her fingers over the lightning bolt Marks, and they glow a solid, unbreakable,
unbeatable red, a hint at what is to come for her child. *He'll take after his parents,* she muses, a bittersweet cast to her thoughts, *he'll have a very intricate waltz to do with War and Death, won't he?* The name comes to her in a flash of inspiration, as Altean names are never supposed to be picked before the child has been born.

She laughs, tapping the Mark on the baby's left cheek gently, “He has a fire in his heart. His future will not be an easy one. His dance with Samtal will be a long and hard one.” She brushes her lips on her crown of his forehead, and her Quintessence flows into him, the pointed ears behind and above his normal ones tiny and twitching. “Keithek.” She whispers, and the stars bow to the three in the cockpit like they are the few who exist in the universe. She tilts her head, running through combinations before deciding on one.

“Keithek Kogane.”

*

Keithek learns to read before he can speak, run before he can walk, challenge before he can fight, and shift before his marks fully settle.

He's a blazing fireball, and anything that gets in his path will rue the day it did.

He picks up on everything easily, everything from writing and speaking to the fact that they are at war, that they are in danger. There's something almost dangerously intelligent hidden among the bright, ambitious stars in his eyes. The constellations that mark his skin are hidden even before his mother teaches him how to, the second pair of ears shrunk down and covered by a mop of hair before his father decides to tell him how dangerous they can be.

The one thing he refuses to hide are his Kin Marks.

Thankfully, if he wills them to look like his skin color and changes his features subtly, it looks like the initiation scars of the Deryrtl, a widespread race, that while rare in some places, is very common in the grand scheme of things. He's not entirely happy about it, but he lives with it.

He has to live with it, or he dies with it.
He's four years old – learning quickly and maturing even faster – when his father leads him out into the courtyard. They have to visit other planets sometimes, to recover artifacts, free prisoners, disrupt Galran influence, but they always return back to Duskeri, their miniature sub-base. Mother and father are important people in the Rebellion, others tell them, they have a smaller place so they don't get attacked.

Keithek accepts that.

His father leads him to the central tree, silver veins arching up the bark, infused with his mother's energy, and picks up two polished wooden sticks from where they lean against the trunk. Keithek barely catches it when his father tosses him the smaller of the two.

Somehow, he dodges the first unexpected hit. Five seconds later, Keithek is on the ground, and his father is holding two sticks again.

Father smiles, helps him back up, “You have good instincts, Scheila. Follow those. They will guide you well in life.” Father hands him the stick back, “But you need to learn to hone it into your reflexes. Go on, Scheila, try and disarm me.”

Keithek grips his stick a little bit tighter and runs, relying purely on the lurking rage every Galra has, the few holos he's seen, and the one battle he saw on Xalios. He winds up on the ground, weaponless, but he kicks a foot out, trying to get his father's shins before he dances away. He misses. Father laughs. “Again, Scheila.”

He runs, he rushes, he follows what his father does, and always winds up back on the ground, ears echoing with, “Again.”

His smile is blazing when he leaves, and he goes back to the tree the next day.

And the next.

And the next and the next and the next, determined and feral and smiling.

“Again.”
He's almost five when his mother collects him just after his practice. Her smile is secretive when Keithek asks where they're going. She brings him down to the armory, and then back out into the courtyard to watch the tree.

“*My Aeksi,* this is where your true training begins,” She says, hand pressing gently against the bark, pure silver flowing from the wells in her palms to stretch into the tree, “Your father teaches you how to fight, how to infiltrate. He shows you how to be a warrior, a spy, an assassin. I will teach you how to stop those in their tracks. It only begins here, but once it ends, I can promise you that you will be more powerful than the Druids.”

That day, they spend the entire time in front of that tree as he learns how to connect with his core, as his mother helps him take apart the blaster she brought before putting it back together.

The next day, they do the same, for months that same pattern, every week adding in another weapon, before she has him take everything apart and put it back together on his own, list all of the vulnerabilities and weak points, the statistics, the history.

She shows him how to use his core to disable the blasters, make the grenade designs self-destruct, how to twist the metal in the swords and dull them with pure intention.

She shows him how to make an entire legion bow, tells him that one day the stars themselves will bow to him. “*My Aeksi,* we have many enemies, but the universe itself is our ally. We are strong, *Kajeet.* We are powerful, never let anyone tell you otherwise.” His mother smiles as she kisses his forehead, silver stretching from the inside corners of her eyes all the way to her jaw.

“*We are powerful.*”

He's halfway through five when he finally disarms his father, both sticks at his throat in an acceptable killstrike. His father smiles, fangs sharp, and laughs. “You fight like a Galran soldier.” He tells Keithek, amused smile on his face.
Keithek tilts his chin up, “Good.”

That night, he gets an Unbound Dagger of the Marmora. The metal sings like victory.

+A+

A week after getting his dagger, Keithek's mother starts showing him how the universe sparks with life.

She takes him on a shuttle, pilots it herself, doesn't answer any of his questions, and wraps them in Quintessence so they can slip past the Galran patrols nearby the living planet.

“Maman,” He whispers, because they are far below the surface of the planet, and who knows what's down here, “Why are we here?”

Mother smiles, placing her hand against the smooth rock of the wall and channeling silver, the tendrils reaching into the rock and stretching out like tree roots. “Shh, Kajeet. Reach out yourself, try and feel the world.”

Keithek obeys, closing his eyes and holding his hands out, letting the impressionable white filter from his fingertips. He gasps and stumbles, because the planet has so much. He can feel the steady thrum of Quintessence arching through the rock, stretching into deposits of crystal, reaching through its people, holding close and tight, the energy a masterpiece.

He feels a presence shuffling toward them, much younger than the planet but channeling so much of its energy that it's difficult to discern just how old the presence is.

He opens his eyes again just as the creature comes around the corner. It's made of rock-like scales, tail sweeping the ground behind it, pale eyes unseeing but always looking. Looping earrings hang in heavy clumps from thick, leathery ears, the tusks at the edges of its jaw carved with delicate designs too intricate to properly see from the distance. A golden shoulder cape curls elegantly, covered in intricate runes.

As soon as it sees them, it breaks out into a smile, tapping its chest once with a closed fist before sweeping it out into a bow with an open palm. “High Priestess Koga, may your crystals glow bright and your Marks never fade.”
Mother smiles, pressing the knuckles of her right fist with her left hand at heart level. “Grandmaster Kros, may the stars guide you and your clan last for a thousand years.”

Grandmaster Kros smiles, “It’s been too long, Koga. I see your youngling is ready for the Initiation.”

Mother smiles, slender fingers carding through Keithek's hair. “Yes,” Her lips curl up into a smile as she looks at the walls, “Your people never cease to amaze me, how you interact with your planet.”

Kros hums lightly, beckoning them before turning around and strolling into the tunnels beyond. Koga pushes Keithek forward until he walks on his own, cautiously following his mother. “Just as you have evolved to be excellent at blending in, we have become excellent at communing with our planet.” Kros looks back at the two of them, earrings clanking together, corners of his mouth turning up, “Will you be joining us for the Renewal?”

Mother laughs, “Always.”

Kros hums and turns back to fully face the winding currents of the tunnel, placing a hand against the tunnel wall. Quintessence flows gently, filling the air with crackling energy. The wall rumbles open, yellow sparking patterns hidden in the stone.

Kros turns back and smiles, “Welcome to the Balmera.”

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He spends two weeks on the Balmera, learning the ways of the Balmerans, mastering the ability to grow crystals from just a shard, to communicate with planets, to siphon Quintessence away from places and people without damaging them, to restore it, to passively create it. His mother stays with him through all of it, adapting it to the magic he knows.

His one Balmeran friend is a tiny spitfire named Kler. When Keithek first met Kler, he wasn't entirely sure which gender they were. “I'm... sorry if this is rude or something, but what are you?”
Kler glared up, “I'm Balmeran, Spacer. I'm not male or female and I'm not afraid to kick your ass, even if you are space royalty or whatever.”

It's the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

They're attached at the hip, showing each other how they manipulate energy, space, time, the world around them. Mother approves, as do most of the Elders, and for the two weeks he spends in the underground city, masking the living planet from the eyes of the Galra, he's happy.

But eventually, he has to leave.

The training ends with the Renewal, a ritual performed whenever the Balmera needs it, giving Quintessence in return for all it's done for them. It's performed in the Heart Cove, with a thousand chanting voices and yellow energy lacing through their words.

Keithek loves the sense of connection he gets when they do it, revels in the way they gently tap minds before reaching out to the rest in the circles.

He cherishes the feeling of being one.

When they leave, Kler gives him a look and says, “I better see you again, Spacer.”

Keithek smirks, his mother exchanging words with the Elders, “Touche, Acolyte Kler.” Kler scowls at the official title, single earring jingling.

Kler drops the false front of playful anger, urgency in their eyes, “You don't get to leave me, Keithek. You stay alive. Your Rebellion takes too many lives, don't let one of them be your own.”

Keithek's smile loses some of its luster, turning solemn. “Don't lose yourself either, Kler.”

In answer, Kler taps their chest with a fist before flinging it out open handed.

Keithek gives an acknowledging fist-in-palm gesture.
His last look at the planet before he's ushered further inside is Kler mouthing, “Don't forget.”

He tries not to.

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On his sixth birthday, he gets an energy blade.

It's from both of his parents, both of their ideas and both of their creations, lovingly pieced together, Quintessence running pure and beautiful through the unactivated hilt.

When he turns it on, his cheekbones burn, then go cold as ice.


Red for Ferocity.

His parents watch as Xera Herself paints his cheeks, leaving behind the glowing, unbroken crimson of Her followers. They Settle the same shade of scarlet that the alarms that blare under attack do, as red as blood.

He starts hiding his Marks after that.

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His cheekbones are freshly blazing red when his mother pulls him onto the smallest cargo ship they have. Her grip is steel, the determination in her eyes relentless. She sits him down on the seat and gives him the shortest possible rendition of how flying works. “Now fly,” she tells him,
conviction burning in her amethyst irises, “Fly, my *Aeksi*. Let the Quintessence show you how.”

So he does.

Like she says, the Quintessence tells him, shows him, prods at him to do one thing or another, a thing made of instinct and power, pushing him and smiling with bared teeth.

He learns like a pale, shaking hatchling pushed from a nest.

He learns quickly that his wings are strong.

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He's just shy of seven when they start to teach him a subject together. Galran and Altean history, both so closely linked they're almost inseparable. He hears old legends, he hears spun tales, and he hears cold, hard facts.

And he hears of Voltron.

He hears of Zarkon from two different standpoints and remarkably different times. He was a merchant-turned-Black-Paladin-turned-traitor-turned-overlord, a snake hidden in the bushes, and a relentless ruler.

He hears of Merial from his mother, one of the strongest, most ambitious, most stubborn Alteans, all the way from her birth to her death. Commoner-turned-Red-Paladin-turned-Queen-turned-mother-turned-corpse. A fighter, an empath, a mother, a warrior.

He hears of Neimao from his father, a kind and heartbreakingly loyal Hretial, from the moment he first fell in step behind the others, to the moment his last breath left quaking lungs, knife sticking out from his back. Prince-turned-Blue-Paladin-turned-carrion.

He hears of Sekhet from the Ceryllian mechanic, the clever and quick beauty, jumping in and out of relationships and experiments and experiments with relationships. She held her head high, until it was removed from her shoulders. Scientist-turned-Green-Paladin-turned-spy-turned cadaver.
He hears of Eiril from the medical officer they rescued when he was born. Eiril was a kind, caring person, with nerves of steel and a heart of gold. Until it was cut from his chest. He was a medic-turned-Royal-Healer-turned-Yellow-Paladin-turned-example.

Zarkon is the only one to live of the last Paladins, the dangerous overlord of the Galra Empire, stretching from star system to star system, holding onto any and all colonies with an iron grasp and an uncaring attitude to the natives.

Mother promises that Voltron will rise again. Father looks sadly at his son and shrugs.

Nothing is certain in this life they've made.

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His mother tells him the same thing each night before bed, “The stars bow to us, Kaljeet. We are the first, the last, the most powerful of our kind. Maybe the most powerful of them all.” She always kisses his forehead there, “The stars bow to Priests, but only if they are true. Listen to honesty and reasoning, sometimes they are the few things that will keep you sane. Trust your instincts and your intuition, they don't follow the path, they will always make their own. Always hold tight to your memories, they will be all you'll have one day.”

Every night, he always looks at the stars, and wonders why.

Every night, there is no answer.
Phoenix in Motion

Chapter Notes

Oh boy. Uh. Here we go?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His mother is a few months along with her next child when the sky lights up with purple fire and the Galra arrive.

Koga's head whips up, thick red braids flying and curving gracefully down the back of her neck. She tries to reach for the Quintessence before pulling back abruptly at the uncomfortable tug in her stomach. Galran, Altean, Ceryllian, and Petuqal curses spill from her lips in a shifting myriad of languages.

She shoots upward, skirts flying as she leaps across the tiled floors, meeting her son halfway. “Maman...” he whispers, sword in hand and blaster clipped to his belt, knapsack at his side containing basic rations, his Unbonded dagger, and the precious High Order Mantle that passed through their family for generations.

Koga grabs his arm and pulls him toward the docking bay. “Shh, my Kaljeet, we must go. You must fly.” Behind them, a laser hits dead on, and part of the safehouse goes up in a haze of rubble and smoke. “Keep forward, little one. Keep walking. Let the Quintessence guide you, my Aeksi.”

Keithek closes his eyes, and for one terrifying moment, amethyst fire rains around them before Keithek grabs his mother's arm and pulls her along. He gets to the controls and freezes, “Maman, where is Fethar?”

“Off-planet,” she replied swiftly, “He's as safe as he can be in times like this. Fly, my Aeksi.”

Keithek hits the controls and they spiral up into the air, evading as much as possible. A fighter ghosts behind them and Keithek pulls into a risky dive, flipping around and aiming the lasers perfectly in time for it to crash into an assembling formation, disrupting it as well.
Quintessence hums around him, around the ship, heightened senses burning as he threads the needle between two rapidly approaching ships, cannons twisting backward and firing on them.

He dodges and dives, trying to make his way through the atmosphere, trying to run away.

They manage to break away from the horde when a blast catches their left flank.

Space looms around them, tugging, pulling, and they fall.

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Thace hears the news on his way back home.

The infiltration had gone smoothly enough, Thace Ne is now known as a highly respected Galran agent, sent on a private mission from the Prophet, a battleship held high in esteem.

Everything has gone to plan, except for the transmission he gets from the Altea Force channels. It's recorded, of course, but that doesn't matter. What matters is the contents.

Jaiwe, Koga's half-sister staring up at the camera with nervous blue eyes rimmed in green from her tears. “To the organization as a whole, and to those beyond who it may concern. Last night at 0900, the Rising Sun base on Duskeri was attacked. The bodies of two of our members were recovered. Koga Reir and her son Keithek Kogane are unaccounted for. The Director and Priestling are assumed dead. I beg of you, my fellow soldiers, my fellow citizens, my fellow rebels, do not let their sacrifices die in vain. Do not let the Rebellion die from grief. Let it live.

“If you are afraid, you have every right to be. But fear, terror, pain, disorder, discord, this isn't what they would want. Stand and fight to your last breath. Even if our High Priestess is gone, we must push on. For those who sacrifice, for those who flee, for those who fight to the last breath, this is the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end. Shriedd qi Altea. Fight for home. End transmission.”

Thace, frozen and disbelieving in the cockpit, looks helplessly out into the distance of space, and heavy gold tears begin the settle in his fur.
Keithek startles awake to the sound of his mother crying.

Koga is propped up against the edge of the crashed ship, blood in a pool around her but no visible injuries. Around her head, her Quintessence dances angrily and shallowly, a broken halo.

Oh. Keithek realizes.

Oh no.

His baby sister is gone.

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They start to walk late that night, after Koga rises from the blood and they piece together what they can from the ship. They scatter the fuel around the fighter, hands trembling. They know they can't return now, it's not safe. They promised each other, one starry night many years ago to never sacrifice safety in the name of the others, and whatever backwater planet they crashed on is better than trying to fix the ship, one already marked as an enemy ship, no doubt, to fly into the uncertainty of deep space. It burns in the night, the blazing inferno lighting up the sky, reflecting in their irises.

They trek until they can't, across dunes of sand with unfamiliar and sparse plant life. By the time the star rises above the horizon – only one star, not a binary system – They haven't come across any sentient life, and the landscape hasn't changed. Keithek is filling up his Quintessence stores, this planet seems to have an incredible amount of it, and Koga is gathering the stray rocks they manage to come across, her metal blade chipping away at it painstakingly, gathering the remnants of the fallen's Quintessence.

The star reaches the opposite horizon, and Koga stops him, the runes she had drawn on the rocks shivering slightly. “We must give the dead their rites, little Aeksi. You remember the rituals, don't you?”

Keithek nods, his fingertips ghosting across the edges of the runes. Seven stones, the traditional number, and unfortunately, all of them are marked. The first is for Eket, the Ceryllian mechanic, a
faithful soldier. The second is for their medical officer, Vieo, a determined rebel and considerate colleague. The next three are for the fighter pilots that Keithek himself shot down, brainwashed and fitted from the same mold. The next is for Altea, for the entire planet and system, long gone, long deceased. The last is for Keithek's baby sister, never seeing her first breath before life was ripped from her miniscule clutches.

The cairn isn't large, isn't any incredible monument, a groundbreaking structure. It's simple, small, seemingly insignificant, but the weight it holds for some people can never be truly expressed to those who don't understand, much like what it represents.

Life.

Or rather, the inevitability of it ending.

They channel the Quintessence into the carefully stacked pile, the memories, fleeting brushes for some, long experiences for others, just stories for some. The words fall from their trembling lips, ancient and sacred. It's muscle memory for Koga, something memorized, something heartbreakingly familiar, but for Keithek, he stumbles and trips over his words.

After all, there's nothing easy about a funeral.

They make their first contact to a town with one decrepit McDonalds, a grand total of ten houses, and a sleazy looking City Hall that looks perfectly built to accommodate the town's thirty-seven residents. Koga and Keithek take one look at what looks to be the common population and shift, clothes changing, features stretching and twisting, skin altering shades, an aura of normality settling over them like a cloud.

Altean's are, after all, a Chameleonic race, especially after ten centuries of evolution to maximize that trait.

For the next few years, they work that trait to the bone.
They are reborn, ironically, in a city called Phoenix, in a haze of frantic research, practiced accents and careful plans. They rise from the ashes in new faces, in unexpressed words, in hidden conversations and veiled threats.

And they are renewed running straight out of the gate.

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They hop between cities and continents, changing faces and forging papers with ease. Compared to an intergalactic all out war with ID's scrutinized to the very last molecule, it's very easy to fake some of their own papers. Keithek becomes Keith, Koga becomes Kora, and they move around under whichever last name suits them best.

From Phoenix to Everett to Guadalajara to Flores to Valdivia to Wellington. From Sydney to Jafna to Tokyo to Tianjin to Mumbai to Awasa. From Cairo to Astana to Zlatoust to Helsinki to Copenhagen before backpacking over Europe. From Lisbon to Reykjavik to Ottawa to Fargo to Nassau all the way back to Phoenix again. They steal and gamble and swindle and win fair and square their place, their money, their lives, their luck.

But, stolen luck runs out.

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The first hint something might be going wrong is when Keith's mother walks him back to the cairn in the middle of the desert with a bag full of supplies and a tired but proud look in her eyes. She slings the bag back off her shoulder once they've walked another fifteen minutes past the Quintessenal Burial site, setting it down and spreading it all around her. It's made for a small survival shelter, but there are some things in there that are meant for slightly heavier building.

“Mother?” Keith asks, hands already working to fit together two of the components, “What are we doing out here?”

Kora looks up at the sun, far on the horizon, eyes shifting just slightly so she can look at it properly without hurting them. “My little dove, I know you can tell.” Her smile is sad and wistful, and she looks out in the distance, casting her gaze to the horizon where stars will be appearing soon, “My Quintessence isn't what it used to be, darling. I'm fading.”
Keith knows. He's known for a while. It doesn't make it any easier.

Kora hesitates, “The Mantle passed to you long ago. You hold the position of High Priest, now. You know how that works as well as me.” Of course he does. It's old blood magic, once it passes down, it starts to pull and ravel the previous Mages' Quintessence into the fabric, into the very core of the position, marking it as the end of an era. “But...” Her voice is small as she takes out a small bracelet, made from Galran Platinum, made from the ship they burned, “If you ever forget me, forget your father, forget yourself, this will guide you. Trust it, Kaljeet. I put all of your memories in it, for safekeeping, as many of your father's as I could scrounge, and all of mine.”

The band slips easily onto his wrist, conforming around his fingers and bones, moving out of the way to rest comfortably right below the slightly stuck out portions of the bone. Galran Platinum is unique in that way, conforming how you want it to, where you want it to, and with heavy amounts of Quintessence, it has some incredible properties. He can feel the Quintessence, the almost intoxicating feel of it, radiating off of the three dangling charms. One is made from Human Silver, the next from Altean Gold, the last from Galran Luxite, all holding memories.

Kora puts a kiss on his forehead, braids slowly turning red from their isolation. She tips his face up with one finger, using the other to wipe away his tears. “Come now, my dove,” she chides gently, tucking a curl of his hair behind his ear, “The past is inescapable, the future is inevitable, the present is a silly lie we tell ourselves. We might as well make that silly lie something good, yes?” Keith nods tearfully, and Kora gives a hidden, sage smile back. “Good.” She grabs a hammer and a few planks of wood, Quintessence spinning around her, “Now come, we have a sanctuary to build.”

Magic lights the sky in a little patch of desert in the middle of the nowhere, and Keith cherishes every last piece.

They finally finish the shack after a week of work, dropping all pretense of disguise for the first time in forever. Kora's silver Marks are dimmer than normal, contrasting against her dark skin beautifully, like a dying star. Her ears are as sharp as ever, her wild red hair a riot of curls once she releases it from her braids. Her eyes are sharp, cutting violet, lancing sparks of deep plum arcing through them.

Keith's deep scarlet marks are vibrant and bright, glowing heatedly in the gorgeous starsets, the pattern cutting even sharper than before. His first set of ears are curved and pointed with beautiful poise, his second set like a lynx's, his hair wilder and more untamed than ever. His eyes blue like the sky and silver like his mother's marks, cutting and calculating, yellow sparks of electricity
running across the rims of his irises.

Every night before bed, Kora infuses more of her memories into Keith's charm for her and kisses him on the forehead as a goodnight. Every morning they hunt and eat together, and Kora takes a brush and attempts to tame both his and her mess of curls. Kora takes up what his father teaches him, shows him how to let the world guide his actions, with some personal control in case worst comes to worst and he has to fight a Druid, or an entire Coven.

They reach the limit of the Altean history she knows, and both of them launch into Earthen history, learning their battle strategies because if they ever go back out into the Great Beyond – if Keith does, Kora would just slow him down – they want to be prepared for using unexpected tactics, also learning about dictators and what makes a good leader. They educate them on the various different kinds of government and people, quickly adapting to the new scheme of things. Kora manages to secure a way onto the Internet, and they lose themselves on Wikipedia binges, a nightly exercise for them now, discovering all that they can.

Kora, after some trial and error and possibly freaking out some very important people in some very important places, learns how to hack into Earthen systems with laughable ease. She ruffles his hair as she teaches him, her Quintessence slowly dripping away, but the fire in her eyes and the determination in the set of her jaw never once going away.

They fight, blaster to blaster, sword to sword, blaster to sword and so on and so forth, dual wielding in various combinations and a fair amount unarmed. They learn together, through tutorials on the Internet and painful practice, until they can hold their own unarmed against someone with a blaster. They learn in bruises and scorch marks and scars that so easily fade, they make their own challenges and create others, they live and learn and love.

Every night they stare up at the stars, and wonder.

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For the second time, they are reborn in a desert, amid sand and spires, in a land made of trial and error, with nothing but a paradise they built with their own hands to protect them. They rise from the ashes with hopeful promises and furious determination, with pale scars and calloused hands, with hearts made of fire and minds made of steel.

And they are reawakened with fresh tears.
They are out exploring when Keith feels it.

There’s really no way to describe it, just a wave of power when his feet touch onto one particular patch of sand, a punch in the gut, a gust of wind whirling and swirling around his feet, a bright blue surge of electricity shivering up his form. A presence brushes against his mind, inspects his Quintessence, and rumbles in dismissal.

He’s not what it looks for.

But he’s something close enough for it to be interested.

“Who are you?” he whispers, and red wraps around his wrists, pulling him into a vision. Five becoming one, metal against metal, a whole forming itself from slivers, eyes glowing from a black helmet, red and green swinging around with a blaster in one bulky hand and a blade in the other, blue and yellow springing away from the ground.

Voltron.

He follows the whispers, the visions, and Kora follows him, until it leads him to caves in the cliffside. It’s small and dark, but he shifts himself until his hair is like a Deitrian, bioluminescent curls lighting up the cavern enough that they can see their surroundings.

The walls around them are covered, inch for inch, foot for foot, in blue lions.

Kora gasps and presses a hand to one gently, hesitantly. Officially, she's still High Priestess of Altea, even though the mantle has passed on and her Quintessence is fading, so the carvings and paintings react to her, but not as they would to their Paladin. They don't spark, don't open the trapdoor in the stone of the floor, but they glow lightly, edged in silver, and prance around.

In the wake of their footsteps, silver Altetian sprouts up, runes for protection, guidance, activation, shielding, trust, and most importantly, loyalty. It's a cave for Blue Lion, through and through.
Kora and Keith start to do their monthly prayers in the cave, impassive Lions guarding them.

+  

Keith is edging on eleven when his world, poised for the inevitability of crumbling, shatters in one, single moment.

They are both away from the shack, changed skins layered on thick, since many of the Galaxy Garrison are in the area, and any slight slips that mean they might be something other than human could spell the end. His mother is on his left in the car they rented from someone who looked older than the mountain peaks in the distance. She's a very good driver, all things considered.

They drive through the town at a sedate pace, casually ignoring the few speed signs they come across. After all, Alteans even adapt to some of the common habits of the race they imitate, including using speed limits more like guidelines than anything else.

They're going through an intersection in Tempe when it happens.

A car – filled with far too many drunk teens – barrels past a red light, lights off, disaster inevitable, licenses questionable, and hits the left side of the car in a sick parody of crumpling tin foil.

The squeal of tires.

The crunch of metal.

A bang of something else hitting them.

A gasping, dying breath.

Darkness.
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Tuthoie - a particularly dumb species of alien that looks like elephants
Caihten - the space equivalent of cows or pigs, meant purely for resources

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Jepis - Agriculture provider, Galra controlled

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'deka/diko/daku - Altean terms for close relations, in order platonic/familial/romantic
Jeesau - an informal farewell in Altean, somewhat equivalent to see you later
Makksaula - the highly formal farewell, used by diplomats, ambassadors, royalty, ect.
Elquae - the fancy court way to say hypocrite

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Blue/Intuition/Sammy - Bolded Italic Speech - Code L4P239
Leo/Castle - Arrow Bolded Italic Speech
When he comes to, machines beep around him, something thick and heavy laying over his skin, begging to be removed. Some feral, possessive part of him snarls back that they can't, that it isn't safe.

He listens to the animal within.

He tries to think back, think what *happened*, to reach out to some comforting presence when those thoughts turn into sharp, biting pain.

He finds nothing.

He sits there in silence for a while, trying to skirt around the blinding headache that rise when he tries to remember. His skin itches, like he wants to claw it off, but a reasonable side rises up, loneliness but excitement in its voice, tamping down the wild fear that builds in his throat with honeyed words and sweetened promises, just so he doesn't try and take that presence off, take the second skin away.

He accepts.

He reaches for that presence again, the one he knows he should be able to feel, even though he can't and he can't remember why, only that it means safety, means something kind and thoughtful, means something that makes his soul *ache* with the lack of it, even if he can't remember what it is. A soft, feathery kind of being comforts his mind with truth, as bitter as it might be.

He can't remember much of anything.
Vague impressions, slight shadows spreading over his past, hiding something important, some larger piece of himself made of a thousand secrets and whispered wonders. His headache spreads down to his neck, and he flinches back, closing his eyes, a single tear slipping.

He can't remember anything, really, but he knows with certainty this is the first time he's been so alone.

+ 

A woman with bright red lips and heavy eyeshadow comes into the room after he's been cleared for visitors. She holds onto a file in a white-knuckled grip, nails painted scarlet and smiles fake and forced. She tells him his mother is gone.

He tells her he can't remember.

She tells him he's going into the foster system.

He tells her he thinks he's gone there before.

(Planet Dhris, his first covert mission, trying to get a potential asset for Altea Force from one certain family who hosts children frequently. The mission is a success.)

She says they can't find much on him anywhere.

He tells her that's fine. Only the puzzled look on her face shows that he told her that in Russian.

She tells him they can't find his files anywhere.

The two voices in his head supply his name. (But it isn't quite right, is it? Something small, almost imperceptible is missing. He can't remember what.)

She writes his name down as Keith Kogane, leaving the room with meaningless condolences and pity in her eyes.
Some other piece clicks in with the other three he knows, logically breaking everything into comprehensible pieces for him to understand, sympathizing silently in equations and numbers.

The woman leaves Keith alone with fractured thoughts and shattered memories.

+  

Keith leaves the hospital, and he can feel something tugging at him, pulling at him. It begs for him to head west, pleads, but the strong fingers on his shoulders, the nails threatening to bite into the skin through his thin t-shirt keep him walking away from that keening urge, building into a senseless, animalistic roar before quieting.

Not for the first time since he wakes up, he wonders what exactly is wrong with him.

He thinks maybe he'll find answers in the home they're shipping him away to now.

He doesn't.

+

For the third time in his life, Keith Kogane is reborn in the desert, fighting and clawing for every breath, red edging his eyes, even if it's blood this time, rage lighting deep in his chest and howling like a feral beast. He rises from the ashes in a hail of fists and blows, in a masterpiece on his skin made of painted bruises, in furious snarls and rare amounts of peace.

He is revived, for the first time, alone.

+

As long as Keith has known, his head has been a mess, his skin has never felt quite right, his life has been a frenzy of sharks after his blood, and his fascination with the stars has been as endless as the universe.
He can tell that before he Forgot, he had some special connection to the stars. They meant something to him back then, and he makes them mean something now. They are peace, his only solace. The stars change every night, shift just slightly, but even when they disappear they come back eventually. The nights are always more quiet, when he can sneak out to lie on the roof and watch them. They're so far away. Sometimes he wishes he was that far away.

He slowly pieces his thoughts together, up on the rooftops, looking up at the tiny pinpricks of light until his eyes unfocus and the sky starts turning a light shade of purple. He realizes that the five voices in his head aren't other than him, aren't anything foreign. The feral one that shoves him into doing one thing or another, threatens him in staying in his double-skin, that one is Instinct. The peaceable one who sends him encouragement and warns him not to repeat his mistakes, guides him softly, that's Memory. The one that roars at him, begs at him, pokes at him sometimes to tell him to keep close to one kid or another who's also on this scenic trip to a living hell, it's Intuition. The one that shows him the way to the computer of the house, shows him how to do anything he struggles with in quick, sharp instructions, that one is Reasoning. The one that tells him to keep his head down, but also goads him carefully into protecting the ones that still flinch away from the raised hands and venomous words, the one that gently reminds him that innocence is always the first casualty in war and the most important thing to protect, it's Honesty.

Whenever he looks up at those tiny pinpricks of light so hopelessly far away, they whisper as he pieces together the constellations, hoping that they'll drag some of what he Forgot back out with them.

They tell him that soon he'll be among the stars too.

+  

The one family he ever enjoys living with is the Shiroganes. They're good samaritans, not the usual jerks that raise the troubled children and shatter their already tremulous hopes. They have a son who's a few years older than Keith. Aleisha Shirogane had wanted a large family, but a complication in Takashi’s – “Please, call me Shiro!” – birth and the uncertainty of Kaito for a full commitment of adoption led to them fostering children left and right.

Aleisha is an astronomer, and Kaito works in Galaxy Garrison. It's a dream come true for Keith, who no longer has to cover his tracks when he sneaks onto the roof or out into the backyard to watch the stars, since he's often joined by one or some combination of the Shiroganes regardless.

For the first time since he Forgot, he knows what he wants to do with his life.
He researches Galaxy Garrison, the tuition required, the requirements in general, what he needs to
do to get there, and in his mind five voices purr. His fingers itch for the controls of a fighter ship,
and he discovers he can make the irritation stop by pulling his sleeves down until he can ball them
around his fists.

His friendship with Shiro is solidified when he throws a pair of fingerless black gloves that stop
the itch at Keith and tells him to keep them. Memory likes Shiro, and the other four respect him
well enough.

Instinct, the one he's the closest to, tells him to keep close. Keith doesn't argue.

Keith looks up at the stars, curls his hands into fists, and sets his mind resolutely to the task at
hand.

+ 

Shiro finds Keith staring at the almost-fully completed paperwork for signing his life away to
Garrison. Keith is nervously twisting the pencil around in his grip, almost poising it over the place
that he puts his signature on before backing out again.

“Can't decide, huh?” Shiro says, breaking the silence and watching Keith twist around in surprise
and twitch his ears back in a weird way that Shiro can't figure out,“I couldn't really either.”


Shiro sits down on the edge of Keith's bed, reaching over and pulling the kid to his side, using the
other hand to ruffle his hair, “Let me tell you. You are going to want to cry, scream, pull your hair
out, guzzle an entire coffee pot before taking on the entire state of Arizona, and eat your roomate's
socks to prove a point, but is it worth it? Hell yes, it is.”

Keith nods resolutely, “Then I want to do it.” He reaches down with his pencil before Shiro
reaches out and stops him.

“Now hold on. This is a big commitment.” Keith scowls up at him, “I know, I know, I'm a
hypocrite, but hold onto it for a little bit. Until you're absolutely certain. Remember, patience yields
focus.” Keith relents and nods, setting the pencil to the side and folding up the entrance form,
“Good. I fully expect you to mop the floor with your classmates when you do decide to join.”

“When would you expect any less?”

Keith is over halfway through fourteen when Kerberos happens. The Shioganes, in their infinite kindness and because they like him, host him up until a week before the incident. Shiro says two goodbyes to him, one for leaving the house, one for leaving for space. Keith pulls him into a tight hug and walks out to the idling car in the street, bag slung over his shoulder, gloves pulled tightly onto his hands.

The Johnsons are an abrupt shift from the Shioganes, but the radio is always on, so Keith at least knows what's happening in the outside world.

When the report comes in, the music on the channel is interrupted, and Keith is annoyed for a second, cocking an ear to listen over the loud spray of water running over the dishes he's cleaning. Kerberos, he hears, all reported dead, they say, *Pilot Error*, reads the official statement.

A glass falls from nerveless fingers and shatters on the floor.

*Takashi Shiogane, Matt Holt, Samuel Holt, all confirmed dead.*

Even the shrieks of Evelyn Johnson don't hurt his ears more than that.

*Kerberos Mission is a failure.*

Her husband punishes him, but Keith is trapped in his own mind.

*Cause of crash...*

They lock him in his room and he runs his mind over that, just as he runs his fingers over the quickly forming bruises.
Pilot Error.

But Reasoning tells him that Shiro could never make an idiotic mistake like that. Memory supplies him with Shiro's flying scores, the highest in class. Intuition denies it sharply, hissing and spitting that it isn't right, that it isn't true. Honesty is angry at the lies that the radio told him, explains to him that deceit is heavy in their words. Instinct is pushing him, a bloodhound on a trail of scarlet, suggests with that tingling feeling in his stomach that what they tell is fiction at best.

So, with resolution in his eyes, he clicks a pen and writes his name on the next chapter of his life.

Chapter End Notes

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Alrighty then. Hope you people like this one.

I don't own Voltron or this original idea. I am a dirty thief.

He walks through the gates of the campus for Galaxy Garrison, the itch in his hands excited by proximity to so many spacecrafts. He's just shy of fifteen, steel as his backbone, gloves covering his palms, five voices howling in approval in his mind, and unshakable determination in his eyes.

Around him, people laugh, giggle, gasp, and joke. He hears a few people around him cracking jokes about his hairstyle, because he hadn't got the chance to cut it and by the time he had the means and freedom, it was already long enough to stay out of his eyes serviceably.

Around him, he casts his gaze out, looking for the ones either being quiet or having meaningful conversations. He zeroes in on one, a boy with sandy hair, back to him, and tilts his head curiously. The other kid turns around and Keith chokes on air.

Because that is Matthew Holt, through and through, from haircut to eyes to face shape. Reasoning purrs happily, prompting Keith not to consider the similarities, but the differences. The smile a crooked smirk instead of Matt's toothy grin, jawline just slightly off, a few inches too short, no spark of recognition when he locks gazes with Keith.

He searches with Memory, and finds a photo Matt showed him once, of him and his twin sister. They almost looked the same, Matt once said as children they used the same haircut to scare the everloving hell out of the kids at school by double-teaming them.

The twin walks up, extending a hand, “Pidge Gunderson, nice to meet you.”

Keith shakes it, and Reasoning hums. “Nice to meet you, too.” He says, then drops his voice lower and quieter, “Ms. Holt.” Her eyes widen in panic, but Keith smiles a little tiredly, “Don't worry. I knew your brother, only reason I knew why. Your secret's safe with me.” Pidge relaxes just slightly, still a little tense, and Keith takes pity on her, “Look, word of advice, choose the loudest talker or the kindest person as your Assigned. One is too absorbed to notice much, the other is too nice to spill the beans.” With those words of wisdom, he holds his backpack with one hand and
starts off, “See you around, Pidge.”

He walks into the Orientation Building, and brown eyes follow him.

+  

He walks into the flight simulator, the first one he's been in, the one that will determine which instructor he'll be assigned under, and muscle memory guides him. Something that he's kept hidden under layers of Forgotten memories lights up and reaches out, and suddenly he knows what every button does, which piece of code controls the AI enemies, what requirements and limitations the simulator puts on those controlling it.

He glides smoothly to the seat, one hand ghosting over the back to get a feel for it. The chair is far from comfortable, but it's... familiar. He takes both gloves off, shoving them in his pockets, and puts hesitant fingers to the controls.

It's like fireworks are lighting from his fingers and up his spine. What he might have felt before, that sense of familiarity, that knowledge of the controls increases tenfold, and for a second his mind stutters, the five presences holding him up.

And then, a perfect moment of pure clarity.

His lips curl up in a smile and his hands tighten against the controls, the simulator starting up. One hand manipulates the stick, the other one taps on buttons and readjusts dials, occasionally switching between the two, sometimes using both for the same task. He whirls and spins and dives. He lands perfectly and shoots to kill, and they have to take him off the simulator so the others can have their turn.

As he leaves, he can see Pidge coming out of her own challenge, flicking a mini screwdriver across her knuckles smugly, a few others in the tech division gaping. He can feel the weight of similar gazes against his back as they shuttle the next person into the simulator, meeting the eyes of one gaping brown-haired boy around his age who immediately turns his open mouth to a mix of a scowl and pout. Intuition purrs, so Keith smirks back at him, and goes back down the hallway they all came from.

Pidge joins him, adjusting her glasses and smirking widely. At that thought, Keith Remembers something. Someone he used to know never liked being stuffed into the general names of their
species, preferring to use something else instead. “Hey, Pidge,” He starts conversationally, “Any particular pronouns you want me to use?”

Pidge stops, as if she's never considered that, tongue rolling around in her mouth, opening and closing it for a little bit. “They.” They decide, “They/them. That kind of stuff works, I guess. I'm not he, I don't think. I'm not quite she either. Yeah, they works.”

Keith starts walking again, “Cool. Well, see you around. Hope you get assigned to me after all of this is done and overwith.”

“Yes, me too. The pair I'm going for... well, one of them is the nicest guy you'll ever meet, but he's super motion sick. I feel bad for him, but kinda his fault for signing up to a space exploration gig.” They laugh, hands nervously running through their hair, “The other one, the one that was gaping at you earlier. Kind of self-absorbed, super clingy, but he's also really loyal, and he treats his little sisters like goddesses.”

Keith laughs, “Yeah, they haven't assigned me yet. Kind of wo-” Keith stops walking, Intuition calling to him again. It's much stronger than it ever was before he Forgot, and he does a sharp about face to stare behind him. He watches as the guy Intuition liked earlier goes back down the hall, muttering and making gestures to a heavyset guy next to him that makes Honesty laugh and trill happily before they round a corner.

The itching starts up again and he startles, digging back into his pockets and grabbing his gloves, slipping them back on. Pidge looks at them curiously, “I noticed those earlier. Any reason why you wear them?” It's a purely curious question, but he gets nervous enough that Honesty curls warningly around his mind.

“I- when I was a kid, I got into a car crash. My thoughts got a little... well, scattered I guess. Memories, stuff like that.” Memory curls around him, flinching away from something that isn't him, distinctly troubled by some outside force, “My hands kept itching for something that wasn't there. Still don't know what that is. The gloves help stabilize me.”

Pidge nods, and the two start walking back again, “Yeah, when K-kerberos happened, I tried hacking Iverson to figure out what was going on. Got myself banned and everything. Matt gave me these glasses before he left, they got me to see more of reality. Got me to sign up for Garrison and everything. They ground me, which is ironic, since they're going to get me up into space.” Keith smiles and laughs quietly, and Pidge tilts their head in question, “How did you know my brother anyway? You said that was how you recognized me.”
Keith bites his lip, considering, before quietly admitting, “Shiro gave me the gloves.”

Pidge deflates slightly, horrified look creeping onto their face, “Oh.” they whisper, “Oh. Oh my god, I'm so sorry.” They hesitate, “For what it's worth, from what little I remember, he was a cool guy.”

“Is.” Keith corrects mildly, tugging his gloves on a little more secure, “I don't think he's dead. His test scores were too high to die of damn pilot error.” He spits those last words like poison.

Pidge brightens up, “You think so too, huh?” they glance at the wall clock and sigh, “Aw, dangit. See you later, Keith. I need to go hack the registrar so I can get myself roped in with those two losers. See ya!” They wink and wave, and Keith waves back.

Intuition never stops tugging for him to walk out, walk toward something else, but it's quieter.

+

The dude who gaped at Keith before is called Lance. He can tell from the scoreboard, which ranks Keith the highest by a margin of a couple thousand points. Lance is just below the threshold for fighter pilots, in the dangerous limbo between the esteem of being a Fighter and the dismal, paper-pushing job of being a Cargo.

Lance. He tells himself, and locks that name up in the secure claws of Memory at Intuition's insistence. He wipes the floor with everyone, just like he promised Shiro, day after day, until everyone learns to bring something to do while they wait for the allotted half hour to pass for Keith's simulation. The team they assign to him is utterly, completely average, at least until Keith gets his hands on them. From then on he hardly needs to order them to do something before they're already doing it.

Pidge shares glances, smiles, and waves with Keith, before Lance sidles up next to them to talk about himself. The guy Honesty liked is called Hunk. He's also on Pidge's team.

Keith loses himself to the rhythm of Garrison, the constant routine, rarely broken by something. Each day blends into the next.

Keith gets bored.
Keith gets fed up with Iverson's constant denial of Kerberos.

Keith gets restless.

Keith gets angry with Garrison's dismissal of Shiro.

Keith gets reckless.

Keith gets... curious.

Keith does something monumentally stupid. He decides to follow in Pidge's footsteps and hack Iverson, if not to find proof then to rain the terror of hell down.

Keith gets caught.

Keith gets expelled.

Keith gets a lot more than what he bargained for.

He walks out of Garrison just before he hits seventeen with a savage smile on his face, whispers behind his back, eyes pinned to him, and five voices chanting, leaving him a trail.

So, for the first time since he's felt it, he follows it.

He steals some idiot's hoverbike – what, it's not his fault that they left it idling, keys in and everything, they were practically begging for someone to... acquisition it – and drives out into the desert, following the purring trail Intuition left, replacing it with the growl of his engine. The sand whips around, shifts, slides, floats, glides. It's formless, shapeless, one vast machine made of a million tiny components. It's mesmerizing, in a strange way.
He goes over the sand dunes easily, curious as he follows Intuition's instructions. It's a cliff face, pockmarked with caves, and the second Keith hops off of the bright red bike, he feels it.

For the second time in his life, he can't quite explain the feeling that sparks across his veins. It's coming back to a home he never remembered he had, taking a breath of air after being submerged, a smile and a sharp word of warning. It's... *something*, so it's more than he thought he'd get, and it's beautiful.

Intuition purrs, and he can feel it through the ground, rumbling through the sand and twining through his bones lovingly, making the top layer of sand tremble and shift just slightly.

Maybe Intuition brought him here, but Instinct guides him to one of the many caves. Inside, there are drawings of lions, painted in blue. They edge in red when he touches them, and he stumbles back when they start moving. One looks down at him with silver eyes, and he-

Remembers.

He Remembers a woman by his side, head shrouded, red locks falling in front of her face, chanting words in a language that tingles the end of his tongue. He can hear himself repeating them. He... can't Remember why.


He sits on the ground, trying to make sense of the swirling mess of memories that Remembering that one piece brought back. He sits on the ground, a lyrical language stumbling and tripping from his lips, and catches up on almost five years of confessions and prayers.

Chapter End Notes

In the process of making this, I had to make myself a dictionary of terms and names and words. I will probably wind up editing this a whole ton, but this is what my
Random Facts:
Prophet - Thace's battleship
Sherrite - Holographic projecting material
Fortitude - Sendak and Haxus' battleship
Oreyu the Glorious - Powerful mind mage

Primordeities:
Luxis - Deity of Quintessence - Keith - Battle
Mikora - Deity of Fate - Shiro - Justice
Faevro - Deity of Time - Coran - Prophecy
Arkien - Deity of Psyche - Hunk - Peace
Vakyr - Deity of Crossroads - Lance - Change
Kalfe - Deity of Beginnings - Pidge - Knowledge
Seltaix - Deity of Turmoil - Allura - Love
Meister - Deity of Inevitability - Death

Various Lesser Deities:
Samtal - Goddess of Change - Vakyr
Caitius - God of Love - Seltaix
Doshye - Goddess of Knowledge - Kalfe
Xera - Goddess of Battle - Luxis
Proem - God of Justice - Mikora
Morais - God of Prophecy - Faevro
Festian - God of Peace - Arkien
Griemm - Spirit of Death - Meister
Vohre - Spirit of Luck - Unaffiliated

Alien Species:
Derytl - Common species with initiation scars
Ceryllian - ???
Petuqa - ???
Deitrian - Bioluminescent hair
Guishatch - ??? They attack????
Venomous Krygia - Name vaguely self-explanatory
Molretp - A high-intelligence species of hoarders
Tuthoie - a particularly dumb species of alien that looks like elephants

Alien Planets:
Duskeri - Keith's Home Planet
Jepis - Agriculture provider, Galra controlled

Alien Words:
Scheila - Galran for kitten
Aeksi - Altean species of bird
Kaljeet - Altean pet name roughly translating to darling
Maman/Fethar - Parental titles in Galran
Spacer - Nickname for someone visiting the planet/foreigner
Kaidel - First daughter
Shrieqq - Adversary
Ghyekip - Medic
Ksepoth - Mechanic
Keyaah - Altean honorific for someone younger than the speaker
Makkel/Makkesh - The highest honorary title in Altean, like your Majesty/Highness
Vrepiit sa - Glory to, Galran, same order of words. Greeting and farewell in Empire controlled areas.
Lesha Shriemm - Altean for 'little fighter'in the same order of words.
Koreth - Altean honorific for someone older than the speaker
Yaleith - Altean for chaser
Mieosaula - Galran mourning term, followed typically by:
'deka/diko/daku - Galran terms for close relations, in order platonic/familial/romantic

Titles:
Grandmaster - Balmeran, the eldest and most powerful of the clan
High Priest(ess) - Altean, genetic and passed down through generations, the most powerful mage out there
High Court - Ruled by the High Priest(ess), a gathering of the most powerful mages
Mage - The standard term for a graduated Quintessence user
Acolyte - Magically sensitive, learning
Druid - A disowned Altean still practicing magic, usually with a Coven of magically sensitive members

Kin Mark Meanings:
Red - Ferocity
Pink - Love
Blue - Loyalty
Green - Ingenuity
Yellow - Kindness
Orange - Luck
Silver - Power
Gray - Change
White - Purity
Black - Misfortune
Purple - Defiance
Brown - Stability

Previous Paladins:
Zarkon - Black Paladin
Merial - Red Paladin
Neimao - Blue Paladin
Sekhet - Green Paladin
Eiril - Yellow Paladin

Lions:
Black/Memory/Priest - Shadowed Underline Bold Speech
Green/Reasoning/Ophelia - Bolded Italic Overline Speech
Yellow/Honesty/Icarus - Bolded Italic Underline Speech
Red/Instinct/Eris - Bolded Speech
Blue/Intuition/Sammy - Bolded Italic Speech - Code L4P239
Leo/Castle - Bolded Italic Outline Speech
Going Through The Motions

Chapter Notes

Uh. *background screaming*

Yes.

He picks himself up from a crumpled mess on the floor, the lions on the wall all guarding him carefully. He can tell the runes they track behind them are protective, safe, careful, but even though they tickle the back of his mind, he can't quite read them.

Instinct is guiding him this time as he hops onto his newly acquired hoverbike, the growls and hisses leading him farther away from the caves and further into the desert. As he gets closer to whatever Instinct is guiding him towards, he can feel something else tugging him too, something other than the five voices pulling him gently, unlike the unerring, forceful shoves and incessant hauling of Instinct.

Instinct leads him to a toppled cairn, runes carved into the rocks. Grains of sand dust them, but they're remarkably well intact for something that's been there for so long. Over nine years. Memory tells him, and leaves it at that. The wind blows the sand off of one of the rocks, and the words come to his lips. “Kaidel.” He can translate it too. First daughter. He doesn't know why he knows it, or why he can see it, but he knows.


He reaches down to pick up one of the stones when the wind blows once more, obscuring them again with sand and carrying a scent of familiarity. It's like the world itself is trying to lead him, tug him closer to something. It tells him not yet, little cub, and pulls him closer to an ultimate goal. Instinct surrenders to the presence, so Keith follows it.

He follows it to a shack in the middle of nowhere.

It's dilapidated, obviously been abandoned for a while. Six years. Memory whispers. It looks pretty bad, but there isn't any graffiti on it, and the sand seems to be oddly calm in a fairly wide circle around the building. Slowly, deliberately, Keith steps off the bike and jumps into the circle of
perfectly still sand.

There's a tingling sensation, like an army of ants is trying to climb its way over his skin, but it disappears as soon as it started. Honesty purrs softly, nudging him closer toward the shack, and Keith lets himself be guided.

The door creaks on rusted hinges, but opens all the same. That same feeling that sparks to life whenever he steps into the simulator reaches out and probes the area. Unlike when he's done with flying, it doesn't retreat, doesn't fall back into whatever dark hole, whichever aching gap in his memories it hides under. It stays right under his skin, sparking and alive, roving in his veins and testing the air.

He watches in horrified fascination as red coalesces over his palm, strands of silver tangled in with the scarlet, strings of the mixed power breaking off to probe around the shack, nestling in the dark corners and brightening them up, swirling in hypnotizing circles and removing the dust. When it's done, the roof rights itself, all of the dust and sand is gone, the clock on the wall is working, the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling is glowing brightly, and the windows are perfectly clean.


After he gets over whatever the hell that was seriously what, he uses shaking fingers to touch the red and silver still floating above his left palm. It's calm and cold against his hand, wrapping around his wrist gently. It feels like Instinct and something else, something heartbreakingly familiar and full of ancient power. “What the hell.” he whispers, and clenches his fist. The power winks out, but he can see it crackling over his fingertips before descending back under his skin. “What the fuck.”

Reasoning shrugs, Instinct, Intuition and Honesty laugh, and Memory purrs excitedly.

Keith is so very confused.

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He's cleaning up the shack, not trusting whatever freaky magic he used earlier, when he finds it. It's a small knapsack, made of some unfamiliar black material, latch closed and held with an unfamiliar symbol. Curiosity is going to be the death of me, he thinks as he grabs it and unlatches it, digging around and pulling out everything in it. There's a folded piece of red fabric, embroidered
with gold and white in enthralling patterns, there's a dagger with that same symbol on the bag on it, a gray bracelet with two silver charms and one gold, and a weird modified kind of gun.

The red fabric sings to him, the dagger reaches out, the bracelet waits patiently, and the gun – Blaster Model X83K1 – is thirsting to rest in his grip. He grabs the dagger, flipping it end over end and catching it as it falls back toward his hand from pure muscle memory. He blinks owlishly at it, setting it down on the coffee table and grabbing the blaster, flicking off the safety and floating his fingers over it, silver sparks dancing and telling him everything is fine before retreating back to the wells of power in his palms. That one joins the dagger on the table.

The embroidered piece of fabric is next. It's long, unfurling into a cloak embroidered with symbols and runes he should know, but doesn't. It's stiff cloth, but it feels... malleable? Of course, life isn't exactly being logical for him, so he decides to roundhouse kick caution into a tornado. He closes his eyes, and thinks of blending in, something no one will bother to look at, bother to examine. He follows a precedent he knows he's been using for almost eight years.

He opens his eyes, and pulls his new red and white jacket on. It fits perfectly, makes the power inside of him sing in perfect harmony. The outside is simple, unassuming, but the inside is patterned with those same runes and sigils that the original cape had, running together in a flowing, incomprehensible, chaotic dance.

Keith sighs and leans against the side of the cabin, pinching the bridge of his nose and wondering when this became his life.

The funny thing is, after all of the insane stuff happening in such a short amount of time, everything starts going normal. The weird magic is there, but it never bothers him. It scans his surroundings, lets him know what's going on, cleans his house and guides him with a much softer hand than any of the five. His weird jacket holds heat if he needs it to, but other than that it acts like it isn't even there. Needless to say, he loves both things, even though he can't understand them.

He visits Intuition's cave as much as possible, bringing with the marked dagger and his jacket, which seems to make Intuition purr all the louder. Instinct tells him to wrap the handle of his dagger, Reasoning explaining that it's a dangerous thing to flaunt around, even if it won't tell him why.

Every time he goes in, he touches the first lion marking, and it sparks with silver at the edges. It questions him, asking if he wants to leave, but he never does. He always feels like something is
missing, and Intuition always agrees, but asks anyway.

A tree starts growing in his backyard impossibly, especially since there's nothing but sand around for miles, and he never even planted one. He doesn't even water it, but it keeps reaching up and up toward the sky, and Keith isn't going to stop it if it's that determined. He does notice that sometimes that same silver and red he has to keep hidden under his gloves whispers through the branches.

The bracelet is still in the bag. It doesn't feel exactly like his, but it doesn't feel like anyone else's either. Honesty tells him it isn't time. Memory agrees half-heartedly, and Reasoning smirks.

The cacti by his house are scorched and chopped to pieces, given his daily routine of using the knife and blaster as much as possible, tapping in on memories he can't remember. The rocks have some score marks and pitted, scarred pieces scattered in chunks.

Some voice in his mind tells him that he fights like a Galran soldier.

*Good,* he savagely thinks back.
Walk Backwards Into Hell

He's been at it for almost a year when he feels it. All five voices call, yell, shove and push and crow in jagged victory. His head snaps up, breath catching in his throat as Memory whispers *Shiro, Shiro, Shiro*, the other four slowly joining the chant until it's a quiet, nagging chorus running in his head. Without pausing, he snatches his dagger and blaster, grabbing a bandanna and leaps onto his hoverbike.

Instinct sets a razor sharp trail, and he pushes his bike as fast as it can go, red energy leaking from under his gloves to coax a little more out of the engine, while the silver masks the sound. Memory keens, Reasoning shivers, Honesty bounds around, Instinct grins, and Intuition's excited energy bleeds through until Keith has adrenaline running through his veins a mile a minute.

When he sees the glowing, glaringly bright lights of Garrison, his stomach flops, but Instinct doesn't force him toward it, and Intuition tells him to go behind one of the cliffs. He watches and waits with bated breath, hands itching as red forms the same scarlet globes above his hands that it always does.

And then Iverson's voice rings and bellows, reaching even his hiding place, “ATTENTION, STUDENTS! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! WE ARE ON LOCKDOWN! SECURITY SITUATION ZULU-DELTA-NINER! REPEAT, ALL STUDENTS ARE TO REMAIN IN BARRACKS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE!” Keith groans and buries his face in his hands, because that right there is an invitation for any student with enough curiosity and sheer stupidity to immediately go figure out what the hell is going on. In fact, as Memory supplies him with a name he would've forgotten otherwise, this is the perfect bait for one Lance McClain, and probably Pidge too. Idiots.

His head shoots up as a crackling, roaring sound emanates from the sky, watching in hushed awe as a spaceship – Galran Model 2384K, not Galaxy Garrison's, not even Earth's – crashes from the sky. Memory shrieks in happiness the second it falls to the ground with a crunch of metal, and the others roar their approval.

Keith watches as they take something from the ship, dragging it inside a tent, and Intuition starts shoving him toward it, eagerly and angrily. “Okay, okay,” He whispers as the silver covers him again and he maneuvers the bike closer to the tents. He can hear Memory purring in a very, very familiar way, but he doesn't dare let himself hope, in case it gets ripped away. He knows Shiro is alive from all five voices, but he doesn't want to be wrong.

He watches and waits, hoping to find a weak spot, but doesn't. He scowls, thinking through plans, dismissing each as they come, but doesn't stop thinking until he comes to the final conclusion. He needs a distraction. He smiles, and scarlet bursts from his hands, silver twining through to keep it hidden as it gleefully heads for some supply containers farther out.
It questions for a second, then dives down, and suddenly that entire area blows up. He smirks and tugs up the scarf to cover his mouth and nose, blaster and knife still in their holsters as he ducks into the main tent, dodging the guards nimbly with quick moves and a fair amount of silver cloaking him. The doors open, three scientist looming over a table, and only Memory's screeches and Honesty's warnings keep him from unleashing the red building under his gloves.

Instead, he decks the first one, flips the second, and shoves the last one into a table.

He doesn't dare to hope until he gets to the top of the table, turning the head of the unconscious man on the dais. That tuft of white hair is new, same as the scar across the bridge of his nose and—oh no, that's a metal—*Ivorian Steel, Luxite compound*—arm. Memory roars ecstatically, and Keith smiles, grabbing his knife out of its sheath and cutting the bands holding Shiro to the table. He's out cold, and Keith can tell he'll need more time to get him all the way out to the speeder. His left hand stretches out, and he's gathering red energy in his palm, when sharp barks of ecstatic warning from Intuition, Reasoning and Honesty make him stop and pull it back under the gloves.

A brown-haired boy bursts through the entrance, and Memory slaps the name on before Keith can get confused. Keith groans, because of course his previous theory would be correct, and of course Lance would come because of sheer curiosity and rebellion.

“Nope, nononononono, I'm saving Shiro!” Lance protests, grabbing Shiro's other arm and glaring at Keith.

“Would it kill you for one second to, I don't know, *not try and blow this entire rescue mission to pieces.“* Keith hisses, a little bit of red escaping from the hand holding Shiro's back to keep the Garrison occupied. “Well, you dragged your lazy butt over here. Come on, we gotta go before the guards get back.”

Lance lets out an indignant, “Hey!” but still pulls his weight in their joint effort to get Shiro out.

Pidge is watching the second set of smaller explosions light the sky as Keith's previous wisps do their job getting into the ammunition stores. “Keith!” They call, and Keith tips his head in acknowledgment, “How the hell did you set this beauty up!” The fiery explosion lights up the lenses of their glasses in manic orange light, and with that crooked smirk they look mildly terrifying.

“You don't want to know!” He calls over his shoulder, and Pidge groans at the unanswered
“Is this thing going to be big enough for all of us?” Pidge frowns.

“No.” Keith replies simply, then guns the engine.

Unfortunately, some of the Garrison have caught on by this point, and there's four cars chasing them. Keith takes a deep breath and makes a sharp turn that wipes out two, then spins around onto an outcropping that takes out another one.

“Um, hey guys?” Hunk says, voice quavering, “Is that a cliff up ahead?”

Everyone immediately starts yelling and screaming, but Keith lets red spark into the bike, letting it know what he wants, letting him see how he can do it. “Yup.” He calls, and a smile starts blossoming on his face. Reasoning and Instinct howl in laughter, Honesty sighs long-sufferingly, and Memory and Intuition are just too happy to care.

So he drives them directly off a cliff.

“Whatareyoudoingyou'regonnakillusall!” Lance shrieks, clutching tight to the tail of the hoverbike.

Keith leans forward a bit more, and his grin is feral and sharp when he growls, “Shut up and trust me, idiot!” Just before they hit, he twists the handlebar and pushes back on the pedal, red sparking the engine higher than normal. They come down in one smooth motion, and Lance is still screaming until a few seconds after they land. “I might be a risk-taker, but I'm not suicidal.” He says off-handedly, and behind him Pidge makes a sound like a strangled cat singing soprano while coughing up a hairball.

They arrive at the shack, and only Reasoning and Honesty's careful warnings keep him from using the red and silver to make sure nothing in the house has changed. He sets his bed and floor and all of his excess blankets as community property, puts Shiro on the couch, and sits in the branches of the tree that impossibly grows and always stays strong.
He maps out the stars again, a habit he never quite wound up shaking off, letting the soothing sounds of the five voices lull him into a sense of peace.

He doesn't realize he's fallen asleep until he wakes up to Shiro's achingly familiar voice calling, “Keith!” Keith shakes his head to clear out the last gossamer webs of sleep, climbing out of the tree quickly, but not jumping because he knows first hand that's a bad thing to do to someone traumatized.

“Hey, Shiro.” Shiro turns around, and Keith gives a feeble smile, “You look horrible.”

Shiro's steel eyes are full of shards of broken glass, and he looks pathetically grateful to see Keith, “I- you- what happened?”

Keith stands next to Shiro, looking out at the sunrise with a smile, “I figured you'd know better than I would. After we got you from Garrison, I shoved you onto to my hoverbike – don't ask how I got one, just know that I have one – and ran it off a cliff back here.”

Shiro smiles, then frowns, then gets stuck with a weird half-grimace half-smirk partway in between, “I'd tell you that was a stupid thing to do if I thought it would still have any effect. I'm guessing you're expelled from Garrison now?”

Keith smirks, “Oh, ye of little faith. I got kicked out almost a year ago. Did you honestly think I'd last more than two years there? It's boring, and you were still alive, and Iverson was being horrible about Kerberos.”

Shiro looks morbidly interested, “How did you get booted?”

Keith laughs drily, “The official report says 'disorderly conduct'. Really, I hacked Iverson and he was too embarrassed that he got hacked by two teenagers on separate occasions to actually admit anything. Now that I think back on it, it would've been satisfying to make it disorderly conduct by punching Iverson. Shame.”

Shiro laughs. They sit in comfortable silence for a while before Keith breaks it, “What do you remember about before you got here?”
Shiro frowns, rubbing his forehead, pushing up the tuft of white hair a little bit more, “I... I can't remember anything, really. It's all scattered, like- like...” Shiro searches for a metaphor, not coming up with one suitable for the situation, and Keith puts a hand on his shoulder, drawing Shiro's attention back down to him.

“It's fine, Shiro,” Keith says softly, rubbing calloused fingertips together in a nervous gesture he never quite managed to kick, “I know how it feels.” He gives a pathetic smile back up, and Shiro seems to deflate.

“...Right, yeah. Sorry, as bad as this sounds-”

“You forgot? It's fine, don't blame you. I forget I had any kind of life before the accident sometimes too.” Keith shrugs, then gives a half-smile, “But hey, at least we can have memory problems together.”

Shiro pulls him into a sideways hug, then pauses before he could ruffle Keith's hair, “How did you find me, anyway?”

Keith looks up to give a crooked grin, “Maybe one day I'll show you. Come on, the others should be getting up soon.”

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Pidge has Lance in a headlock, Lance is attempting to bite Hunk, and Hunk is yelling when they walk back into the shack. “Honestly,” Keith says, completely deadpan, “I'm not surprised. In fact, I'm more wondering how it took this long. What is it this time?”

Pidge glares at the other two, “Hunk went into my room, read my diary and stole a picture of me and my-” they cut themselves off before they can spill the beans, “They breached my privacy!” They shriek, angrily gesturing.

“Hey!” Hunk yells, “To be fair, I don't have an excuse, but I'm going to act like I have one anyway! You're the one who wasn't talking about your free access to alien frequencies!”

“Because you would've thought I was insane!” Pidge snaps.
“To be fair, it did seem kind of far-fetched until Shiro fell out of the sky,” Lance offers, still in a loose chokehold from Pidge, “I mean, Bowl-tongue or whatever, sounds pretty stupid.”

“It’s Voltron!” Pidge defends, “Not Bowl-tongue! Honestly!”


He knows these names.

He tunes into the conversation late, “-But we have no idea where to start! Whatever they're looking for could be anywhere!”

“I know.” Keith mutters, and everyone turns to him.

“I'm sorry, what?” Lance says, eyebrow raised, “You might want to speak up.”

“I know.” Keith says, “I know where we have to go.”
Intuition roars and purrs excitedly as the entire group heads off, not before telling Keith to bring with the bracelet he hasn't gathered up the nerve to put on yet. The blaster and knife are still at his side, his jacket is securely around his shoulders, and his gloves hold in the nagging itch.

Their group of five walk under a ridge and duck into the cave. Again, he has to rein in the silver and red before it goes searching along the walls. “Woah...” Pidge whispers, looking at the carvings and weathered paintings, “How did you find this?”

Keith goes with the simplest answer. “It found me.” They look at him quizzically, and he can feel Intuition purring. Now is the time to leave, he can tell, but he won't be the one activating their route. “Oh, fair warning, don't know what it does for anyone else, but the carvings light up and start moving when I touch them.” They look at him like he's crazy, “No, I am not insane. Watch.”

He presses his fingertips to the closest lion, and silver runs through the chiseled patterns in the stone. The lion shakes its head and starts bounding off, awakening its fellows. “See.” He says bluntly, and everyone else is white as a sheet.

Lance stumbles back, hand touching one of the carvings, and the veins in the rock light blue, spreading around the silver, giving respectful distance. Intuition crows in victory as the floor under them races with twisting patterns of blue, runes familiar but not quite at the forefront of his mind.

Then the floor drops out, and they fall.

Someone, when they created this, must’ve gone straight from 'Let's guard this thing with ancient, powerful magic!' to 'Let's just put in the coolest waterslide we can.' in three seconds flat, because by the time they come out in a giant puddle at the bottom, Keith is thoroughly soaked and not at all having a good time.

He can feel Intuition purring as they get up from their pile on the ground, resonating through the stone physically, sending shivering tremors up his fingers when he pushes himself up.

And then she's there.
He always thought of Intuition as an it, but now that he can see her, he can tell that she's definitely female. She waits with bated breath – or as much as a concept with a sentience possible of reaching all the way over to Keith stuck in a mechanical lion's body can wait with bated breath – As Lance picks his way toward her.

Keith reaches out a hand to rest against the blue barrier, and he can tell Intuition is willing to drop it for him, but he knows that the one she's waiting for isn't him, but rather five feet away from him and very confused. He smirks, and Intuition purrs in his head.

Lance reaches out and knocks against the barrier, and Intuition reaches out to him, reaches out to all of them as she drops the barrier, using the excess power to send a vision.

Memory is the head, the director, the leader, the master. Instinct is the right arm, the most visible, the most active, the warrior. Reasoning is the left arm, the hidden side, the knife in the darkness, the assassin. Intuition is the right leg, the one bounding forward first, the most loyal, the companion. Honesty is the left leg, the most stable, the grounding force, the guardian. They roar together, loud, pulsing, victoriously, viciously, in the vision and in his mind.

Keith smiles, because together they make something beautiful, something powerful.

Hunk breaks the silence with a strangled, “Uh, did everyone see that!? Voltron is a robot! A huge, awesome robot! And this thing is only part of it!! I wonder where the rest of them are!” He starts jumping around, and Pidge is starting to join him.

“All scattered.” it escape Keith's lips before he can stop it, and he decides to dig his grave a bit deeper, “Scattered among the stars. Well, Lance, I believe your ride is waiting for you.”

Intuition hunkers down and opens her mouth like a ramp, letting all five of them climb in, mechanics whirring, and for the first time he can hear her voice. Hop in losers, we're going shopping! Lance climbs into the pilot seat, and with the way Intuition roars, he can tell that the bond is true even before he sees the electric blue wrap onto the impressionable white glowing around Lance's wrists.

Lance busts them directly out of the cliff face, and as soon as they leave the ground, Keith knows with absolute certainty that they won't be coming back for a long, long time. Instead of giving more ammunition to the argument ensuing, he steps away from the pilot seat, sitting down wedged against a wall and pressing a hand to the casing.
Hello? Can you hear me?

*Oh, this is so cool! An actual High Priest, it's been soooo long since one came by! Thanks for letting me and the others into your mind, it was awful lonely down in that cave!*

Uh, you're welcome?

*Oh, aren't you adorable! Anyway, my name's Samtal, but you can just call me Sammy, nerd. I like the Intuition and everything, that's cool, but I like my nicknames better, Capiche?*

Alright...?

*Oh, you might wanna tune back into the conversation. We're about to exit the atmosphere, there's a Galran ship heading toward Earth, and it might get a little rough. See you soon!*

With that, he blinked back into reality just as they finished spiraling up in a blaze of fire, and entered the cold, dark void of space. For one perfect moment, he could see nothing but darkness and stars. He could hear Memory singing happily, and his heart soared, because *this* is it. *This* is why he always stared up at the stars, always felt like he had a connection, always heard the five telling him that he would be with them.

For the first time since he Forgot, he feels like he *belongs*.

And then a warship warps into view, and Keith's blood goes cold. He reaches out and latches onto the wall as the others scream, Lance tilting the ship at a dangerous angle to do something most likely incredibly stupid. Instead of yelling at her pilot, Sammy just roars ecstatically, bounding through the void of space like it's a personal playground.

Lance guns it, and Sammy purrs, hunching forward just a bit more, putting just a little more into the engines. Unfortunately, the ship doesn't want to let them shake it, and follows them, gaining on them a little. Sammy growls unhappily at that, and taps into a source of some hidden piece of Quintessence, a tiny reserve for this purpose alone, opening up a gateway with runes etched on the outside. He recognizes a few, travel, fold, fast, a set of numbers that are probably the coordinates, and homebound.
Sammy urges them, and Lance hesitates, “Uh, guys? I think this thing wants us to go through *that thing*.”

Pidge leans forward, “Where does it go?” Lance shrugs, fingers tapping nervously against the controls, and Pidge turns to Shiro, “Well, Shiro? You're senior officer here.”

Shiro studies the gateway, “I say we trust it, but we're a team.”

Keith offers up his opinion wedged in the corner, far away from the chaos of the cockpit, “We should decide together.”


Lance sighs, casting one pitiful look back, even though the Earth is too far away to see, “Guess we're missing class tomorrow...” Keith doesn't mention that they're probably already expelled.

Sammy purrs, launching forward and straight into the gateway, which closes as soon as her tail passes through, just barely keeping out the ship still following them.

Stars blur, space folding and twisting and Keith tightens his grip on the wall.

They come out over a planet that looks close to Earth, but just a slight bit off. Keith smiles a little devilishly, because now he can feel Memory, energy restless and excited the closer they get.

“I... I don't recognize any of these constellations,” Shiro says with a furrowed brow, “We must be a long way from Earth.”

Lance peers forward, Sammy directing her feelings toward him, “It wants us to go to that planet. I think... I think it's going home!”

Hunk starts going on a longwinded rant about how horrible this idea was and still is, but Keith tunes it out, looking around at the stars and trying to place them.
He stops attempting to piece together constellations when they run through the atmosphere and fly toward a castle in the distance, one that makes Keith's memories tingle with a longing pull, something on the tip of his tongue but never said. It's white stone, covered in overgrown foliage, but it looks regal, magically powerful, some kind of aura surrounding the area. Sammy roars, and five beacons light on the castle in response.

Sammy lands, tense with coiled energy, urging them off as she gears up for something. *Go! Get! You don't have all day, nerds.* Keith is the first to jump out, and the others follow suit cautiously.

Shiro frowns, “Keep your guard up. My crew was captured by aliens once, I'm not letting it happen again.” Behind them, Sammy gets back up from her hunkered position, mischievous energy leaking through.

Hunk screams, “I knew it! I knew it! It's going to eat us!” He flinches back with everyone but Keith as Sammy opens her mouth wide and roars, long and savage, the heavy doors at the front of the castle lighting up with pale blue light. She sits back down, smirking. “Oh. It opened the door.” Hunk turns back to Sammy, “Guess I was wrong about you.”

Keith forges ahead, everyone else following him hesitantly. Pidge frowns at the steps, “That's weird. These steps are too small for the lion...”

Keith puts his foot on the first steps, and silver energy shudders around them in an emanating sphere, shivering up the castle until it reaches the highest points before soaking into the walls. “I don't think they're meant for the Lions.” The plural slips from his lips without thought, and he takes the next few steps two at a time.

The entry hall is a huge, swooping thing, ceiling tall and shadowy above them. A pleasant chime echoes through the castle, silver reverberating up from the ground and into the roof, emanating down as blue. A pleasant voice resounds through the room, “Please wait for identity scan.”

A presence ghosts through Keith, measuring and scanning his Quintessence before zapping away sharply, deflected by the inherited silver burning in his core.

Then the lights down one particular hallway start sparking to life, and Keith tilts his head. That same presence lays down the path in his mind as well, and he walks carefully down, chasing the glimmers of lightning blue down the hallway. The others, like always, follow him with no small amount of trepidation but a reasonable amount of trust.
The room the blue leads them to is dark, and it smiles in his mind as it lights up each lantern in the walls, powering up two particular cells in the ground with careful caution.

Dark shadows lurk, still and stiff behind shields of blue energy, and Keith can feel Sammy's excited energy ripple through the room.

A sliver of blue from the castle rerouts, and the field in front of one of the figures melts.

He barely has time to see the person in the pod before he Remembers.

A face in the mirror, red edged eyes, long ears. Hummed lullabies and a brush running through his hair. Silver marks gleam in the relative darkness behind him, purple eyes sparkling.

A face in the Holos his mother showed, ruddy pink in delicate boomerangs framed with white hair.

Red hair and purple eyes and glowing marks that stretch down a pale face. A soft voice and sharp mind, a delicate presence reaching out to his.

“Princess Allura.” Mother says, “Not on the planetary logs at the end of the war. Who knows, maybe you’ll run into one of her descendants one day.”

Her eyes snap open and she tumbles forward into Lance's arms with a cry of, “Father!” just as Keith stumbles back, heels of his palms pressing to his forehead, trying to block out the noise bursting through his head.

He snaps out of it at a screamed, “Who are you! Where's King Alfor! What are you doing inside my castle!”

Oh god, Keith thinks, because he remembers his own face with those ears and red marks stretching from around his eyes. Oh god, Keith thinks, because he knows the name King Alfor, knows that the words Paladins and Lions and Altea are connected, he just doesn't know why.
That same panicked voice cuts through his terrified, crushing rush of thoughts, “How do you have the Blue Lion! What happened to its Paladin! What are you all doing here?! Unless-” A horrified noise escapes her as she rushes to a control panel, lightning blue energy sparking when it makes contact with her hands, “How long has it been?!“

“Who are you?” Keith croaks, because his mind, usually a comforting lack of everything, a simplistic void, is a swirling, whirling, screaming mass of color and noise and he knows, somewhere in the dark corners of his soul, with the swirling feeling in his gut he's learned to trust after so many years, that he already knows the answer.

She stands higher, cold glint in her eyes, “Princess Allura of Altea.”

Fuck, he thinks, because the chaos in his mind that he's just starting to make sense of has new ammo, a new out of tune string plucked, resonating turmoil.

Memories flash in a discordant mess, leaving him with fleeting glimpses, vague impressions and stilted sounds.

*The sparking flash of an energy blade-*

*A gentle laugh-*

*Howling red-*

*A pool of blood-*

*People made of rock and pure energy chanting-*

*Fire burning their last escape-*

*Yellow eyes filled with laughter-*

*Purple ears flicking backward-*
He yanks himself out of it to see another Altean sharing rapid-fire comebacks with Lance before the computer beeps and Allura covers her mouth with her hands. “No,” she whispers, unbelieving and pained, “We've been asleep for ten thousand years!”

Before his mind can spiral into darkness again, all five original beings and the electric blue humming through the walls reach out, hissing and spitting protectively, herding Keith's mind back together and locking the enclosures, leaving behind the key.

Allura stumbles away from the control panel, hands pushing back into the gently curling locks of white hair, “Planet Altea,” she falters, “and all of the planets in our solar system have been destroyed.” Her long, dark fingers twist in her hair, coming to rest just beside her long, pointed ears. Her eyes snap to the shell shocked Altean with blue marks and orange hair, “Coran...” she murmurs, “Father is gone. Zarkon...”

Shiro flinches back with a small gasp, a memory tickling the edges on conscious thought. “Zarkon?” He blurs, and Allura turns her razor sharp focus to him.

“A vile and wicked creature. The King of the Galra, an enemy to freedom itself.” She spits it accusingly, hands fisting in her dress before she turns back to her control panel, fretting over something or another.

Shiro rubs his left hand over his head, the tuft of white hair springing up defiantly, “I... I remember now. I was his prisoner.”

Allura whirls back around, skirt flaring up around her ankles at the sharp twist of movement, shock, horror, disgust and anger written over her features. “He's still alive?” she seethes, the question harsh and biting, “That's impossible!”

Shiro raises his hands placatingly against this raging force of nature, this furious lioness. “I can't explain it, but it's true. He's searching for a superweapon called Voltron!”

Allura scoffs at that, hands animatedly flying through the air, “Of course he is! He knows it's the only thing that can defeat him!” One hand dances over the controls, the other waves chaotically in the air, “And that,” her smile is borderline vicious as she slams her palm down on one control or
another, blue lightning arcing through the castle sharply, “Is why we have to find it before he does.”

Far away, in the center of the Galran Empire, a Druid shrieks.

Purple lightning abates immediately, and her scowl is fierce, only slightly victorious as she adjusts her hood, keeping her eyes in shadow, her ears hidden, and her Marks obscured. The original cloak was destroyed long ago, before Haggar even came into the position. Her re-creation is the best she’ll ever get, runes sewed from memory, each thread imbued with Quintessence.

Still, she knows it’s not enough.

Whatever spells the original High Court used on their cloaks to maintain the natural, pure magic was long since lost, discarded into the annihilating tides of time. All she has to work with is the perverted Quintessence ripped from other planets, purple and black and yellow and sickly.

She gathers up the folds of her robe in clawed hands, strutting to Zarkon's throne room.

“My Lord,” she dips into a heavy bow, trying to garner as much favor as possible, “The Blue Lion is awake. I believe the others to not be far behind.”

Zarkon sneers, “Do you know where they are headed?”

Haggar dips even lower, “Regrettably, my Lord, I was not able to divine that. The... Presence interfered.” Ah yes, the Presence. Her greatest enemy, for as long as she could remember. Six years ago, the Presence changed, but it was more powerful, for some Luxis forsaken reason.

“Ah yes,” Zarkon rumbles, displeased, “The Presence. Tell me, Haggar, how much longer until your little charade is dropped? The Presence is an excuse for your own incompetence. Commander Sendak already contacted me. He is analyzing the gateway residue now. Take your magic tricks away from this place, Priestess, and come back when you've built me an army and learned some discipline. Am I clear?”
“As Balmeran Crystal.”

“Good. You are dismissed.” Zarkon leans back onto his throne, hands filtering through correspondences coming in from all over his empire.

Gritting her teeth, Haggar spits, “Vrepit sa.” before she leaves, trying to hold her remaining dignity tight.

_One day, one day_, she promises herself as her feet click against the floor, as she passes whimpering prisoners, sneering and hissing at them in turns, taking dull satisfaction in watching them shrink away, whimpering.

_One day, she promises herself, Zarkon will rue the day he chose to spite me._

Vrepit sa indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Haggar is a vengeful little ball of contained sass.
Allura hisses angrily, combing through reports. Vaguely, she can hear Coran trying to coax her into eating something, but she's not in the mood. Having your entire civilization die does that to a person.

The mice from the inside of her cryopod were a nice surprise, but now the novelty has worn off and she's still angry because ten thousand years went by, but for her it's only been a few minutes since the war was at its peak, and all she can feel is betrayal. She sends cursory glances at the five that reawakened the castle, curiously analyzing them to distract from the cold rage.

The green one is hiding something, no doubt. The yellow one seems like someone to watch carefully. The blue one has enough potential for her to be interested. The black one has an Ivorian Steel arm, something to be wary of. The red one... he projects a strange aura of normality, intense enough to make Allura hesitate.

She scowls, finally detaching from the keyboard, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “These are less than ideal conditions, but we will have to make do with what we have.” She gathers up her dress and strides down the hallway with purpose. Her ears flick to catch the conversation happening behind her as she heads toward the hub, watching the electric blue sprout up and dissolve into veins at her every footstep, the Castleship slowly coming to life with her energy.

She walks into the hub room, breath whooshing out of her in one gasp at the utter familiarity of the setup. Nothing has changed, she knows that, but she also knows that ten thousand years have passed. She keeps expecting her father to walk in the door, even though she knows that he's dead. It's much like the last few days before she got frozen, when she kept expecting her mother to come into her room again, taking down her curls and running her fingers and her brush through her fluffy white locks.

She shakes her head, breath coming in shaky but exhaling smoothly. She shakes back her hair, holding her head up high and tilting her chin up, stalking with purpose for the two crystalline pedestals in the center. Her palms rest against the crystals, the Castleship reacting to her Quintessence and pulling up the star maps.

She hears hushed gasps behind her as the planets and stars unfold, but she ignores them, reaching into her Quintessence and tugging. The Lions purr and laugh in her mind, a sharp contrast to her own turmoil, and it feels like they're saying About time. Their dots unfold over the universe, bright and sharp, raring and roaring to go.
She tunes back into the conversation, “-es! The Black Lion was put in the castle for safekeeping, it can only be accessed when all of the other four Lions are present!”

Allura clears her throat, drawing the attention to her, “As you have found, the lions choose their pilots.” She glares at them like they might try something, “It is a mystical bond and cannot be forced. The quintessence of the pilot is mirrored in their lion. Together, they form something greater than science can explain.” She flicks her hand, and the ebony dot lights up, “The Black Lion is the decisive head of Voltron. It will take a pilot who is a born leader and in control at all times, someone whose men will follow without hesitation.” The dot grows limbs into an actual model and floats over, “That is why, Shiro, you will pilot the Black Lion.”

Her hand rises again, and the verdant spot spirals, “The Green Lion has an inquisitive personality and needs a pilot of intellect and daring. Pidge, you will pilot the Green Lion.” The green zooms over, roaring, and the blue sparks up, “The Blue Lion is the most ambitious of the bunch. It takes someone unfailingly loyal to those they call friends, a pilot with high dreams and an unwillingness to compromise.” The cobalt purrs to wrap around Lance’s neck, “That, Lance, is why you pilot the Blue Lion.”

Gold flits around excitably, and Allura lets her smile grow a little more, “The Yellow Lion is caring and kind. Its pilot is one who puts the needs of others above his own. His heart must be mighty. As the leg of Voltron, you will lift the team up and hold them together.” Hunk makes a questioning sound, and the gold settles on the top of his head, kneading his hair. “Well, that doesn’t take explanation,” Allura laughs, “The Red Lion is temperamental and the most difficult to master. It’s faster and more agile than the others, but also more unstable. Its pilot needs to be someone who relies more on instincts than skill alo-” before she can finish her sentence, red washes over the projection, condensing into a roaring blur, clinging to Keith like a particularly dangerous cat, tail wrapping around his waist and paws digging into both shoulders, head resting on top of Keith’s with ears pulled back. “...Well,” Allura says at length, “I think we all know who the Red Lion has chosen.”

Allura frowns down at the console, “Unfortunately, I cannot locate the Red Lion’s coordinates. Then again, after ten thousand years, I highly doubt the Castle is in the best shape. I’ll have to do maintenance with Coran while the rest of you go after your Lions.” Her hands splay against the pedestals, the Castle responding and preparing, “Shiro, Pidge, you two will take a pod to the Green Lion. Lance, Hunk, you will take the Blue Lion to find the Yellow Lion.” Her right hand rises up to flick the map again, “Keith, you will stay here until we’re able to find the Red Lion.”

Everyone stares at her for a second before Coran smiles brightly, “Well, what are we waiting for? Hop to it!”
Keith doesn't stick around to watch the others split off to find their Lions. He walks far away from the two Alteans, following Memory’s purrs and the electric blue power flowing with clear purpose through the walls. Every step that leads him further away from everyone else is a slight bit looser, every breath coming out a little easier. He barely notices the red and silver slipping off his calloused fingertips, winding around him and seeping into the floor.

The air holds a hushed, almost reverent quality as he goes through the hallways, letting the energies guide him out to the fringes of the castle, the twisting hallways emptying out into one chamber, with tall steps and a giant door. Memory is closer than ever, just like before Lance dropped the bubble from Sammy, and Keith ghosts over the floor, footsteps not making a sound as he presses against the door.

He closes his eyes, takes off one glove, and presses his palm fully against the white surface.

Hello?

> Welcome.

Greetings.

>I am Leo, but I am also referred to as 'Castle'. Either one is acceptable.

I am Priest, though others call me the Black Lion. Use either or neither, I've spent enough time with Samtal to know some are very particular about their nicknames.

> Oh dear, this one has some issues doesn't he? It's been so long since a High Orderik came. I worried you all died out.

Leo, give the child room. His mind is chaotic enough without you tossing around Amonic phrases.

> Apologies!
It's... fine? I don't know how to do this very well, sorry if I mess it up.

>Nonsense! You made contact with all five Lions, despite the distance, and you've already talked to two and me! Xosera spent five years with unrestricted access to all of us to even feel anything while making direct contact. You're very good at this already!

I agree. Best to keep this away from the others for now, Keyaah. Gifts are useful, but they are even better kept in shadows. You may be a warrior, but your kind only survived this long with keeping secrets.

I'll take your word on it...

>Aww, Makkel. Point of recommendation? Listen to us. We're genuinely unable to lie with words when we're in your presence. Actions, however... Well, watch out for the others with Eris. She's a pathological liar.

I'd watch out for yourself more. She loves misleading people.

>Priest, you forget that Eris dug through the surface of a Neutron Star to save Merial. She’ll go to the ends of the universe and back to protect her Paladins.

You forget that she once told Emery that the world was going to end of a Guishatch attack in two quintants.

>Emery wasn't her Paladin. Also, Emery was horrible anyway. I made sure the door hit him on the way out.

Priest and Leo continue to bicker and banter, a conversation filled with strange phrases and inside jokes too convoluted for him to even understand. He doesn't try to figure anything out, just sits there, letting the voices wash over him, lulling him into a peaceful kind of trance, silver and red flowing into the castle, mixing in with the existing electric blue and multiplying, reflecting back.
Keith’s energy builds until he’s sure almost all of it has been recycled through Leo, the wells of power in his palms filled to bursting, the force traveling up his veins and coalescing in some deeper reservoir in his chest.

At some point, he feels something reaching out into his mind, impatient, jealous, furious. The voids of his memory rise up to protect him, the core power he’s gathered surging out with it to safeguard. He knows that something is happening, something is pushing and pulling and gathering, rerouting and storming and gently chiding.

He can’t tell how long he sits there, confused at the short mental battle, just listening to the two exchanging comments and compliments and jokes, but eventually, in the sunset clouds of his mind, Leo reaches out again.

>Ah, seems our time has to be cut short. Three of your sisters are returning, Priest. Makkel will be expected in the Hub. Return any time you like, Keyaah. I will watch over you, no matter what. When we get all five Lions together, you might need to mediate.

Alright then.

Farewell, Keyaah.

Keith takes his palm off of the door, smirk bright on his face as he picks up the glove from where he left it, pulling it on and rerouting some of the humming, buzzing energy trapped in the wells of his palms to empty out into the veritable ocean bed waiting in his chest.

He shakes out his hands and feet, pins and needles crawling over them from sitting in one place for so long, and takes off back down the hallway.

Allura, suffice it to say, no longer has a firm grasp on reality. For one, even though her life force is tied to the Lions, she can only feel the vaguest of things for them, even though she knows that by all rights she should be able to hear their voices. For another, the Castleship is shining with way too much energy and she doesn't quite know why. For a third, the Castleship isn't even listening to her, and about half of the cameras have been disabled, only to come back online moments later.
The tech she spent her whole life around is snidely dancing far away from her, latching onto something else.

The strangest thing is, she doesn't feel drained, but the castle is buzzing with an energy it didn't have before. She doesn't even have to power the wormholes to keep them open, they do it all on their own. She rubs her cheek as fury bubbles up in her, sighing, because her Marks always were just a slight bit darker than normal Love ones were supposed to be, tinted with Ferocity.

She frowns as she steps away from the pedestals, because for some reason, everything is repairing itself which is terrifying in its own right, and the castle is set to be perfectly ready for takeoff within two days at most.

The Paladins seem to be doing fine on the opposite ends of the universe, and Keith wandered off somewhere else a while ago. Allura frowns and arranges her skirt as she sinks down to the floor. Maybe my emotions are interfering... she muses, setting aside her circlet and taking deep, soothing breaths.

Coran looks back at her, confused, before continuing to run diagnostics, bewildered and uncertain.

Her mind is a landscape of darkness, memories waltzing across the seamless surface, some breaking off into sparks. With sure, quick motions of her hand, she tucks the blindingly colorful scenes in a darker corner. Not now, she thinks, not yet.

In the corner of her eye, she can see eight connections. One is to something vibrant orange that feels like Coran through and through. She frowns at the dulled black, sickly yellow, feeble lime, unenthusiastic navy, and a watery pink that doesn't even look close to the blazing red it should be. An electric blue dances teasingly out of her reach, straight into a brilliantly bold scarlet that everything other than the orange seem to gravitate towards, orbit around.

She hisses, because those are hers and she is the pri-no. She is the Queen of Altea, and she'll be damned if she lets anyone usurp her throne.

Her pain, her fear, all of it mixes and blends seamlessly into something primally known. A rush of adrenaline, running too hot, too dark through her veins, tinging her hatred with terror, trying to push it all back. Fight or flight, and with the way her hands go so smoothly against ship controls, she's obviously meant for flight.
But, her Marks, tinted much darker than anyone else she’s heard of ever has, say otherwise.

Her body, her role, her duties, all of them built for flight. *Preserve the royal line, Allura. Fighting is no good for a proper princess. You need to get a personal ship, my lady, much easier to access for escape. The escape pods are to your left, and all you need to do is...*

On and on and on. Ignoring the fact that both the Green and Red Paladins are both women, both with nerves of steel and minds of something even sharper.

So she gathers up her mind, her solemn vows, her spat oaths, her happy promises and her devastated declarations. Her anger roils and spits under her skin, the bone-deep sorrow boiling from the heat of her rage, giving it confusing fuel, her long-forgotten happiness corrupted by the icy cold of desolation and destruction.

She picks it all up, challenges spewing from the power she cradles in her hands. She picks it all up, frigid fury burning in her eyes. She picks it all up, and says *This is what I have left. This is all I have. You will not take this from me!* She picks it all up, and sends it tumbling out in one crashing, crushing tidal wave.

Only to have it all-

_STOP._

The enraged mass of cerise curses halts, coalescing together into one focused, compact wall, the threads of corrupted memories and darkened emotions weaving together, silver running through and wrapping around each carefully.

Her breath rattles out as she stumbles back, because that is _not possible._ Because no one since Oreyu the Glorious has ever even _attempted_ to stop a full scale emotional attack, much less actually do it.

_HERE you go._

Carefully, ever so carefully, the boiling, corrupted scarlet of anger and fury is combed out, picked away and shivering into nonexistence. The rest of it comes back to her in a tumbling mass, all of the fuel with none of the fire. The fury, the anger, the thing that keeps her going instead of
tumbling into that vicious, horrifying thing she calls a mind, that's gone, leaving her with only the aching sorrow of betrayal and heartbreak and things she had long since buried under layers of her ire rearing their ugly heads. She snaps her gaze from her shaking palms to the lights that took from her the one way of her keeping her emotions under lock and key, and stumbles back with eyes wide.

Because they aren't just lights anymore.

Yellow and Green perch on their shoulders, Blue wrapping around their waist, Red draping around like a scarf, and Black curls up like a crown on their head.

Who is they, you might ask?

Dark scarlet descending into shifting shadows. White and gold dancing over draping sleeves and across the rest of the fabric, intricate and unrepeatable. A black mark, centered on the cowl. Blue steel staring curiously out from the shadowed hood.

Twisted lightning bolts of scarlet arcing and screaming under the cobalt and silver.

Behind their regal form, electric blue eyes blaze, simultaneously looking over their shoulder like a mother supporting a child and peering out cautiously like a frightened youth hiding behind their father's legs.

Be careful, Princess. Save your volatility for more useful purposes, or it might just be taken from you again.

Allura's breath catches in her throat, and a single, pale finger rises from the shadows of the red cloak sleeve, pressing approximately where the mouth should go, one of the glowing blue steel eyes disappearing in a wink.

In a flash, they're across the mindscape, and that finger is pressed directly where her circlet would rest.

She startles back to reality, hands flying up to her temples, chest heaving as gasping breaths of air escape her. Coran spins around, alarmed, and Allura staggers to her feet, circlet clutched in nerveless fingers.
Her face is ghostly white and going paler by the second when she locks eyes with Coran. His eyes widen at her shellshocked expression, and his lips part in a faint, “Oh no.”

Allura's voice is terrified. “We may have an issue.”
Keith walks into the hub to find Coran white-knuckled on the control panel, Allura crumpled by the pedestals, and a very confused looking group of Paladins hovering at the opposite doorway, looking just as unsure as him.

“What happened?” Shiro asks, alarmed.

Coran looks up with an air of false confidence, while Allura's head snaps up abruptly. Coran clears his throat and painstakingly releases his painful grip on the edge of the table. “It doesn't matter for now. We have a more pressing concern. The Galran ship that chased you from your planet managed to gather some of the Scaultrite residue from the hasty wormhole you took here. They were able to track your location with it, and the ship is heading for us.”

Allura stands up from her collapsed position on the floor, hands gently settling back on the pedestals, “Unfortunately, though the castle is far enough online to shoot it from the sky when it does appear, the Red Lion is also on board.”

Shiro frowns, “How long do we have until they arrive?”

Coran's fingers flick against the screen, “A day at the least. But two at most. We don't have much time and only three Lions to work with.”

Allura sighs, and Keith realizes that she isn't wearing her circlet anymore. “As Coran said. Regardless, it's high time you came into your full titles and ranks as Paladins of Voltron. Follow me.”

She leads them down the hallway, Leo lighting up her steps, but it's all only ceremonial. Leo's true master walks behind Allura, his steps the cautious, open gait of a swordfighter. The princess sweeps into a room, the lights buzzing to life, illuminating five sets of armor and four matching... things to go along with them.
“Traditional Paladin armor,” Allura announces, the tubes hissing open, “And their matching bayards. I would get comfortable with this style and with your weapon, you'll use them as long as you are Paladins. The tubes have opaque options if you aren't comfortable changing in public.”

Immediately, they all book it straight for the tubes, the armor settling back into the wall as they slip into the tiny chambers, the barriers immediately settling stark white. Keith's clothing is loose, just like he always liked it, and he feels uncomfortable in the skin tight bodysuit, even before he slips the armor over. His gloves come off hesitantly, quickly replaced by the fully covering versions that the suit offers. His nose wrinkles at that, and the red reaches out from his palms to cut off the fabric at the second joint, letting his fingertips glimmer silver and mist red before retreating back under.

The bracelet is stuffed in with the rest of his clothing, the dagger tucked in a gap in the armor, the blaster slipped into a concealing holster, and the bayard clipped openly on his leg. His jacket still sings to him, and as he concentrates, he can feel it shifting with his needs, conforming into a new shape. The newly changed scrap of red fabric is shoved into a hollow in his left wrist guard, white and gold runes dancing nimbly over it.

The helmet slips on easily, just as the tube peels back open and he jumps out. Everyone else goes out at the same time, looking pretty well put together but still very confused. Allura spreads her hands from where she stands, smiling sadly. “The bayards take a unique shape for each Paladin. I'd recommend practicing summoning them. Unfortunately, Shiro, the Black bayard has been lost, so you'll have to improvise.

“That's fine,” Shiro nods, “I'm good at that.”

In an instant, Hunk has an energy bazooka, Lance has a sniper rifle, Pidge's has green energy at the ends, and Keith's doesn't lose the glowing crimson power it gets when it shifts. Allura's eyebrows raise a fraction higher, and he feels his second skin, normally a second nature, tighten almost suffocatingly. “That's interesting. Energy blades are very dangerous, Keith.” His memories stir in their corrals, because for some reason, that one time sent them whirling away again. Not my name, not my whole name, say it right this time, he thinks, before he realizes the flaw in that skewed logic, that he doesn't even remember his full name. “You'll have to be careful with that.”

Shiro shrugs and hums noncommittally for Keith, “He'll be fine. I've seen him around knives and stuff, he's a natural at that sort of stuff.” He frowns then, eyebrows tugging together and shiny scar on his nose scrunching up just slightly, “I don't know where he got it from, though.” he turns to Keith then, “You have any idea?”
Keith shakes his head and pulls the bayard back so he can clip it to his side. “Less than what you do. Half the time I didn't even realize what the hell I was doing in the first place, so you're one step ahead of me in that department by actually noticing I'm good around this stuff.”

Shiro nods then freezes. “Oh no, am I going to start doing that?”

“Depends, really. Keep in mind, you only forgot three years, so I could probably pull you into some of the exercises, see if that does anything.”

“Good.” Shiro turns toward the others who are looking at the whole exchange like a particularly confusing ping-pong match, eyebrow raised, “Well? We don't have all day, alien warship coming for blood, people.”

A few more tense seconds pass when no one speaks or moves, only Leo humming around them showing that time hasn't frozen. Allura clears her throat, “Right! Right. Those of you with Lions, go work near them, or connect with them. Strengthen your bonds. Shiro, Keith...!” She frowns, “I don't have anything for you two to do, so just improvise. It's what you do best, is it not?”

Everyone gives a singular shout of affirmation and splits apart.

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Shiro frowns as Keith leads him down a series of increasingly complex hallways, “Keith, wher-”

“Shh!” Keith snaps, free hand coming up to snap in front of Shiro's face. “Look, I have no idea what's going on anymore. I have seven years of memory in an eighteen year old body and I'm in space goddamnit. I'm talking to aliens and my memories are doing a weird thing all over again and I don't.” Keith cuts himself off with a pitiful whine, hand coming loose from Shiro's arm to press to his face. He backs up a few steps before sliding his back down a wall to sit on the floor, one hand covering his eyes and pressing down on his nose, the other lodged firmly in his hair.

“Hey, hey,” Shiro says, sitting down in front of him cross-legged, leaning forward and breaking his perfect posture, “This is weird for all of us. I have all these things stuffed in my brain, but they don't fit right you know? It's like someone decided to take a butcher knife to a thousand piece puzzle and scatter the pieces everywhere. I can't tell where they go, I don't know how they fit, I can't find the pattern, can't even get a single clear picture. Everything's jagged and I'm honestly afraid I'm going to hurt someone else or myself on them, you know?”
“Not really.” Keith says, tilting his head back up and cupping his hands against either side of his neck. “It's more like a void for me. Sometimes I feel like something is wrong, so very wrong, but I can't tell how. I'm pretty sure my name isn't actually my name. Sometimes I feel like it isn't right, sometimes I can't even tell the difference. I feel the most afraid the days I can't tell, I think.” He sighs, wry smile fluttering across his face as he moves one hand to lay lightly in his lap, the other pressing softly against the pulse point on his neck, a weird habit he picked up on his most unstable days to remind himself that he was real.

“You think?” Shiro asks, curious.

“Yeah. My frames of reference are kind of skewed here. I don't know what I'm doing half of the time, and half of that time I'm terrified of the part I don't even recognize.” Keith sighs, remaining hand falling down onto his lap to fiddle with his fingers, head dropping so his hair covers his face, “And now I'm just... if I let this catch up to me, I won't be able to even function for a while properly. I... fuck.”

Shiro slides next to him, arm draping over Keith's slightly shaking shoulders. “Should I worry about this with the others too? I mean, it is a pretty big leap, from Earth to wherever we are now. They might have some trouble adjusting.”

“Might be a good idea.” Keith's shoulders go weirdly rigid, like that's the only things he has left, “Mental instability is a given, but I think I might be in the most danger of a full-scale panic attack.” His voice is carefully neutral, the way he speaks calculating, impersonal, clinical.

“Why's that?” Shiro asks, because he never quite learned that curiosity killed the cat, and if you ever mention it he'll always tell you the second part.

Keith gives a hollow, broken laugh. It's a shaky thing, something that sends shivers down Shiro's spine. He looks up, and the pink surrounding his eyes is utterly terrifying because Keith has never once let tears fall in Shiro's close vicinity.

What's even more terrifying is what he says next in a hoarse whisper.

“Because I think I knew all of this before.”
The two sit there for a long while, neither wanting nor willing to say more. It's quiet in the
hallways. Leo gives them a respectful distance, only pulling and pushing power through and in the
halls when there are no other available conduits, skirting them so he doesn't feel any urge to
eavesdrop. Leo learned that from the long, agonizing conversations that the First Paladins had
together, none of them were any of his business to listen to.

Leo hums around everyone else though. His new Queen, her Advisor. He exchanges pleasantries
with Ophelia, trades barbs with Sammy, and tells Icarus how things have been. Priest rumbles
within, unhappy but willing to connect with his sisters and brother through Leo, despite being
trapped. Leo can already tell Eris is going to be a seething mass of nerves when she gets back down
to find she was the last one to reconnect with the network.

After all, Makkel had done admirably hosting all five Lions simultaneously, but he still wasn't *quite*
good enough to re-create the entire network from scratch using his forgotten memories and skittish
grasp on his Quintessence. Still, Leo couldn't help but feel attached to the little cub. He wished he
could fix that void in his head, could poke and prod him into putting on the bracelet and
remembering everything, but Leo knows that it isn't time.

Mikora works in mysterious ways, and often in close league with Faevro.

Leo watches the three Paladins trying to connect with their Lions. They've managed to fast track all
the way to Stage Two, but they haven't reached the Stage Four status *Keyaah* has. Emotions vague
and indistinct but decipherable, words impossible, intentions transmittable, thoughts far from it,
complete contact necessary. That's Stage Two.

Leo morbidly looks forward to when Eris arrives. She's always been a little intense, and the little
cub hasn't even met her yet and he's already breaking down. So far, the cub has about a third of the
stakes for each Lion, but he still hears their voices, meanwhile he has about ninety-five percent of
Eris. Hell, given the strength of the kid he won't be surprised if they wind up having to make more
Stages just to accommodate the sheer amount of power the cub will develop.

It scares him sometimes.

In a good way.

Ophelia is staring at her Paladin, energy sparking bemusedly at the curious touches and constant
readings. Icarus is currently being cleaned and rewired by his chosen, who tends to keep up a
constant mechanical dialogue as he pokes around. Samtal is keeping up an active and mildly frustrated silent conversation with her Paladin, trying to force her bond a little bit tighter so she can actually share words, but that might take a while.

Leo goes back to cooing over the mice now attuned to him.

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Keith watches Shiro carefully as they stew in silence, both tense and afraid to break the thick tension arching through the air with thick cords. In the absolute quiet, Keith wonders whether or not he could even cut it with his dagger.

Finally, after a good ten minutes of hushed thoughts whirling almost tangibly through the air, Keith stands up. He looks at Shiro before impatiently gesturing for him to get up too. “Come on,” Keith whispers, and even that feels too loud after the long silence, “I want to see if we can get something back. I'll show you some of my techniques, see if they help.”

Shiro stands up wordlessly and follows Keith down a very convoluted path stretching through the twisting hallways, Leo's energy guiding but very carefully not hovering. Keith stops in front of a door that sings with Leo's energy before it backs away and slides open.

The room is full of stars.

Wall to wall, floor to ceiling, floating midair and lightly rotating, constellations trace themselves out and break apart, flowing from one to the next seamlessly. The room bends to his memories, stars whirling around into the familiar constellations he remembers. His lips curve into a smile as he goes to stand in the center of the room, slowly sitting and leaning back until he's sprawled on the floor, looking up at the connecting lines and stars and letting the familiarity coax the wild memories out of their cages, taming them into something resembling order.

He looks over to find Shiro hesitating by the door, looking at the stars with no small amount of fear and trepidation. “Come on,” he says, snapping Shiro's gaze over to him, “It's hardly the weirdest thing that's happened today, is it? Come on, join me.”

Shiro hesitates for a split second before copying Keith, sitting just a few feet to his left. It's strangely familiar, and they slip into their normal positions in a heartbeat. Shiro has his left hand behind his head, cushioning it from the hard ground, the other held on the ground from all their
time on the roof, just in case he got destabilized. Keith has one arm thrown over his stomach, the other slung just above his eyebrows, uncaring of the possibility of slipping off of the normal tiles.

“I don’t really know how I did this before, not really. It’s kinda... *Instinct* by now.” Keith's eyes flick to follow one of the moving trails tracing slowly through Orion’s stars as he smiles. “I guess I always felt some kind of weird connection to the stars. Just go with it, I guess. Don’t try to remember or anything, just watch the constellations. Sometimes you get something, sometimes you get nothing, it’s not an exact science.”

Shiro laughs, “Yeah I can tell. I’m pretty sure there’s no concrete evidence for you there.”

“No, really?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Shut up and watch the stars, idiot.”

“Love you too, little brother.”
Allura remains tense and drawn out for the rest of the day. Since her Marks have long since settled, the outer rim of her irises flare a cold, deep red. Her anger hasn't entirely left her, reignited by recent events, it just refuses to go where she needs it to, uselessly flickering under her skin and wreathing her every breath, too bright but not loud enough to succeed in drowning out the rest of her thoughts.

Shame.

Coran works near her, loathe to leave her side. His eyes storm with gray and purple and scarlet and subdued yellow, defiance mingling with change and anger as kindness tries to drag him back to stability. He's oddly silent for the mildly eccentric man that went into the pod, his hands curling into fists when he thinks she's not looking. He keeps her stable with feather-light touches on her shoulders, the center of her back, a pulse point at the edge of her jaw.

She frowns as she looks down on the reports, the images, knits her eyebrows together at the readings. She sighs and spins away from the controls, whirling so she can look out of the bay windows. Her hand presses softly against the glass as she stares out at the planet around them.

It's a beautiful place, whichever planet they're stuck on now, she has to give it that. Green forests and fields of grass. Blood orange flowers dot the ground, the same shade as her mother's Marks. Ironic that one of the Fallen Paladins would have Lady Luck on her side and still fall to the Shadow-Worshipper. Mountains loom in the distance, telling promises of a desert beyond. The ocean hums behind them, waves crashing against the shore as if to prove that it's real, eroding at the cliffs just to show that it can make an impact.

Allura can relate, creating chaos and destroying the things around her to prove a point for no reason.

Coran puts a hand on her shoulder and she removes her palm from the window, noting the cracks from her pressing too hard on the inner layer of glass covering the Sherrite projectors. “Sorry.” She whispers. Her mother had been dead only a week before she was put into the pod, the Red Lion piloted by her father in the meanwhile. Her people have been dead for ten thousand years, but
yesterday they stood by her side, fighting against Zarkon. Her father is gone but she remembers him kissing her forehead goodbye the night before. The Paladins have fallen into myth, but a scant few years ago they fought side by side to defeat Kaiekter. Allura vaguely wonders if the final parting shot of the dying warlord broke down the flimsy walls holding together Zarkon's erratic psyche. She curses Arkien for giving him the weakest mind and morals she has ever seen, but she can't hold a grudge against a Primordeity.

“There's nothing to apologize for, Princess.” Coran's voice cuts through her quiet musings, and she very carefully removes her nails from the meat of her palm without hissing so she doesn't alert him. She delicately takes a thread of Quintessence from her full-to-bursting stores, painstakingly drawing out the meager quantity she can control and weaving it over her bleeding hand so Coran won't get suspicious.

A faint smile flickers over her features, but even that is empty and distant. “Makkesh.” She says quietly after a long silence, “If we're going to use titles, I am technically Queen of Altea.” Her laugh shudders out of her like a vile, disgusting thing, clawing its way up her throat and spilling out harsh and feral. “I always wanted to become Queen.” She admits, shaking her head back to keep a stray curl from falling into her eyes, “But not like this. Never like this.” She doesn't let her chin drop, instead keeping her head lilted up so she can see the gold lettering of the names of all of the Castleship’s previous captains. “Should we put our names up there?” She wonders out loud, only half a question.

Coran shrugs, conflicted eyes staring out over the landscape around them.

“Quiznak.” Allura curses, dropping her head back down and closing her eyes. She refuses to let the pale blue tears well up, refuses to let them control her, so instead they trickle into her mind and settle into the cracks. “How am I supposed to live with this? I don't know if I can survive with this grief anymore.” She laughs humorlessly, tiredly. “I'm afraid to mourn. I'm afraid to... shatter.”

“I know.” Coran says, and his voice is as broken as hers. He lost his family long before the war arrived, all of them sacrificing themselves for Altea, for Home. He's lived with this grief far longer than she has, weighing down on his shoulders. His blue Marks are uncorrupted, untainted. It's incredibly rare to find someone with pure Markings, really. Alfor and Coran both had the perfect blue of the Absolutely Loyal, but she was always known and identified by her piercingly bright Marks of Furious Love.

They stand there for Luxis knows how long, afraid to break the razor sharp silence that hangs between them, prowling and wrapping around their throats to stop any words from squeezing out. It's painful, this place in their hearts that's been carved out piece by screaming piece. It hurts to linger in it, to breathe in it, to live in it, to exist in it.
It hurts.

It's a righteous kind of pain though, something entirely internal. It's a selfish agony that she allows herself to feel, a dark kind of aching destruction that she thirsts for. It dances on her tongue like the copper of blood, like broken promises and honeyed lies. It strikes through her mind like a Venomous Krygia, like the blade her mother gave her cutting through her neurons and synapses.

She loves it and hates it in equal measures, and is too fragile to try to fix the blurred line between the two.

In silent, motionless agreement, they break apart to go to their separate stations, hands shaking just slightly, the warm hazel of Stability far off.

They have to cut themselves on their own shattered pieces, because if they can't pick them up the war is lost.

And neither of them have ever been particularly graceful at losing.

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Lance leans against his Lion, the metal casing resting against his cheek in a cold semblance of comfort. His arm wraps around the paw of the robot like a particularly large teddy bear, gloves long since discarded since the physical contact with the Lion makes it easier to sort through the emotions. They're outside now, an ocean that's a shade too blue and a slightly blander scent than the usual comforting one of sea salt and fish reminding him once again that this is not home, you left it behind, left them behind you sick excuse for a human being. The star that's setting over the horizon makes chills run coldly down his spine, a phosphorescent blue light that makes his skin crawl, and by consequence it's farther away, but just as hot as if it was the sun he's so familiar with.

He feels something heavy and choking rise up in his throat and flinches back from the bastardized and skewed version of Earth that sits around him, laying heavy against his skin and digging sharp and unforgiving claws into his mind. Blue rumbles above him and shifts, thick tail wrapping around him protectively.

He knows that by all rights, he shouldn't be feeling this guilt yet, shouldn't be missing Earth just now, but there's something nudging at his mind, telling him to get it out before it festers and burns.
He left behind everything and went into a wormhole at the drop of a hat and- and for what? A suicide quest to save the goddamn universe from an evil overlord that's ruled it for ten thousand years? He'll die long before they can even make a dent in what the Galra control, before he can fix anything. He sacrificed a happy life on Earth for this piece of shit, but he can't blame anyone but himself for that. He was the one that decided to start this whole thing, to drag Pidge and Hunk along with him and-

Oh god, Hunk.

Hunk must be feeling like this too. He had a family nearly as big as Lance's own, the reason why his cooking skills are always sharp. Nothing feels like a family reunion more than the members anywhere between ten and thirty all crammed together in one kitchen to make food for the whole shebang. Hunk has to be freaking out about this, his anxiety always gets the worst when it has something to do with his family.

Pidge he feels a little less guilty about. That little gremlin was practically jumping at the bit even before the explosions started, and after it would be an immense feat to stop that ball of energy from hopping around. Plus, even though they hang out together a lot for simulation practice and stuff, Pidge never talks about family or friends. It's all technobabble, thinly veiled threats, general exclamations and expletives or straight up random words in a ton of different languages for the tiny genius.

Keith... well, safe to say he knows absolutely nothing about Keith Kogane. He's an absolute mystery of the highest degree. No one knew who his family was, he never made any friends, and he never held a civil conversation with anyone for longer than three minutes. His relationship with anyone and anything other than the simulator was rocky at best and three seconds away from both sides hiring a hitman at worst. An ice cold badass with the highest average scores of any recruit, even Takashi Shirogane.

And Shiro... well, he knows by rumor, but only a few hours of conscious acquaintance. Shiro was known as the golden boy of the Garrison, a vibrant and dutiful student with clear leadership and people skills. But whatever happened to him in those years changed him. There were the obvious things of course, the white tuft in his hair, the scar on his nose, the *fucking metal arm holy shit*, the stiff and borderline predatory way he moved, the confusion constantly present in his voice. Then there were the smaller things, little ticks. The way he clipped his words shorter, said them almost hesitantly at first before rushing through, the way he'd look at something and his eyes would go vacant for a moment before his mind rebooted. He reminds Lance of his one war veteran uncle that always sits quietly in the corner of any family events with a (un)healthy amount of brightly colored bracelets covering the scars on his wrists.

Not much slips past Lance unnoticed, especially not when he's looking for it. It's a skill he picked up from living in a household of mainly women and a family with many problems, any detail is
important when it comes to looking out for the ones you love.

He sighs and leans against the cold metal of Blue's leg, the tail curling slightly closer, but not too much since Lance would more than likely be crushed if it did. The machinery hums and clicks under his ear, a constant droning buzz of incredible mechanics at work, creating a lulling song of gears and switches and wires. He's no mechanic, no technician, but he knows that Blue is a work of art, inside and out. He can feel it in the thoughts and ideas he gets around the robot, the way the humming reaches in his mind and soothes him, the eerie sentience.

He closes his eyes and lets himself tip back until he's cradled by the tail, quiet and tired. The waves crashing and the humming of mechanics gives him noise, not a silence he feels like he has to break.

It's peaceful in a way he knows will be gone once he opens his eyes.

He doesn't want to, but he knows he will.

For now, he sits and dreams of something better.
Trust Your Instincts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eris prowls along in her own mind, hissing and spitting. Of course all of the others would get to meet her *Scheila* while she had to sit and wait in a warship run by some of Zarkon's most loyal. She's had thousands of years to stew on her grudge, stuck in various battleships, the whole crew trying to gain access to her. Zarkon killed her previous kitten, and anyone he'd send her way would be tainted by the spilled blood he took unfairly, blood stolen and stopped by cowardly, traitorous means. None of them had the fire she liked in her Paladins, quiet or loudly crackling, so it didn't matter anyway.

And then, reaching out like a gift from forgotten stars, blessed by the hand of Luxis and sent by Mikora's fluctuating tides, a cry of help reached her ears. Sent by the High Priest, mind open and vulnerable. *Oh no you don't,* she thought, and without hesitation, dived into that chaotic mess and protected it like her den. In a way it was, really. She let her sisters, her brothers, her family stay, but they all knew and respected the fact that it was her territory, never tried to test the readiness and cruelty she would exercise to keep it safe.

So, it was a little grueling for her to be stuck in a dark hangar inseparable from the other thousand she'd been in, knowing that her Paladin, her master and friend and cub all rolled into one, was so close but so far away. The nerves of having her Chosen set for her but not there for her is uncomfortable and growing steadily, making her growl in discomfort. Her sisters and brothers and honorary packmate had already made contact, had already let their minds fully form and meld to quiet, unused corners, but she was left to wait.

Eris prowls around in her mind, but didn't dare to in reality. She hadn't moved a gear for the past five thousand years, and she wasn't going to warn the Galra that anything was wrong by acting antsy and screwing up the plans of her family's Paladins. Still, it bothered her. She was so close from escaping from that traitor's hands, breaking away from the coward who dared to use her oldest brother's titles as a weapon rather than a peacemaker, who destroyed the sacred bonds with corrupted means. If Zarkon had beat Eris' kit and Eris herself in fair battle, if he had taken Merial's life using the Ancient Laws, then Eris would've had to submit. But he tainted the old texts with corrupted blood, desecrated them with no regard to tradition.

Suffice it to say, Eris is no longer bound to the Ancient Laws. It is the only good thing that blood traitor, that oathbreaker had ever deigned to give her, and it's probably her most valuable asset. That unpredictability, that unwillingness to conform has always been hers, has always been her most valuable traits. *Instinct* her cub had named her, and it was fitting. Instincts sometimes went against logic, sometimes followed it to the hair, sometimes threw caution to the wind, sometimes stayed as close to it as possible, you could never quite know, you just followed your gut. Fight or Flight instincts, an art perfected for the rush of adrenaline, and even though her Paladins had the sharpest claws of the bunch, they always had the best groomed wings.
Instinct, he had called her for so long, and she realized now that she'd been waiting to hear that name for a while. She lived by it for so long without even realizing she was until he told her.

Instinct, he pleaded for in the dead of night when the desert was so quiet and he was the only one around. She always answered with rumbling purrs and the snatches of celebration music she remembered to fill up that soundless void.

Instinct, he would reach out for without thinking, to feel safe and secure and not so lonely. She leaned into it too, the gentleness of both parties covering coiled power, built in limbs and minds and magic.

Eris isn't afraid of what the universe tells her, she rolls with the punches smoothly. Priest liked to live and survive from experience, always following mind and morals above all. Ophelia listened to razor sharp logic, followed the plans she made with little room for error because she already calculated it. Icarus followed the others but always acted true, no matter what, no matter how far off plan he had to go to do it, always trusting but only to a point. Sammy stuck to what the others did, but followed her heart most of all, trusting but independent, the one who most heavily relied on her Paladin.

Her mind crows and yells and screams for her to go, to run, to fly, to destroy. But she doesn't listen to it.

She trusts her instincts.

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Thace taps through reports flowing to and from the Prophet. He's meant to find important memos to direct toward Commander Prorok, or any incendiary outgoing messages. Thace tends to do the opposite.

He marks another message from Altea Force to go to one of the ships with a closer Marmora communications specialist. Though he's kept far away from the Force, it seems to haunt his footsteps no matter where he goes. They keep trying to make contact with the Marmorans, but Kolivan is both distrustful and a creature of shadows. He lives by the guilty until proven innocent mentality of the Empire still, instead of the opposite followed by Altea Force.
He carefully diverts the distress calls from a planet being liberated by the Force to different and hardly checked channels, marks another correspondence to go through cleanly, makes sure that another report of the agricultural situation on Jepis goes to Prorok so that something is going through at least.

It's something familiar, quiet, careful. He's done this for almost ten years now, making sure the Galra machine runs close enough to smoothly while rust creeps up the joints imperceptibly.

He almost passes one of the reports over before he freezes. He stares at it for a second, thick eyebrows high.

*Blue Lion (Code L4P239) spotted in an uncontrolled sector by the Fortitude Battlecraft, disappeared through wormhole before capture could be attempted. Tracking efforts underway, assistance requested by Commander Sendak on behalf of Emperor Zarkon. Vrepit sa.*

It's signed by Haxus, the real brains on the *Fortitude*, and the one the crew really answers to, Commander in all but title. But that's not the part that gives him pause.

Because that name could be mistaken, but that code couldn't. That code is only used for the Lions of Legend.

That code is solely for Voltron.

Running on autopilot, he removes it from the databases, marks it and sends it off directly to both organizations. No one on this ship would know of it, he made sure of that. He tracks down the rest of the envoys in record time and deletes those too, making sure to keep everything off the record.

*Luxis*, he raises his eyes toward the ceiling, even though direction is inherently meaningless in the expanse of space, *Help us all*. He isn't particularly religious, but he still prays sometimes. If not for strength and hope, then to honor Koga's memory. He looks over the copy he left for himself with tired eyes, bowing his head. *Keithek would've loved this.* He'd always loved the idea of Voltron, always asked with hungry eyes that shifted colors so easily for more tales.

With a sigh and a heavy heart, Thace deletes the final copy.

*Vrepit sa.*
Allura doesn't sleep that night, can't sleep that night, so neither does Coran. They alternate between double checking readings, resorting files, staring out of the windows, and going back to watch the hologram of the Galran warship slowly sliding toward their location in an approximation of how much time they have left. It's over halfway, and Allura can feel the cold fingers of dread flowing down her back in prickling patches of anxious insecurity, flowing past her shoulderblades like the silvery white locks of her hair.

She shivers, not from cold, but from the endless barrage of questions her mind assaults her with. She tugs on a curl of hair next to her left eye until the spot on her scalp is smarting and tender, wrapping her hair up in the royal crown she was always so envious of, wanting to wait until she was half as good as her mother to have it placed up in the manner that the previous Red Paladin was so fond of. She moves to bat his hand away, but he just holds the progress he's made with one hand while moving the other to place her hand back by her side. Coran continues but before he can pin it in place Allura's voice is there, shattering the icy quiet they've been uncomfortably immersed in, “I don't deserve this yet, Coran. I haven't proved this yet.”

Coran’s eyes, which had settled on a rich purple of Defiance, sparks with red and sympathetic black running with threads of cobalt. “Makkesh, you've proved yourself far more than enough. You don't have to convince anyone of anything anymore.” He slips the silver pin that he keeps just in case into her crowned hair, backing off and leaving her stock still as she stares at the inner layer of glass, reflecting a ghostly impression of herself back thanks to the darkened scenery beyond.

Her head tilts almost curiously as she reaches up a hand to touch the braids, shuddering out a breath as she runs her fingertips over the white silk of her hair, hunching over her free arm and trembling. It takes her a while to realize that she's laughing, the tears streaking down her cheeks making her wonder why. It takes her a bit to catch up with her mind, but at that point she's still again, head still tilted slightly to the left. “Luxis,” She says, half a curse, half a prayer, “I look nothing like her.” Her laugh is humorless and biting, “I can't even honor her properly.”

Coran sighs and shakes his head, “When will you understand, Prin- Makkesh. You honor her by living, by fighting for every breath and each heartbeat. She wouldn't ask for anything more. She wouldn't want you to break yourself to pieces to try and conform yourself to her image. You're both War's children, even if she was blessed by Doshye and you were chosen by Caitius. You're both Xera's Furies in your own right and you should be proud of the fact that you are different. We need different. Your mother helped rule a stable civilization, you're tearing one down and building it up from scratch.” He reaches out his thumb and swipes away one of the pale blue tears tumbling down her cheeks, “You deserve to be different. You are better different from her. We- we can't be like our parents. It'll break us a little more when we try to fit into the molds of our family. We are stretched and set as ourselves, don't you dare try and chip away at yourself for this.”
She lowers her head in shame. “Sorry.” She whispers again, stiffening slightly at the gentle pressure of Coran's arms wrapping around her, chin tucked against the crown of her head. She relaxes into the hug, letting her arms wrap around Coran, breathing in the familiar scent of whatever cleaner the older Altean used for his uniforms.

He pulls back to set his hands on her shoulders, looking her directly in the eye with red dancing in his irises, “Don't you dare apologize for anything you can't fix. There's lesson number one.”

Allura's laugh is wet with tears, but it's a genuine one, so at least that's progress. “Yes, Advisor Coran.”

“Good.” Coran spins away, one hand tucking behind his back and the other gesturing in the air, and Allura watches in fascination as the orange-haired Altean tucks his emotions neatly under the rug all over again, shoving those jagged edges into a corner and letting sunlight stream through the broken window of his soul. “Now, my Queen, we have to make sure your castle is in tip-top shape.”

Chapter End Notes

So uh, just putting this out there, I am 206% not ready for season 3. Just putting that out there.

Probably not gonna include too much of any of that steaming pile of canon in my story because I don't even have a plan but I've probably already contradicted most of it.
Keith wakes up still on the floor of the star room, legs tucked up into a small circle like a cat, cheek cushioned by his arms. Shiro is messily sprawled out over the floor, one leg sticking out into Delphinus, an arm slung on Pegasus, head haloed by Lacerta. Keith frowns as he sits up, watching Shiro's expression pinch and arm spasm, leg jerking to the side into Cygnus. Oh, Keith realizes, standing up and taking cover behind one of the pillars in the room, Nightmares. I can deal with these, hopefully.

He takes a deep breath and starts speaking confidently in a ringing voice. “Your name is Takashi Shirogane.” He can hear the rustle and clang of metal and praises himself for the foresight he had of getting cover. “You are technically twenty-two but if we go by birthdays you're only five. You were missing for three years but now you're not going anywhere without me.” He waits for the rustling to calm down again. “You good? Can I come out now?”

Another rustle, a sharp sound of metal tapping against metal. “Y-yeah. I'm good.”

Keith sweeps out from behind the pillar, looking around. The stars had altered and changed into something else, labeled in a language that stirs something in the corrals he had shoved his mind into. “Huh.” He says, looking around at the sharp edged designs, “Guess it did help. You remembered something.”

Shiro looks up from his slightly curled position on the floor, slate gray eyes under the shocking white of his hair. He stares at the stars in bewilderment before a smile blooms on his face. “Guess I did.” He takes a deep breath, lifting his metallic arm up and away from the tiny crack in the floor gingerly, almost like he's afraid he's hurt the ground. The ground, of course, doesn't care, and Leo uses the blue electricity to sculpt and fix the fracture easily.

“Hey.” Keith says, making Shiro's head snap up to stare at Keith, who's fingertips rub against each other obsessively again, callouses rough but familiar, “Nightmares are perfectly normal. Don't worry about them, just trust that you can get over them. Besides, at least that went better than the first time you tried to wake me up from one.”

Shiro winces at the memory, left hand coming up to trace the thin scar on the side of his neck, “I don't even know how that happened.”
“You decided to wake up a person with a pocket knife under their pillow.” Keith challenges, eyebrow raised.

“You didn't even have a pocket knife when you got there.” Shiro counters, “There wasn't even a pocket knife in the house!”

“There was one less at that convenience store you took me to the month before.”

“You stole a pocket knife and almost killed me with it.” Shiro deadpans.

“You.

“You are the paragon of moral righteousness.”

“Shut up.” Keith places his hand on a pad next to the door and it opens up easily. “Come on, there's a Galra ship heading our way with my Lion still on it, we don't have time to lose.”

Shiro sighs and picks himself up from the floor, the stars around them swirling off into constellations that Keith vaguely recognizes from his musings at the stars outside the atmosphere. Shiro watches as they move with quiet wonder, slate gray eyes just a little bit brighter. His eyes drift from glowing white dots to blue steel irises, tilting his head just slightly as he asks, “How did you find this place, Keith?”

Keith gives a hum then pointedly doesn't give a clear answer, “Well, there's ways to find pretty much anything in the castle.”

Shiro cocks one eyebrow like he always does around Keith, and it's a relief to see the familiar expression on his face. “Oh?” He does the wiggly thing with his eyebrows that Keith always had to fight to keep a straight face for, “Do tell how.” Then he widens his eyes and holds a hand out, ignoring the fact that Keith wasn't even about to start speaking, “Wait, wait, no. Let me guess.” A moment of consideration, then a rapid fire waterfall of guesses, “Computer terminal, instinct, pure luck, idiocy, trying to find the bathroom and getting lost, a map, your armor. Did I get it?”

“Very good guesses,” Keith says, casually checking his nails, “But no.”
“Well, I tried.” Shiro shrugs, “Now tell me how, because who knows how much stuff this place has.”

Keith leans forward in the doorway, leaning one shoulder against the frame and saying in a perfectly mystic voice to go along with cryptic words, “Follow the lightning lion in the walls and he'll lead you to what you want.”

Shiro stares at him for a second then opens his mouth to say something. Before he can, Allura's voice rings out from speakers and quiet but no less nagging alarms start up, “Paladins, get to your Lions, the Galran ship is close. Vohre's blessings, let's make them pay.”

The lightning lion in the walls leads them back to the hub, and any questions are lost in chaos.

+ 

Eris prowls in her mind, growing more agitated by the second. She's so close now, she could reach out and tear down the shield around her, fly out, and greet her master in seconds flat. She wants to, her mind and heart screaming at her to leave, to go, to greet and fight.

But her gut tells her no, and she's a creature of instinct through and through. Also, she made a promise to Half-Paladin-King to keep in her shield until her chosen opened it for her, and she won't break that promise. She may be a liar and a thief, but she won't leave the stain of a broken oath on her Pride's honor.

She's had many names over the years, many titles, honorable, dishonorable, each famous and infamous in their own ways. She was Xera, Luxis' chosen, a goddess, a thing of danger and raging, unhidden fire. Then she was the Red Lion, then she decided that that wasn't good enough and called herself Eris because she wasn't Xera or anything else, she was chaos and discord because Seltaix had chosen to descend into his own realm and pass part of his duties to her. Then she was called a tool, a weapon, vicious, feral, a swindler, a traitor, a hero, the mantle of Red falling heavily on her shoulders until her metal was coated with scarlet blood. Then she was a friend, she was fire, she was guiding and threatening but beautiful, and she was Instinct. Eris was who she chose to be now, but Instinct was the one gifted title she bore proudly.

Eris feels herself inching closer to her Paladin, to her cub. She aches to soar in the stars with the one she guards so fiercely, to protect and guide and hold close. She, for the first time in decaphoebs, thirsts for her element, for the crimson of the battlefield. She slips smoothly into the skin of a new identity, letting the waves of bloodlust wash over her and soak into her casing.
In her mind, the predatory smile she's kept for the past eight years grows until it's all fangs and feral laughter. She can feel Samtal shivering down their bond, as weak as it may be, roaring in victory because she knows her twin is waking fully, knows that the battlefield is calling for her again.

Sharp teeth and scarlet smiles, beating hearts and savage snarls, battlelust and timeworn scars. Stolen songs sung in ancient caverns, drunken ones sung in every tavern. Words of those that would call her 'hero' just for bleeding, snide voices calling her a scarlet demon. Blood and fire and ash and rage. That's what Eris is made of.

So her energy coils and readies, and she waits for her cub, her Paladin, her General to give the first orders.

+ 

Keith can feel Reasoning – *Ophelia, her name is Ophelia, and her mind is as sharp as her retorts* – humming excitedly around them, anxious to meet up with her sister that's her utter opposite but compliments her oh-so-well. They are the only contradictory Lions – though Leo and Priest are opposites of the same mind – with one running on ruthless logic, the other on the whims of the world.

The closer they get to the Galran ship, hidden under the cloaking device that Pidge dreamed up – and *isn't Ophelia happy about that, her tiny little powerhouse of a Paladin making up any differences she would've had otherwise* – the more Instinct purrs in his mind. He doesn't know her name, but he knows that she's a girl from the fleeting glimpses Ophelia left him to puzzle out. He's so close, the energy tickling under his skin with heated and glorious promises, rage and anger and pain stewing for so long left to dance and run like wolves through the wild and lions on the hunt.

Everything is carefully timed for this plan. Allura and Coran have Leo running with the appearance of being low powered, to lure the Galra into complacency. Lance and Hunk, who's Lions have already been spotted by Galran forces, are 'surrendering' their Lions in an act of perceived submission, because Allura and Coran spent their entire life around this species and know how they view obedience and compliance. Meanwhile, Pidge takes Shiro and Keith onto the ship to find the Red Lion and potentially disable the ship from the inside depending on how long they have.

Pidge opens a piece of the ship efficiently with their dagger-like bayard, and all three of them slip inside and ghost through the hallways. They turn one particular corner and Shiro almost crumples his weight against Keith, who holds him up slightly worriedly. Shiro waves him off as his eyes dart around, shattered glass in his steel eyes molten and glinting with feverish light. “I remember
this place...” He leans heavily on the left wall, right hand twitching with a whirr of machinery, “This is where they took me after stealing us from Kerberos.”

Pidge gasps, hand coming up in front of their mouth, shoulders hunching just slightly, and just then Keith realizes for the first time that they are all children, each and every one of them. Shiro is technically only five if you go by birthdays, Pidge is fifteen and a half, Lance is sixteen, Hunk is eighteen and Keith is only seventeen. They’re all fragile and fighting a goddamn interstellar war that has been less of a war and more of a takeover until incredibly recently. A battlefield that’s been ruled by one faction for over ten thousand years.

Then Pidge goes shockingly still and their head snaps up to meet Shiro's gaze with twin infernos blazing in their eyes. “The prisoners were taken here?” Pidge questions, hands trembling just slightly by their sides. They let out a breathless laugh just a shade off manic at the nod they get from Shiro. “The Holts were taken here. Shiro, we have to go find them.”

Shiro shakes his head sadly, “Pidge, we can't. They nee-”

“My brother and father need me more than this fucking space war you dipshit.” Pidge interrupts, stone cold sadness and icy rage punctuating every syllable. “Besides, we'll be saving prisoners from this hell.” They turn to Keith, gaze loaded with a thousand heavy words, “Keith, can you find your Lion without much issue?”

Before Keith can answer their comms crackle and Lance's voice comes from their helmets, “Uh, guys, the Galra know!” That last word is punctuated with an explosion in the distance, “So by all means, go find your Lion, Keith!”

“Go.” Keith orders, and Pidge nods gratefully, dragging Shiro by his human arm until he keeps pace with them. Keith descends momentarily into his mind. Patience yields focus, yeah, sure, sure. That's probably Priest's mentality, and sure, it could work, but Instinct never cared much for logic and hated patience with a passion, and the only focus she cared for was the razor sharp kind in the heat of battle.

He surrenders to the red power slowly wrapping around him, letting it guide his footsteps with crimson trails and tugs in his gut. The room it leads him to only has one thing still in its gutted interior, and go- Luxis help him if it isn't gorgeous.

Red runes swirling in hypnotic circles, shifting in a hidden language, beckoning, welcoming. It's a gorgeous work, intricate and all-consuming. Its very essence runs through his veins, swoops into his palms and the reservoir in his chest, making high on his cheekbones tingle with power.
Keith tilts his chin up and struts forward, because he knows that this is something he's known since forever. Something he's waited, worshiped for. “Hello there.” He whispers, and his hand rises up to hover just inches away from this masterwork of wards. “You're mine.” He says, more confidently, hand dipping until it's centimeters away, eyes tilting up and momentarily flashing brilliant gold as he stares into the eyes of the Red Lion. “And I'm yours.”

His hand descends the final distance, and the world burns.

And it's glorious.

+  

When a bond is etched between a Paladin and a Lion, it carries more weight than you could possibly imagine. It binds soul and spirit, mind and body. It stitches together, intimate and only truly known by the one that holds it.

But here's the thing about the Lions. Partial ownership is given to the High Priest or Priestess, around twenty-five percent per Lion, usually a little more of the one they have a magical affinity for, made to keep the Paladins from falling to deep into the Lions at first. After all, the High Court only have the surface power of the Lions, but only a true Paladin can dig deeper into the buried power, slowly accessed by the Paladins to prevent them from losing their minds into the enthralling trance of staying in the minds of Gods and Goddesses in mechanical form.

Here's another thing: Eris has always hated waiting, sneered at the concept of patience. She chooses only the strongest, those who had been broken but healed even better, forged into titanium from experience. She knew that Merial had needed a little time, but by month two, she was already fully submerged and doing just fine. She knows that Keith is even stronger than Merial, mind having already hosted all five of them for years and making contact with the sixth that chose a different form.

Simply put, Eris doesn't give a flying fuck about following the rules.

So she doesn't hold back from Keith, letting him fall through the layers of her mind, not keeping from any piece. In return, she slinks through his, the familiar terrain of broken memories and scattered impressions folding around her welcomingly. She lets herself fall even deeper than she ever dared to go before, mapping out his brain with meticulous care that she never uses for anything else, but this requires it.
Their souls mold together, both red and silver with thick threads binding them together. Two minds, two bodies, two souls, all bound irreversibly.

A deafening roar shakes the battleship, and everyone who hears it relearns the definition of fear.

Chapter End Notes

So, Season 3 has introduced my L'Oreal son. Hell yeah. It has also screwed completely with my fanon but also given me a loophole.

As of right now, this is set in one of the other alternate realities which actually exist now, so that's going to fix any other problems I might've had.
Pidge runs through hallways, Shiro following them with no hesitation, keeping pace easily. *Curse tall people*, Pidge grumbles in their head, and the answering purr of their Lion makes them shiver. *Seriously, what the hell are those things even made of*, Pidge rants internally, following the map in the corner of their helmet visor, *How do Alteans even know about lions? Are they a universal occurrence? Is there an Altean equivalent to a platypus or something? Also, telepathy. I need explanations.*

Pidge wanders, hoping desperately to find something to use, feeling antsy when her palm closes down on nothing but the bayard clipped to their leg. They rely on their tech to an almost uncomfortable level, because that's what saves lives. Brain over brawn, yeah, but if you have the biggest and most effective guns along with a good strategy, that's usually a big bonus.

A beeping, whirring noise interrupts their thoughts and the two of them stumble into a hallway with a floating triangle patrolling the halls. Before they can even think about it too much, their bayard is out and thin green coils of energy wrap around the drone, pulling it to a halt and pulling it to the ground. Shiro sighs as he sneaks forward, “We need to hurry. If we've been spotted it's only a matter of time before the core coding takes priority and the footage is sent off.”

Pidge hums noncommittally, “We’ll be fine.”

Shiro frowns and his right arm twitches a little, moving just slightly, the fingertips momentarily giving off low lilac light before settling back under. “You can't be sure about that. We don't have time, Katie.” He says their old name like it's going to mean something to them, like it'll change their mind.

“Excellent deduction skills, Sherlock. Keith was a bit quicker on the draw the first time around. Also, my name is Pidge you incorrigible wombat, so shut the hell up while I try and salvage this.” Their voice is icy cold, and they immediately dive back into the inner workings of the tiny gizmo, just big enough to be cradled in two palms.

A halting feeling comes snapping and shivering down the line that connects them to Green,
pushing at their mind gently, trying to show something. Fine. Pidge thinks, _Just be careful, 'kay? Alien tech is awesome and this thing has potential._ Green purrs in response and Pidge opens up the bond a little more, letting the influence travel deeper, fizzling through their bones and connecting to the immobilized droid. Ivy green lights up under their palms, and Pidge can feel the very subtle influences they have at the moment.

For a single second, they can feel the whirring, whizzing pieces of code, binary and command all pushed together and running tangibly through the air. _Oh hell no,_ Pidge thinks, because even the code feels corrupted, sick, wrong, _You're mine, you miserable wad of chewed bubblegum, so shake it off and fix yourself._ Emerald smashes into amethyst, a vicious battle of tech and teeth and claws before leafy green wins out and spins new protocols, new pieces, new directives and orders.

Then Pidge pulls out of the trance and looks down curiously at something they either hallucinated or fixed. The bot is dark for a second before lighting up in blazing jade, and Pidge's smile grows until it's nothing but teeth. It beeps out in a series of various pitches before floating up and leading them along. “I am the best techie in the universe. Suck on that, Kelly.” With that, Pidge yanks on Shiro's arm again and sprints after their lovely new bot. Speaking of which... They'll need to name this thing.

“Rover.” Pidge says out of nowhere, and the robot-drone thing stops and chirps in response. A wide grin spreads over their face as the tap the top of the triangle and nudge it forward, “Come on, Rover, show us the yellow brick road.”

From then on, it's a sea of near-identical hallways and twists and turns. There's a certain kind of power running through the halls that Pidge can sense, something with venom in curved fangs and a gaze made of death, coiled and hissing, a basilisk slithering through the walls made of twisted amethyst energy. It's a power that surges through the area, making the shortest Paladin almost dizzy, an advanced energy that seems almost lazy as it moves around.

Rover chirps again, high and loud and happy, and swoops through a door just like all the others they passed on their way through the compound.

The aliens inside, all wearing identical uniforms, startle at the appearance of the two, and their eyes collectively widen as they zero in on Shiro. “Champion!” One that looks a bit like a catfish starts, excited and breathless.

Before anyone can say anything, a deafening roar shakes the battleship and all anyone can think about is the all-consuming terror that comes from the sound.
“...Right.” Pidge breaks through the silence, “I have no idea what the hell is going on, but I'm going to guess that Keith did a thing.” They clap their hands together and lift up the nearest alien by the... it's not entirely an arm but it's close enough to its feet, “Let's blow this popsicle stand, we got some furries to beat into the ground and one robot still inactive.” No one budges, too busy staring and quivering in fear. Pidge groans, “We don't have time for this! Just follow us and you'll be fine. I think. I have no idea what I'm doing, but that's fine too. Get!”

The aliens shake themselves out of their stupor and slowly rise to their feet. Pidge just grins and launches out into the hallway.

+ 

Priest is patient. Perhaps not the most patient of the Pride, but patient enough. Leo and Icarus are the most patient, since prophecy and peace are difficult things to do fast, but justice is not a thing that takes only a few days, either. Justice is trials drawn out over years, justice is a near endless hunt with a tantalizing goal at the end that could really just be a mirage.

Justice is never an easy thing. Motives and morals and minds and matters and the twisting, ever-evolving thing everyone affectionately calls truth. Patience is key or justice fails entirely. Rush it, and the scales are tipped beyond repair.

Often, justice leads to death or a worse destiny. It's why Priest serves Mikora, the one who guides the world down twisting paths long before and long after Kalfe and Vakyr will guide theirs.

Justice is like many questions the universe offers. There is never a simple answer.

*Justice*, many will say, with contempt in their eyes and a sneer on their lips as they watch planets die, as they kill it themselves. *Justice*, some will whisper, condemning another to death, watching the blade fall as blood stains their hands. *Justice*, a few will laugh, bitterly or happily, shoving morality into the corner as they lose themselves in greed.

Priest never quite understands the reason for why people see morality as black or white or gray. Color has no bearing for morality, you could make cold blooded murder sunny yellow and it wouldn't matter.

Justice is blind. Justice sees nothing, not even the truth, not the lies. Justice has a pair of scales and a sword that could slay anyone, innocent or guilty, just as easily. Justice has wings long ripped
from their back to make a shield around the world, fragile feathers fraying and snapping off from the strain of it all. Justice has a prison made of stone and a scream that will never tumble from metal lips. Justice has regal clothes made of silken lies wreathing marble skin.

*Justice, justice, justice. I will bring you to justice, I have justice on my side, I am true and just.*

Just what? Just what are they, truly? They are braggarts and sinners, saints hold no power over them, hold no office because the liars and the thieves will always find a new way to reinvent vice, to re-imagine evil, to recreate the worst of the world under a new name.

So they say that Proem is the God of Justice, the righteous one, the only one who knows the truth of the universe.

But truth is flexible and easy to bend and fit, to break it to pieces and create something that looks close but wrong.

But Proem is a sinner, not a saint. So like every other in the world, he remade himself into someone else. He made himself into Priest.

Because there are two sides to a coin.

Prophecy can save the universe, or destroy it in turn. Love can be the catalyst of happiness, or the crucible of cruelty. Peace can be a beautiful thing, or lead everyone down the path to apathy and entropy. War can be for the good of all, or for the evil of some. Change remakes a world, for better or for worse. Knowledge can either raise or raze galaxies. Death can be a comfort in its inevitability, or a curse in it. Luck has more than two sides to a coin, it's a whole purse full of them.

But justice? No, justice isn't quite a two sided coin. It's a drawing on a sheet of paper, drawn over by hopefuls and fanatics desperate to keep the image of a kind and benevolent ruler alive.

Because justice just is vengeance under a colorful veil, under a new coat of paint.

And vengeance is a long and drawn out thing, with many stages, from the moment it begins stirring from its dark, sinister pits in minds and hearts, to the moment the black ink of sins and bloodshed spills across the thousands of pages that a soul holds, leaking between each and leaving the constant commentary of spirit stained and ruined.
So yes, Priest is patient.

But now, with his Pride waiting outside of his stone prison, with each of them roaring their messages to the sky, with a familiar power waiting for him, with a new Paladin waiting, Priest allows himself to stop feeling patient.

So Priest steps out, and vengeance curls his smile into something made of sharp fangs.

Chapter End Notes

Ok so I've had these ideas spinning around fruitlessly in my head for a while but I don't know how to put them down on paper and every time i try to start I just can't, so if any of you would like to use these, go right ahead.

1) a Voltron/PJO thing, don't really care how or why this happens but I would just love my seventh wheel boys to get along in space so a Lance/Leo relationship? Either platonic or romantic or both doesn't really matter I just want both of them to be happy. Bonus points if Leo's like a ghost or god or something and no one else knows he's up in space following around Lance until he has to fuck some shit up to get him back.

and 2) A Voltron one where Lance and Keith have been soulmates that have always had their memories of past lives and always find each other? Except in the Voltron universe Lance's rebirth wound up weird and he doesn't remember any of the previous lives. I don't have much for this just a single line that's been running around in my head for a while. He thinks he could drown in those eyes. He thinks that he did once.

if any of you are brave enough to take up either of these, please, please, please send me links!

I love you all and thank you so much for commenting on this thing! Comments give me and this work life!
Ok so, I'm sorry to all of you who really like this story, but I have two more chapters that I've worked on that will be posted soon, but after that I don't know if I will wind up updating this again. The inspiration for this has sort of run dry, and I have a tendency not to plan ahead, so I really have no idea where I was going to be taking this. I'm sorry, and I hope you enjoy these last few ones.

Keith watches with sharp eyes filled with fiery laughter as the largest lion steps out into the artificial lights, letting out a roar that sends shivers down everyone's spines. Black armor and silver metal, eyes glowing gold and rimmed with a scarlet red that has Eris laughing like a hyena. In fact, scarlet seems to be a motif for every lion but Ophelia. Icarus has red edging his jaw and shoulder plates, Samtal has a red ridge behind her neck, Eris has entirely red armor, and Priest has red wings folded on his back and a ridge of scarlet going down his forehead.

**Battle scars,** Eris explains, her form twining around the twists and bends of his mind comfortingly, *Since I rule the battlefield, if any in the Pride get injured I'm the one to heal them and supply them with a new piece to fix it. Icarus hardly gets injured due to his better armor, but it still happens, Samtal almost got beheaded once, Priest got his wings removed even before he was a lion, and also a particularly nasty hit on the head, and Ophelia is too sneaky a fighter to get caught up in everything.*

Priest growls and bends front paws to get even with Shiro. *We will destroy what Zarkon has created, Lesha Shriemmm. The universe bows to Priests. We will prove it. Agreed?*

Shiro, though he didn't understand a word said to him, or he might've looked more shocked, just smiles sharp and bright, a fire lighting in his eyes, full of determination and excitement. "Oh **hell yes,**" Shiro whispers, and Keith knows that it's not because he's agreeing to the proposition, but because the lion in front of him looks badass.

Eris cackles in Keith's mind, tail lashing about playfully in her mental stomping ground as Priest casts his gaze around the room, the bright crimson edging the unnervingly golden eyes sharpening into lurid scarlet. *Oh, it's been far too long since this happened! Priest's anger has always felt quite nice. It has an excellent stability. Like ground covered in ashes. This kind is a little less volatile than last time. Last time it felt like it was still on fire.* Eris says it all conversationally, stretching out and going limp on the floor of his mind, because despite being millennia old, Eris is still a kitten through and through.
Ophelia flickers through Keith's mind too, testing out just how deep she can go, how much she can borrow before Eris starts getting territorial, **You and your anger. You hold onto it so jealously, Koreth, you'd think you were starting to turn into a Molretp with the way you guard it.**

I am a sentinel, *Lesha Ksepoth*, not a hoarder.

*I severally doubt that, Kaidel, but alright, continue living in your little fantasy world.*

Shut up, you graceless Tuthoie. My Paladin is still your minder, no matter how leniently he uses that power.

*Your Paladin wouldn't hurt a single one of us without good reason. Sisterly bonding isn't a good reason to override our directives.*

Shame.

*Hey, you two.* Samtal suddenly jumps in with no warning, swan diving straight into the conversation, **As much as I'd love to listen to this catfight, we have some stuff to do. And my Paladin is better than both of yours, so suck it. He's gonna rival your cub someday, Eris, I can feel it in my whiskers.**

*You don't have whiskers.*

*Semantics.*

So the little one knows her big words, doesn't she?

**Eris. We have a battle to fight. I thought you would be excited to get into your element.**

Hell yes I am. This isn't the end, you two. I will return.
I tremble in fear at the mere concept.

Lia! Don't provoke her!

I wouldn't dare.

I hate you.

Ophelia's laughter echoes oddly as she detaches from the conversation to flow off back to her mechanical form, the vine-like tendrils of her mind retreating in a curious, evasive set of movements, zigzagging with no real pattern, almost like she expects a parting blow and is preemptively dodging them.

I hate her.

Eris! Hate is a strong word, isn't it?

Fine. I despise her.

...Not what I was going for, but it'll work. You'll have to get over your petty grudges some day.

It's instinct, darling sister. We're made to conflict against each other, it's a physical incapability not to.

And yet you sound just like her when you open that big mouth of yours.

I am going to kill you in the most gruesome way possible and they will never find your body.

That's the spirit! Now let's go out there and show Zarkon exactly who he's messing with. Show
him exactly why he can't mess with any of our cubs ever again. Samtal sounds... murderous, bloodthirsty and angry in a way that Keith definitely hadn't heard before.

Damn right, sister mine. Let's go.

Keith snaps out of it as each Lion roars, loud and strong and bitter, sound rolling in ferocious waves throughout the room, the noise only echoed by the vaulted ceilings, shrouding the entire room in an echoing cacophony that makes Eris accidentally let slip dizzying waves of euphoria, and the feeling of everyone's anger.

Eris' own is something hot and blazing, a room thick with smoke since it never stops burning, gorgeous scarlet satin being consumed slowly, crimson wax dripping down and creamy parchment curling in black ribbons as it too burned, a graveyard with skulls unearthed and laid bare. It's luxury that doesn't stand a chance, opulence submitting to raging flame, and the hopeless silence of the mourning dead.

Priest has something that feels distinctly righteous, hallowed ground with ashes spread across, a church long burnt into an empty shell, the hollow moan of the breeze gaining fast, pews nothing but soot-covered lumps, a cross collapsed on the ground, the sharp sound of wood on wood, a gavel going down. It's something holy and pure desecrated and destroyed, wind whipping in a frenzy around it all.

Icarus', the one he's the least familiar with, is homes abandoned and struck down, innocence suffering a slow, painful death, no sounds of children crying because this is all they've ever known, it is normal, it is commonplace, this new generation only ever knowing suffering, virtue simply a way to get killed. It's a landscape of war, a place where children are simply soldiers and morals are a thing of old.

Ophelia is twisting, consuming vines, oil sliding down crumbling papers and erasing ancient words, archaic citadels gone quiet and choked with plant life, men with wizened eyes and hands covered in ink with blades at their necks, women trapped in a suffocating place, words never even making it from their throats, much less from their fingers. It's wisdom destroyed, never even given, places of knowledge and information dead, philosophers giving their lives for nothing.

Samtal has to most interesting anger of them all. Deep blue oceans with secrets hidden at the bottom, waves crashing against the shore and eroding in monotonous consistency, trapped in an overwhelming, never-ending cycle, the waves hitting and sanding away the shore for long enough until there is nothing but endless water, nothing but blue. It's entropy in its finest form, a constant thing that destroys and destabilizes, terror choking just like seawater.
So many different kinds of anger, but all with reason below them, not a mindless, unleashed thing, but something with deliberate purpose. A much more deadly kind of rage than something mindless while it is still hot and active, something much more precise and cruel.

“Go, Paladins.” Allura says, white hair swept up in an elaborate braided crown, ice blue eyes perfectly settled, “Vohre watch over you.”

Golden eyes flare, and each Paladin smiles.

There is something oddly exciting about the battlefield, Icarus finds. Of course, there's that lingering bit of hatred that underlies it, but side by side defending their cubs, Icarus finds that he can get used to it.

By nature, he is supposed to abhor the battlefield, war, and suffering in general, being Eris' opposite in ideals if not in mindset and color. He joins Eris in being a warm color, though her fire is raging and untamable and his is the welcoming constant of a friendly hearth.

But some of the kindest people hide some of the sharpest edges when sufficiently provoked, and Icarus? Oh, Icarus is more than sufficiently provoked.

The other first cubs were killed with some sense of honor, killed for fighting back and standing up. Neimao went first, one of those sleeping tigers just itching to be awoken, but Zarkon slit his throat before he could even stir. The fighting truly began then, Samtal prepared to rip the universe to shreds for revenge, and would've most likely, if Vakyr hadn't intervened. Merial fell next, a giant star that burned too hot and too bright to last long in this twisting land of betrayal. Sekhet fell after, in a simmering calculating rage to try to bring it down from the inside, still boiling with fury when the blade fell. And then Alfor, who took up Merial's mantle in her stead, died in a suicide run to the main Galran hub.

But Eiril, precious, guiding Eiril? He had known that the battle was lost when Neimao fell, but still fought for the sheer hope of it all. So when all of the others were slaughtered like Caihten, when each and every star fell under the sheer force of the darkness that Zarkon possessed, Eiril knew his fate.

And so he had walked into a Galra-controlled hub and went peacefully to the end.
He had looked at the twisted monster that used to be his friend and for the universe to see, to be played and replayed in the millennia to follow, he had said, “I forgive you, Mieosaula’deka.”

Zarkon himself cut his heart out, but Eiril had kept that peaceful smile on his face until it was frozen in death.

Icarus, though largely cut from Eiril to help soften the blow, still felt how much Eiril wanted for that 'deka to be a 'daku.

And he knows, from the barely there hold he's bothered to keep on some minds from his stone prison, only thanks to the fact that his master is the guardian of the mind, that Eiril is considered the useless Paladin of the group. The rebellion foolishly thinks that Eiril could've tipped the scales using a tactic like Sekhet's, but Icarus' cubs aren't built to take things down with underhanded tactics, they're direct and constant, built for protection and power.

So Eiril is swept dismissively under the rug as the foolish Paladin, as the stupid one, and they leave it at that.

And Icarus has had quite enough of that. He chooses his Paladins and preachers for a reason, like all of the others.

Sammy chooses the most flexible, the ones with something, somewhere to fight for, someone or someplace that they want to protect, the ones with a quiet fire in their bones and loyalty in their veins, who commit themselves wholly and fully to a cause, who see the world as a million different paths to take.

Eris chooses the most stubborn, the ones who will push through the unbeatable odds and come out at the very least equal on the other side, the ones who will chase their goals ruthlessly and endlessly, who will fight for the glory of the battle, who sees the world as a series of constant challenges and wants to be the winner.

Ophelia chooses those that can can keep up with her, set blazing trails with their minds and their ingenuity, the ones who will stop for no one, but invent them a way to go just a bit faster, the one that will fight to free the minds of others, to liberate them to release others, who use the universe as another tool in their toolbox.
Priest, using some kind of ingrained sense of balance, chooses those that have equal opportunity to fight for good and evil, the ones that walk a perilous line but walk it all the same instead of shying away from it, the universe using the Paladin or follower as an extension of the universe rather than an underling or overlord.

Icarus chooses his for the ones that will stick to their true ideals, the ones that will fight, not to destroy an enemy, but for the more final goal of a peaceful place, ones that have more of an urge to protect than to destroy, who recognizes the universe as the ticking bomb it is, but is willing to try to defuse it, no matter how temporary.

And Icarus has the most volatile and unobtainable element among each of them. Change will be a fixture so long as any energy in any universe exists, justice and knowledge will persist until the Primordeities themselves die out, and so long as Seltaix lives or lesser beings linger, so will battle exist. But peace? Oh, peace can be a very fragile thing, but unlike the rest, it will exist when everything everywhere has gone, when the last meager scraps of energy fall into nothingness, in those universes that have already been held in darkness, that is where peace rules.

Peace, oh it sounds so, so appealing, so perfect and so close, yet so perfectly unobtainable. So they had called him Festian, oh, what a cheerful name, and he had openly decided to join Arkien in the rule of the mind, and started to create his own facet of himself, the God of Ataraxia, and when that became his domain, he realized so much. Justice is revenge, yes, and love is heartbreak, and change and war are bittersweet in nature, prophecy is a mixed bag of many-sided dice, and Icarus won't pretend that even that is correct. He knows that he is not infallible, that he is often wrong and he won't put on a guise to prevent that, won't dance around with extravagant words and sleights of hand to tuck the truth away in some dark corner that will eventually become flooded with light.

But the one thing that Icarus does know, is that none of them have just one nature. Many times they group them up under one name, but Icarus prefers to keep them all separated because it's easier to put fluid things together than pull them apart.

The one thing all of them except Morais seem to forget is that they can split their identities as much as they like, create as many pieces of their power as they deem necessary, become two faced gods.

So he is the youngest of the gods, the bastion of peace in its most traditional sense, simply a lack of war and not much else.

But he is also Arkien's sole prodigy, the guardian of ataraxia and it's many different forms, typically somewhere in every mind no matter how small of a portion.
Yet in many ways, he is also the champion of unity, because peaceful times can be better achieved if everyone is equal as cogs in a grand machine.

He is also the only one that will survive his own element in entropy. It's simply a peaceful decline to the end, after all, a simple, easy path into the darkness.

And just as Morais has a mirror image in Vohre, Icarus' reflection is Griemmm. There is a reason, after all, why death is called the final peace.

Icarus proudly hides each and every one of these titles, because there is no good in flaunting that he, eventually, after the inevitable decay of everything and everyone around him, he will stay utterly sane thanks to who he swore his loyalty to first. Even after the corrosion of entropy has eaten Arkien away into nothingness and Meister finally fades, Icarus will stand nowhere, on nothing, for no one, with no brand of insanity to ease his isolation.

He will be utterly, irrevocably, inescapably alone.

In the words of his second master, *certum est inaversibilis*. It is inevitable.

And so Icarus will live with whatever nature he pleases until he only has the one to live with.

And Icarus chooses to follow unity the most, to follow that nature, because there is not much ataraxia in war, and peace in its traditional way is a foreign concept in battle, he does not want to merge with the part of his soul that will be free in the end, his spirit, because he can at least give part of himself a peaceful end when everything else has gone, and he will keep from entropy until it is the only nature he has, the only thing he can live with.

So Icarus cherishes the unity of the battlefield, the way they come together to form the ultimate protector, the way they will merge and he will savor that sense of harmony, of solidarity and *family* until his final and most dangerous element comes into play and slowly, painfully rips it away from him.

He will fight with them and for them until he alone is the survivor.

And then he will live in the ashes of a dead universe in solitude.
And he is at peace with that.

But now? Now, there is no peace, only the feral, violent, erratic tides of battle to push and pull and destroy, now he will occupy his oldest sister's realm with a sort of breathless relief, because peace does not have many stepping stones or much control in battle.

And he is glad, sometimes, to forget that some parts of himself exist.
The rush of power that echoes endlessly down their bonds, spills tangibly into the air, connects them all and pulls them close in that inescapable way that just makes them stride farther even further than before. It's an endless feedback loop, a constant, beautiful thing, and now they have seven in their number able to join into it, it's even more active than normal. Absence makes the heart fonder, and all that.

Icarus bleeds through to everyone, connecting them with a firm undercurrent that doesn't sway one bit, steady and bright as a thousand stars, constant and edged with dangerously sharp, cold fury. Leo supports them from a distance, taking the mindless anger away from them to ensure that their attacks are precise and coordinated and not just fueled with berserker rage. Ophelia is cold and distant and calculated, every movement and twitch another set of calculations, mind a whirling, bright, exhilarating mess held together in steel binds.

Priest is all bloody, bright fangs, snarling in high definition with the urge to kill painted in lurid letters over the eerily still landscape of his mind. Sammy is a tumbling, whirling mess, running this way and that with a smile growing sharper and harsher with every growing second, with every near-blow and each glancing hit, drinking everything in with hungry, restless eyes. Eris is brighter and darker than all of them combined, shining like a supernova from the immersion in her element, but acting like a black hole, drawing them all mercilessly into her event horizon, fueled by the urge to protect what is hers. Keith just sits back and watches the skies alight with fire.

And Luxis help him if the flames aren't gorgeous.

The other four are there too, of course. There's Hunk, a careful undercurrent of honey gold and amber underneath it all, pulling them up and using himself as a baseline, connected with Icarus with neither of them reaching for a deeper connection. The mass of tangled copper and green is Pidge, lashing out periodically in restless, fascinated wonder struck through with annoyance, engaged in a battle of wits with Ophelia to prove themself worthy of the full connection.

Shiro is a slowly pacing mass of onyx and steel, a predator on the prowl, circling around Priest's energy like a kitten chasing around a lion, woefully unprepared, but with claws all the same. Lance is blinding white and a mass of blues, all the way from deep cobalt to the pastels, streaking around with reckless fire, fluid and carefully stepping out of the way of Sammy's persistent attempts to bond with him deeper.

But, it's still flawed.
There’s still that light, fluttering bit of uncertainty, a swarm of butterflies sectioning them into wedges with easily crumpled gossamer wings, flurrying in ivory synchrony and keeping them from fully merging until their physical forms join, too numerous to kill before a million more take their place.

But they connect regardless, maybe not fully melded but close enough to fight together.

Icarus purrs in the back of their minds and pulls even closer to his own Paladin, tail lashing about excitedly and claws sharpening just the slightest bit, laughing deep and smooth.

Eris is as smooth as a panther, in reality, in mind, in soul, in emotions. She slinks with teeth bared, silently and unabashedly deadly with fangs sharp and bright and lethal.

Sammy is unerringly, unnervingly ecstatic, joy creeping over their thousand-winged guard, a hyena by all rights, laughing and laughing even as blood is spilled and throats are slit.

Priest is cold and distant and glorious in rage, the deep, savage colors of it bleeding the white wings a shade of red that’s almost familiar, the first blizzard of winter, cold and untouchable.

Ophelia prances high and mighty, running circles around her own Paladin, waiting and watching and filled with so much pride that the gold colors haloed with emerald power spread like spilled paint.

But in the physical world, it’s rather hard to tell.

The Paladins are untrained, used to primitive spacecraft and physical controls, rather than the deep bonds between the Paladins and the Pride that run bone deep, because they’re on a time crunch and can't afford to slowly ease them into the process, don't have the time to teach them, to pick apart their minds with reverence and hold them close. They're fledglings with weak, untrained wings, stumbling blearily into a world defined by war and death, built on the fragile foundations of revenge and made with two extremes in mind.

They learn quickly that their wings are strong.

Hunk and Lance weave around each other with movements that are sure enough to spell out a lifetime of familiarity, Hunk using the bulk of Icarus to guard the more fragile form of Sammy as
she rips into everything she can with a frenzied, excited kind of righteous retribution, ripping away metal plating with sharp teeth and slamming her metal tail against every available surface. Shiro and Priest work together in close synchronization, but they're both distant and slightly cold, two predators working together, neither really trusting the other with their lives yet, simply together for the better of the situation. Pidge is seemingly everywhere and nowhere, a blazing ball of emerald flame that flashes about, sometimes appearing to bite at something Samtal was about to bash before merrily zooming away, blinking out of existence thanks to the invisibility and taking pride in the utter chaos the selective, precision hits she and Ophelia make together with seamless, cold logic.

And Keith?

Keith and Eris work in utter tandem, ripping off pieces of the battleship with sadistic glee, the alphas of a pack, trusting the other with the most basic of urges, the most primal of impulses. They are beings of the wild, first and foremost, beasts with sharpened claws and hungry eyes and fangs shining, prowling through the shadows and streaking with wild, animalistic strength to destroy everything in their path. They are creatures of instinct through and through, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Allura's voice cuts through the chaos sharply, like a knife, cold and authoritative, edged with that razor sharp anger it's had ever since they met her, “Paladins! Get it together, all of you!” Sammy rips out another chunk of the battleship pointedly before finally pouncing off of the dark metal into empty space, joining the others in their rough V shape. “Gods above, keep your Lions under control! I don't want my first move as Queen being to destroy any natives because you can't help but rip apart the Galra in the most destructive way possible. Imbeciles.” There's a heavy sigh and then her voice is as sharp as an icicle again, “We will have quite a lot of training to do before we leave this planet for good.”

Coran cuts through after her, voice having lost it's grandfatherly edge for the sharp authority he wields like a fountain pen, “That will have to wait until we're not still in danger, I'm afraid. But I fully agree with my Queen. We don't have time to waste sending a message to the Galra, unfortunately. Our presence will have to count as message enough.” And then, his voice loses the last remnants of light exasperation, going very abruptly cold and sharp, “Go for the mercy kill.”

There is a moment of silence.

And then Samtal laughs, harsh and crowing and proud. It spills out of her mind and into the others with sadistic glee, tearing away until it is nothing but jagged edges and broken off pieces, cold and impersonal and filling the quiet with pieces of shrapnel sound that echo and bound hollowly with lethal, unnerving beauty. It hangs in the air after it ends for a few seconds, before Samtal speaks, voice oozing with malicious pride, with biting sarcasm and vengeful delight.
PERFECT.

Mercy, Icarus tastes the word and casts it away scornfully.

Mercy, Priest laughs, a concept familiar and hated to wrathful onyx.

Mercy, Ophelia sniffs disdainfully, grinding it under her heel with a sense of retribution.

Mercy, Eris crows, killing it with a bloodied blade and smiling with scarlet stained teeth.

Mercy, Samtal taunts bitingly, remembering a man with true blue loyalty.

Show you MERCY.

And the world shifts on its axis until there is nothing certain in the world but blood and pain and steel. Until the horizon is everywhere and nowhere and unbreakable, until there are scarlet skies and black clouds and every soul is silver and blue and every heart is made of gold with every mind blooming with new green growth.

Until it's/they're/he's/she's/we're/you're infinite.

And then the butterflies take flight, leave no barrier behind as their glowing white forms mold together above, and below, colors bleed together until every one of them are one and the same, until it is all they've known and all they've seen, until they are nothing but dizzying power and gorgeous light.

And Voltron stands, lives, breathes for the first time in ten thousand years.

Fun fact: The concept of mercy doesn't tend to age well.

Vengeance however? Vengeance is fine wine turned to vinegar.

Vengeance still has many uses.

And Voltron keeps the vengeance close, in the forefront of its/their/her/his mind. It rides out the tumultuous tides of anger, an ocean made of blood crashing against a seashore of broken glass.
Anger flows through her/their/his/its soul and shakes the entire ship they face off against, still small compared to it, but so much stronger.

Voltron brings the battleship down to face it/them/her/him, stare at it with golden eyes, the color of pride and kindness, hardened with fury and time, and breaks it in half.

The pieces fall, tugged by the gravity of the planet below, the one that makes his/its/their/her heart ache. So similar to the two planets that raised their pieces into the creatures they are now, the beasts that lurk in every piece of every component. Blue seas and green land and white clouds and deserts and mountains and pale beaches.

It hurts to see it all.

And so Voltron doesn't.

Eyes closed, letting gravity do its work, they/he/she/it falls.

The butterflies undo from their new form and descend back down, the mixing colors leeching back into their cordoned sections, metal unfusing until they are ten instead of one, until Leo lets out a shuddering breath of relief at the restored contact.

Breathe, breathe, breathe some voice tells every one of them, sweeping through them and bringing them back down to the ground safely, Don't hold your breath for doomsday now, just breathe.


Besides, the fight is hardly over. A third voice inputs, So at least wait until you're alone to break.

And then, the wind rushes the voices away and they are back, and there is the smoking wreckage of the battleship around them an they feel hollow. They feel tired and slow and spent.

The Lions don't move for a long while, braced against the ground and panting, coaxing their
Paladins back into themselves.

_The battle's over._ Icarus says quietly, large form pulling back up from his position on the ground, looking back toward the distant gleam of the castle.

_But the war's only begun._ Priest announces, grim with the feathery beginnings of a hope.

_I suppose we'll just have to see the forest for the trees._ Ophelia offers.

_Or the trees for the forest._ Eris counters.

_Or just raze the roots._ Sammy tempts.

>_The time for planning will come later._ Leo dismisses, _For now we have cubs to take care of._

And every single one of them do. Even Leo, who has never taken a Paladin, has cubs in the form of a Queen and her Advisor to coax into their newest forms, to help fully out of their cocoons.

For a precious second, they wait in silence, with no thoughts passing between them, simply savoring the feeling of _family-pride-pack_ until they are dizzy with exhilaration.

And then the Lions all rise from the ground and begin the trek back.
Lance wakes up back in his Lion, with a monster of headache and little to no memory of what the hell just happened, except that he currently feels just a bit miserable, and there's aching pulses of fury spreading out from somewhere in the back of his head and it all just screams, getting louder as he tries to escape it before it finally goes quiet again. He drags in a deep breath, and his throat pulses with pain, raw and sore and he winces, but it's hardly the worst pain he's ever had, after all, no one liked the kid with the smart mouth and the smart brain to back it all up, and they tended to respond with unthinking fists.

Carefully, he takes stock of his surroundings, stretching out his limbs which burn from some kind of exertion that he doesn't remember going through, wincing but humming all the same, shaking the tension out and tapping the side of his helmet thing. “Hey? Anyone? Is anybody awake, and can someone please tell me what the license plate was of the train that hit me?”

“Trains don't hav- wait do they?” Hunk responds, voice the slightest bit slurred and blurring together, confusion very clearly present. “Pidge, help a guy out, do trains have license plates? I feel like they don't but I am very frequently wrong.” There is a long silence that succeeds the words, and Hunk slowly repeats himself, “Pidge? The trains?”

“Fuck you.” is the eloquent response from the gremlin themself, “And fuck your trains, I don't know. It was never my job to know if trains have license plates. These Lions should've come with a 'you must be this high to ride' sign because I think I have a concussion.”

“Nah, I think we all got one, so you should be fine.” Lance replies, then makes a confused noise and furrows his brow, “Or you're not fine and we're all screwed because we're not fine either, in which case we're all fucked, not just Hunk and his trains.”

There is a long pause and then Keith breaks it with, “Yeah, definitely concussions. Several of them. Shiro, you good?”

“Uhh... Possibly? I don't know if I have a concussion, but I definitely have a headache, and I don't remember that much? Then again, pretty standard.” Shiro then makes a noise that sounds like
several question marks vocalized, “Uh, anyone have a clue what their Lion is doing?”

Oh, yes, that was a thing. Right. Lance looks out of the viewscreen, squints a bit, then replies slowly, “Running. I think. It definitely looks like running, so I'm gonna say that it is.”

“Yup.” Hunk confirms, and then pauses, “Dude, I hate concussions. My head feels like it's imploding.”

“I like it when things implode.” Pidge adds cheerfully, “It's a bit difficult to do, but it's very nice when they do. Exploding is much easier, but it's not quite as satisfying.” There's a long incredulous silence. “Wait, shit, did I say that out loud?”

“Yeah.” Shiro says, and there's a note of almost-pride/light-disappointment that only a dad can pull off.

“Fuck. Forget I said that, please and thank you. I totally agree with Hunk, I despise concussions with all my heart and soul.”

There's a lingering sense of amusement at the back of his skull, humming with light laughter and carefree joy. He stiffens just a bit, because his headache roars heavy and loud, sending shooting pains down the back of his neck and echoing through his body, and then simply stops, taking the rest of the headache with it. “Uh, guys? I'm pretty sure my migraine just went away.”

Pidge just sighs, “You do realize that disappearing headaches isn't the weirdest thing we've encountered in the past twenty four hours? We're fighting an army of purple cat furries who've been in control of the universe for the past ten thousand years with semi-psychic robot lions and two aliens that somehow speak English, I'm pretty sure we've lost any and all sense of reality.”

“Y'know,” Shiro put in thoughtfully, “I'm 90% certain my life wasn't nearly this weird before aliens happened.”

“That can pretty much be accurately said in almost every situation.” Pidge adds, “Also, I'm also wondering what kind of drugs we're on and whether or not I'm going to burn them in a bonfire or toss all of them into the ocean.”

“I just want to know whether or not trains have license plates.” Hunk includes.
“We know, Hunk, we know.”

Coran watches calmly as the hangar doors open and the lions bound through in the close balance that allows them to enter as quickly as possible without messing up the entrance of any of the others. They sing as the stars do, with energy wild and untamed, in harmony and in discordant solos attempting to win out over each other, and his Marks itch with the power of it all, the close proximity to the ultimate guardian. His skin crawls with the weight of it all, the untempered force that presses down around this whole planet, and he breathes it in with breaths that seem almost too shallow, kept short with the immense mass that presses down on his chest naturally in the presence of the Lions of Legend.

Allura, his Queen, stands just a bit in front of him, one hand laying lax and unmoving on one of the pedestals while the other remains at her side, fingers twitching occasionally, which is honestly the only indication she's giving other than the slow rise and fall of her chest and the steady echo of her heartbeat that she isn't a statue. She stares out of the front window, head tilted just slightly to the right, eyes a bit glazed as she look at the plumes of smoke that come from over the mountains, and the one jagged piece of the battleship that sticks up over the peaks.

All around him, the Castle, his home for the past ten millennia, give or take a few hundred years, sings with power and majesty. He's lived on this place ever since he was a lowly servant. It had been where he had taken up the mantle of a guard after a particularly nasty bug on a ten year mission to bring peace to the stars wiped out a whole squadron and they needed more to take their place. It had been where he set his broken bones, where he hissed his guilt and his regret to the walls, where he had gained his first kill against an assassin who targeted the king. It had been where he had been truly christened in ash and blood and fear, instead of simply coming back home from the Bunkers to the news that his mother and father had died in the final raid to push back the dissenters. It was his home, because even though he didn't spend his childhood here, he had sculpted himself within the walls.

And of course, the biggest issue with establishing which home truly shaped him is that the ones he knows he had, his original house and the bunkers and the barracks, are distant and difficult to place. Stasis pods are meant to function as both preservers for any medical attention that cannot be administered while in flight via any healing pods, for three year stretches at the most. Anything beyond that, and... well. The natural pieces of the universe would take over, demand something decay in the place of shape and soul and sanity, and your memories would start to fail and fall away from the beginning forward. He no longer remembers whether he lived in a cottage or a manor, whether or not his childhood best friend who died in the first attack had Marks that Settled black or white, whether his mother and father shared yellow or green Marks, what color her hair used to be, if he had a beard or not, what either of their forenames were.
He forgot his own last name, and unfortunately, after becoming an orphan and pledging himself to the Greater Cause, and with no one who knew him left surviving to confirm his claim, he was simply entered into the databases as 'Coran – 7H3-807'.

He lost so many important parts of the past when he became the future.

“Coran, have the diagnostics come back yet?” Allura asks softly, and it still comes out in that strange language these new Paladins use, and he finds that he misses that soft, crisp feel that Altean gives. Coran doesn't hesitate for even a second before his white-gloved fingers are running over project files thousands of years old, eyes narrowed just slightly as he lightly imposes his will, imprinted with echoes of his quintessence, gently attempting to ease an answer out of the systems.

“But yet, Makkesh. The Castle has yet to finish processing the backlog.” He flicked his fingers against a line of text requesting personnel assistance with an issue in the vents in the Southeast Wing, turning it white and storing it in the system, where the Castle itself would remind him of his commitment until he confirmed that he had indeed completed his task. The roll of his Queen's title comes out easily, the k's clicking loud and sharp and ending in the hushed sound that almost reminiscent of the shuffling of bare feet over the temple stones.

Allura nods sharply and takes her hand fully off the pedestal, flexing her fingers and rolling her wrists, finally shifting from where her feet have been rooted to the floor, gliding toward the open doors to go meet with the new Paladins. She hesitates by the door frame before shaking her head slightly in rejection at whatever statement or sentiment she was about to use and settling on, “Keep me informed. Jeesau, Coran.”

Coran dips his head in acknowledgment. “Makksaula, Allura.”

She leaves with dress trailing out behind her, and he knows with a deep certainty in his bones that it will be quite a bit before he will see her in that outfit again. She always did have a preference for outfits that were clung closer to her frame in times of conflict, so any weapons she held were fully visible except for the knives kept hidden in her bracelets, a strong show of force to the opponent that even the Heir of Altea was fully willing to engage in combat at any given moment. In peace times, she preferred dresses and ballgowns, simply for their uses to hide weapons so as not to provoke the visiting ambassadors and royals, but still remain protected and safe. Ever since she could hold a knife, she had kept one, if not on her person, then certainly as close as possible.

Yes, she was certainly destined to be a wartime ruler, wasn't she? With Marks that had such a tendency to flare deep, vicious crimson in her youth, it was almost a miracle they hadn't Settled as such. She always burned cold after all, staring at any of her opponents with cold, distant eyes.
before she pulled the trigger of the mock gun and stabbed down with the phase-daggers, and it was clear that though Caitius had claimed the majority of her Marks, Xera truly held her morals and her destiny.

The door closes behind her, descending from the ceiling and clicking pleasantly against the floor. For a second, he simply stares at it, letting his last exhale hang in the air, lets the light breeze swim around him and curl around his hands where they remain suspended in the air, not interacting with the holograms in front of him, simply hanging in space. He drops them back to his sides, closing his eyes and letting the simulated solitude lull him into an almost sense of complacency.

“Pull up Project Files 10709-15783. Archive any correspondence before then, create a folder for any messages from the royal family, notify me when their wills are located, and if I am not available put it in a private file. Begin an active search for any surviving Altean bloodlines, attempt to locate the next Wayfarer and until then take me as proxy, override code three-eight-six-four-Meshta-Ka.” Coran spits out the words as fast as possible, and his fingers dance over the projections, setting them aside individually in various folders and letting the sheer mind-numbingness of it take over. “Place all distress calls sent on non-Galran sources into the map algorithm, and isolate the Galran frequencies, look for any blank spaces.”

In that remote place, where he feels a million lightyears from everything else, he closes off his mind and focuses solely on his work.

It's probably the one thing keeping him in some semblance of sanity.

Sam(tal)my swims in seas of ceaseless cerulean skies breaking with the burden of breathing beings, talking in tongues told of in tomes too timeworn to remain relevant and written with runes roosting in nice, neat nooks. Her head is filled with horrors so old everyone else has forgotten, but she remembers them very nicely. Oh yes, they fill those little hidey-holes in her mind, every last one until she is a meadow of rabbit holes and every last particle of dirt is another secret, and hidden in the pockmarked dirt are the ground up bones of every skeleton in her closet.

She always preferred to be close up with all of her followers. Pr(oem)iest liked to be a spectator, (X)Er(a)is tended to participate, (Fest)I(an)carus was always distant, Le(M)o(rais) never truly chose any preachers and was therefore the most distant of them all, and (D)O(shye)phelia only ever interfered to spite her followers. Sam(tal)my trusted all of hers, even though an impressive amount were liars and deceivers, considering the sheer numbers of her following.
Everything changes. Maybe just slight fluctuations, but anything that has matter, being, thought, or other things around it changes. Maybe slight things, temperature or air currents or just molecular changes, maybe larger things, like gravity and stretching or bending, or maybe fully internal things, changes in opinion or thought, it all counts as change. She allows the souls to move on peacefully, after all, another has a much more valid claim on them, but everything else is hers. Criminals and killers and warlords and scum, liars and the power-hungry tyrants all the same. Saints and good Samaritans and angels and the kind ones, innocents and the generous included. The rock in a backyard? That had to be taken from somewhere, the energy it holds that used to belong to one single point in the void, therefore it is hers as well.

She is the goddess of change, of everything that has been and everything that ever will be, and her mind is fractured and broken under the weight of it all. But that's all fine, she has countless more to fall back on. Her preachers are always so very loyal.

Oh yes, her preachers, her favored ones, the people that speak of a change they are committing themselves to. She doesn't care much for those that champion a cause, that shame others for not committing themselves the same when they aren't giving their own pieces to it as well. No, her own are the ones that sacrifice themselves for a cause, maybe not because it's right or wrong, maybe not because it's good or bad, but because they are committed to a change. She will never claim that all of her preachers are good people, she will not even claim that most of them are. She can respect the Galra, even if they live under such a horrible disgrace, follow a cause made by that despicable creature, but she has to admit that they are determined to see it through to the very last. She understands perfectly well why they do as well, for it's all they've known, this conquest of theirs, and they are willing to die to keep the universe under their control.

But her highest are her Paladins. Oh, she's so very happy that she can make that plural now, that she can speak of two of her children, of her cubs and her kits and her young, that her pups are not alone, will not be alone once they pass on, once this little world comes to an end. They are her everything, her little ones ready to go out and enter her twin's realm, hers in every moment of it that matters, in all the ways she wants them to be hers. They are her voice and her breath and her heart, they are her humanity and her morals and her decency, they are her rage and her blood and her weapons. They are hers, and they commit themselves to her cause first and foremost.

Even her requirements are a bit of a mix-up, a loyal person with great ambition, who will not compromise and has high dreams. Loyalty is inherently chains binding you to another's will, and so to pursue their dreams, to follow their ambition, they would have to do them under another's instruction, and that's simply not Sammy's way. She does not think outside the box, she proves that the box is a mental construct that's flimsy and 2-D in nature and should not, should never, exist. Her mind is a raging hurricane, spilling rage and saccharine sweet kindness out from the eye of the storm, where her Paladin walks unharmed.

She likes the enigmas, the antitheses, the oxymorons, the ones that by all rights should not exist, should not make sense, don't make sense, but still exist and think and breathe and fight. They're in a constant state of flux, constantly in her element, in the front of her mind because they are
consistently different in every second, pinging at every single opportunity on her radar and drowning her in a thousand oceans of breathless, mortal emotion.

She loves to drown anyway. In water and oceans, in fire and emotion, in pain and blood. Blood most of all, warm and scarlet and so similar to Eris, her twin made of pain and flame and ruby red, of everything. Eris is perhaps the one thing she prizes as high as her Paladins.

She dreams of her oceans, of surfing out onto the waves and letting the riptide curl her under its inescapable embraces. She dreams of her seas, of hellfire flames consuming her until she is burning with rage, an inferno of fury. She dreams of slinking through hallways, of sinking knife-sharp fangs into the neck of that dirty traitor, of ripping his throat out and watching him bleed into an oblivion he does not deserve.

She dreams of chaos and screams out her approval.
When the adrenaline crash hits, it hits hard. Green has to lash her tail out and wrap it around Pidge to keep them from falling over, and a sharp, sudden needle-prick pain comes from that one part of their skull. “Yeah, yeah.” They mutter, and squint up at the massive head of their lion, “You are really big. I didn't really notice that so much before, but you are massive holy shit. Who made you? You must've been really expensive to make, with all that extra fancy metal.” They rest their head against the tail and perk up a bit, “What kind of metal are you made of? Because this stuff is strong as hell but this tail doesn't have enough seams to be this flexible. Tell me all of your secrets.”

A voice echoes through their head, underlying with the soot from ancient smoking pipes, singing with vines that wrap around and strangle gently, coaxing the world out from behind someone's lips, making them form it from flesh and blood and shoving it out to be devoured by galaxies and worn away by time.

No. Earn them.

“Oh my god.” Pidge says faintly, pushing the tail away and deciding that the floor is a perfectly good place to sit, thank you very much. Clearing their throat and stopping to hack up the dry air that came with doing that action, they scoot forward until they can touch the armor plated paw in front of them. “So, run down, you have a voice and a sentient mind all wrapped up in the most advanced piece of robotics that will ever grace this world along with some telepathic things and from whatever that thing was in the ship some weird technological visualization thing that is apparently transferable. Please, for the love of god, let me into your beautiful circuitry. I would kill someone, die, and resurrect myself just for a glimpse of your code.”

There's an almost incredulous silence that follows, like everything around is holding in its breath.

...You'll do.
“...Was that a yes?”

No answer.

Pidge makes an incoherent noise of indignant distress up at the suddenly deactivated mass of mechanical marvel that sits unbothered, tail wrapped tight around two paws, pushing its form into as small a horizontal space as possible, like that one stray cat that would imperiously lord over the neighborhood from the roof across from theirs.

God, they miss that house. They miss the nights on the roof that they could spend, the cozy, cluttered nook that they called their own, the horrible karaoke sessions the entire family would get almost disturbingly into, the crayon drawings they never got around to erasing on the walls.

Then again, it's not entirely fair for them to miss the thing they abandoned in their quest for blood and stars.

Pidge stumbles back up to their feet, lifting their chin up, trying not to stumble as a wave of exhaustion nearly sweeps them back down to the floor. “Just watch.” They hiss up at the distant, dark windows where golden light had spilled through moments before, “I won't go down easy.” Their trembling legs disagree, but they stubbornly lock knees and stay upright, if only to give one last pointed jab of the chin and turn away before they fall over, brain themselves on the floor, and die after bleeding out.

They can see the epitaph now: Pidge Holt, beloved child and sibling. Died after going to space, fighting a battle in a ship shaped like a giant cat, and hitting their head on an inconvenient piece of flooring. They will be missed.

At least it's better than the crappy con job that was the other two Holts.

The few steps away from the lion feel like they're trying to achieve escape velocity with nothing but flesh and bone and ragged determination, weigh them down until they feel like the second hardest they've ever taken, except for those up the stairs while their mother sobbed in the living room-

Oh, fuck.
Fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck no.

Goddamnit way to fucking go Pidge, leaving behind the only person who loved you and didn't leave you for the galaxy beyond. Good going, ten out of ten, god, what a genius.

It hits like a sledgehammer to the chest, like something deep inside has been irreparably broken, been damaged beyond repair, circuits sparking and code spitting out errors.

Now their mom is all alone. All alone in an empty house full of ghosts and crayons on the wall and- no, not even the house, the entire fucking planet, the solar system.

At least before they could say they would make mom proud, that they would find their family and they would be happy again, that they could send emails from the Garrison to say 'Hey, I'm still alive, I'll find them and we'll come home', had the reassurance that they could dial a phone number and talk to her again, even if they never did.

Now there isn't a single phone line or email that can cross these lightyears of space between Earth and here. There won't be anything to say 'Hey, I'm still alive, I won't leave you in the stars like them' because now that's a lie and goddamnit why is nothing ever easy.

Their torso shudders as they hunch over slightly, a high, whining, keening sound rising in their chest, stumbling somewhere around the collarbone, and emerging as a muffled, broken croak.

But no, they will not cry, won't shed a tear until they know that everyone else is okay, and then maybe they can find some nice little place to sit in and scream until the walls are filled with vicious, hungry sound.

They huff out a breath, dig their hands into fists just to feel the pressure, pushing with all of the might they can, don't bother trying to fix their hair that falls in a haphazard, uneven curtain of imperfect isolation.


A jaw cracking yawn breaks the almost eerie silence that follows, and Pidge raises their head enough to spot Hunk blearily making his way out from over by his lion. “Welcome back to the land of the living, buddy.” Pidge drawls, the casual affect in their tone sounding miserable even to
their own ears.

“If this is life, I want to talk to the manager.” Hunk deadpans, wincing when he catches sight of Pidge’s probably red and betrayingly tear-streaked cheeks, “Because I think mine is defective and I want a refund. Or return it for store credit or something, I don’t know.”

Pidge musters up enough energy to send fingerguns in his general direction and they both begin the seemingly endless trek of the fifty feet between where their lions were parked and where the promising looking door sits.

It opens without either of them either touching it and both of them sigh on cue, sending each other dual glances of mute deadness in the place of any rants about the complexity of the bullshit they have to endure.

Beyond the door, Shiro is leaning back against the hulking form of his own lion, dwarfed even by its paw, bright gold eyes tilted to stare down at the comparatively ant-sized beings below.

It's almost humbling, staring up at a skyscraper sized alien spaceship shaped like a giant cat, that less than half an hour before, had melded into an even bigger alien space ship shaped like a man made out of cats that then proceeded to destroy an entire alien cruiser run by sentient, bipedal purple cat/lizard hybrids.

And that’s... strange. Not just putting it all in perspective, but the reality of it as well.

Because that's it, isn't it? This isn't some bizarre fever dream. They wouldn't wake up with a splitting headache back in their thirteen year old body, having dreamed up the last two and a half years of hell from some dark, animalistic corner of their brain, imagined everything from blistered hands to shuddering sobs on the top of rooftops, of hair in the sink and the trash and using Matt's hoverbike to drive out to the middle of the desert to scream until it felt like the sand of the dunes was trapped in their lungs and clawing up their throat.

They wouldn't, because this fucked up reality isn't fake and dismissible, isn't some movie to sit on a couch and laugh at from the clinical distance of the spectator. No, this is the only reality they had now.

This is- it.
No other way around it, this is real.


The looming height of the ship before them stretches up and up into the hangar, the head shrouded in shadows, blocking one of the massive flourescent patches above from shining down fully, golden lights staring out from behind the silhouetted muzzle of a massive creature. They remember it in the same way they remember being sick, like it came from beyond mists and stole away some important thing in their mind.

They remember being one with it.

The sensation of self being ripped away like duct tape stilling the lips of some great mind, something sickeningly natural and entirely foreign, painful but relieving.

It was terrifying that they could lose themself so perfectly in it. That it could all feel so completely and entirely like a home they lost in the voice of a newscaster plainly announcing that two out of three of the most important people in the world (beyond the world) were gone in a haze of ash and rocket fuel and fire far beyond where they could follow.

It was a bittersweet, clawing sensation, but only after the cold, unfeeling, predators rage had faded and suddenly there was a planet that looked like some child's remembered drawing of the Earth rendered into high definition, the stars beyond designed in patterns foreign despite the countless hours of staring up at them from beyond where light could snuff them out.

It was a sense of oneness they hadn't felt since-


It was like being blood and the veins, the feel of a heartbeat tatooing itself against their skin in long, heavy beats, the beat of a massive creature. It was being everything in the fine details, the wires in the machinery, the cogs and gears beneath the machine, the piston in the engine, the sharp, perfectly edged lines on a circuit board.

Is it strange that they felt almost more at home in a body made of metal and four other souls that their own skin and bone?
God, when can they go find that corner?

This is all way too fucked up, too twisted and broken and terrifying to even comprehend, to put in nice and neat boxes. It's too massive and horrible. She's studied enough regimes in school to know how bad one can be, even only lasting a few years, how many dead and injured and mutilated and broken and relocated, refugees to be tossed around like dolls. This is a regime that's lasted for ten thousand years, with a dictator who lasted just as long, with time to evolve his plots and plans and practices with no signs of stopping until his goal is reached.

And he won't stop. Not until his corpse is cooling, and even after that, there are a hundred more like him waiting to rush into the power vacuum he'd leave behind, probably. They're outgunned, outmanned, and outplanned, because this Emperor has apparently been waiting ten thousand years with plenty of time to make a thousand contingency plans against the only thing he fears.

Even if – by some miracle – they succeed, much less before Pidge is old and gray or dead and gone and six feet under in alien soil, what about the billions that have no homes to return to, that need to pack into ships and brave a void to find a new home? Or- fuck, what happens to those that have lost everything to the Galra? What happens if they take down the regime and then guide an entire alien species to extinction while the worlds all make themselves blind by taking eyes for eyes and blood for blood and death for death? What happens to Galran noncombatants? What happens to surrendering soldiers? What’s happened in the past ten thousand years that their new alien buddies have no clue about?

What happens now?

What if they can't do it? Where are any of the resistance movements? When can-

“Pidge?”

they go home? How would-

“Pidge!?”

they even get home? What does any of it mean? Why can't they even-
“Pidge!”

breathe properly?

Oh, there’s Keith. He's close and warm and his hands are on their shoulders and

They. Will. Not. (fuck it)

The keening sound they tried so hard to keep down comes out unrestricted, and they taste salt like they've just burned their past and are making sure it's dead and gone, flooding the ground and sinking down from skies.

Their legs fall out from underneath them but it doesn't matter because there are hands holding them up, the reassuring heat of human beings around, guiding them gently to the ground.

There is nothing but chaos and flurries of flapping wings, and there is no eye to this storm, there is only the devastation and snatches of mere moments to appreciate the horror. A wild buzz of noise, a burning, aching sensation like blood fresh from a blade.

They hear some of the words some of the time. Frantic little short bursts of sound that almost sound like the noises a bird makes before a cat gets to it, words that sound like shellshock and *spaceno they can't be alone they can't go find that corner because now they can feel hands that they hit with a wrench far too many times carding through their hair and isolation is too sweet a torture to endure/deserve.*

A warmth tries to move away and only a frantic, uncoordinated scramble with numb fingers manages to snag on a joining seam of armor manages to convince it otherwise.

“No.” They hiss, and it feels like the ancient vines have returned, are lashing veins into their places, organizing thoughts into beautiful organized chaos, until the whole lot of them are bristling with sharp ends ready to impale and defend, dragging away the pieces broken from the wild tempest for repair and leaving behind this muted, horrible stillness, and the wings. “Don't- don’t leave me.”

“I-I won't, Pidge.” Oh, there's Hunk. He feels like a rock now, stable and sun-warmed, where something cold-blooded like them could lounge on until it could convince itself it was alive.
They push closer to him, until gloved fingers scrabble over white armor and stone, and the tense bow of their shoulders relaxes. There are flocks of birds that buzz around in the blank, desolate landscape in their mind, held close and tight while they screw their eyes shut until afterimages of color splatter over doves wings, wild greens like acids and reds like blood spatter.

Winged creatures in the air circling, *predator predator PREY homelostboundbrought* a roost on the edge of a cliff, *fall, fall my child spread your wings or diegonedead PREY* the smell of blood on the wind*onlyhomebreezeguidingstars*.

“The birds are hungry.” They whisper, and they know that it is the truth, that now they have woken from their slumber to an offering on their altar, of blood and broken steel, and now they scream to the sky for more. “They won't stop singing.”

It is music, a great, horrible music. A wild, frenzied sound, like a choir of wolves howling their hearts to a faceless moon that has forsaken them, like a wildfire rushing to consume and a flood to drown, until they meet in the middle and make a storm together in this insidious harmony.

But somewhere close there is sunlight on the rocks, and waves crashing against the shore, and fog that rolls around their feet with a silver lining, and they hold a torch to a forest and tell it to grow.

They need to find a home, a roost, somewhere to nest and protect with blood and claws and sharpened beaks and bitterness.

They need- need-

“Come on, birdie.” Hunk whispers, and suddenly they're a little bit airborne but they don't particularly care, they just want to stay where there is sun and nothing hurts and their mind can be theirs and everyone else's.

They would tell themselves not to cry but the sea has already marked their cheeks, so the only thing left to do is dry tears with sunlight.

There is another hand on their back that feels like the ocean again, come back to tell her *don't weep child, for one day you and all your tears will be mine* in a voice like seabirds and sunset wind.
The sunlight holds them at their back, and the ocean holds them with it, dragging them back into blissful oblivion.

They let the riptide take them.

- 

*I pushed too hard.*

*No shit, Sherlock. Good going. Ten out of ten. An utterly breathtaking performance from the universe's most ignorant goddess of knowledge.*

I'm sure she was trying her best, Lesha'diko.

*Tone down the sarcasm, please. We're more dignified than petty insults.*

*You might be but I'm sure as hell not. She hurt her paladin, I'm not going to excuse that, even if it was an accident.*

*They have the support they need for right now. They just need to become well-acquainted with the flock.*

And the flock is a menagerie of bloodthirsty birds of prey with no set home or nestmates, who haven't eaten for ten thousand years. I'm sure it won't be long before the fifteen year old child properly tames all of them.

*Listen, my decision was made. I can't exactly take it back, and I wouldn't want to try to rip all of the birds out of the forest.*

*Someday you're going to kill a planet and just say 'oops' and walk away.*
I made my choices, Elquae. I'll live with them and I'll learn from my mistakes. I see it's not a behavior you tend to exhibit.

One day, when the stars set upon your forsaken path, you will feel fangs against your throat and know fear.

*Invoking the ancient rights, are we? Then one day, my sister of the sea, you will thirst upon the desert night and drink the blood of demons.*

How dare you-

**Enough. Take care of your Paladins. Do not be fools.**

You don't know us well enough, then. Folly is our very foundation, you fool.

**Maybe so.**

Pidge shudders and shakes in Hunk's arms, saltwater tears shedding like drops of blood, hands locked in a desperate, clawing embrace around his neck, and Lance can't help but feel a little useless now.

He holds their glasses between careful fingers, toying with the frame, running fingers over it in nervous loops, tracing an infinity symbol between the two sides, hands stuttering over the nosepiece before following the lenses of the frame perfectly. Every step feels too loud when he takes them, every breath too invasive, lagging a few steps behind Hunk and finding that it makes it worse than if he went up and hung off of his arm and made some stupid ass comment.

Here he just feels like he's intruding on something he was never meant to see, like he's sitting in a dark corner and watching something intimate occur, looking through a peephole, a light at the end of the tunnel, and feeling his guilt manifest high in his throat from this anonymous, impersonal distance that immediately makes everything *so much worse.*
His skin feels a little wrong over his frame now, crawling with his sins, unbearably loud breaths hitching just the slightest bit on the solid lump that sticks in the back of his throat. His brain feel scattered and picked clean, like his mind has been shattered and frantically pieced together in the space of a second, the crash of it still echoing in his ears with your fault, not good enough. There's a kind of mental nausea he has, not that he quite needs to throw up but more that he needs to purge these imperfections that rage and roil like some mud monster rising from a drowned swamp in his head.

His fingers fumble over the glasses for a second, and he scrambles to grab them before he can drop them onto the marble-like floor and have them break and take away the last few things that Pidge might have to remember a pale blue dot in the far off distance. He grabs them by their edges before they can tumble away from his grasp, the two panes of accusing glass glaring up at him for this almost-failure.

His grip twitches and shifts them from being two twin pits of light that glower at him like an accusing spirits into half-mirrored surfaces, like when light glares off of his tablet and he could either read the words like before or zero in on his surroundings and his own slack face.

His eyes are bloodshot, he has the worst case of helmet hair he has ever seen on a human being, and there's a bruise on his jawline, but for the life of him he can't remember where he got it from. He didn't sleep well in Keith's Walmart brand murder cabin in the woods, just sat there and felt that mental nausea churn as it ever so harshly sunk in that he just committed at least three felonies. He couldn't sleep after he got back from the desert planet with the sense memory of the white-hot, burning terror that coursed through his veins and consumed everything until the heavy yellow figure of another Lion breached the ground like a whale coming up for air.

He probably needs to sleep, though. He probably will.

Maybe.

Probably not.

Probably not until he cries himself into numbing exhaustion though.

But maybe he'll get lucky.

Maybe.
His head shoots up, and Hunk is there halfway between him and the end of the corridor. Oh. He must have stopped walking when he started remembering the heart-numbing panic. Stupid.

His footsteps are loud, far too loud, as he takes a few jogging steps to catch up, and the sensation of intrusion only amplifies as he gets closer, some ancient instinct telling him to turn back now and run as fast as he can or stay silent in the corner and hope to god the predator doesn't find him.

“Are- are you alright?” Hunk hasn't continued down the hall, even though Lance desperately wants him to, wants to return to this previous normality they had where Hunk carried the sobbing, broken one with stoic grace and Lance quietly sheds his parts behind him like a malfunctioning machine and neither of them say a word when they retrace their steps so he can pick his pieces back up and shove them haphazardly back into place.

Still, when he opens his mouth to respond, whatever he was going to say gets stuck halfway between thought and speech, and there is not a single variation of 'yes' he could say that wouldn't clog up his throat until he choked on his own guilt.

So instead he manages to rip out a, “Can we please keep walking?” from his traitorous vocal cords and lets his footsteps replace any other sound he might make.

They don't say anything else on their walk back to Pidge's room.

Chapter End Notes

guess what I finally managed to get this out and it's one am where I live and you best believe I aint got no beta with me on this and I'm not proofreading because you have suffered enough.

btw Elquae is the fancy way to say hypocrite/lie/cheater/perfectly-lovely-person-except-for-one-thing-so-maybe-look-into-that-wink-wonk in the Altean high court.
a lot of the chapters I had before was pre-written and came out quicker than any that might follow this one but I am currently filled with a lot of spite for Marvel right now so I'm channeling it into semi-productive things. I can promise nothing but I'm going to give it my best shot to keep this thing going and prove myself wrong.

I live off of spite and your glorious comments, so if you can, please give me more of the second and sustain me.
He can't think about anything right now, he finds. Empty places where thoughts are supposed to be, no coherent thought except to note that it all feels so barren. A brain stripped of everything but base instincts and the need to keep walking. He doesn't even know where he's going but *away*.

Away from the screeching birds and screaming forest, from the desperate rush of river water over an eroding lake bed, from the sun-warmed rocks that seem like they'd burn his skin, the wild, roaring pillar of flame that seems like the safest of them all.

(away from the cell next to his where a creature won't stop howling with grief, from the blood on his hands, the brand biting into his skin, the lightning-strike of white-hot fire a blade makes in his hands)

Just away.

The floors are white and the walls are white and the ceilings are high enough to be cast in shadow, but he feels like that's wrong. Like he's walking on the ceiling instead of the floor, like the world has been twisted upside down and he'll fall from this height and die if he takes a step in the wrong direction.

(the floors are pitted with blood, the walls are harsh grey and purple, and the ceilings are filled with screaming, bloodthirsty spectators and that feels such a sickening mix of wrong and right that he wants to rip his skull apart and find what makes him feel this way)

Footsteps sound heavy in his ears, like his brain is making up for the lack of true thought by overcompensating with his senses, taking up space and sending the same signals over and over again until each step layers with the next, an unbearably loud drumbeat smashing through his skull.

(the drums of war, the pounding of feet, of hands, of heartbeats in his ears, of the rhythmic chanting of harsh words that cut into his mind with the surety of a blade he holds in his hands)

The air here is too clean, too perfect. It's filtered and smells like- well he's never been good at
placing smells but it smells natural in an artificial way, in the uncanny valley of natural scent. It's not dusty and dry like the air back in the Garrison, not that familiar uncomfortable itchiness that came with living where he was.

(not the ring-dusted air he remembers, that always scented of metal and sweat, tears and blood and pain and the familiar uncomfortable constant of sentry-oil)

His hand is in the (painfully) white wall and it hurts with a deep ache through natural bone, a sharp, unsettling contrast between that and the unfeeling metal at his side, which squeezes into a fist in acknowledgement, making a creaking noise like a gate to some creepy cemetery creaking open to invite the mourning emptiness to pour in.

(it already has, had the moment he turned and screamed into an uncaring void and got the answer of of course, little one)

He tastes blood. It tastes stale and old and foreign. Not that the taste of the blood itself is foreign but more that it tastes like it's not his own. Like it's sat on his tongue for long enough that it's turned brown and dry and stagnant, like it came from something he was fighting and not from the throbbing in his tongue.

(he has scars in his mouth from when he bit a species with acidic blood but the taste hadn't ever left him so he never really had room to fear it)

Senses spiraling together and apart in sickening harmony and he cannot think now, not for the Emptiness but for the Sound, the consuming and annihilating thing he becomes with every second, every indrawn breath that tastes of blood and smells too clean and feels too soft against this monster in human flesh, that echoes loud and absolute in his mind as he watches his chest rise and fall and can't believe he is breathing because it can't be right.

He can't be breathing because he is suffocating and drowning in the Sound, in the absolute of this, the contrasting black and white of the lying sensations his senses send to him, that his heart is beating and he is sucking in air like a starving man, because he can feel the press against him from every direction, this ultimate sensation, the pinnacle of everything, the direct opposite of nirvana.

A panic-ridden absolute knowledge of the self down to every heaving of his lungs, the phantom pain where he joins with the unfeeling weapon he has become pressed into the physical plane and impressed in metal and purple energy.
The destruction of the external for the survival of the immediate, blocking out the painful white halls and the humming in the walls and the screaming silence from down the dark doorways as shadowed as the distant ceiling, the lack of warmth and people and the hissing urge to separate from any of them, to drown in the Sound of himself before he suffocates anyone else.

And suddenly there is only one thought where there used to be a million and none simultaneously.

AWAY.

His feet stumble as he moves, as he nearly trips over himself and the numbness of the blissful absolute agony of breathing disappears for a fraction of a second as he rights himself and finds his feet again, takes in a gasp of breath, and before the Sound can take him again, he runs.

Runs like the devil is on his heels, because the devil is in his head and he has to obliterate thought, demolish himself and every piece of his mind to keep it from taking over.

Runs like he has been set on fire because it would be preferable to this horrible on-off not-enough TOO-MUCH Emptiness Sound.

Runs because every other reason for running seems too petty to be compared to this moment of intimate and horrible destruction, of havoc and the silence between impact and explosion.

Runs because not even the Galra could make him flee like this, because they felt like sludge and oil and seeping corruption and he could feel their dirt and wanted to wash it clean but this is his, in its lack and devouring entirety.

Runs because he knows with a sickening certainty that he needs to move or this will kill him in ways more horrible than anything else and leave him alive as a mere vacancy, blankly staring as too much enters his bloodstream and tears him apart.

Doors shoot open around him, matching his pounding steps and pounding head with a drumbeat of quick sliding sounds like a sharpening blade.

Poundpoundpound
There is death in his veins, he knows. In his very being, as this cruel reaper he became and accepted when the scythe became a part of him, the purveyor of this cruel madness some call justice and most call entertainment and they roll their tongues around the word *barbaric* and never say it.

*Poundpoundpoundpound*

There is pain in his mind and he cannot escape it anymore than he can escape the blanks in memory or the blood on his hands. This exacting, precise madness of a guilty storm.

*Poundpoundpoundpounddeathanddrumbeats*

And then there is a perfectly imperfect silence.

It is beautiful in every way that it is flawed, in all of its broken pieces and smoothed edges.

The room is filled with stars.

Something has drawn him here to salvation, to this glorious earthly (ha) paradise of lazy quiet, some gracious, guiding hand with a voice like white noise and sharpening blades.

*The lightning lion in the walls.*

His knees give out just a bit now, heartbeat uneven and rushed with adrenaline, only calming now when faced with the abyss in this finite space with specks of divinity sliding through the sky.

The constellations are unfamiliar to him.

(They almost look like a face.)

His eyes close as he drops his head, remembering the damage he wreaked against this room of stars waking from nightmares he can't remember.
(It growls and turns into stardust, into Orion and Libra.)

He breathes. In and out, and hates himself for it, for being incapable of breathing right. His teeth bare in a silent snarl, a half-grimace half-growl, a bitter, soundless thing that seems to speak all on its own.

(The hunter and balance disrupt into Axcip and Klaeziv.)

He stays there for a long, long while and tries to forget remember think.

He stays there for a while and the lightning lion keeps him safe.


>So, Scheila. Do you want to explain yourself?

**Explain what?**

>What a new and fantastic level of ignorance you have for your own Paladin. I'm sure your maker would be proud of xer son.

**I am not in the mood for games, Morais.**

>Apparently you're not in the mood for protocol either, Proem. I understand you're all recovering from a Merge but this is utterly unacceptable. My Wayfinder is still recovering as well, and you don't see me losing track of my own quintessence or my Paladin.

**I came as soon as I heard. How did Kore'deka mess up?**

I didn't-
>Then explain why he's currently halfway to catatonic in the Remaker with wild quintessence in his system. You lived inside of me for ten thousand years, I know your quintessence when I see it.

So the Shriemm'eyaah got some of your powers, what does that ma-

...

Priest. How did you even...?

Well fuck me sideways. You've got some work to do, don't you?

It wasn't my fault.

Oh no, we get that. You're still screwed.

I would like to point out that my Paladin is the only one without amnesia or a guilt complex the size of a Balmera.

Yes, yes, you got the steady one, hardly surprising.

>I cannot believe every single one of you. Priest, try to keep your Paladin from getting into any heads other than his own. I cannot believe I have to be the responsible adult in this situation.

What, you didn't see this coming, oh god of prophecy?

>Samtal I will forcibly eject you and make you fly to keep up with us.

Jeez, message received, cool your jets.
You're all idiots.


The doors open for their queen into a hangar with a chasm of a ceiling swallowed into shadows. There is only one figure that remains, despite all of her haste to finally look the fully realized Paladins in the eyes. The Black Lion looms above the lone shadow, almost impossibly tall, eyes dimmed from their bright, familiar gold to empty, inactive pits, blinded and silent.

She had stood on the bridge and ignored the spinning statistics and blaring warnings, watching the five blurs of color seamlessly run with each other, reunited and bright, and felt that disconnect in her ache with power. Watered down colors and a blazing orange like a halo of fire and corpses in a river.

She had watched them fly, and felt a yearning growl echo up from her throat with the aching need to be up there, to be with them and soar with them and kill with them and destroy with them, to wage war to obtain peace.

She can't help the bitterness, really. It's a part of her now, she finds, seeps and sinks into everything until even the happiest moments of her life seem tacky and cheap at best, bittersweet and worthless and frivolous. Especially now that she has something to be truly jealous of, with the ease they take to their Lions, take to the skies and the bloodshed.

She finds herself envying their comfort with which they take lives, like they're coming home to it rather than setting foot in uncharted territory. Maybe it hasn't quite set in for all of them yet, the magnitude of what they've done, but she saw the sharpness in the eyes of the Red and Black Paladins, the kind that reminds her of her mother and the traitor both, veterans of massacres and untold losses.

It's not like she isn't familiar with the sensation of taking lives, but she has never quite shook off the guilty crawl that came with it. She's just a little out of practice is all. Give her a knife and a blaster and she will burn and sever her way through storming a castle. Give her the ability to use her nails and she will claw them all apart without hesitation to get to the end-goal, to reach the end-game.

Zarkon.
The monster damned eleven times over for killing those who bear the marks of the Deities, both Primordial and Created.

Oh yes, she will make herself bathe in the blood of her enemies if only to plant a knife in his throat. She will take their mantle of easy destruction with desperate, greedy hands if only to hiss damned words into his ear as she listens to him bleed out.

*And then there was one.*

The lights of the hangar are dimmed more than they should be to accommodate this alien species, but she will not contest the Castle's AI in it's sporadic wisdom. Dimmed enough to cast high shadows over the walls where tools lay half-scatters near the floor lights, left there in haste by engineers ten thousand years dead.

Dimmed enough that she can't quite tell what color armor the last Paladin wears, only their silhouette as they examine the helmet in their hands, gloved fingers tracing over the smoothed, sharp edges of Altean engineering, just another careful gesture, an expression of themselves in the harsh angles tempered until you put enough pressure on it and find that it cuts deep.

“Be careful with that, Paladin.” Allura calls out, and very abruptly feels exposed, a million eyes suddenly planted on her in her form-fitting battle-suit, on the bit of skin on the back of her neck that's exposed between her hairline and the edge of the high-necked fabric that cuts out just beneath it to leave an inch of skin uncovered. It's a sign of strength, to expose such a weakness openly, unrestricted and unblocked by a durable neck-vest or with her hair, ready to puff out and display the protective spikes whenever necessary.

She's almost a little gratified that whoever remains startles, head snapping up from the helmet to her with a quickness that makes the vertebrae in her neck cringe. Eyes flash, reflecting light back in bright beacons of red light before they shift their stance and the light no longer hits at the required angle.

“Princess. Didn't think I'd see you down here.” Well, that voice narrows down her options to three. Both the Green and Blue Paladins have voices too high to belong to the speaker, and the lack of knowledge she has now makes her skin itch below the white fabric that's meant to stain the colors of massacre. “Everyone else left already.”

“It's not-” she cuts herself off before she can cut in that it's not *Princess* anymore, it's *Queen,*
Makkesh, Third of her Name and First of her Marks. She doesn't want to lie to her allies, to the Paladins of the Lions of her People, but from what she remembers of how her mother spent the day after a battle that involved Voltron, the message likely wouldn't stick anyway. She always walked around with an aching limp to her step and a wince on her features before collapsing in a dark room and sleeping it off. That would explain the dimmed lights. “Where did they go?”

“Hunk and Lance took Pidge back to their room to sleep off a panic attack. Shiro left somewhere in there but I don't really remember when. I wouldn't bother any of them right now.” The Paladin lets out a heavy sigh and sits down gingerly, leaning back against a toe of the Black Lion's paw, casting his features and armor color into the light. The Red Paladin’s lips curl into a tired smirk before it dissolves into a heavy, disbelieving exhale and a yawn.

Gloved hands – the fingertip portion of each has been semi-evenly cut off, and the nails are bitten ragged – card through hair that wouldn't look out of place on an Altean, the unbroken raven black of Proem's forsaken chosen ones. She finds herself in the somewhat awkward position of not quite remembering his name.

It came easily to her when she named them Paladins and called the Lions to choose among the candidates she saw, the potential she saw burning like a supernova, temporary in its majesty before her eyes before she couldn't see much of anything anymore, just like all of the rest, but she can't remember it now any more than she would've been able to remember any of the other's names unless they hadn't been told to her just then.

“To be expected. My mother was always exhausted after returning from forming Voltron.” She tilts her head up again to marvel at the Black Lion and feels the unfamiliar gathering of hair at the base of her neck, the bunch of it pulling at her scalp, heavy and light in a way it has never been before.

Her fingertips raise to it, unconsciously, as if checking for a foreign object, but finds nothing but her own being, so horribly foreign to her now. She looks up and meets a steely-purple blue that looks as lost in itself as it is sure of her.

His head tilts, as if trying to decipher some complicated code. “Your mom was a paladin?”

A bitter smile, happiness turned bittersweet with ten thousand years of unconscious reflection. “Of the Red Lion. My father took up the mantle after her death but... well, we can guess how your Lion ended up in Galran hands.”

“ Seems like a family tradition.”
A harsh, barking laugh from her throat, like a lone hyena calling to a pack that will never come for it. “One I hope dies with the rest of my people.”

That gets a flinch and she hates that it feels good when he looks away, that she can take a quiet second to wallow in whatever bitter grief she has now. “Shit. Sorry.”

She should say that he doesn't need to apologize, or say that she accepts his apology, or do anything, but that spiteful part of her that feeds off of the endless supply of bitterness says no.

So she doesn't say anything and lets him take that however he wants to.

They sit in silence for a long while, uncomfortable and stilted and she should probably leave but she doesn't. Just stares up at the twin emptinesses in the muzzle of the Lion and curses out its last Paladin with every word she has ever heard uttered by any creature of ill repute that her mother had glared at and laughed with sharp edged smiles.

She had spent hours in front of a mirror, twisting her face into different contortions until she could mirror it, the kind of smile that didn't really belong on a child, sharp and deadly, less of an expression of amusement and more a declaration of war, a baring of fangs and poison.

She wishes she could see that smile anywhere but flawed memories and mirrors.

She wishes but wishes died with her world and her grief poisoned for ten thousand years of unhonored spirits.

“I... I don't think I ever had any family traditions.”

It's a dull knife to use against this thick tension in the room, but he doesn't bother to let that stop him.

“My mom died when I was pretty close to eleven. I don't really know how close because apparently I wasn't in any system. Still don't know my actual name.” She remembers sitting with her bodyguard when he told her I don't remember my last name and she felt that accepted grief hit her like a sledgehammer to the chest, “Lost pretty much all my memory of anything from before
then. I don't even remember if my dad is alive or not or what the hell his name was or- anything.”

He gets up to his feet and starts pacing, bitten nails running through his hair and pulling at some strands with such vicious zeal that it almost seems targeted. “I get kicked out of the Garrison, you know, the place I went to so I could go to space and get proof that it sure as hell wasn't pilot error that took down Shiro, and a couple months later I'm in a flying lion with Shiro being chased by something that sure as hell look like they could cause some pilot error and I'm royally pissed off and- and it doesn't even matter anymore? I guess? It's just pointless bullshit because hey, intergalactic war, and telepathic lions who cure migraines.”

He inhales sharply, like he's going to continue, but then forcibly stops himself, letting it out in a slow breath and removing his hands from his hair to ball into fists then splay to open palms at his sides.

“Fuck. I need to sleep.” He casts a glance back toward the Lion before picking up his helmet from the floor and striding with purpose toward her, and as she now realizes, the singular exit to the main hangar which she's been blocking after she forcibly imposed the awkward silence.

He's just about to pass through the door, pass from where she can affect him when she reaches out and grabs his wrist with a deceptively light grip. “Wait.”

She has a choice here, to say whatever she needs to say. Whatever words burst from her lungs will be final and first, will be the thing he will remember.

She tightens her grip determinedly, an unfair advantage, since this species is much weaker than even the most under-strengthened Altean. And she's been trained to kill practically since birth.

“What is your name?”

He looks at her, and then slides his wrist – impossibly – out of her grip without even a sign of effort.

A wry twist of his lips, a sardonic tilt of his head in parody of the previous before he asked the damning question of her legacy becoming his. “Isn't that the million dollar question?” He says, and the door shuts behind him so fast that it almost clips the back of his armor.
What is your name she had asked, and she remembers still don't know my actual name.

“Quiznack.”

She probably would apologize if he hadn't already left the room, and now she's the one left without anyone to accept her unspoken apology, left to stew in this solitary silence that still feels awkward.

That doesn't change the fact she still doesn't remember his name.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I did not edit this thing and it was written after midnight for most of it so...

A quick explanation on the neck thing because I couldn't figure out how to work it into the chapter without sounding stupid:
It's Not Paranoia If They're Really Out To Get You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sleep doesn't come easy to Hunk that- is the technical term still night? He doesn't know. Probably.

It should, it really should, which is what makes it so annoying that it doesn't. He sits on the edge of consciousness, locked in darkness on an unfamiliar bed that puffed up dust when he first sat on it. The darkness is uncomfortably absolute, and when he blinks his eyes open after tossing and turning it's still that same pitch black.

There aren't any windows this far into the alien castle – and isn't that just a sentence he never thought he'd have to think – and the lights pressed into the corners where ceiling meets wall had started to dim down a while back, leaving him with no muscle memory to guide him to a lightswitch (if the place even has one) and a restless brain.

He wants to sleep. Wants to fall back into comforting oblivion and dream of absolutely nothing or just forget about everything and dream of something less fantastical and cruel as reality. He wishes he could be numb, but he really can't.

Instead he feels them through the walls. Feels it like an extension of himself, like he is the soil their footprints rest on and their roots stretch into. Feels Gray and Green cutting its own forests to pieces to build from the wreckage. Feels Blue and White like seafoam against a shore, hungry waves claiming storm-tossed ships. Feels Black and Purple eating itself whole where the stars cannot reach the void. Feels Red and Silver screaming into the night, silenced and pained, the phantom pain of an amputated mind. Feels Pink and Red mourning like poisoned flowers falling in graceful spirals from willowy trees. Feels Orange and Blue like a blaze in the making, a phoenix clawing itself back to existence with bitterness in its bones.

Feels.

Honestly, he'd prefer being numb to this. This- it's not really noise. Not the same way Black and Purple screams of the Sound in all of its horrendous glory.

It's just too many things all at once, little snippets that make him think hold on, back up, what? before it abruptly shifts over to another sensation from another color. He's Yellow and Brown, like dried out autumn leaves crunched into soil, a well-worn path of familiar landmarks.
All of them are too vibrant. Unnaturally vibrant, like someone spilled the most potent pigments all together into one jumbled mess on an easel, dried paint flaking away little secrets, little piles of suffering on a canvas. It can't really be described in words, but it just feels wrong in the same way it feels right. An unwanted, destined purpose.

He hadn't felt them until he became one part of a being. Hadn't felt them until he became the path and a pair of well-loved boots, became the mountain ascending and the grassy plains on which they stand. He was not intricate or powerful or raging, he was the resting place for the intricate roots that gave life to it all, where power makes craters that heal over and become merely another facet of the whole, where rage falls flat as howls are consumed by earth.

Really it all just sucks and he'd very much like to sleep instead of feeling like literal dirt.

But he can't. Which sucks. But he can't. So he'll try to get himself out of this mental loop before his anxiety decides now is when it's going to kick in.

Eh, he doesn't really need sleep anyway. Probably.

He sits up, and around him the darkness falls apart as the lights in the wall begin glowing again, a slow process to being fully lit in their glowing, electric blue states. The walls are shadowed and empty, fully and entirely devoid of character, and the night clothes he managed to find are completely unfamiliar to him. These things are twice as old as human history, probably, but he just found them lain out either by one of their alien landlords or their weird magic castle.

He kind of hates his life right now. Just a smidge.

The clothes he was wearing before he broke federal law and the laws of physics itself are folded in a neat stack by the door, wrapped up in his headband for easy carrying or whatever and that's more than a little freaky. He throws off the blanket that has to be weighted with something and steps over cautiously to grab them and make sure they're not reproductions or something and his real ones are having tests run on them so the aliens can discover what makes humans vulnerable and eliminate them.

Alright, maybe his imagination is a little active, but the strange weighted blanket doesn't have shit on the feeling of coarse fabric, taken from a bolt of orange and shakily but ornately stitched with thread of the same color with little geometric flowers. His nana had only gotten into sewing after her joints decided to give up on her, but she always was a perfectionist too. He doesn't think even
whatever ambiguous mix of logic and bullshit this place runs off could ever accurately reproduce all the little frayed pieces of string or the overlap that spelled his name between shapes.

It's both nice and absolutely horrifying to know that this is probably as real as all of his previous experience with reality.

Maybe it's still all a giant simulation but- well, at this point Occam's Razor might be pointing to that one but still...

He lets out a heavy sigh, running his fingers through his already messy hair in some vague attempt to restore order. He doesn't think he has to energy to get dressed again just to wander around the dark and undoubtedly creepy hallways of an alien castle whose two tenants have been Sleeping Beauty-ed for ten thousand years. If he's going to get murdered he's not going to get blood on his own clothes, he's going to at least get the last laugh by getting blood on the clothing it gave him.

Yeah, no wonder he can't fall asleep. It's bad enough to get horror movie thoughts in his own bed, much less at the worst possible sleepover he could ever have.

He unwraps the headband from the rest of the stack and slips it on, hands tying it in the familiar knot all over again, keeping his bangs away from his eyes, giving that familiar, light weight on his skull all over again.

He takes a deep breath to center himself, to adjust the band and stand up straight, but before he can even take a step towards the door, it slides open.

There's no one behind it.

Softly, but with feeling, “Oh, fuck that.”

Bare feet pad against the cold floor, the lights in the hallways just bright enough to not be painful but to still be on that edge of spooky where the shadows are painfully obvious. He wields a wrench he dug out of his pockets before he made his way out of the door, ready to throw it at whatever tries to kill him first.

Nothing does jump out of the shadows as the lights lead him somewhere, remaining dim or entirely off in some hallways while most glow brightly, feeling less like artificial light and more like some
kind of bioluminescence, sleeping creatures attached to the walls and urging his footsteps with flexes of spines in the darkness.

They're just lights, really, but out of the corner of his sleep-blurred eyes some of the light glare turns into spears of electric blue that only grow the more he squints at them.

He stumbles over nothing, and shakes his head to wake back up, feeling that brief moment of agitated confusion that he can half fall asleep while walking around the creepy place rather than being nicely horizontal with a very nice blanket. Somewhere in his head, there is a tiny Hunk wildly gesturing and making single-syllable noises of mystified exasperation.

There's a door there that he's ninety percent sure was a wall about two seconds ago. It's designed like almost everything else there, white and arched, sharp angles turning to curved shapes with grace, like a weapon someone sanded the edges of down to use in an exhibition. War turned to peace with scrutiny. Blue lights glowing out like eyes staring out of the darkness.

He's a little more hung up on the whole 'was a wall' thing, but he can still admire the architecture. This one's fancier than some of the others he went past when the lights were herding him along, but he's still not going to open it. A standard rule of not getting killed in a horror movie: don't open mysterious doors unless you know they lead to an exit.

“Not today, Satan.” Hunk mutters, turning to either continue his walk or find his way back to what is now his room.

Only to find that all of the other lights are off. Only the ones on the door are still glowing, beckoning with the promise of sharp teeth in the shadows, of creatures to either call him home or rip him apart.

Alright then, he's doing this then. Why the hell did he even leave his room?

He tightens his grip on the wrench.

- 

Jaiwe has forgotten how to not mourn.
Not to feel the sticky, heavy sensation of grief pushing down her shoulders and halving her rest hours with sleeplessness until it's a biological need to let the darkness come and take her. Take her and deposit her in hails of blaster fire and booming cannons and Koga's tree gone in a burst of flame.

Razed down to the roots, ripped up and charred until only recognizable by the thick coating of quintessence that had strained to tell the piece of wood to grow before falling apart in her hands.

Somewhere, in her glass cabinets of souvenirs and artifacts she has gained from her long career as her half-sister's Enforcer, the one chunk of wood they had managed to find is still secured in an air tight container, to keep any of the fading impression of two lives in the charred tree rings in concentrations of scattered red against silver, blood on the knife.

Not to feel that constant little voice in the back of her head, the one that laughs and mocks and whispers every time another casualty report comes across her desk or she has to sign away lives with strokes of a pen.

They do not deal with the Empire for their captives. It's a long standing tradition, one that has never been broken in (long)living memory. That doesn't change that they still send their demands nonetheless, another stone added to the weight of a world against her back.

That doesn't make it any easier to watch the tapes they always send with, faces she knows, faces she doesn't, trapped in agony, eyes burning an amethyst bright enough to rival the glaring lights and the electricity arcing over their skin. How cruel that the ones who use the colors of defiance and kindness became the most callous regime in known history.

How cruel, indeed.

It's impossible not to let that little scream get trapped somewhere it will never be released when she has to analyze the footage of the Empire's Coven stealing life from a planet and making it their own, little horrible creatures birthed between their fingers in twisting shapes of a thousand colors.

To watch leviathans of quintessence, the massive, fanged creatures they are, wrapping around a planet and squeezing and squeezing, tied together, biting each other's tails in an endlessly interconnected net of tainted infinities, and not want to weep for every life drained in horrifying synchrony.
Her grief might kill her someday. For family and friends and strangers, all gone and lost in bright hazes and screams.

Shriedd qi Altea.

Sometimes she hates that phrase. Some days she looks at the hologram she always keeps on the corner of her desk from which she orders atrocities, the slowly rotating planet, clouds swirling in meandering paths over the surface, pierced by high mountain peaks and holo-blue plateaus, and wonders if it's worth it to die for ghosts who've been gone into their own hazes for as long as the Empire began.

Wonders if it's worth it to still fight for Altea, fight for a homeland dead and gone that she never truly belonged to anyway. That honor always went to Koga, with Marks like twin swords, and quintessence glowing with mercurial light, snapping and sharp and smooth as river and soft as clouds.

She was the pure one. Not pure-blooded, by the gods no, her father learned from his first mistake, but she was pure and untouched in ways that made her the next best thing to flawless. Power arching between her fingertips and against her eye sockets and jawline, pure and unmarred by any other lesser colors. Demure and forceful and eternal, wearing the high-necked scarlet cloak with the shifting letters in dead languages that blur before her eyes because she isn't worthy to read what the Primordials wrote.

She mourns her, misses her, misses the good moments they had as children, wild and free and with marks that shifted like the sands of their home planet. Misses her as she had been when growing the Priestling with her own near-infinite stores, dedicating every bit and piece of herself to that task, letting herself be vulnerable, the half-goddess like creature she always was in private or public falling to pieces without the voices of the stars to speak to her.

She still can find it in her aching heart to hate her for her smirks and sharp-toothed smiles, for the easy grace with which she attained power. For the difference between one lonely ceremony out beyond where horizon meant anything, to the countless decaphoebus she spent clawing her way to the top, teeth made sharp by latching onto stone rather than careful filing by the easily swayed masses.

She misses the little Priestling. Raven dark hair that catches the light and turns purple, his habit of manipulating his form to have secondary ears just like his father's, eyes like stars and steel and annihilation. He had always smiled a little strangely, a little too much teeth for a child, not exactly fake but incredibly threatening, canines grown a little too sharp to be a baseline Altean's.
His smiles, no matter how threatening, no matter how disconcerting, were always so beautiful, so much closer to his father's than his mother's. The last time she saw him, his Marks still hadn't settled. By the time she got back from the decaphoeb long campaign and finally had the time to rest, she only managed to open the messages she had in reserve and feel that little bit of bitter pride that the closest thing she'll ever have to a child of her own had marks the exact shade of red as his mother's hair and that there was another on the way before the news came in about the attack.

He is what she regrets the most.

Not the killings she has caused, the ones she has ordered, not the friends she had watched die, not the half-there half-sister lost to the stars with the scarlet flutter of hope.

Him, in all of his selfish, ignorant, untamed love, watching him grow and lose what a kinder person would call innocence but she would call naivety.

Him, because he called her Ko'di Jai! With such unique childish glee that it made her heart ache to know that he would lose it the moment he stepped into the battlefront.

Him, with his destroying acceptance of her, all of her in ways no other ever really quite had before she took her half-legend half-sister's place and made them accept her or jump this ten thousand year old crashing ship.

Him.

She can't bear to talk to Thace anymore. Had never really been able to, cautious and afraid of him at first, in ways her half-sister could afford not to, with power itself Marked against her skin and harnessed between her fingertips.

She hadn't trusted him at first. And by the time she could bear to, he was already Koga's, already enthralled and seduced by the red-haired and god-blessed child of Rebellion.

By the time she could, she could feel nothing but bitterness all over again.

And even now, with her spirit rested for ten long decafeebbs, her ghost would haunt them both,
weigh heavy against their words and their consciences, make any conversation into another eulogy dry on their tongues.

So she sits at her desk, surrounded by mementos from civilizations long ago protected under their shield and destroyed for it, and breathes through it again. Takes slow, heaving gasps of air, half tempted to try forming gills on the sides of her neck to breathe in this suffocating darkness.

She shifts her fingers instead, running through all of the transformations she can think of before settling them back as her own, growing out the nails into hardened claws, changing their colors, shifting webbing between each pad, growing microscopic hairs that immediately attach themselves to the desk she has an iron-clad grip on.

She forces her hands back into shape with a cracking shift of bone that makes her wince and releases her grip on the table like it burns her, standing upright and raking one hand through her hair with a pained noise. Her prosthetic leg aches where it connects just below her left knee, rubbed raw and chafed, hidden by the high, military grade boots that keep her gait measured and unbothered no matter what, heeled just enough to give her those extra few inches without hindering her in combat.

Wincing, Jaiwe sits back down and reaches onto her shoulder to push aside the blue caped jacket on the left side, rolling it up so she can work with the clasps that ensure her gloves don't come off, carefully undoing them until she can drag the fabric off with a few careful tugs and her teeth. The zipper and buckles on the boots are undone in a few seconds, both hands working on it until she can slide the boots off and roll the socks down and the under-leggings up to touch the joining with bare fingers.

Green and blue sputters to life at the end of her fingertips, flowing into the area and providing the much needed numbing, taking the inflammation with it. The uneasy sparks that come out almost make her wince, the gentle nature of her quintessence rebelling against this bitterness she’s taken in as a part of herself.

She wiggles the toes of the prosthetic and sighs when there’s a pause between the ordering of the action and the accompanying movement. Maybe it wouldn't be too long of a pause if she was just doing paperwork all of the time, but she has missions she needs to run on the ground oftentimes, and one slightly lagged reaction can be the difference between life and death.

She makes a mental note to get in touch with her mechanic again soon for a recalibration and a rewiring. Hell, maybe if she's good, she'll even get an upgrade. It's the hazard of having unbound mechanisms around the high concentrations of Warrior quintessence. The circuits don't tend to react well, and there hasn't been any suitably powerful techno-mages born into the organization for over a thousand years to fix them on the regular.
The door chimes a pleasant sound, a brief few notes she thinks she heard performed once in an orchestra that she can no longer remember. It's the proper chime for a scheduled appointment, but for the life of her, she cannot remember if she had one today.

She can't even remember looking at her schedule for the day, just sitting back down at her desk after long hours of staring a hole through the dark ceiling punctuated by fitful minutes of sleep snatched from Arkien's jaws. Sitting back down and signing off on more deaths and staring sightlessly over her holograms and hyperventilating just that slightest little bit.

That little sting of panic comes back, chased on its blind heels by the snapping monster of paranoia. Whatever lays outside of that door is foreign to her, whatever lies in wait for her to open her sanctuary up will eat her alive.

It's a wild scramble under her desk for her personal blaster, and her numb fingers set the dial to something, either stun or kill, she doesn't know, and doesn't really care, blind fear taking control and dragging itself across her shoulders like the mantle she wears now, a wedding veil she wore the day she married herself to grief, till death do they part.

She walks softly over to the door, cursing the slightly hobbled gait she has to take with one of her boots off, trying her best to eliminate anything that could suggest her movements.

She closes her eyes as she presses her back to the corner just beside the door, facing back in towards the rest of her office as she raises the gun to chest level, holding the trigger with both hands.

“Co-” She curses her dry tongue, and swallows hard with a silent prayer, “Come in!”

There's a hesitation outside the door, and then her ears, pricked sharp to listen as intently as possible, pick up the sound of a heavy sigh from outside the door.

Then there's a knock. One, two, three, pause for two beats, two.

The tension melts from her frame as she practically melts against the wall, left hand dropping to her side still clutching the blaster. The door slides open and a bemused half-sigh, half-groan enters the office with familiarity.
“Esh’quaa! Ya always keep this place so damn cold!” The drawn out, drawled a's only serving to calm her down more, from absolute panic and straight into the self-beratement.

“Am- Ambassador.” Jaiwe greets shakily, lifting her head and opening her eyes to stare straight into the faded summer-gold eyes that have become quite familiar in recent times.

“Hey, hey, don't get all formal on me now. I'd hate to hear what the old Kro would have to say about that.”

In spite of herself, she chuckles, raising the gloved hand to fix a section of hair carefully behind her ear, feeling the spikes retract back under the gray-streaked black, leaving it smooth and shiny. “It would be something along the lines of 'finally, you heathens.’”

A hearty chuckle of response. “Good old Kros.” A pause, and then a blunt, “You look terrible.”

Jaiwe winces at that, shoulders dropping from their tense bow, resisting the urge to press down on the horrible pressure on the back of her neck, aware of the biological response she would get after such a heightened state of adrenaline. “Not one for sucrose-coating, are you?”

She can't resist turning, though, to look at the nearest mirror.

Her skin is dark, mostly. On her right side, little patches of lightness scatter across her skin like stardust, riding over the curve of her nose and sprayed out like a supernova, the left side largely unmarked. Her eyes are blue, darker than even her sister's, and her right eyebrow has a scar down the middle, cutting around until it almost joins with the start of her right Mark.

And that is where the problem starts. On the right, she looks like she could be full-sisters rather than half with Koga, a far cry from her unblemished, unbroken smoothness when it came to any of her colors, but close enough in appearance. Darkness with the stars, part of an almost void, eyebrows cutting the same sharp, vicious tilt. A bright silver Mark tinted with just the slightest edge of blue, less bright than Koga's, but only fractionally, enough to be mistaken as pure at a distance.

On the left, she is undeniably the flawed one, the unbalance of her appearance unsettling even her. A blaster in an ungloved hand, palms fully exposed to the open air, bare skin all the way up to her shoulder, where the carefully stitched mantle in hitched up to reveal the glove clasp that doesn't
connect to anything currently. A prosthetic leg the same color as her right Mark revealed by the leggings folded over above her knee, black socks brought down to reveal the few entirely visible mechanical joints by the ankle. Her left Mark extends further, more jaggedly than the other.

And it glows a vibrant, poison green.

Here, she looks and sees the crossroads more vividly than ever before, the difference between her two halves, between the closest approximation to perfection she will ever attain against the dirty, corrupted thing that is undeniably her, rather than the cheap simulacrum of the right side.

Jaiwe finds that she rather hates looking at herself in a mirror.

The sound of snapping draws her out of her head, a hand in front of her eyes blocking her line of sight, heavy scales clacking together with a crisper sound than any flesh could produce. She meets the worried eyes of her companion steadfastedly and gives a smile that tugs fakely against the corners of her mouth.

“I believe we have business to conduct?” Jaiwe says with just the edge of that stiff geniality that tastes sickly sweet against the bluntness of the one she speaks to. She practically falls back into her desk chair, gesturing for the other to take the guest chair, putting the blaster away and fixing up her appearance as best as she can, reattaching gloves, pulling the fabrics back into place to hide any of the machinery behind her careful appearance, putting her boot back on with mechanical efficiency.

The Ambassador sighs heavily and takes the offered chair, meeting Jaiwe's eyes unflinchingly as they take their required documents from the pouches sewn on the inside of their cloak. The digital ones pop up as soon as the data chip is lain on the reading zone, revealing audio and video files, and a few star maps. The physical documents undoubtedly contain a few printed testimonies and carefully plotted coordinates and all of the recent intel on troop movements.

This is not a supply request or a guard mission, not a request for infiltration or for reconnaissance.

This is a battle plan.

(this is more death on her conscience, more lives signed away with a few strokes of a stylus)

“One of our own has recently been located. Unfortunately, they've been under the thumb of the
Empire for long enough that they haven’t ever known the Hive. My people are suffering in their ignorance of their own kin. I don’t think I have to remind you what the Galra will do with our... unique resources. I know I ask for a lot, but the Hive petitions you for additional troops to help on this liberation.”

Jaiwe draws in a shaky breath as she flips through the intel she has now, who she will have to sacrifice to Xera all over again.

When she bothers to look up again, the Ambassador stares at her with conflicted eyes. “I know that my people will need time to prepare, I can come back later if you need time before making your decision on whether or not to support the current plan-”

“No.” She swallows hard, “I will make my decision. Walk me through your proposed stages.”

“Are you... sure?”

“Please, Ambassador Kler. I am all ears.”

- 

The door doesn’t slide open automatically like all of the others. Somehow, despite all of his previous bitching about the horrible rules this weird castle follows, he’d kind of hoped it would remain consistent, but no.

Now he has to push open the creepy door slowly, wielding his wrench in a white-knuckled grip.

It creaks. It creaks and he’s ninety percent sure he’s about to get unceremoniously murdered by whatever creatures live in the ten thousand year old bowels of a castle run by aliens with sentient machinery.

The room inside is dark, a few small lights stare out, two in gold, two in blue, four in red, and two slightly larger ones in purple. He doesn't even know what the contours of the room are, doesn't know where there's going to be a wall that he's going to smack into.
Behind him, lights edging the doorway hum to life, dimly lighting the floor enough that he can tell where the silhouettes of things are, several bulky and nearly square objects that might be some kind of seating area, and a few vague shadowy things that are probably some kind of alien machine given the multicolored lights that sit on them.

The place smells a little different from all the rest of the castle, like someone has gone through meticulously and cleaned the room with the faint smell of something that’s halfway between lemon and wet dog.

There’s something crawling down his spine, though, a lingering paranoia that’s not quite going away, a prickling at the back of his neck and the sensation of not being alone.

He runs suspicious eyes over all of the silhouettes, eyes adjusting a little bit more to the dimness of the lighting.

There are a few things with glowing green dots at his right, but those are dimmed and pressed against the wall seamlessly. There’s what looks like either an incredibly uncomfortable couch or some kind of counters just in front of him, and two long, identical shapes far to his left.

But for some reason, he keeps finding his eyes drawn to the collection of multicolored lights at the back.

He takes a step toward them, and behind him, the door shuts itself automatically with a muffled snick, making him jump just the slightest bit.

He stares back at the lights and tilts his head, trying to mentally puzzle out what they could be while he waits for the rest of the lights to come humming online.

He blinks.

They blink back.
season 6 just murdered me. straight death, no more, no less. i am not prepared for anything more. why are all my fandoms conspiring against my mental health.

anyway, I sort of realized that I had a character I introduced way back in chapter 2 i think and I never used her again so fuck that. have a mostly competent half-aunt.

I don't actually have a definition of El'quaa, it's more like a general explanation that you might not want to use among polite company in Balmeran.

god bless hunk.

(oh yeah, again, I didn't really feel like going through and editing this so let me know if I have any egregious typos. please leave a comment, they sustain me.)
He's not proud to say that he screams. He's definitely not going to deny it, but he's sure as hell not proud of it.

To be fair, anyone would've screamed, probably. Nothing like an intergalactic kidnapping to the set of a sci-fi horror to get that adrenaline going.

The colors don't really help either, like they were trying to play into the jumpscare, flaring in the back of his mind like dyes dropped into water, heavy and bright and spreading faster than it has any right to into a ballooning sheet that clamps over him with heavy fear.

There's a squeaking sound and the smaller lights disappear from their places and reappear much, much closer.

Before he can scream again, or skip that straight to running at a wall in the hopes that it, too, can one day become a door, or just pass out and finally get some goddamn rest, the lights all buzz on.

The little lights that he was ninety percent sure was going to resolve itself into a mechanical monster and eat him whole turns out to be four mice. The curved shadowy thing does resolve itself into a counter and he decides that this is either the morgue or a kitchen, and he hopes to god it's not the second because he wants a live production of Ratatouille about as much as he wants to eat a pineapple whole, skin and leaves and all. He also hopes its not the first because he does not want to be in the room where they keep the dead bodies before he goes to sleep.

Oh, and the big purple lights turn out to belong to the orange-haired alien and- look, don't sue him, but he had bigger things to worry about than learning a guys name. He can only hope that it's something he can actually pronounce with human vocal chords and not mangle horribly in ways that would make them challenge him to a fight to the death out of sheer embarrassment.

He's not in whatever half-blue-penguin half-court-formal he was wearing before, replaced by a baggy navy sweater-type thing, with quite a few loose strings and several mistakes in the stylized sun on the front, paired with pants the same style as Hunk's, just thinner. A swathe of white fabric is wrapped around his neck, the collar of the sweater dipping low enough to show a patch of skin
between the blue and white.

Now that he thinks about it, both of the aliens are very protective of their necks. Maybe it's just a fashion choice, but until he is proven otherwise, he is going to be on watch.

“Sorry if I startled you.” The alien says, and there's something about that tone of voice that's undeniably human, undeniably tired. Is emotional exhaustion a universal thing? And tone of voice? Hunk doesn't really know, but he'll take it under advisement.

“I mean, I'm just paranoid as hell, but maybe don't sit in pitch darkness blankly staring at people.” Hesitantly, Hunk walks over to the counter and, in a display of discourtesy for a host's kitchen that would make his nana glare at him the entire visit, hops up to sit on it. It feels just like granite, cold and hard but textured against his calloused palms. It's also the perfect height to let his legs dangle off of it, toes skimming the floor if he stretches.

“Ah. Sorry, I'm not entirely sure of your species' physiology yet. I could see just fine.” The alien hops off of his own perch in the back, where he'd rested his spine against the wall by perching on a tiny ledge that could probably only really be used to set down glasses. It's still dim enough in the room that when he tilts his head a certain way his eyes glow like a cat's, bright yellow tapetum lucidum.

For a second, they almost remind him of the eyes of the Lions, the unearthly, unholy glow that just for a second made him mumble a prayer and whisper and apology to his nana from across lightyears for consorting with demons to take down the devil.

The lights brightened a little bit in response and the glow disappeared as the alien tilted his head, squatting down by one of the green lights glowing in the walls, pressing a palm against it and drawing it back, a drawer following the path of his hand. He grabbed a glass from the rack in there, made of the same kind of material as the countertop, painted with the same stylized sun as the front of the jumper.

He shakes a sleeve over his hand, wiping away the old dust onto the dark navy, rubbing over every inch carefully, like he was holding a religious artifact instead of a cup. Hell, for all Hunk knows, maybe it is a religious artifact, maybe this is a temple that looks suspiciously like a human kitchen. He's only realizing now the seething hatred he has deep in his heart for space, something that extends further than his (now mysteriously missing) motion sickness.

Maybe it's not that he hates space. He still likes the stars and nebulae and all of the exo-planets to study. He just kind of hates that he's encountered aliens and the score's at 1-1 for the friendlies and
the ones who would very much like to eviscerate him. Also, they both speak English. That kind of makes everything better and worse, because he at least knows what they're saying but he also doesn't have a full fledged excuse to be really confused by every single thing they're doing.

He kind of wishes he never went to the Garrison. Maybe then he'd be back home where there was always sound and life in the walls. Maybe then he wouldn't feel like he was having an out of body experience in the kitchen of an alien.

Of course, maybe he'd be dead in some ditch. Maybe's suck just a little bit. There are too many of them.

The alien has stopped cleaning the dust off of the cup and if now just standing there, half-leaning against a wall and tracing pianist's fingers over the sun pattern. The mice on the floor take a leap upward, and in a grand middle finger to the laws of physics, they all land in perfect cheerleader formation, wide grins splitting their cheeks. Are they even mice? One of them looks more like a rat, and all of them look like they encountered the entire pastel hair dye section, and, most importantly, they're in space.

“So...” Hunk says, partially to break the silence and partially to jump headfirst out of that train of thought before it can go any further down the track, “Any specific reason why you were sitting in the kitchen with the space mice in the pitch darkness, or did you just feel like it?”

Very carefully, the alien takes the cup and sets it off to the side, tracing the rim with a hand that he now realizes have flesh-colored gloves over them. “Ah, no. I always liked this section of the Castle, the mice merely followed. I took the time to ensure they had developed the proper shielding and examine the psychic bond for any flaws.”


“Right, of course, the psychic mice. I'm guessing you...” fuck, fuck, improvise something, “also bonded with them?” Alright, screw it. “Listen I honestly have no idea what the hell any of that really meant.”

The alien frowns for a second before muttering something under his breath in a language he doesn't know. “You must have different customs and rituals on your planet, because the insinuation that-no, no, apologies.” His voice had risen considerably before he cut down on it, and now he rubs his sweater sleeves between a thumb and forefingers, forcefully releasing it and meeting his eyes head on. They glow purple, like they're trying to prove a point, a shade brighter and more intense than he could've sworn they were a second ago. “I understand that I am as foreign to you as you are to me.”
He presses his fingertips against his mustache and then brings his hands down to roll his wrists, “In Altean culture it is... immensely rude to bond with any familiar or being without their permission, much less override their shielding to do so. It is a violation of the self on such an absolute level that it is one of our most strict social taboos.” He shudders just a bit, but there's a happy excitement to him, the thought and act of teaching lighting a fire deep within him. He returns to the tiny shelf and leans against it, hands making wide, sweeping gestures, “At least among the uncloaked.” He seems to consider it for a second and then nods, “Yes, those that are of the Royal Coven are-” The light in his eyes that had glowed with an edge of fondness and happiness dies, “were the exceptions to the rule. And sanctioned Covens are encouraged to be fully bonded with all of their members, of course. To keep the blood strong.”

And again, for about the millionth time today, Hunk has no idea what the hell is going on. It seems to be a recurring theme. He kind of just stares blankly, and the alien seems to take that as a queue to continue.

“That is, after all, a meeting and mingling of what is...” his lips twitch slightly, “*quintessentially*, you. I'm certain Allura didn't mean to make these into her familiars, but ten thousand years caught in her quintessence has given them a complete link to her mind, and I wouldn't dare to violate her trust like that.” He gives him a look that says, *see what I mean, I mean, it's so obvious* and Hunk doesn't really have the heart to interrupt his rant. “I will have to ask you and the other paladins to use our traditions when dealing with us and ours, but you're free to bond however you want with the others. The Paladins-” he almost seems to trip over his tongue for a second, but picks it up quickly, “of old were quite a close-knit Coven of their own. They didn't have the full spectrum, of course, but the Lions are sacred and they didn't want any of the Clans to feel slighted by only including a few from their regions.”

There's an incredibly wistful feeling around him now, but it's a little confused at the same time, with an edge of grief that hasn't disappeared since he entered the room. (Before then, really, but the Orange and Blue is hard to match to the muted russet and navy here, like someone used those same pigments with a brush that had been used to paint everything into voids and night skies and oblivions.)

Hunk's still putting all of the pieces together but- jesus, ten thousand years. That must've been an amazing transition, from a society where the kind of technology that made this ship and the Lions with it runs rampant, into this place to find your enemies still alive and well and everyone you ever loved dead and gone and ground to dust.

He wonders where this guy stood in the royal family, to be the only one who came with the Princess to this horrifying future. Why he and he alone stands with her in this place where ceilings loom to allow giants to pass through, where dust clings and electricity spikes in the corners of eyes, where the lights turn on and guide and the entire place feels like a mausoleum.
What the hell happened to the rest of the royal family where there's only two left here? Maybe the two are related somehow, but they differ too much to have much of a close relation, washed out where the other glows with color, their little cheek thingies differing in shape just slightly, hers extended and sharpened just a little bit more, his rounded and closer to his eyes, more guarded.

He has to wonder what it feels like to stand at the end of a world with the last remaining bastion of hope, the last other member of your entire species. What it must be like to have destroyed worlds pressed down onto your shoulders, having to carry the debris and the guilt alike, some new, horrible incarnation of Atlas against these uncaring gods.

He feels a shocking lack of bitterness from the alien, though. He feels the bittersweet grief-love of remembrance, but nothing outright bitter, poison in his lungs to drown upon and spit. There is nothing but tiredness left in him now, sore and overused hope stubbornly holding out, wavering candlelight held high above his head to light his way down memory lane.

A mouse squeaks as it runs over his hand, and he nearly recoils in disgust, but it looks up at him with eyes just wide enough to pass as cute rather than horrifying, glinting with intelligence that no other creature should possess. It stares at him like it's staring straight through to his soul, and to his mounting terror, it is quickly joined by the three others, eight eyes glaring at his with a singular, intense focus that says less feed me, I'm hungry and more I know where you sleep so don't mess this up.

Honestly at this point he'd rather suffer through that live action Ratatouille than another second of this spirit-flaying staring contest with the most self-aware and creepily smart vermin he has ever and will ever encounter. He darts his eyes down to glance at their paws and internally screams as loudly as he has ever done, because these things have opposable thumbs and the drive and capability to kill.

The biggest one, with a lighter spot over its right eye, doesn't even really have its eyes open, but he can still feel them pressing against his soul. He's honestly worried what he'd see if it opened its eyes, because it stares up at him with little cherub cheeks, smiling all the while it and its comrades quietly eviscerate everything he stands for.

He decides, very suddenly and abruptly, that he does not like mice at all, and he will also never say it to their faces because he is very much attached to his own and he'd rather not have it mauled in the night by the creatures that are reminding him every second longer he stares at them, of Pidge.

“Regardless,” The alien speaks again, snapped out of his reverie, bittersweet grief tucked away beneath fire and earth and salted ground. “It would be a good idea to learn a few things about
Altean history. I'm sure by tomorrow the Castle library will have translated everything properly to your language. The translator for the library does take a while longer to sync up than other systems, unless given priority. It has to properly link and ground itself before it establishes, and the wait time for full and accurate translations is nothing to scoff at either.

“Besides,” He continues, as if he hasn't just raised a thousand questions with everything he's just said and given Hunk some excellent incentive to try and take apart the library at the first given chance, “It will be best to explain everything with the full team, although I don't doubt any of you could easily pass on the messages to each other. Still, one man's comprehension is another man's confusion.” He smiles, quick and wide and just a little pained, “And I'm sure we'd like to know all you'd like to share of your home planet.”

Hunk doesn't entirely know how to respond to that, really. Yeah, sure. He could talk about home, dig the knife into the wound that he probably won't see Earth – his home planet, god this sucks so much that he actually has to use that phrase now – for decades, if he's lucky. He really wants to go back home, but he has the feeling it wouldn't work out like he thinks it would, and mama didn't raise no quitter.

“Yeah, yeah. Totally. I'm sure that'll be- fun? Yup.” He kind of wishes he could spontaneously combust right now so he would have at least some bearing on the situation and a conversation topic he could actually use. Also, death sounds preferable to this specialty Space Bullshit™. Limited time offer, only the first five callers, but wait, there's more. For only a few payments of sanity, you can get more of it than you can stomach and the rest will be shoved down your throat forcefully, for free! Call now!

He watches too much late night TV when he can't sleep. What can he say, infomercials are utterly mesmerizing at two am, where god can't help you now.

The alien smiles then tilts his head curiously and placing on gloved fingertip directly over his mouth in contemplation, splitting his mustache in a very unsymmetrical way that makes Hunk's hands itch to fix it. “Yes, I'm sure it will be enlightening. Speaking of which, I'm quite afraid I don't remember your name.”

Oh thank God, Jesus, and any other deity that wants to get in on this, he thinks, I'm not the only one that forgot names. “No, it's fine.” He extends a hand, the one not being sat on by a potentially homicidal rodent and friends, suddenly very much aware of the gap of physical space between them. The alien stares at it for a long moment, as if in an attempt to decipher the action before standing up from the wall and padding over on bare feet to hesitantly join his hand with Hunk's. “I'm Hunk Garret.”

There's a sudden and abrupt flash of bitterness that soars through the air and lands, like a fly caught
in amber, struggling and twitching and falling to the crystallized embers. The alien looks down at their hands and hesitantly releases them, raising the hand to his chest, giving it one light tap before bowing and flinging it out to the side, “Coran.”

And for some reason, some part of Hunk is abruptly at peace again, some sort of disconnect finally settling. Somewhere within him, something is sated for the first time since he came onto this stupid ship and the skin crawling and overactive mind came up and tried their damn hardest to eat him alive.

Like he knows his core with a name, knows he can be trusted, because he knows what he is at his very center, everything about him pulled together into one, beautiful thing, a collection of letters that are blessedly pronounceable.

Something under his skin purrs in satisfaction, and for the first time, he's not afraid. Not not-afraid like where he's transitioned from being so freaked out that he's at peace with the consequences, where he just thinks, *I mean, might as well, it's the natural progression of things that such-and-such will happen and I will be murdered by a clown,* but an absolute lack of fear.

And that in itself should be terrifying, but it isn't, and he's sure he'll look back on this later and freak out, but it's like that little shred of resolution has made itself a rock in the storm, a little circle of firelight he will maintain and feed so he can at least see the predators before they eat him whole.

Something that makes him turn around and face the cave wall he's backed himself against, dramatic shadows turning into monsters by the light of his own fear and say no, not today, today I will be reckless and fearless and after that you can whisper and hunt, but not today.

“It's nice to meet you, Coran.”

- 

There is a shadow on the wall. It's not a dark shadow, per say, but it wavers against the stone, movements translated against the wall in shivering, shaky changes in position, the edges of it transitioning into the wall like a healing bruise, the edges darker than the center.

It lunges across the wall and hunts a piece of light, bright and tall, swallowing it victoriously. Behind it, the space it once occupies glows again with it no longer there to block it out. It wheels around and screeches to find the light still standing over there, taller and sadder, like the shadow
has proven something with its betrayal.

The shadow lunges again, and the wall crumbles before it can even get close to the light, falling, falling, falling into ashes, scattering in the void below.

The lights sighs and leaves, and where it walks, great white trees appear, a thousand vines wrapped together at the base, splaying out like veins and arteries, reaching up and making a flat canopy of light, blanketing and protecting, a grove and forest of power latched over the abyss. Birds flock to the tops of trees, Marked creatures reaching up and taking leaves straight from the crown, prey and predator alike roosting at the roots, under their soothing power and glorious shade.

Then the snakes come.

From the void they crawl up through the roots, slithering up and taking everything they can, taking the trees one by one, bitterly and bloodthirsty, sinking fangs and dripping venom, growing until they encircle the ocean of light, eating their own tails and squeezing to kill.

Animals scream and others stand and walk into the darkness and emerge with twisted gold in their eyes and purple in their skin.

And beneath it all, the void howls and laughs and hisses, slighted and cast in darkness eternal.

He stares into it, mute and terrified, snakes over his shoulders and under his skin, hissing in hysteria. Poison in his veins, he watches as he's paralyzed, as his heart ceases to beat for the terror and the chemicals in his being.

And the void lunges to consume him.

The scene crumbles like the wall before, and he falls falls falls deep down, far down, until there is nothing but the screaming void, the walls of the place coated in light, a black hole that he passed the event horizon of a long while back.

It is bright, so achingly bright, scorching his retinas into blazes of color, the darkness of before sacrificed for the entirety of now, nothing but color and blank slates, every color of blood imaginable spilling off of this impressionable easel and over his hands.
Then the black hole retches, and screams, and spits him out, colliding harshly with the floor, with dark metal stained dark, horrible red, an open wound spilling more out against the warm, sticky ground.

There is a body next to him, mouth open in a silent scream and eyes staring at nothing, heart gone and breath stopped. There is another not far, without a head to see, and one next to it that seems to have been gunned down by fifty different blasters at once, hardly recognizable as a being.

He retches like the black hole, and from his there comes only sludge, dark and sickly, eating through the floor beneath him, turning red and dark, reflecting back up at him with a red tinted version of himself, a horrid simulacrum. Just like him, he supposes, as he wipes the back of his hand against his lips and the substance eats through his hand painlessly to reveal a nothingness, no bones and blood, only a void, a ghost, a sick re-creation of a monster.

*Come, Come, Come Little One,* something says, singing and speaking and rasping and silent all at once. *Come, Come, Come See The End.*

*PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE LOOK,* another screams, heavy and wretched, *SEE WHAT MADE ME FOR I AM FORGED FROM PAIN.*

*let it all die,* the last whispers, *don't look back and don't look forward just end.*

He looks back. There is a void and another body, sprawled and spilling scarlet as if it rejects the very concept, a sliver of silver sticking out from between the shoulderblades.

He looks forward. The hallway lights beckon him onward, to see and watch, to be a spectator to the last breaths of the universe.

He looks down. The puddle beckons him to annihilate himself now.

He steps over the puddle and toward the lights, and they brighten like a hungry smile, like a thousand purple-tinted eyes staring and crowing in victory. There are footsteps that chase him the more he takes, echoing and multiplying into a shambling gait with an army of corpses following him, and he cannot look back or they will tear him limb for limb.
The void opens before him after an eternity, after his steps never end, and every one he takes does not have the time to be consumed by silence before the next makes itself known. It opens, and before him there are two figures.

One has a crown of high, spiked metal, reaching up to the invisible stars, claiming them and spearing them on its high spires, a senseless massacre of spilled stardust. The other has a crown of blooms and thorns, dark violet and tipped with white, and it whispers and does not move and does not have to kill, only has to watch them do it and take them as its own.

*Watch Watch Watch!*

*SEE SEE SEE?*

*sorry sorry sorry.*

The second raises its head to stare at the first, reaching out and collecting the crown from the top of their head and casting it aside, spearing into the ground like some haunting gravestone, ripples of voidstone like water spilling out from the impact point.

The snakes scream under his skin and he watches it take them by the head and guide them down for a kiss, a final blessing given, a whisper in the ear and another star system burned and salted in the name of their old god.

It whispers something into the air, and he cannot hear it, only knows that it is not a promise of more darkness on their hands, knows that it is not a word they have ever heard before.

And then it takes fangs to their throat and buries deep, taking life from skin until it withers and falls apart, grabs and rips and takes, and the void burns bloody red, like an alarm somewhere has been sounded by the act before being silenced, a singular pulse, the last. The inevitable end.

He looks on and thinks he should feel horror, that the black hole should come rising underneath his skin to take more black poison from him, to reveal the puppet he truly is, all paper and wire and imperfections.

Instead all he feels is victory.
And then there is a crown on his head that bites down coldly and cruelly, and blossoms tangled in long white strands, and he looks down and sees the one that had watched him with such cold eyes the mere second before he had summoned the snakes, gorged with pain and fear and hungry for blood, and left his prison behind with all of its ash and sand and metal against skin.

He watches the light fade, and he *smiles*.

A shame it's a dream, really.

Truly, truly, a shame.

Lotor wakes with the taste of blood in his mouth and the phantom of blooms against his scalp.

Chapter End Notes

This bitch didn't want to come out. YEET.

Apparently trying to write exposition when one side of the conversation has no idea what's going on is harder than I thought it would be. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

As for the last bit, post season six I actually know what the hell I'm doing to explain away some of this. I have also decided that I like my own Lotor better than attempting to wrangle the canon one into submission, so the Lotor from my other voltron fic is currently the one I am going to be using here. The first four chapters are entirely canon (at least from what I remember of actually writing the thing) and the majority of the fifth chapter counts too, minus all of the obviously conflicting bits.

I'm doing that because I actually kinda got attached to that little psychopath and I'm not reimagining canon any more than I actually have to. Also that was roughly 23k
words just for the stuff I'm counting as canon for this one and I'm not going through that again.

Fun fact: the working title for this for a little bit was For Only 19.99 You Can Witness A Murder
The sun rises.

Improbably, impossibly, ten thousand and twenty six decaphoeb after her birth, where she clawed to life in the Grove of sacred trees with only her mother there to witness her making and saw sunlight through leaves, she sees light breaking against the distant mountains.

Her eyes have not failed her, and her limbs do not creak and ache like the Elders, and her Marks are still faded and quiet compared to what they could be, blazing hot and sharp and like someone has removed a piece of reality to make room for them. She is still young, is still untested and untried, she has not stood before the Great One and died one of the three deaths she will experience.

She has not stood among the ranks of the watching, searching eyes as quintessence spools into thread and seals up the patches of broken, ancient prisons, watched with pupils blown wide with the ritual words spilling from her lips, high on the truth she speaks, as the lurid scarlet of the High Order settles upon heavy shoulders. She has not witnessed the end of an era.

But she has. Maybe tradition has been lost along the way, maybe she has not left her body around for a precious few seconds as the mantles of power exchange prayerclasped hands, but she has been trapped in her own for a hundred lifetimes, in folding blackness that gave up dreams long, long ago. Maybe she hasn't witnessed the end, but she embodies that end, standing in this palace of ghosts with the corpse of her enemy jutting up just to the left of the rising sun.

Maybe she has not experienced what is meant to be the first death under Luxis' watching eyes, but she has killed her innocence with bloodied hands already, and later she will stare xer down with the silver-blue of Quick Loyalties in her irises and raise her hands bathed in xer disciples colors and ask, will you turn away your loyal queen? Blood beneath fingernails does not mean evil. It merely means that you didn't have the time to pick it out.

She didn't really sleep. She doesn't know if she could've, mind gaining a clarity she has never before experienced in the isolation after her ten thousand decaphoeb slumber. A time of rational irrationality right when she wanted the normal chaotic tumble, right when she wanted all of her thoughts to end with jagged edges pasted against the next broken blade, they were as clear as they'd ever been.
Her Marks itch like nothing else, but she keeps her now ungloved palms far away from them, an exercise of restraint on her part. She can feel them reaching, calling, begging to be given just the slightest catalyst of power to reach out and connect and take and become. The mice she dismissed after the realization that she and Coran aren't the only semi-sentient survivors of this genocide are calling in her mind now, little jewel colored eyes gazing at her out of the corners of her eyes, gone when she glances at them fully.

She's not entirely certain if they're actually there and just hiding or projecting themselves mentally. She feels like she should be concerned if it's either, but she finds that a suffocating numbness took her limbs away about an hour before she could even conceptualize moving.

Her legs are still over the edge of the balcony, and she traces her fingers over the smooth blankness of the material. It folds back into the walls of the Castle once the time comes for takeoff, so some of her fondest memories come from here, sitting on this high balcony, her mother leaning against the railing, smiling up at the rays of sunlight sparkling down over her features, the moonlight lighting up bioluminescent splotches reaching back and capping on her ears, a reminder of a few interesting cosmetic choices made in her childhood, a light lavender shade that contrasted so beautifully with the Settled sunrise of orange-red on her cheekbones.

She would swing her legs over the edge excitedly, then, and lean over dangerously to point out things, stand up and walk across the fragile wall between her and the hungry claws of gravity, an exaggerated prowl atop the wall, a predator hunting, her mother laughing and allowing her with a fractal flower of quintessence waiting in her war-gloved palm, waiting to snatch her and carry her back to safety if she ever fell.

She never did.

She gives her right leg a half-hearted tap against the hard wall, cooled by the night, not yet kissed by the sun rays that creep across the land. The star in this system is blue and cold, interacting with the atmosphere and splashing out hazes of green and purple and olive yellow, far from the sunrises on Altea, far from the colors her mother took on her cheeks in the night time.

Her hand raises to scratch at her Marks again, but she forces it down before it can go far, clenching her hands in her lap. Her gloves are pulled back into the bracelets, the storage ones she got from the armoress with a knowing look in his eyes, capable of holding any house rings, a few pairs of gloves, including natural, war, and court style, and one matched pair of curse-runed knives.

She runs her fingers over the blue grooves down the center, entirely for stylistic and diplomatic purposes, because solid white was boring and every other color would seem too “presumptive” or however he had put it. A reminder to others that she was loyal to the crown and cloaks and soil of Altea, whether she was mingling, wandering around the town under a painstaking combination of
her few good illusions and natural shapeshifting, or holding a knife to someone's throat. They also feel nice against her fingertips in a way she's sure was intended, a nice geometric swirling pattern that only becomes apparent once you touch your fingers to it.

But the man that commissioned them for her, that had smiled knowingly as he handed them to her and smiled brightly and knowingly at the loving awe in her eyes at this unasked gift, is dead now. The blue only holds her loyal to herself now, the cloaks all gone and burned in an artificial supernova of destruction, the soil obliterated in the same, the crown itself held in a vault in an old allied planet, under enough wards and spells to be practically impervious to theft unless the thief is the heir apparent to the throne.

Her hair is still pulled into that high crown she had envied for so much of her life, lovingly placed and falling apart now, after enough rough hands raked through it. There's nothing inherently royal about it, really, nothing that makes it the old and time-honored arrangement of her ancient ancestors.

Her mother had worn it before she was a paladin, before she was royalty, before she was dead, had it knocked from her, hair spilling out in messy, midnight purple waves in the last few frames of video footage they had of her alive and snarling, eyes glowing with the fire that consumed her whole.

Because there is the truth that makes Allura different.

(there is what makes her different from one who, at this time in another universe, is staring sleeplessly at a ceiling before setting up a spiteful alarm, in an effort to try to prove they will never be the same as her father)

Allura has always been her mother's child, and her mother was the child of a pack of wild star-wolves. Not literally, of course, although some court rumors would say so, but she is- was wilder than the rest of her peers. A reckless fire that became her bones, that made her restless until the military called upon her, saying you can fight for the homeland and she roared yes back.

She joined the Forces three days after she was declared an adult, and the day after she arrived at her new posting as one of the few rookies assigned to a low-level diplomatic escort force on an agricultural planet, they were attacked by an up and coming local warlord.

They say she tore her way through the armada that Kaiekter supplied to the warlord with nothing but her bare hands and Luxis-given power. Said she cut and clawed and bit and howled her way to freedom, leading her and the rest of her unit to liberate the entire planet in less than a decaquin.
Not entirely true. She had her blaster for the first wave, and stole one from a corpse she made for the rest of their liberation. And it took a decaquin and a half.

Still, that didn't change her promotion, or her temporary assignment to the Home Guard when she refused to take full leave. A brief, embarrassing encounter in the hallway between the second in line Prince Alfor and her later, she was shipped back to the front lines.

What followed was a several decaphoeb long, stilted half-heartedly hidden half-courtship-half-long-winded-game-of-chicken between the Holy Soldier and the Prince, then a blatant, almost sarcastic flirtation between the now Crown Prince and the Red Paladin, and eventually a marriage between the High Scarlet General and the newly crowned, freshly mourning King.

But Xera never left Merial. Just because she was Queen, and soon to be a mother, did not mean that she wasn't still bound to the Red Lion, still blood-sworn to the Force. War followed her footsteps and she would always meet it with a smile and remind it that it was emblazoned in her cheeks, with Lady Luck on her side.

(she was not raised by a Lady of an influential family, with a father so lost in all of his work and duties that she craved for him until he was gone and dead. She was not raised by a carbon copy of herself, of one with a silver spoon in her mouth and power at her fingertips)

She was raised by a commoner orphan at fourteen decaphoebs, with a King for a father that was there as much as he could be, one that she still loves, but not enough to idolize. She was raised by a wild riot of colors and curls, one with a rusty knife in one hand and clawed fingernails raised to strike.

(she does not crave and receive love with such equal measures that it overtakes every other desire and becomes her defining trait, arched over her cheekbones in soft, approachable curves)

She has love and war in equal measures, because she has learned that nothing is fair except for there and she wants that. She wants to love recklessly and with no abandon, to stare down the one who will help make her legacy and say mine, and wants to fight and make war with restless energy, to feel alive as metal sings and blasters fire.

She loves war and she will fight love tooth and nail.
The sun is on her face now, bright and unfamiliar, but soothing all the same. Her left foot taps out an even rhythm against the balcony, and she raises her hands to push the hair into the right place, to regain that soldier's crown, this time made in ivory instead of plum. Her circlet is sun and skin-warm when she brushes over it, the charging crystal heavy and saturated with quintessence.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she brings her hands down, away from the wildly itching Marks, and stares down at her calloused, uncovered palms. She's ashamed that she let them show around these new Paladins, no matter how brief a glimpse they may have gotten. She had forgone them after the news came that Altea was annihilated, ripped them off with a scream as her quintessence ripped through the air, and her father had sparked her into unconsciousness before she could even get back to thinking about putting them back on.

It's not that they're unsightly. And yes, two of the Paladins had not had gloves to cover their palms when they first arrived, and maybe they have different customs, but the idea of exposing her palms to them makes her shudder.

The Black Paladin has lost one entire arm, and she thanks the Deities that the replacement he was given isn't quintessence null, because otherwise she doesn't know how she would react. To have an entire arm lost, one of the main Channels cut off and removed, is too horrible to imagine.

She remembers the horror stories from the captured prisoners from long ago, had looked through the files in her own time and been utterly horrified. The experiments with the Berserker effect had her wearing her extra high collars for phoebs. The Silver Hand program kept her from making any kind of contact with others until her mother had sat her down and calmed her down.

Her palms are rather pretty in her opinions, the lines drawing together at the base before spreading out with a carpet of leaves above, same as the trees in the Grove. They're speckled with silver-gray at the top, little flowers or leaves, she can't tell, but they sparkle like diamond dust is imbedded into her skin.

And she makes them bloom.

She grabs quintessence from deep within her, straight from her reserves, and her Marks glow like miniature blood suns, bright and red and horribly beautiful, grabs and pulls and spins until there is the electric blue of her father tangled with the pink-orange-red of blood spilled into water, drawn into bright lines in the air, unfolding and unfurling.

They carve into curves and harsh corners, into dulled blades and sharp clusters, a beautiful ceremonial weapon coming to life between her fingertips, trees on palms swaying in the breeze as
light flows into the air.

It's bigger than any other she's made, bigger than the ones she's seen her mother make on the balcony next to her, always watching, always waiting, always the predator.

The fractal flower blooms.

Ice meets blood-in-water and they mix and swirl, budding and folding open, petals surrounding her like she's some precious thing, revealing the poisonous center to the beauty.

(to an outsider, she is Venus, born from blood in seafoam, coming out of the clam with a smile that some would call beautiful and some would call bloodthirsty, ready to make humanity weep)

The sun that is not her sun glares in the sky.

The Princess that is no longer a Princess glares back.

And the Queen crafts a star for her home, blooming around her in solar flare petals.

And smiles.

The sun rises, and revolution rises with it.

Chapter End Notes

This one's a little shorter but to be fair I wrote it all last night between midnight and three am. I am also very tempted to write a little mini-fic involving Alfor and Merial, but I also do not trust myself with them.

My sister has told me I need to post a link to my tumblr on this so here you go. https://www.tumblr.com/blog/zenzaaaaaaaaa

Fair warning I don't really tag anything and my fandom reach is long and meme- filled.
I am sorry for all of the spoilers you may find.

Some songs that I've listened to while writing that I've realized are pretty good theme songs for these characters:
To Build A Home - Radio Version by The Cinematic Orchestra
Smother by Daughter
Youth by Daughter
Medicine by Daughter
Everybody Knows by Sigrid
I Am Bones by Joe Brooks
Lions Inside by Valley Of Wolves

Also, please tell me if I have any typos or mistakes here. I didn't even read it this morning to check with my non-sleepy brain.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith wakes up sharply. Not like waking up from a nightmare, the heaving gasp breaking out of chests, mindless panic fleeing at an achingly slow, knowing pace. No, he doesn't really have many nightmares. He doesn't have many dreams either.

He has the blankness in the night and the return of the senses in the next second, eyes snapping open the same time the world breaks through with the humming in the walls and the purring of the Lions, the he can taste dusty dryness on his tongue and smell the careful nothingness of the walls.

Images flash through his head quickly – sun rising over smoky mountains, the broken form of the enemy imbedded in the ground, a bouquet of flowers sprouting between palms with tree roots sketched over – and disappear before he can even ask about any of them.

>Oops. Sorry, I'm still recalibrating a little bit. Only you, my Wayfarer, and the Uncrowned one are currently awake, so it's the best time to do it.

“Oh.” He can only guess at who else is awake from the little flashes, from the feelings and impressions, but they’re probably referring to Allura. Given the awkward conversation post-battle he really doesn't want to have to interact with her again, with her sharp eyes and sharper scorn. “Thanks for letting me know.”

> No problem in the slightest.

Leo's presence disappears after that, at least as much as it can. Withdraws into the pure-metal walls and continues on its way. Gender is always confusing when it comes to Leo, only sometimes feeling human, and sometimes feeling more like a machine. And when they do feel human they have a few separate airs that make it difficult to entirely tell. His first impression was male, but by now he's not so certain.

But, more importantly than the mental checklist he has to make of questions to ask, he's finally alone. All of the other Lions are quiet, giving the impression of sleeping, of nesting and roosting together, of basking in each other quietly while blocking out the world. Even Eris is quiet in his head, distant and far removed but still rooted deep, paced out of their den to join the others in a dream-hunt.
He sits up slowly, kind of afraid to move and damage this moment, where his mind feels quiet again. It doesn't feel whole and he can't remember a time when it was, but it feels like the closest he's ever gotten. He knows the Lions now, knows their names, even though Eris and Instinct will always have that same feeling, that maternal danger, that furious love, that same ring in his head of knowing and loving. He has seen them, has been with them in unity, has been one of their conduits, their voices and their minds molded together for one act of violence and bittersweet remembrance in harmony.

He has been lonely for a while now, he realizes. Has felt lonely from the day he woke up with red in his head and a woman with scarlet on her lips telling him about the end of his own world.

He wasn't lonely for a little while, with Shiro there who looked at the stars and saw the same majesty that he did. He wasn't lonely, and for a second, he allowed himself to love someone other than the voices in his head, allowed himself to call another being home, allowed himself to hesitantly whisper brother even though he knew that wasn't ever going to truly happen.

He was right, of course. Even before Shiro went to bow at the feet of the majesty and got stolen away in the starry night for it, Keith had to leave the place he had almost called home in and of itself.

And the the hungry stars took and took and took and Keith looked at them and said no, and then looked at the ones that controlled the gateways to them, and with split knuckles and a black eye, said no.

Then a cloak and dagger, a blaster and bracelet called him, and he ran his fingers over them, and smiled with red and silver and said yes.

And the stars called and Shiro came back with starlight permanently imbedded in his hair and an arm sacrificed to them, and he looked Intuition in the eyes and felt Sammy in his head and said hell yeah.

And still, he was restless. He was pacing in his own head in a room made from stars, was howling along with Eris the moment she broke free and started to sing of war and hate and loved him with every individual millisecond he existed and did not fear her.

He was restless in the tides of battle, watching the others break and shatter and take and destroy with an unpracticed grace that seemed so horrid in retrospect. That they could kill and annihilate so
easily on their first go around, that the bond with these ten thousand year old beasts of bitterness ran fresh and deep enough that they could do it and not feel churning sickness echo.

And now, after the butterflies had come back and kept them separate and entangled, after Eris had purred and rubbed against him and said *I know you better than you know yourself, and I love you entirely.* After he talked with the one that barked harsh laughs when faced with legacy, she had rared up and laughed in the same way, with an extra edge of harshness, and he could feel her staring out from his own eyes to stare at her, a gesture of respect in the same way she scorned her.

Eris likes Allura. Likes this grandchild of war and love and blood she has now.

*She has fire.* Eris had said, as he walked away and shed gloves, let the silver and red pop from his palms angrily, stretching and pulling around him, tugging at the second skin that's second nature, and he had to say *no* all over again. *Not as much as you, not as much as her mother, but Luxis, she has fire.*

He’d wondered then, with little pieces of fluttering knowledge settling temporarily into place if it's weird to curse using your own parent's name. The thought went out of his reach in the next second, soaring away on bloodied white wings, and he doesn't ever know if that empty spot is going to come back.

The void was what he needed, though. That temporary moment where he forgets dream and nightmare and his brain, all full of burnt out wreckage, doesn't have the room to make worlds in the night.

Now, he can look back and process and realize that he hasn't forgotten any of it, that this is real and true, that he can reach out, extend mental claws in stretch, and Instinct will respond with words, rather than impressions, and he can walk down and lose himself in her own presence.

He isn't alone anymore.

And for some reason he finds that absolutely, entirely, *fucking terrifying.*

Now they are not voices in his head anymore, they are not little things that he can fully justify to himself as losing his mind, not just weird coincidences, not just the magic at his fingertips and the jacket that isn't a jacket anymore, not just some elaborate hallucination of aliens and the people in his skull given names.
Now they are real and entire, and he can reach and stretch out his claws and ruin everything and cut it into shreds without a second thought.

Now they are real and true and they can be taken from him by the monster under the bed, the beast ready to kill like he has for the past ten thousand years. But now his fear is named, and now it can die too. Now Zarkon is a name he can feel true hatred for, the one he can sharpen his claws for, to destroy and kill and take no mercy.

Eris was right. He does have fire. He's just afraid that it will burn down everything he has loved until only he sits in the ashes and is lonely all over again.

His mind isn't really quiet anymore, but he also wishes it was louder. He wishes he could dare to reach out and take hold of Eris again, to wordlessly ask for comfort from the closest thing to a mother he has always had, but he can't.

She knows him, yes, has always known parts of him, has known most of him most of his life, but he can't risk this, can't risk chasing away this one bright north star.

It's a blind fear, it's an illogical fear, it's a fear that he hates and despises and wants to kill in its slumber, but it never sleeps. It looms over his shoulder and sinks claws into the back of his neck, croons and sings and sits back to watch, the restless monster in his skin that keeps him pacing, this existential dread of the loneliness that he has crowed at while he waited in the desert, almost sure that he was going insane with scarlet and steel.

At least then, then when there was no one he ever talked to, only the desert and a cave full of drawings, he could look at the fear and laugh, because he was living it.

Now he can't laugh, because he can lose it all over again.

He hates that.

His palms itch.

His palms itch and his mind isn't quiet and he hates it.
The fear comes back, and on its heels comes panic, temporary and crushing and destroying and his palms are itching and there is crimson and blades now, flashing through the room, hungry, searching, desperate to find and fix and keep him safe, desperate, desperate, just like he is.

His palms don't even itch anymore, they ache, they burn, they hurt, and there is too much coming out of him and too much left inside and he is too much, and he is going to scare them all away when he opens his mouth and they see fangs and say predator.

The red howls and screams at the walls, and Keith can feel Leo again but only distantly, only hearing his pleas from the far distance, only feeling the walls rising in his head, gray and black and twisted, spiraling upward and outward, exploding from the lines on his palms, blazing and agonizing as all grace and slowness abandons him.

His breath quickens until it's a pointless exercise, rolling off of the bed, hitting the ground hard and not hesitating in scrambling over to the collapsed pile of his few belongings, hands shaking to the point where it's not even shaking.

There is no stillness anymore, no more quiet, as he yanks away the rest of it, the blaster and bracelet and scrap of cloak cloth fluttering to the side with one swoop, the knife picked up and thrown away with a frantic energy.

Black gloves lay at the bottom of the stack, and his hands don't shake anymore when he pulls them on and the storm disappears.

Blood and steel back under his skin, his fingers twitch restlessly, rubbing against each other and returning the circulation, the persistent, needling sensation of having the digits fall asleep.

Breath comes easier now, and he winces now that he can look around. The blanket is pulled off of the bed and tangled together, the scrap of cloth that becomes his jacket lain in an awkward slump in the corner, one of the corners folded over the rest. The blaster and bracelet are swept off near them, and he can already tell that if they weren't made of whatever freakishly strong stuff they're made of, he would have to deal with a fair amount of dents and scuffing.

The knife is imbedded in the wall at a semi-diagonal angle, crooked but thrown deep enough into the material to remain stuck.
He winces.

The wrapping around the hilt is looser than he feels comfortable with, that little voice in the back of his head that's not one of the usual suspects nudging him to fix it before anyone can see it.

He grabs the cloth first, nudges over the gun and bracelet with a foot. “Sorry.” He says down to them, voice cutting unnaturally loud through the room and the sudden silence in his head.

His head is never silent.

Almost as if the revelation was the key, black and gray retreat back, and Eris rockets back into his mind with the force and speed of someone who'd been bearing down at an obstruction they thought wouldn't break easy and disappeared without warning.

-you better be- holy shit, Scheila, don't scare me like that!

>Ow. Could you take that knife out of me, please. I don't much care for being stabbed first thing in the morning.

Hey, Zuko, could you chill for a second. You gave Eris an aneurysm and she doesn't even currently have a physically manifested brain.

He winces again, “Sorry...?” He grabs the hilt of the knife and tugs it out, pulling on one edge of the wrapping to tighten it before tucking it back under itself.

I am apparently not ready to raise a teenaged son if this is what I get on my second day as a parent.

Honey, we've all got big storm's coming. These ones are gonna be even worse since we did a full Merge. We're all screwed.

>I'm not.
If I'm going down I'm taking you down with me, Leo. I don't care if you have the only one not going through full space puberty, I will make your life a living hell.

>>I am the baby monitor for everyone’s demon children. Yours just impaled me. I have to live with all of your sass since I'm the only one with a form that can accommodate all of you. Mission accomplished.

The hole in the wall seals itself up with a crackle of electric blue lightning, with the mental impression of a wince. Keith guiltily stuffs the knife back in his belt, picking up the mess on the floor and dumping it all on the mattress, with the strange impression of parents arguing over a suitable punishment without remembering he was there, trying his best to mentally and physically project innocence.

It's honestly one of the most surreal experiences of his life, just because of the sheer normalcy of it. A magical lion robot who's been hanging out in his head for most of his remembered life greeting him with a quote from Mean Girls didn't even come close.

Having parents is a very strange occurrence. Mostly because he actually fully cares what these ones care about him and he has more opportunities than ever to mess up.

And there's the fear again. The panic isn't there anymore, though, and his palms aren't burning anymore. It's better, yes, but it still feels strange.

Leave Eris' kit alone. He needs space.

>>Oh, right. Sorry kid.

Keith stares at a certain part of the wall, taking a wild guess. “I'm sorry for accidentally stabbing you.”

>>Eh, I'm over it. It takes more than that to really hurt me, but it's sweet that you really care. Try to give some warning before you drag up your shielding, next time.
Yeah, that wasn't really fun. I don't mind it happening but when it doesn't have warning that gets more than a little nerve-wracking.

Please, kit. You're going to make me spontaneously generate a virus if you keep it up like this.

**Space, Eris.**

**Relax, you big Amwe-**

Her voice cuts out halfway through another alien word that doesn't fit in his head, leaving him alone again, but not silent.

Silence hurts, but this general quiet, that rumbling sensation somewhere within him, a purr to calm down both him and Instinct, healing wounds, a gesture of comfort and pain in equal parts.

The hilt of the knife digs uncomfortably into his hip, and he pulls it out, setting it in a neat line with the rest of his stuff.

Everything he brought from Earth, lain out in one place, himself and all of his clothing included. No keychains from a convenience stores, no stolen pocket knives. No bag, no novelty calendars, no notebooks or writing implements, no phone, no easily huggable hippo plushie.

A blaster and a knife. A bracelet and a magic jacket. His favorite grey t-shirt, a pair of black pants he probably shouldn't own given where exactly he lives climate wise, and one highlighter blue hair tie at the very end of its life stuffed into his back pocket.

He can accessorize and kick your ass, but after that he's out of luck when it comes to the stuff he brought from Earth.

He knows the blaster, knows how it falls apart and gets put back together, it's power source, where to conceal it, knows that as soon as he picks it up his fingertips will spark bright. He knows the knife, knows that it is dangerous, that it must be protected, must be kept from prying eyes, must stay safe.
He doesn't know the bracelet, except for that it would fit his wrist perfectly if he put it on, and that the charms glow and tangle together with such happy ringing sounds that it makes the loneliness rise up all over again and the fear come clawing back. He knows the cloak with the vagueness of his old life, knows that it will always shift when he tells it, know it's stuck in scarlet beauty, in white and crimson and gold.

The cloth is cool under his fingers, but when he runs them over the golden shapes that swirl together into one chaotic mass, they are hot under the pads of his fingertips. He doesn't even have to fully think it before he has a lap full of cropped jacket, lining stitched full of blazing runes in languages he can't recognize.

The blaster doesn't really take much of his time to look over. It's always been the best understood piece of a past he will likely never remember.

The dagger is cold too. It doesn't warm up or change under his touch, remains as cold and impersonal as ever. It feels like it belongs to a stranger more than him, belongs buried hilt deep in the desert sand until it gleams under harsh sun rays and rises anew. It belongs in the shadows, silently slipping into steel walls and darkness, into flesh and bone, belongs where no one can see it until it's too late.

It does not belong to him.

(yet)

He doesn't test the edge of it, because he is hesitant to feed it the blood of its wielder, because he knows that he would cut deep without even trying, blade turned sharper than diamond by just the will to harm, to hurt and cut and protect.

He reaches for the bracelet.

Before his hand can make contact, a screeching echoes and echoes, high and loud and desperate, an injured animal in the place where dunes meets desolation meets the endless heights.

It cuts out and restarts, and it takes three iterations before his heart stops pumping too loud, before his mind can make the connection between the sound and the screechy one that his short-lived alarm clock had made before it met a sad fate, reportedly by the hands of none other than Matt
Alarm bells ringing, red lights flashing, a short lived scream and a gruesome metallic *crunch*- 

He is off of the mattress and on solid ground before he can blink, one hand clinging to the jacket, the other holding the knife in a reverse grip.

The knife flips up into the air before he can even think, reacting on pure instinct to launch the thing toward the ceiling, jacket pulled on in a flash of movement, knife caught on its way back down, feet pounding out of the door with no hesitation.

-

Coran removes his hand from the alarm button, not bothering to touch the intercom and make up any more motivation. Sure, he could tell them that the Galrans had returned, but that would be pointless anyway. This is their first drill, and he's only really pressed the button so he could work out any immediate flaws in their planning. After all, two out of the five paladins had left all of their armor and weaponry behind in the armory, and only the Black Paladin had left his entire set close at hand. The Green and Yellow Paladins only had their helmets and bayards with them. It was an oversight already, and he was only just getting started.

He's not here to scare them, he's here to prepare them. The terror will come later, at the hands of the droids he's spent a healthy portion of his life fighting, at the hands of the Galra. He will never give them more cause to fear him than they will be forced to experience.

He couldn't sleep last night either. He had tried, very valiantly, had gotten into clothing that should by all rights be dust and scraps, felt the uneven edges and loose threads of the dark blue. A soldier he was friends with on the infamous Elchris Mission, the ten decaphoeb maiden voyage of the Castleship under its new leadership, had made it for him, painstakingly embroidering the High Sun on it in light blue, presenting it to him with a smile, Coran giving him a War-red mug painted with the same.

The soldier was in the first twenty to die from the outbreak that slipped through quarantine.

Coran can't even remember his name anymore.
It's less troubling than it has any right to be.

The Yellow Paladin- Hunk, had been kind, as one holding his position is wont to be. Still, it was good to know that they hadn't made a huge mistake by granting near-infinite power to the first five sentients to arrive on the vine-covered steps.

He will have to go over their policies with unwanted psychic bonding as soon as possible. Even though Hunk had seemed confused by most of the technical jargon, he was sure he could dumb it down enough so that they could understand. They had to be powerful psychics to make it to where they did as quickly as they did.

It had taken six battles and one collective month of peace-time bonding for the original Paladins to make the base form of Voltron, much less the full Merge he saw from behind a layer of glass and Sherrite. To fall into one another's minds with no hesitation, become one form with enough power and constitution to remain together long enough to complete their mission, even with the five new additions of the Lions and their coding.

If he didn't know better, he would almost say that Hunk had no idea about his species' psychic abilities, but of course, that would be impossible.

Or at least he hopes it would be impossible. Faevro willing they weren't a species that lived as the only fully-sentient one in their planet, or, Mikora forbid, their whole solar system.

Who knows what would happen to the psychic abilities of an alien if there wasn't any competition. He shudders to think of it.

Besides, if the Paladins were wholly ignorant of their own powers or strengths, he doubts that Hunk would've been able to speak of bonding. Even if he did so in an utterly vulgar and revolting way, all things considered.

After the Paladin had left, with a truly terrifying display of teeth that he called “yawning”, he had only had the will to meditate for another half-varga before he abandoned the kitchens for the bridge, with a quick stop in between at his room to change into the proper military uniform befitting a member of the (dead) Altean Advisory.

He spent the rest of his time checking over security cameras and checking through the newly updated files the Castle had made at his behest. A varga before the star was set to rise on this
planet, he finally got down to the dirty of it, recoding most of the training protocols they had
turned into an improvised set of traps in the final days of the war. The gladiator droids had been
switched off of their assassin modes, and he took extra care in removing the self-destruct protocol.
The electric maze had to be localized back down to only the training rooms sensors and the
intensity decreased to significantly less lethal levels.

The Paladins are lucky that the Castle had decided it liked them when they entered, or they would
be dead eighty-three times over, hunted down by droids activated the second the identification
system had flagged something suspicious in their quintessence systems, left charred and smoking
in hallways with unpassable walls of electricity.

He ran system checks over six times. He checked the star map of distress signals and swiped
moisture from his eyes as he asked it to check over the data again, just to be absolutely sure.

He didn't want to believe that this is what happened to the Black Paladin. Sure, he hadn't known
Zarkon well for the years he was the staunch protector of the galaxies, much like he hadn't known
Alfor or Merial and the starlight angel of their daughter for most of their intercrossed lives.

He'd seen him once at a feast, seated between Eiril and Neimao, with Sekhet and Merial further to
the right. They had given hunter rites over the meat and warrior rites over those that had fallen in
the victory they threw the feast for. He had been unsmiling, but not cold.

He distinctly remembered the feeling of frost spiraling away from fingertips, unhindered palms
pressed against glass.

Eighteen decaquins later, he was a soldier. Six decaquins after that he met the Red Paladin eye to
eye, and she had smiled when she saw his marks and hair, put together just perfectly.

“You remind me of my bonded.” She had stated bluntly, shaking his hand with the delicate
harshness that only she could truly claim, “Same marks and look in your eyes. I'm Eight-Alpha-
Nine-dash-One-Twenty-Six.”

And that was when he gained true respect for the Red Paladin, when she looked at him with
respect in her eyes, when she, the Queen of Altea, greeted him with a courtly handshake and a
soldier's clasp, and introduced herself not with her Lion or her honorifics and titles, but her
designation.
“Seven-Hyperion-Three-dash-Eight-Oh-Seven. It’s an honor to be compared so favorably to the
Makkel, and an even greater honor to meet you, Amakke.” He bowed, and she, with fingernails
painted a carbon nanotube and changestone compound to give her better conduits for her
quintessence and harder and sharper nails besides, tapped the height of his back, the humorous
mocking gesture of the predator.

She laughed and showed fangs, “You really are a riot, Coran. Please, just call me Merial. Luxis
knows only Alfor and the other Paladins ever use my own name, and I’ve been wanting to hear it
from someone other than them.” She tapped his chin again, ran careful eyes over his Luck colored
hair and then tapped her own Marks, with their seamless blend of coloring with orange and red,
hands coming to rest around her abdomen. “Besides, if you think this is an honor, just wait until
you hear the offer I have for you...”

He had seen Zarkon only a few other times. His duties, after all, were not to watch the Paladins, it
was to guard the newborn Princess.

He heard a few decaphoebs later about Zarkon's own lost child. It barely managed to wail out a
feeble few notes, it's said, and then it said nothing. By the morning, it was gone, and Zarkon's wife
was irreversibly damaged from the birth.

He could understand his grief now, after he had looked down at that gurgling thing who liked to
turn her own hair white and orange and purple at the same time, firelight rising from her scalp,
Marks shifting and twisting in time with her laughter.

Eighteen decaphoebs later, Kaeeker was finally brought down. A scant few after, he was looking
Alfor in ice blue eyes fractured with grief right before his Makkel went to die, still staring into
them as he went to his pod without protest.

The electric blue of the Castle's Quintessence reminds him too painfully of Alfor's eyes.

He couldn't bring himself to look at their wills.

Time has passed too quickly for him in his life. A life of holes in memories and gaps where his
precious people were supposed to sit, safe and sound.

He has never gone to Oriande to meet with deities, to unlock all of his quintessence. He never had
the chance. He was supposed to, but he missed the ship, and he never brought it up to anyone ever
If he'd gone to Oriande, he never would've been relegated to a serving position in a lesser Lord's household. If he'd gone to Oriande, he never would've been randomly selected to join the Elchriss Mission, and he never would've been in the right position to stop the knife with his own arm.

He knows that Allura thinks he went. Knows she thinks his connections are just weaker.

He's never really seen the point in correcting any of them.

He does wish that he'd gone, though. Maybe then he would be strong enough to keep it all from happening, maybe life would form itself together just enough that when the time came, he would've been able to save countless lives.

He's spent the past thirty conscious decaphoebs wishing he'd been quick enough to catch it, the spider web threads of quintessence slipping between his fingers.

It will be his job to guide Allura to the places of her ancestors, where the space between the Heavens and the Void is breached. His duty to give her the rights, to cleanse her spirit and mind and ground her with symbols over skin.

He will not fail this time. He refuses to fail.

Even if he has to start small, with the alarm buttons and the tests, over and over, even if he has to break the skin of his hands sanding down the edges of this seven person machine, he will sacrifice what he has to to make sure that they will live.

He will not fail.

He will die before he lets another fall for him.
So, Comic-Con is conspiring for my mental health to greatly improve. Season 7, Steven Universe, Clone Wars, holy shit.

I wish I could work Adam into this one because I love my dead gay son and I want to make him happy with his hubby but I honestly can't really think of a way to get him into this thing without some serious ret-con. Shiro will have to remain tragically single until my muse raises its head and screeches out something vaguely inspiring.

Also, I've sort of realized I keep putting words in that aren't in the glossary thing that are mostly compound words or have a part of another word involved in them. If something reminds you of a previous word you saw, chances are good they're related and also have no real effect of the plot.

Originally this was just going to be Keith but Coran butted his mustache in and I didn't have the heart to say no.

As always, most of this was written past midnight and I really don't want to edit it so tell me if I have typos. Reviews sustain me, feed your local screaming artist.
Sup. I'm very sorry for everything.

Guess what y'all, I am filled with chaos and fear and absolutely no muse most days. I got a few comments with support that kicked my muse in the head and cured it of its amnesia. It was neat.

I have no one that proof reads these, nor am I even bothering to go back and try to fix anything. Let me know if it all sucks. Comments give me power.

I admire the dedication of any people that have stuck with this thing.

Thank you for waiting.

There's a zit on Lance's nose and Keith never realized how clear his skin always was until he too comes running into the command center with his shirt on backward, eyes foggy but alert and terrified at the same time.

He shows up behind Pidge and Hunk, who arrived only seconds after each other, but he's not the last one to show up. That honor belongs to Shiro, who comes in around ten seconds behind Lance still in full armor, that exact same look in his eyes.

Coran stands on the raised dais with the pedestals, surrounded by glowing blue sigils and one screen resolutely changing alien characters at a regular pace.

Allura is next to him, still fingering the knife she pulled out of Doshye knows where, having practically popped into existence with a rush of speed from a high up entrance. Apparently the thin metal poles braced against the walls aren't just for aesthetics, since she swung down from them, the gloves probably being the only thing keeping her palms from burning on her quick descent.

Coran snaps his fingers and the alien symbols freeze in their increments.

“Two dobashes and twenty eight ticks. Reasonable, very much so, but you can do better. Also, only one of you showed up in paladin armor, and he was the one sleeping in it.” He gives a head tilt to Shiro, with a quirk of an eyebrow that's half-judging and half-amused, before sending a quick smile toward Pidge and Hunk, “You both brought your bayards, which I will commend you on, but the armor is an integral and important part of Voltron. You are not as safe in the cockpit as you
might think, and if the alarm was sounded for the bridge because of an infiltration...”

He reaches under the edge of his glove, and impossibly pulls out a knife as long as his forearm. He doesn't even bother to finish his sentence, just holds the knife in a casual grip, as if unbothered.

Now, Keith is horrible with people, but he can see the edges of tension at the creases of his eyes, in the set of his shoulders, the fresh, young worry for these fresh, young paladins.

The knife goes back under the glove, fitting smoothly back into place without a crease or line to show for it as the handle disappears into the white fabric. Keith really wants to learn that trick.

“Now, though I would love to run through all of the the training exercises, I believe you might only be up to the physical type and some light communal meditation. Merges are always rough on psychic energy.” With a wave of his hand, all of the blue screens blink out, “The rest can wait. Please gather all of your Paladin armor and return here once fully equipped, I am sure this won't take long.”

He left all of his stuff in the armory where they first got them, most of Hunk's was put back into its alcoves, and all of Lance's illuminated in the electric blue lighting. Pidge and Shiro's were empty, which Keith didn't question at the time, but the dead-eyed shadows of Shiro's face now make him wish he did. Coran said that Shiro slept in his armor, so that's not a ringing endorsement of his current levels of self-care.

Keith very badly wants to fix this, but he's also totally and completely stumped as to how.

Hunk and Pidge leave together back toward the rooms, probably to gather whatever they left behind in their rooms, and Shiro goes to lean back against the wall, crossing his arms tightly to his chest.

Which leaves Lance and Keith to go back to the armory on their own.

Lance's hands twitch toward his sides, balling into lightly curled fists almost like he expects something there to stop them and hold them, furrowing his brow and looking at his arms before bringing them up just a bit faster than seems natural to cross them protectively over his chest.

It strikes him that this might be the first time he has seen Lance without any kind of layers. First the
Garrison uniform, then that oversized jacket for the entire time he was running away from the authorities and their solar-system sized jurisdiction (he can admit that the lengths he went to while escaping from the Garrison may have been slightly overkill, since he's probably in an entirely separate galaxy.), and then the paladin armor, thick panels of white plating and glowing electric blue making all of them feel and seem larger, even making Pidge with their height of all of four foot ten seem intimidating.

Without all of the layers, with everything stripped away, he seems bizarrely small.

Yes, he is taller than Keith, but it's not by much, and he's thinner than him, bizarrely so, in a way that makes him look just to try and figure out why it feels so bizarre. Without the pauldrons of the armor and starched corners of the uniforms and the oversized bunching of the neck of the jacket, his shoulders are so much smaller than he thought they were, arms thinner than he always thought they were.

He matches his fingers well, which is a strange thought to have, but his hands have been the only things that have never really been covered by anything, which makes him feel some weird unnameable emotion in the places where the Lions have locked up slips and snippets of sound away into their corrals. He probably played piano as a kid. The zit still stands out strangely, and honestly, there is nothing about Lance that he doesn't find incredibly distracting in that moment.

A shade of blue that's surprisingly vibrant and even more familiar turns toward him, and Keith suddenly realizes that he's been staring, but also feels that fire of stubbornness, all of those little sparks, rear up in his chest, and he doesn't look away. A few seconds later of silent staring the fire banks itself, but at that point he's committed and it's too late to back down now.

Lance stops walking for a second, opens his mouth like he's about to say something, then scowls and keeps going, jogging just a few steps to make up the ground Keith's taken, swiping a tired hand over his face and then grimacing down at it, rubbing his fingertips together.

Keith's staring again, and this time when Lance glares up at him, he looks away, and feels a light bit of shame at that concession of power. (He'd been told in countless foster homes that his tendency to initiate and perpetuate arguments by having blank-eyed staring contests with his opponent was deeply creepy and catlike. Jokes on them, he had five cats in his head and that habit was still only his fault.)

“What's your problem with me?” Lance asks. It's the tone and volume that make it such a shocking statement. It's more tired and blameless than he expected. Most of the time, no one ever bothered tacking on the 'with me' bit, and it was hard for him to not drily reply and number of countless things that could get him a therapist if anyone actually cared that much.
Most of the time, it's all accusatory and sharp, and it stings like a physical thing. This one almost hurts more though, because he remembers Lance from before, with all of his wild gestures and wide smiles from the distance, all of that exuberance flushed down the drain to make room for an incredible apathy that doesn't sound right in his voice.

“Why do you ask?”

Lance scoffs, hands tucking back into a tight cross, curling in his entire torso just slightly, “Oh please, like you don't know.”

Keith frowns. He really hopes he didn't miss some desperately obvious social cue. “I actually don't,” Keith says, then pauses, “Oh wait, is it the staring?”

Lance's eyebrows raise and his arms unsbrand in a 'yeah, duh' gesture that makes some part of Keith happy again to see his gesturing back.

Keith winces, and smacks his forehead with a palm, “Sorry about that. I am very bad with social-things.” Then, because that feels like an awkward place to leave things on, he tacks on a, “I don't think I've ever seen you without layers.”

Lance's arms re-cross, but now there's less of a 'hide from the world' feel to it and more of a cocky one, shoulders pressing back and perking up. “Yeah, well look who's talking, bigshot. I don't think I've ever seen you without your gloves.”

Keith's fingers automatically curl into the black fabric, rubbing it over his palm. “I took them off for the simulator.” He mumbles, and sees Lance opening his mouth a raising a finger to retort only to look back down with a frown of concentration and then tilt his head in concession.

The doors to the armory slide open easily, the armor remaining in their respective tubes, helmets lifeless and faceless, the bodysuits and armor plating floating midair, held awash in a shade of electric blue that is distinctly Leo's, even though it seems like it should belong to Sammy.

Keith very carefully doesn't sneak a glance over at Lance while he climbs over to his own scarlet set, keeping his eyes firmly on the floor until the opaque tube comes down. He leaves the dagger with his clothes this time, wrapped up and hidden in a corner, making sure the plating is fastened on tight enough. The bayard feels hungry in his hands, and it quickly snaps to his waist. The gloves
didn't mend in the night, still leaving his fingertips exposed.

The helmet's visor casts everything in that same shade of electric blue, and he snaps it up to leave all of his face exposed, the tube disappearing and leaving him free to step back out.

He's the first one out, and it never struck him as just how awkward it would be for that to happen until he's forced to experience it. Does he leave the room and head back to the bridge? Does he stay and wait for Lance? What's he supposed to do in this scenario?

He shuffles his feet as he mentally debates himself, only for the opening of Lance's tube to cut that train of thought off at the pass. He holds his helmet against his hip, fingertips drumming over the sky blue surface. He's very careful to look away quickly after that, tapping out rhythms against the bayard.

The door slides open before Keith can even start to move toward it, revealing Pidge and Hunk, who only pause for a second before moving in. In response to their entrance, their armor colors flare just a bit brighter and they each simultaneously sigh slightly before heading toward the platforms.

“We had to stop through the control room on the way here,” Hunk says before the tube closes, “I would try to get there as soon as possible.”

Pidge's laugh echoes sharply as she says, “The alien princess does knife tricks while staring you down into hell. I would not want to be within stabbing range. Don't die, nerds.”

Keith gives a nod in their direction, but the tubes already closed. Lance does a hop-skip and swings around the edge of a doorframe, cocking an eyebrow, “You coming? Although I'm sure her face would be a lovely last sight to see, I'm not ready to die yet.”

Saying anything else would be too awkward, he decides, so he just gives the tiniest of motions with his head and stalks through the door, keeping his footsteps heavier just so he can hear them better, have something in this situation he can control.

His fingertips rub together compulsively on the walk back, eyes darting everywhere but carefully away from Lance (because that's weird and he told you not to) in a vain effort to distract his mind from everything.
The control room is largely quiet, Shiro staring down at the floor, hair hanging down over his eyes and masking what either must be intense focus or dead eyed blankness, given his dedication to that one particular patch of flooring. Coran and Allura stand next to each other, him manipulating star maps with alarming looking flashing alien markings, her with one elbow on the control pedestals, flipping the knife between her fingers and throwing it between her hands with disturbing competency that immediately and completely justifiably makes him fear for his life.

Coran glances up from his readings, his own blank-eyed, pinched eyebrow stare at the holograms settling into something amiable with an amount of ease Keith doesn't think he'd be able to match. “Ah, three down, two to go. Excellent timing, really, the training room just finished its final calibrations.” He glances over toward Shiro, glances away, then very slowly performs an undeniably subtle double take. “Ah. Hmm.” His fully gloved fingertips flutter against the air at his side before he brings them up to swipe the whole mess of charts off to the side and past whatever invisible boundary the holograms aren't made in.

His hands tap against some sort of setting that Keith can't see from his angle, and then Coran is writing in the air with perfect red calligraphy. *Would you mind waking him up?* It reads, and admittedly it takes a moment to actually understand what he was trying to say. Quietly, Keith moves to stand right next to Shiro, just slightly in front of him, softly leaning against his shoulder with increasing weight.

Coran gives him the smallest of nods and swipes the writing away with a flick of his wrist while Shiro comes back to reality again. “Sorry,” Shiro says, and rolls his right shoulder.

“Don't apologize, Shiro,” Keith whispers, then flicks the back of his head, “Except for your lack of self-care. Apologize for and fix that.”

“Smart-ass.”

“Thanks for the compliment, dumb-ass.”

Keith looks over just in time to see a wounded expression quickly fall from Lance's face, replaced with an exasperated pseudo-fondness and then shuttered away the second he notices Keith's eyes on him. Keith has to reprimand himself on that again, because though Lance is incredibly distracting, he literally cannot spend every moment of his life making the poor guy he dragged with him into space miserable, despite how aesthetically pleasing he is.

Allura's knife handle thuds onto the pedestal, her eyes literally flashing silver and red at the same time before settling back into their somehow contradictory blue and purple. Her teeth bare out at
the world and her canines flash for a brief moment, almost feral.

Then she turns away, her shoulders hunch, and she uses her free hand to fruitlessly tug up material around her neck. “I’m sure you’re all having a lovely time,” she says, “but I can’t just- stand here and do nothing. I’ll meet you in the training room, Coran. I have some aggression to work out.”

She picks up her knife and slinks away, and when Keith's eyes dart down, the electric blue of Leo's repairs are filling in the crack made by the handle of Allura's knife.

“God that's hot,” Lance whispers, only loud enough that Keith is the only one that hears. Keith doesn't exactly agree, he's more scared than attracted, but he is well aware that he's weird, even more than the five angry cats in his head can explain. He's not-defective. Eris would bite his head off if he even thought that much, but he knows that he is not what is typical, he is too vicious and different to be human but too soft and uncultured to fit in with these aliens. He doesn't fit anywhere but in this raw, irritated niche he's carved out for himself in every place he's made to arrive in.

Hunk and Pidge arrive a few minutes later, with Pidge glaring at the ceiling lights and Hunk very cautiously stepping through the doorway. “No scary knife princess?” Pidge asks rhetorically, their hands skittering over their armor.

“Queen, technically,” Coran responds, “and yes, she opted to go on ahead and break the gladiators in.”

Shiro flinches at the g-word and Coran purses his lips like he ate something bitter and unpleasant at the unfortunate name.

“Well,” Coran says, and clears his throat, “We should go join her, I suppose.”

The walk down is largely quiet, Coran passing a clear crystal between his hands in a soothing way that Keith's eyes naturally track, catching electric blue in Leo's lights, Hunk and Pidge stare the walls like they expect them to grow teeth, Shiro seems to almost passively hibernate, and Lance lurks at the back, silent. Keith doesn't dare to look behind him, in case he winds up staring and making Lance uncomfortable again.

The silence gives them ample time to hear the training room before they see it. Loud, rattling sounds and crackling electricity, animalistic snarls and robotic, rhythmic clanking. The entryway to the training room is a large arched set of doors, completely flung open and letting the bright
fluorescent lights, far brighter than those in the hallway, bathe the floor and wall in bright white light and flickering shadows, only vaguely humanoid and moving too quickly to perfectly track.

Before they can round the doorway, a piece of white, blue-sparking metal slams against a wall, and falls to the ground, a mangled and twisted robotic leg. Everyone but Coran stumbles back. Coran keeps his even pace and swings around the doorframe, sighing slightly.

There are approximately five robots, all messily disassembled and scattered along the edges of the room. There are two more in action, and the bright-dark-red blur of Allura, white bodysuit and white fangs and white hair, and dark skin and dark emotions and dark snarl and red markings with red scratches and red edged blades.

Her daggers rend into the neck of one of the remaining robots and she flips away as it collapses, landing low to the ground, feral and nearly familiar. The few locks of hair that came loose from her high crown of hair stick out in dangerous points, perked up and sharpened at the tip.

“End training sequence, override signature: Wayfarer,” Coran calls out. The scattered robot parts and the two largely intact gladiators sink into the floor, turning into electric blue light as they fall into the ground.

Allura, her final adversary gone before its defeat, hisses and turns in a rapid and dangerous movement toward them. Her Marks glow their vibrant blood-in-water, pink and red and dangerous, and her eyes and slit through with dark purple, crossing over the blue and nearly overtaking it.

She lunges.
Keith moves.

He doesn’t think, doesn’t even notice the way that Shiro flinches behind him, nor the bright flash his arm emits for the smallest of moments, bright purple and twining through the air like a supernova in a second. He just moves.

The bayard in his hands glows, meeting a red-hazed dagger with a scarlet mass of energy, sharp teeth gnashing in unison. His hands crawl with little silver points and he silently wishes he hadn’t left his dagger behind with the things that make him human, that he could have that extra edge of security in steel and runestone.

Allura holds his blade in a lock with one of her daggers, but flips the other around, wielding it like it his birthright more than a crown, claws between her fingers and fangs for teeth, red light and bloody determination painting her high cheekbones in feral shades of moral gray, war paint smeared messily in the pink-red height of her Marks, cutting down with the grace of a lightning strike. She wields War like it is hers, but Keith lives with and for Conflict, every day of his life. She can stand, with a crown on her head and a cold look on her face, she may be Conquest, but one must fight the War before they may Conquer.

Something rises within him, Eris or the well of power in his chest, the spreading veins of light-

It is over in a second.

A flash of blue and orange, of white and tan, and Allura's eyes go blank.

Coran stands behind her, one hand on her shoulder, the other wrapping behind her neck, where her suit lets the nape of her neck meet the open air. Deftly, and very carefully, Coran snatches the claws from his Queen's hand and swipes one of her loose locks of hair, now completely limp, behind her ear.

Keith's bayard goes inactive as the fight drains from him too. Eris appears suddenly at the front of his mind, ushering all the silent screams back into their corrals, sweeping her tail back and forth in amused irritation. Messy, kit. Her voice fades as she keeps speaking, just not to him, Some
forewarning would have been nice, jackass. I can't keep...

Allura's eyes regain awareness from the deadness as Coran removes the light pressure of a few fingertips from the back of her neck. They're the blue and purple they were when they first arrive, the blue overtaking the rest.

“I understand the temptation, Makkesh, but going feral doesn't have many positive benefits off the battlefield,” Coran says wryly, “and while we can unmaim a Paladin or two, it's deeply uncomfortable for anyone to undergo. Endeavor not to kill anyone but the enemy, preferably.”


“Motherfucker,” Pidge states.

Shiro looks goddamn terrified. He works his jaw for a few seconds, unwinding it from where it was stuck, wired shut with the weight of fear, before finally speaking, “You good, Keith?”

Keith very quietly and carefully eases the bayard back onto the leg clip and runs a quick hand to swipe over the unnaturally smooth surface. “...Yeah,” Keith says, after a long pause, “I think so.”

Allura reaches back to her battle-suit, trying to tug the material back up again futilely and sighing when it refuses to budge from the highest vertebrae of her spine. “Apologies,” she whispers, “a thousand times, apologies.”

Keith nods, stepping back and to the right of Shiro, a silent presence painted in scarlet and the same ink as a declaration of war. He makes eye contact with Allura, silver-blue-purple meeting steel and both narrowing. The fire within roars back to life, unbanked and unchecked and snarling.

Lions pacing in a cage, hungry and vicious and deadly, staring each other down as the world almost seems to fall away for that one singular moment, where eyes narrow and heads toss back to display a mane, to show a throat and say *I am not afraid, I have bled before,* to pull back a lip in a snarl and keep the almost physical bond of eye contact between the two.

Keith is a Lion, the same as Allura, the same as the abbreviated rainbow around him, tense with energy and fear.
Allura looks away first, looking toward Coran and shifting her weight back, her shoulders losing their high, thrown back, prideful stance, head dropping a bit in a surrender, Coran started talking in the middle of the stare-down, when all that mattered was the fire and steel meeting invisibly and storming through the air, filling it with a gust of ozone and petrichor, and now Keith doesn't remember anything he previously discussed.

“-ere's too many variables involved in that,” Coran continued from the blank void, “We'll stick with low-level gladiator combat while your bodies and quintessence become accustomed to the presence of your Lions. Some surface level psychic contact wouldn't go amiss either, but it can wait if necessary.”

Aaaaanddd....- there he goes, walking away and very carefully tapping Allura on the wrist to signal her to follow him, leaving Keith with absolutely no clue what they're doing now.

Keith takes a second to just glance around, to take in the four others around him. Shiro is definitely there physically, but he stands bizarrely still and unmoving, hands frozen in half-claws by his sides, and Keith knows, in that moment, that Shiro is not mentally present. Hunk and Pidge stand close together, with Hunk nervously running his hands over the bayard that's almost dwarfed by his hands, and with Pidge studying the designs on the side, digging into the invisible seams that separate black from white and green. Lance is on his left side, directly in his blindspot, bayard still transformed as a rifle, but held loosely and slowly being dropped back to his side. As Keith makes eye contact, Lance stiffens slightly before relaxing again and shoving his chin into the air with a pointed confidence that feels distant and faked, bayard dissolving back into its base form.

Very slowly and stealthily, Keith sneaks backward until he's a foot away from Lance. “What are we doing again?” Keith whispers out of the corner of his mouth, fingers tapping out an uneven beat against his own bayard.


“What, do you need your food pre-chewed too?”

That remark actually gets Keith a glare from Lance, his eyebrows drawing down and together in frustration. “I just didn't sign up for a space war, samurai,” Lance spits out, all quiet venom, “Maybe you're all fine with going toe to toe with aliens very much ready to kill you, but I'm not. I wanted to fly in space, not murder people via spaceships and magic space guns.”
Keith stays silent this time and looks away. Stares forward into the empty space, fingernails ticking out dashes and dots like morse code in a blender. He really has to break his staring habit before he pisses Lance off completely, even before he opens his stupid mouth.

“Prepare yourself, Paladins,” Coran speaks over a crystal clear intercom, “we'll keep it low but your combat capabilities may not work well with our technology.”

The ceiling opens, and down comes a knight, clicking with clockwork gears and wreathed in purity and kindness and loyalty, ready to make war.

Five weapons activate in their abbreviated rainbow, and five Lions roar.

- 

On the eve of Creation, the Void split to allow its children into its own uncertainty. They all walked forward, and saw the Abyss that the Void could not conquer, and thought it would be a great task indeed to remake it. One to please their Parent.

Kalfé was the first to step forward and make a vine, green and healthy, twining across the great chasm and fastening itself where their parent began. Kalfé laid the groundwork, gave a net and base to work off of, carefully structured.

Vakyr smiled at the vines and walked fearlessly among them, shaping them and growing them gnarled and twisted within one another, completely and irrevocably intertwined.

Mikora came then, and weaved their Parent’s shadows over the net, grounding it until the end of existence.

Then came Faevro, burdened with knowledge, and set it into the roots. Set a heartbeat to the universe in soft ticks, in the gentle hum and drone of his chanting as he gave the starways his gifts.

Seltaix laughed and made life. A being sprung and entered the lightless void and searched for something to make into chaos.
Arkien stood before Seltaix and took the hand of this new creation, gifting it with thought and meaning, a conscience and a sense of empathy.

Meister took the roots and sculpted them up, into vast trees containing countless worlds, flocking with spirits yet to be made.

Luxis set foot among the creations of the Void’s children and gave life, gave spirits and color and the bright beginnings of hope.

They made the universe, spreading from their footfalls in a thousand world trees, a million arcing paths with a beginning, a path, and an end, and the beings to walk them with war in their hearts and thoughts in their minds.

So then they made gods.

She places the scale bound manuscript back onto the shelf it normally resides on, dustless in the vacuum of space. It slides into place without a sound and leaves the smell of real parchment in the air, the scent of ancient texts sparking through the vents of their own technological behemoth.

She has never cared much for tales, but her eldest and most precious sibling consumes himself within ink, an ouroboros of thought and burning glyphs etched long ago into the medium of the ancestors. She listened to him speak many times before, and knows the rest of the tale, of the joy of creation, the choices made, and the return of the Void’s most favorite child without xer own consent. He spoke it to her until his lips were cracked and dried and his voice stumbled over words, kept the Epic resonating through the air and bouncing through the shell that guards them from meeting the true Parent of all.

She has never cared much for tales, but her older brother is falling away, is getting distant and tired and cold, and she cannot stand it. She will memorize the Fallen Epic if she has to, to get him to look at her again.

The bay windows in the hallway between their quarters and their communal room is massive, allowing an uninterrupted view out to the maddening stars, stuck in twisted orbits. They are close to one system in particular, a blue-giant-red-dwarf binary system that is doomed to go supernova in a few decaphoebs and obliterate the primal, resource rich planets in orbit. The Empire never
bothered to conquer them, with the limited time stamp and the resources it would require.

From this far celestial orbit, with the tint on the windows to allow for astral viewing, the stars are blue and red, the glowing deserts burning gold and oceans are a rich purple, even this far away from them, framed by the black abyss of space. She remembers when she first looked at her oldest brother, at her savior from the sands, and truly saw him. She had just killed her first being, had warm blood on her cold and nerveless fingers, and she met his eyes.

She doesn't remember much about her childhood, but there are a few details she knows, that she carried with her into the slave camp he found her in. The royal colors were red and black and gold, were high and mighty and the hue of the godsworn, of hard won kindness through trials, of light made amid darkness. He was painted in that blood, the gold of the unkind and the black of the misfortunate sinners that held them all captive, scarlet dripping down from his chin and painting his blade in gorgeous sin, in combat and war.

He saved her, wreathed in the colors of royalty, and she wished in that moment that she had a crown, knelt before him after collapsing to her knees, her horns shivering at the side of her head.

For his blood, for that which he shed, for the death made in harsh starlight and wrought by both of their hands, she loved him as a packmate. For his care and soft gentleness, even after the Pits made him into a monster of a different kind, she loves him as a brother.

Truly, he is royalty, and they are his most loyal Generals.

The ship corrects course and the bay windows leave the planets and stars, leaves the colors of her brother behind. She leaves with them, entering into the common room where her three other sisters sit, two of them bent and twisted into donuts, intertwined on top of one another while their third does push-ups with them on her back.

Her eldest sister perches at the top of the pile, her tail twining together and unnaturally flexible body craned up, allowing the scars on her throat that stole her voice to be perfectly visible. She was taken from a planet that was not cruel, but was corrupt. Used for medical experimentation, brother had found her and taken her from hell and certain death for the cost of her already mutilated eyes and missing voice, for the toll of a packmate.

Her older sister supports the eldest, nearly naked and wearing the old tokens of her office. It was a bad day, then, when her older sister had to remind herself that her body was her own again. She ran the brothel brother freed her from for several long decaphoebs, with her girls given freedom and a knife within arm's length. This sister and mother-of-shadows hadn't killed for him like the one he
claimed from whips and desert sand, but she did hide the bodies.

The youngest of their pack is at the bottom of their pyramid, with thick muscles made for show, a lion in the gladiator Pits. She was the last and most costly addition to their pack, the final puzzle piece forged in blood and grit, in grief and loneliness. She follows brother without hesitation, with his old title in mind in the same way she keeps her old favor-collar in the back of her closet.

They were all saved from brother's own familiar hells, and they will always be thankful for that.

Sister, greets her eldest sister, we were just waiting for you. Brother wants us to meet for our next stunt.

“It's bound to be interesting,” the mother-of-shadows cuts in, acerbic yet bubbly, “I hear we're still trying to get the witch to kill us all, so I suppose it's going to be a very exciting endeavor.”

Their youngest sister slowly rises, leaving the two older siblings to untangle and move themselves to cling to her arms. The oldest unfolds down to the ground, heavy tail supporting her weight before she allows her feet to make feather light contact against the thick, plated flooring. Shadow-mother sticks her tongue out at the youngest and stretches backwards with her thighs tightly squeezed around the arm of the youngest, tipping backward to grab a silk robe stained in rainbow colors and sling it on before gently hopping down.

“We shouldn't keep him waiting,” the daughter of the desert says, and they stand shoulder to shoulder as they make their way to the main cockpit of their gifted monstrosity. It is a dark place, lit by purple fluorescents and bright data screens, all orbiting a central figure in full armor, long hair pulled up in a hasty updo, held in place with a few poisoned needles that are typically found in the possession of the oldest sister.

Purple plays across sharp cheekbones grown sharper through war, like blades in the sky and darkness in oblivion. Eyes the same as the daughter of desert's search through the charts and sound frequencies, a hunger in them impossible to feed. His gloves are clipped tight and held down meticulously, not allowing any edge of self to escape, sharp taloned claws on the ends glowing purple as the swipes down a hologram with an angry swipe, turning to face them and clearing the displays in his path with a sweep of his hand.

“We have an issue,” he states plainly.
“What kind of issue?” The youngest, forged in the Pits, Zethrid, has never been very good with flowery words.

“I’d hazard a guess and say it has something to do with Altea.” The shadow-mother nods sharply to the flowing war-script decorating the holograms, tendril bouncing with the gesture as a smirk curls over Ezor’s features, ready for war.

*Something, indeed.* Narti speaks and everyone can hear her, their silent and most merciful killer.

“What do you need?” The daughter of the desert has felt pain and blood, and Acxa wants to see her oldest brother in the colors of royalty, in the colors of a massacre, all over again.

He turns out, a grateful smile curling over his face, a fond and still pleasantly surprised look. Even after all of this time, after all of their loyalty and unceasing faith, he still seems to not believe that there are people that care for him. The stars before beckon him, and he swipes a hand, clenching it and bringing one display to present over their viewscreen, blinding the stars.

There are numbers, corrupted coordinates and messy transcripts, writing in the Galran and Altean alphabet, and a damning image caught right before destruction reigned.

Black and red and green and blue and yellow, impassive and cold and glowing purple in the light of the hologram.

For a second, all of these Generals freeze and stare up at the imposing image, an avenging angel ready to strike. But only for a second, for then they are looking to the back of their brother, of the man who saved them and gave them the keys to their kingdoms and a rock to break shackles with.

Some call him a disease, a plague upon the Empire and the Royal Family. Others call him the Deathless Child, a grim portent of their own future come back to take them into the Void. More than anything else, though, he hungers. For glory, for war, for death, yes he is a plague, but a plague of locusts come to eat all and destroy all.

“I’m going to need your faith,” he says, measured and confident, “your loyalty, and your determination.”

They don’t even need to reply. He knows that they give it to him freely already.
He turns, and there is the ghost of blood in his teeth, a rainbow and a massacre of the monsters that lurk in the between-void.

“We'll be hunting Voltron,” Lotor says, “And then we'll kill the Empire with its own worst enemy.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess who didn't even proofread this? It's ya boi. Booyah. Enjoy this hell carcass, and good luck to everyone during this trying academic time.

For more probably going to be overwritten details on the revised backstory for Lotor and his Generals I have another fanfic in this fandom that I am basing pretty much everything off of because though sad bitch canon Lotor has some potential and I could do something fun for the generals, I wanted to write some more of whatever bullshit I had before. Enjoy it, or whatever.

I am very tired. I am also very much not looking this thing over again.

Oh yeah, I want to try to work in some more religious backstory into this because I've made up a whole religious system that justifies all of these changes I've made and I'm going to explain it if it kills me.

Season 8 was a season, technically. I've seen enough cursed posts about the potential ending to be largely okay with whatever the hell that was. I'm largely trying to avoid negativity about everything because of shitty brain chemistry so I'm not that into discourse rn. I built my own hill back during season 2, and I'm going to die here.

See y'all in the next year (most likely, who knows, maybe the writing gremlins will arrive)
Coran watches the paladins with a sense of anonymous unease slowly entering his veins. They are clumsy, yes, and all of them frequently stumble over having multiple people fighting with them, but not one of them have been seriously injured and they independently discovered their shields without much prompting. They remind him too much of

They move more like an Altean Unit back before the Joining of Daibazaal and Altea, a chaos only contained within an unspoken range, separate beings in a loose alliance of thought. The updated version, Altean Legion, based on the pack instincts of the Galra, will have to be drilled into them, where individuality is abandoned for the sake of battle. They can learn, though. Coran has faith in them.

Shiro is the most openly competent of the five, with a reckless and quick style that gives him far too many openings but takes down whatever gladiator he faces with brutal efficiency. His metal arm lights up and changes itself on his command, little sigil lines streaking down to sharpen his fingertips, the whole thing lighting up a deep and angry purple with barely any white center to plunge straight through the thing, wreathing itself in poisonous energy and turning its function into an energy blade. It's an impressive feat of engineering, and Coran feels all the worse for knowing that. It's an impressive mechanical marvel in the hands of the enemy.

Close behind him – both literally and in combat prowess – is Keith. He wields Merial's bayard with an eerie competence that leaves ghostly afterimages floating after him. He clashed with Allura, the closest thing he has to a daughter his queen and for a few seconds, he almost seemed to have marks as violent as Merial's line. He shows the same instincts here, hunting behind Shiro and guarding him from his own single-minded focus. He tears himself away when necessary, blocks shots meant for the others when he needs to, making tight circles of movement and orbiting around the others interchangeably, seamlessly. He shows good potential to pick up the Legion style quickly, but he is still hyperfocused and disconnected, with a tendency to overreach and spend too much time fully hacking apart his opponents.

Lance comes in third, but with a wider margin. He has excellent aim, which is very impressive given the structure and number of his eyes. His bayard is the only one in the fight that is actively changing styles, from a longer, more accurate rifle to a handgun with a less accurate and less powerful shot. He wields it expertly, getting in headshots to a few gladiators engaged in combat with either Keith or Shiro. The second a gladiator got too close to comfortably wield any of his weapons, he fumbled. He dodged out of the way ungracefully and barely avoided colliding with
Keith, demonstrating a tendency to panic and a lack of skill in close combat.

The other two largely match each other when it comes to combat. Pidge takes their height into account and now uses the forms of the other Paladins to sneak around to the back of any gladiators and sever important wires with precision, melting back into the mass of the other Paladins quickly. They're flighty and quick, every one of their movements made with swift, birdlike precision, green energy following their dagger form of bayard like tail feathers. They're a stealth operative, not like Sekhet, but still oh so familiar. Hunk is the pillar they all rotate around, the star to their formation, unknowingly setting their instinctive boundaries. His bayard hasn't budged from its miniature cannon form, despite it being wildly unwieldy in a fight like this. Hunk uses it to provide covering fire and calls out the occasional warning to his teammates. He's getting the most use out of his shield.

His notes taken, Coran glances over at Allura. Her hands fiddle with the pin in her hair and she looks out at the Paladins with a detached hurt that looks incredibly familiar but distant to him in the same way that his parent's faces might if he even had a picture. She glances up at him, a stray strand of hair spiking up at the sudden weight of attention before the understanding of it being Coran clears her head, edging her eyes with brown for a few precious seconds.

“Any stand-outs?” Coran asks, half-playful, half-serious. Allura is the Queen of Altea, and she stands in the Castle she and her bloodline have held since the beginning of the monarchy. Not genetic bloodline, no, but her ancestors shed the blood of a previous ruler in a ritual duel, as that previous ruler had before. Blood is important in a rite of succession, whether it be spilt before the gods or run through one's own veins, and scarlet had always been a favorable color to mark one's cheeks with.

Allura reaches her palm out against the glass, then raises it up until only her pointer finger remains in contact with the glass, pointing directly at the Paladin with a red ghost in his wake. They both watch as he pounces forward, a silent snarl on his face, crackling red energy painting the right side of his face, before bisecting another gladiator and disconnecting all of its limbs, leaving it behind to melt into the floor and be repurposed and repaired.

“He fights like they did,” Allura says, finger slowly falling down the glass and returning back to her side in an open palm, “All cruel victory and certainty.”

“Yes,” Coran agrees, without hesitance, because it's true, “He fights like a Galran soldier, doesn't he?”

Allura says nothing for quite a while, tracking the bolts of energy, cobalt and gold, electric blue, flying through the air. Red, purple, and green cut through the air in bright arcs, leaving afterimages imprinted in the air before fizzling out.
The Paladins are tiring and losing speed, almost getting nicked a few times, when Allura finally speaks again. “He fights like my mother, too.”

“They all fight like those that had the mantles before them,” Coran responds, a heavy weight in his chest as he watches them rally in the center of the room in a defensive ring, “There’s a reason the Lions chose them.”

“Maybe they should have chosen with different criteria. Maybe they should have chosen differently.” There is a void of bitterness in her voice, as if Allura forgot to include the most key ingredient into her criticism. She just sounds tired, now.

Below, the Paladins make their final stand, finally being overwhelmed by the endless and quickening stream of gladiators entering the arena. Coran cuts off the exercise before anyone can get injured, and says nothing to his Queen as he logs the time into the system and makes his way back to the training room floor.

Shiro is slowly deactivating his arm as it becomes apparent the exercise has ended, the others still a bit warier of the circumstances with their bayards active. When Coran enters into their previous bubble of combat, however, hands clasped behind his back and pleasant smile pasted on, they take it as their cue and let the vibrant energy dissipate from their weaponry. “Excellent work, given how new most of you are to combat.” Coran praises, tilting forward and back on his heels, “It's always good to have a baseline for any further drills. I'm sure you're looking forward to some more time to bond with your Lions, so we're skipping the spars and going straight to the Circlets.”

Coran taps his foot and concentrates, twining what he has of his quintessence supplies into a request for the Castle to process, imprinting it with even more of his signature as the Castle's designated Wayfinder. As his quintessence mixes with the Castle's and the Circlets appear in a semicircle in front of him from bright pools of light, Coran is struck with a hint of unease. Something doesn't feel right, something doesn't-

Something feels like it is about to go horribly wrong. Something else feels like it's gathering itself for something worse.

But Coran isn't a Prophet, and he doesn't know anything of the future. He could never hope to get quintessence supplies large enough to bend time to his will. Maybe it's animal instinct, honed and gathered together, and he's quite sure that it's wrong.
After all, what's the worst that could happen with some light psychic greetings?

Haggar twists her wrists in nervous circles, nails slashing through the air angrily. The Druids around her stand respectfully by the wall, most bowing deeply, others using their own native gestures of respect, very cautiously pressed far away from her own figure, tense and tight and sharp.

“The Rebels have formed Voltron.” It’s a question, but she lacks enough inflection to make it anything other than a statement in her quiet, bubbling rage.

“Y-e-s,” The sentry that brought her the news frizzes out, staticky voice making the word annoyingly loud, annoyingly sharp, annoyingly correct.

When her nails cut through the air this time the gesture burns black rends into the air, bubbling with malice. Burns stretched over reality, held hovering and jagged before fading away. If possible, her Druids edge even closer to the walls, away from the blazing heat of her quintessence against their senses.

She turns, achingly slow, and the sentry’s mechanical limbs lock up in the same way. On an actual being, it would be a slow, creeping stiff terror that eased over their joints in tandem with her movements, until she was face to face with them and they were frozen in place as her eyes bored within them and left agony in the aftermath of her gaze. It’s instantaneous for the sentry, and she already knows that it won’t be quite as satisfying with a mechanical being, but there’s a bitter pain within that must be satisfied, a few snakes and gnarled trees within her soul that must be fed with prey, roots watered with blood or oil.

She makes no movement for a long time, still and silent and cold. The lights on the sentry’s helmet begin flickering uneasily, unsteadily, joints quaking as she impresses her will alone onto its body, brutal and crushing, with no finesse. Haggar is not graceful in her violence. Not like the cloned child of the Emperor, with hatred in his eyes and a path of blood trailing him artfully and purposefully. Her leviathans are tamed, while his were-

The sentry croaks a broken sound out from a damaged audio generator, and Haggar curls a lip, sharp canines on full display. Bright scarlet flares, in her mind, on her cheeks, in the air. There are no gestures to put this useless scrap of metal out of its misery. Black tendrils emerge from behind her, from the shadows she emits as her mind descends, and strike straight through the sentry, breaking delicate machinery and sparking amethyst electricity over the tips of the hungry creatures.
she claims, acts host to.

She closes her eyes.

A brutal crunch sounds, echoing through the air, a sickening grinding noise and a hair raising screeching keen. She hates the noises, hates the way nothing ever dies silently, voided and tired from the weight of her righteous task. She must kill them, as was ordained, and yet they still say that her gospel is false, that this is not her burden, is no one’s burden. They will die all the same.

It is ordained.

Yet still, the masses scream from her scripture and do not go quietly to the halls of their deities, into the Void, into Rebirth. They shrink away from her touch, which heals what it needs to destroy, from the blindness she can give them and the bloodied crosses she places them upon.

She opens her eyes.

The sentry is gone entirely, the dark tendrils snaking back into her being full of starlight energy and bitter metal. She has eaten it alive and still feels empty and dissatisfied. The snakes curiously taste the air near where her Druids are pressed, lunging and only barely missing one in a tattered shawl brought from the ruins of his planet, ensconced in the energy of a billion lives, the tang of it irresistible to the creatures she has given her best to tame.

She pulls the leviathans back by the collar, by the invisible leash, leaving their teeth inches away from his throat. He has been inefficient lately, he just needs a reminder once in a while, that he is far from superior to her, far from being in charge.

The shadows around her disperse quickly and easily with the reversal of the hunt. Quickly, the Druids come to kneel, pushing away from the wall quickly but only slightly, remaining close to their feigned safety. “Come along, my children,” Haggar whispers, echoing in the room, “the Emperor will require his weapon earlier than expected.”

Her palms itch, and her Marks ache.

There is an emptiness in her skull that she fills with rage, and smiles.
“Damage report,” Sendak rasps. He knows it will not be good. Voltron broke the damn ship in half while in the vacuum of space and left it to succumb to the gravitational pull of this Empire-damned planet. What an ugly place it is, too, all bright green and sharp mountain spires not quite blocking out the distant spires of Altean architecture.

“Well, half of the ship isn't with us, but you knew that,” Haxus reports, with that edge of sarcasm that none of his other officers could have gotten away with, “From the life signs on the half still here, we appear to be the only living crew members, though I cannot account for the sentries still active.”

Sendak smiles grimly, that special edge of insanity now that only one of his pack is alive creeping into it. “The few must annihilate the many,” Sendak whispers, “Vrepit for those that stick the course, the Void for those that do not. What do we know of the rebel base?”

Haxus smiles similarly, pressing a palm to a sparking control panel to leverage himself higher up, knuckles rapping sharply against groaning wall panels in an attempt to give it a restart they both know won't come. “The mountain range and non-operational scanners make it hard to gather many details, but neither Voltron-” the word spoken with the venom it deserves, “-or any rebels have come to check on survivors.” Haxus wrinkles his nose and gestures loosely to the two of them, drawling, “Rightfully so.”

“What is your opinion on how best to take down the base?”

“Nonexistent,” Haxus says nonchalantly, picking up a deactivated drone from the ground, “I haven't the faintest clue how, and I won't until I get close enough to appropriate their weaknesses as our strengths.”

“So we're going to walk over a mountain range alone, with no back up, sneak into the rebel base that is undoubtedly packed with rebels at the arrival of Voltron, and just wing it from there?” Sendak snarls at Haxus, who doesn't budge in the slightest as he runs his fingers over the etching in the drone's casing, “Answer me!”

Haxus looks up calmly and tilts his head back as he rummages in the pouches on his uniform, holding the drone by one pointy tip. “Yes, we are, sir,” Haxus responds, “or do you have a better suggestion? Please, do enlighten me. Victory or death, commander, and we've both lost our chance to go down with this particular ship.” On each of his last words, Haxus moves closer, grip getting tighter on the sharp edges of the drone.
“We will both die.”

“For the Empire, then! For all the packmates we lost, I think it's time we had some *poetic* retribution.” From his pocket, Haxus pulls out a vial of dark, almost black quintessence, tinted slightly red within the darkened purple. “Did you ever hear the story of what the old Altean god of love did to his enemies?”

Sendak watches, wary, the stump of his arm aching slightly in the presence of the poisonous, concentrated quintessence. “No...” he hazards, after a long pause from Haxus indicates he's actually waiting for an answer.

Haxus smiles again, all teeth, and Sendak would feel threatened if there wasn't a pack pond stretching between the two of them. “Good,” he hisses, “Let's hope they haven't either.” He uncorks the vial and spills it into the channels of the drone, careful to avoid any splashing over his skin or clothing as it deepens the grooves carved, turning the drone on in a haze of violet and violence and crackling lightning.

It comes active with scripture in its code.

Haxus smiles as it floats, using his elbow to shatter the last of the viewscreen and allow them both to step outside of the fallen ship. He dips his hand into the pockets again, and comes up with two other vials, both glowing a malevolent gold.

“May the few persist,” Sendak says as the blue star rises, “*Vrepit sa.*”

The star rises, and the grim specter of death follows.
That Which We Call A Rose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The device is a pretty thing.

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There is a blankness in the middle, a barren patch of shadows untouched by existence. An uncharted territory, a frontier of the mind none dare to cross. Darkness, stretching on and on and never ceasing, never stopping, consuming and consuming and eating life whole with its own blankness and oblivion. It demands submission and reforges the pieces that rebel.

It holds an understanding within it, of the beings it must consume and obliterate, enough to dig claws within their minds and tug functions out of order, to wage war within the most sacred of places. It knows death intimately, has almost experienced and directly caused many, and from there comes power and mastery.

It is an emptiness and a crucible.

- 

The silver makes an itching spread across cheekbones.

- 

A ring of fire and smoke, silver and red and beautiful, surrounds the center, blazing and harsh but gorgeous all the same. It feels holy, feels purifying and sacred, purging sin and emblazoning damned rites on bone in ash and agony. One must pass through it to reach the end, to reach where all ends in sharp and mighty glory, dying sharply and savagely.

It holds scripture within its own flames, burnt and lost forever to itself, carrying hymns on its own ashes and painting rituals in soot, the guiding candlelight to the rites of old. It reaches out with hungry tongues of flame and burns, claws with sharp red and kills with heady life sparking across the flickering light.
It is the sentencing and the event horizon.

The metal sparks electricity in familiar paths.

From the ground, from roots that made the universe whole, trees sprout in a grove, young and ancient, creaking with new growth and with destroying age. In the air, demons fly, hungering for blood and metal and for the skies to fall before them in worship. It steals from the mind, takes the most ingrained certainties from the deepest citadels of the mind as its own.

It roots itself in lightning quick connections, in the ordered roots of circuit boards and takes control without hesitation and without mercy, for all things belong to the trees. It roosts in the mind and takes what it requires as its due, cold and impersonal, pilfering what it needs and carrying them back as shiny treasures to the nest.

It is birdsong and destruction.

The circlet is cold against skin.

In the surge, there is something ineffable lurking. Deep and indescribable, it is the ocean and the monsters in the darkness beneath. It measures sinners and saints and finds both lacking, it demands a revolution, a transformation, a change. One must cross the tide, trace a path between the waves and make their own way to avoid the beast, the travel giving them a sentence.

The waves are one being, and so is the monster that they are, anywhere they go, there they will
remain within themselves, forever everywhere and capable of riding their own current. It is one within itself, and it can take anything crossing the surf and make it one with another, one with itself.

It is the trial and the odyssey.

- It is a comforting burden to bear.

- At the outermost ring, there is a cave littered with moss and bathed in sunlight. It evokes a gateway to the underworld, down to Erebus and into the comforting grasp of death, and yet it feels open anyway, a place to whisper thoughts into the cracks of the boulders, to allow emotion into the air and sink within the stone. It feels like a home and a final resting place.

It holds the whirls of emotion within sandstone rocks, layers upon layers, knowing each and holding each down carefully, grounding them within stone and keeping them close to shelter. It speaks to to the spirits within itself, and knows those that live and die as its own, to have and to hold, to love and cherish and care for.

It is a beginning and an end.

- It meets and makes itself. The abyss, the flame, the forest, the ocean, and the cave. It is a nothingness and a destruction, a flock and a beast and a mountain. It is dark and fiery and massive and has seen many things and forgotten most of them as a singular and a multitude.

It has no name. There is no name, there are too many facets matched up between them in a tangle and too many sharp, unmatched edges to give it any name known to itself.

There is an endless space and nothing between itself, a wide gap and many beings residing within
one skin. Somehow, there is not enough of itself, gaps left in the void and in the intersection of existence, painfully bare and painfully aware of itself. Three creatures missing from the nest, from the den, from the hearth.

In the liminal distance, a tree rains flowers in the colors of blood and love, a canopy spread out over the horizon. The blooms caress softly over skin with thorns hidden, ready to maim without hesitation in the face of danger, keeping poison within. Beauty keeping pain within itself, ready to be inflicted upon those that dare use them.

It is rooted within the ground, deep and irreversible as if it were made to live forever, and so it keeps life within its limbs, ready to give sparingly to those it claims possession of. It is soft and graceful against the skin if one does not seek to harm it, and it will calm worries but draw blood of any that attempt to manipulate it.

It is the crown and the thorns.

In the fog, there is a torch held high, bleeding light into the air and chasing away shadows, burning away the fog. It calls beasts to its light, making them flock and gather and stare out curiously, sparks calling and begging as it illuminates the paths before. The paths stretch out, and behind loyal dogs wait at heels.

The torch calls all, moths to a flame, and through it compels them to listen to the wise one with a hand full of flame and light burning through the fog of mystery. The light stretches forth, and so the torch sees the roads stretching forth, the stepping stones one must take and avoid, the future imbedded into rock and hidden by mist.

It is howls and revelation.

Far away, where not even the stars dare to shine, there is-
Well.

It is the executioner and the bloodlust.

-  

It waits for the others to come, but they grow no closer, and so the nameless one rises, and with it come sparks and sound and cresting waves through rock and darkness. Its form coalesces and grows until it stands on two legs and has two arms to either side, a head pointed to the sky in a defiance that does not belong to it yet. It has kindness and loyalty and ingenuity and has come to wage ferocious war against those misfortunate enough to face down- whatever they are.

The many sons and daughters it will be churn beneath its skin, and it is too hot and too cold and there are not enough adjectives any language could make to define it, with its multitudes forced into one. It wants to burn and drown and suffocate it all, crush it and choke it alive. It wants it all to live too, wants to sate thirst and warm skin and shade from the blinding sun, provide tools and give protection to those beneath the boughs.

Will it be Contradiction? No, that is not its name. It is not a contradiction, it does not go back on its word and it kills with savage truth, with brutal honesty. It is not complete either, does not deserve the name that comes blazing into its mind with unerring certainty.

What's in a name?

Identity itself is a rough draft, a place where one has touched onto their own being far too closely, become an isolated legion and acquired a name. It must be molded, must be shaped by others and create itself further. An identity without a history is an empty being. Even deities had to shape themselves, it is true ignorance to believe mortals will not need to evolve themselves.

There is no identity, not yet. It is newborn to this world, even with all of its youthful experience and elements battling each other to coexist peacefully. It has a unique choice, though. To choose a name, to choose its own identity as a being made of five instead of eight, unshaded and made perfect.
Hello, it speaks to itself, and it answers with another greeting. My name is...

Choices to be made. The past creeping in, shut out behind towering spires of gray metal arranged to protect and shield.

Hello, I am freedom, and my name is-

On the throne there is a suit of armor that feels empty. It is not, obviously, but it is a void with tree roots struck through, drinking from the redacted being for whatever scraps of life remain so the poisoned trees can grow to die. It is not a lovely sight, is not poetic or fascinating, instead it inspires this slack-jawed disbelief and disgust, and a spine-chilling sensation of fear.

Zarkon prefers it that way. He does not care for beauty, he lost his appreciation for it many deaths ago. It holds no weight anymore, a weakness that must be culled and taken away in favor of brutality and fear, the best way to remind others of their own fragile mortalities. He has no care for such things, he has not been afraid or particularly reminded of his own mortality, as he doesn't seem to possess it, but it is an effective tool against others that would seek to name him a power-hungry madman. He does not hunger for power, he hungers for understanding.

Once upon a time, there was a prince that lived in a palace, and he loved a genius he had never met. She was Altean, and had gone to Oriande and learned its secrets like so many of her kind, but she sought more than that. She sought a purpose for herself, an understanding of every last atom the universe had to offer and every last deity that pressed life into the fabric of nothingness and created existence.

The prince adored her, though he did not show it for many years, sitting in the shadows of the throne that would be his and reading her papers to himself, marveling at her brilliance and capability. He could often be found in the library, similarly, reading every last book he could get his hands on until his head was stuffed with knowledge and he could understand and deconstruct every sentence she had ever made.
His mother died, and the crown became his. He clung to his scientist in that moment, to the knowledge she gave him, and found another pack, a tight knit five with colors knit deep within their bones. He flew with them, he fought with them, and he killed with them.

And for a while, he was Happy.

One day, a god named Caitius walked among life and observed them passively. They were funny creatures that populated the planets, and he found it so very fascinating how they would scatter among themselves and devise their own rulers, either by their so-called divine right or by election. It was adorable, truly, the way they resisted anarchy.

He had done his rounds many times before, he knew the paths he would walk, with sweet-smelling flowers trailing his wake, the ones that he, Festian, and Morais would take while the birds sang of prophesied peace. This day, however, his path was interrupted by one of the creatures’ divine rulers, who glared at him and said, “Bow, my subject. I have given you the favor of the deities by deigning to sit upon my throne, you must give me my due respect.”

Now, Caitius was a god who had never bowed to anyone, not his Parent, not the Void, and certainly no mortal. He wasn't about to start now. “My dear,” he spoke, careful to keep the divinity of his true form from shining through, “I bow to none, and most certainly not to you.” He pushed past the mortal and continued on his way, but that was when disaster struck. The Lord struck Caitius across the back of the head with a branch, and although it did not hurt him, it did anger him.

Before Caitius could follow through on his revenge and destroy the man, an idea struck him. For you see, Caitius had taken to enjoying the company of his sister, the trickster shape-changer Samtal, and had learned a few tales from her of her own exploits. More than anything, he learned that creatures don't learn from a silent death in the forest. No, they needed an audience to be shown to as an example, and from there it would take its natural course.

So, to teach this fool a lesson and ensure an incident of the sort would never happen again-

Caitius turned and dropped to one knee. “My Lord, my deepest apologies. I have heard of many that have taken your shape across these roads and taken the livelihood from your subjects, making them unable to serve you.” Now, Caitius was careful, as he wanted to see how long he could
prolong the man's suffering, and so he said, “Please, my Lord, allow me to serve you humbly in return for my grievous mistake.”

And, as the first fool to fall before the God of Love, the Lord said yes.

The king met the scientist in a blaze of glory, her with her eyes glittering with knowledge and untamed ambition, him with a crown on his head and devotion in his heart. She danced among him and his blood-sworn brethren with the grace of a fellow predator, claws carefully sheathed to avoid having them removed. She studied the Void, and it showed.

She introduced herself with musical vibrations in her voice, a cleverness belying her every gesture, motion, and sound. She was a calculated experience, a performance art of masterful control, and for this wild king with skin that ached to be covered in blood, hands wanting to take lives and write decrees, she was a beautiful opposite.

She looked at him with bright, intelligent eyes the color of kindness, Marks of ferocious, lucky love, and hair painted in pastel defiance and silver power. Nowhere on her was there the colors of the goddess of her fellows, as she cared little for praying to Doshye with any bit of her self.

And for a while, he was Happy.

Caitius followed the Lord back to his estate, submissive, and not in the coy way he sometimes appeared. For you see, he had a plan, and for that, he would have to play defeat, play dead and innocent. He would love nothing more than to burst from his skin and make massacre, but he was tired of open death, he was tired of the righteous way for all of his followers. They must learn a new way, he decided.

And for his followers, for his priests and preachers and harem whole, he would allow himself to be “broken”. It was time to take the mantle of his oldest brother, all black scales and dark vengeance. Proem may be the result, but Caitius would be the cause.

It took barely a fraction of his power to cause a distraction, and in the distraction, fold into the
crowd of the servants. The Lord, although untouched by Caitius' divinity, promptly forgot about the arrogant man who became his servant. It is the way of tyrants to forget they invited their undoing into their homes. The servants, whose minds were bent using skills he learned from his second youngest sister, Doshye, always had an inkling of wrongness about their newest member. It is the way of the downtrodden to recognize ambition, after all, even if hidden beneath stifled divinity.

And, as the first struck dumb by the God of Love, they let the beast within the birdcage.

The scientist fell for the king in a messy, inelegant tumble. She almost resented him for it, for forcing her to abandon her grace in the slow surrender of control as the attraction came, gravity slingering her into a binary orbit she didn't know existed. They both played at being each others' satellite, ignorant of the orbit of the one they thought they alone were circling.

Finally, when the scientist could not stand it any longer- she stewed within her own feelings and wrote a rather thoughtful, if scathing essay for the king, many pages long and full of bitterness at the assumed unrequited status of her feelings. She handed in her resignation letter with the essay and stormed back to her lab, far away from the king, to try to recover.

The king, meanwhile, was delighted. Not by the resignation letter, but by her writings and her emotions, lain bare. It was with a happy heart that he wrote a rebuttal, and included the engagement dagger of his people. She accepted, and shed his blood in a marriage ceremony.

And for a while, he was Happy.

Caitius began his insolence quietly, where no one would look. He would take from the kitchen, only little bits and pieces, hardly noticeable, but they would add up. A loaf of bread stolen over the course of a week, the same as a block of cheese. A small enough amount missing that no one would notice, an amount that no one cared to notice. From there, he expanded, to two loaves, then two blocks, to a bottle of wine, to pastries smuggled under noses.

Caitius taught the art of stealing to his followers through his actions as well, taking not enough to be noticeable, then starving the kitchens to death slowly, without them even noticing.
Caitius took for himself, mostly, but he would take care to leave a few crumbs in the shadows, a few pieces of cheese scattered in the corner. He left little behind, but what he did, he did for the vermin. The mice took his bounty eagerly, and they increased in size and strength and number, until they could eat through the storeroom locks and take what they had to. He dyed all of the clothing pink and knocked over vials in the physicians room.

In time, the kitchens were starving, the Lord's castle was overrun with hungry vermin, all of the finery was the sacred colors of Caitius, and the medicine was poison. The Lord called them all forth and threatened to punish them severely if they did not tell him the perpetrator. Caitius stepped forward and named a few of the servants that had been discourteous toward him, and they were led away as he was promoted into the Lord's forces.

And, as the first betrayed by the God of Love, they were killed while his power grew.

- 

Once upon a time, there was going to be a happy family. The king and scientist were overjoyed—they would finally have a child, the king would have an heir, and the kingdom would rejoice. There were preparations, naming ceremonies, rituals and festivals and so much love that the world almost burst for it.

But the scientist had not stopped in her research of the Void. She had not stopped her excavation of the Primordial Parent, and it poisoned her soul. The Void reached out, with tree root tendrils dipped in acid and creatures with fangs of venom and bit down, breaking skin, breaking soul, breaking womb, and breaking child. The Void humbled the scientist for her hubris.

When the time came for the birth to occur, there was the bated breath of the kingdom and the screaming, pained cries of a mother. There was anticipation and an empty cradle. The baby they would have named Lotor died not long after he was born, twisted by snakelike creatures.

And for a while, there was Grief.

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Caitius took to combat like a duck to a pool of blood. He had spent long times, after all, with Xera, learning the battlefield from her as her aspect shone through in blinding rays. He couldn't best her,
he could never hope to. She was violence, pure and simple, while Caitius was more insidious and cold-hearted. He is not a star in the way that she is, bright and strong and hot and vicious. He is more a child of the Primordial Parent, slow and consuming and destroying but capable of moving whip sharp and annihilating in a second. That is why he chose Seltaix. Discord is not a pattern, it is only pain.

He went to battlefields in the Lord's name and sabotaged everything he could on both sides, made weapons unusable and shields melt away into thin air, cut important lines and destroyed necessary machinery. He made opponents fall for one another in the heat of combat, turned a blind eye to those fleeing with those in opposing colors into the forests to make a new life, together.

Caitius took on his Parent's attributes quite kindly as battles raged and those that lived stumbled back home to the Lord's castle, in shambles and chaos still.

Eventually, there was a decisive victory despite Caitius' best efforts, and all of the soldiers were invited back for a feast. Caitius attended, and finally brought his plan to fruition. He had already destroyed the homefront, not that the homefront knew it, and the battlefields were all but lost.

And, as the first who wronged the God of Love, the Lord knew pain.

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The scientist was broken, and so was the king. They had both lost their ray of hope, their one good thing they had hoped to make together, and it crushed them. The scientist lost herself in her work, and the king lost himself in his war. He fought against a warlord who took joy in innocent suffering and killed him, at the price of some sanity.

The war ended and he came home to a silent castle, a silent crib, a silent wraith of a wife. It was an abrupt difference, from the heat of battle and destruction to the silence of his broken home. From the Sound to the Emptiness. The scientist could not have children anymore, the Void had destroyed her in that regard as well. Still, she sought to find answers, no matter the cost.

She found her answers, at the cost of her life, and the king could not stand it any longer, and so with those he called pack, he broke through the skies of Oriande and into the Void, to try to revive his wife. He died in the arms of the Primordial Parent, holding his wife in his arms.

And for a while, there was Grief.
It was the fifth course of the feast when Caitius decided he would be born the second time over. He rose from his seat and went to the throne, unoccupied as the Lord sat below at the head of the table, and sat upon it.

The Lord noticed immediately, as he was a prideful man that feared his power would leave him and had a hair trigger for such things, anyway. “Traitor,” he bellowed, standing and causing quite a ruckus, “remove yourself from my throne immediately, or you’ll be losing more than just your head!”

And Caitius, who had finally completed his task, laughed and laughed and laughed and stopped hiding his divinity. From him, light burst in appendages of broken glass with no pattern except to be contained within the shape of a bird wing, multicolored and gorgeous in an ineffably horrifying way. “Why, fool,” he sang out, and it shrieked against ears in the most pleasantly deafening tune one may ever hear, “My name is not Traitor! It is Caitius, and I have come to reap vengeance on you.”

The Lord collapsed, weeping and begging, and Caitius took control of him, placed himself within his body and drank the poisoned wine that Caitius had previously drunk from, infused with his divinity, burning the Lord alive from the inside out as the poison took care of the rest.

The onlookers watched in horror as their Lord collapsed and Caitius stepped over his corpse. “Let this be a lesson,” he decreed, “to any that dare assume themselves higher than a God. Love thy neighbor, and love me above all else.” Then he took flight, and left behind a corpse, a ruined feast, and a burning throne.

Caitius was never bothered on that path ever again.

And, as the first lesson of the God of Love, it is the one his followers conform to the most strictly.

The king awoke from death at the same time as a witch. She used to be a scientist, but she had forgotten it in Griemn’s cold hands, the cost of her reanimation. The king forgot all of the good of the world as his price, leaving behind only pain and the longing for the family he could no longer
have. He killed his own pack, broke their bonds and one of his brother's planets in return.

He could not love the witch the way of the scientist, but neither could he bring himself to kill her. She was a flawed reproduction made from the ashes of a perfect masterpiece, and he could not love the flaws, but he could not destroy the ashes. He tried to remake the child he could never have, cloned it from his DNA and the witch's quintessence, but the soul of it was Void-touched.

The being given the name Lotor was much the same as the farce of his mother. He was imperfect and sickening, but held the seeds of the loved creature, held the last good things. He would not die for the sin of his existence, the life he took from a better version of himself, but he would suffer for it.

And for a while, there was Emptiness.

- 

He thinks as he sits upon the throne, of those two greatest mistakes, the two things too close to the last lost remnants of love to destroy, but also too close to not punish. He could kill them too, could send the order and have them wiped off the face of the universe, try to make a better copy, but it would only leave the shell even emptier.

Zarkon is a vessel, he knows that much. An intended host for some creature, made and designed, perfectly balanced for destruction and pain. He chafes under the own order he has made, craves the chaos and the ending of life in scattershot pain and misery interspersed with lightning strikes of hope and happiness, ending in desolation.

Hope will die someday. He will kill it, if he must. Hope holds no place in the pantheon, holds no bearing upon him. His wife held no God high, only worshiped herself, and he held her belief strong. He will kill the Gods if he has to, just to see what will happen, how they scream.

And for a while, as the shell sits upon his throne, there is Sound.

- 

*Hello, I am the liberator, and my name is Paladin.*
I'm very sorry that this is incredibly incoherent. I have no one that looks at this thing and I'm feeling generally incoherent recently. I tossed a fuckton of symbolism and shit somewhere in the everywhere in this so be ready y'all. That is to say, if I go through with my full plan. This is your chapter reminder that I have no idea what I'm doing and have nothing written ahead.

Leave a comment if you're awesome because I am perpetually stressed for No Reason and i constantly seek that good good Validation.
Connection Success: Try Again?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The circlets are quite simple, really. White and blue, connective colors with connective energy, placed in a spherical net over the skull of the being, with one open end projecting to the center of the formation the connected individuals. They can help connect even those with minimal psychic energy, so they might even be slightly unnecessary, but for the least mental exertion, one must use the most open symbolism.

Allura taps her foot somewhat impatiently, watching and waiting for them to start forming the connection, for them to inevitably ask for more instructions, these battle novices and cold-hearted, innocent killers. They remain silent, however, eyes closed and stock still. Statues colored, with breath and beating hearts.

The back of her neck still aches, tingles uncomfortably, a constant reminder of the unfinished berserker state she never got to complete, a tightness that bunches up a select few muscles that loosen the rest, giving her a wrung out, uncomfortable sensation. She can't blame Coran, though, it wouldn't be great to immediately maim a paladin on his first training day.

“What do you see,” Coran encourages, “Are there colors? Do you hear any sounds? What impressions of each other can you gather?” None of the paladins even seem to react to his voice. Oh quiznack, did she break them? What weak mental constitution they must have, to fold so easily under the lightest strain. Still, not good, since they are currently the only defense the universe truly has.

“Paladins,” Allura orders, “report.”

They are statues for twenty long ticks. Then, in unison, almost zombie-like, they reach out with their right hand, palm forward against the other four. Their heads tilt to one side, then the other. They freeze like that, hands outstretched, heads tilted to the left, listening and listening and hearing nothing as Coran tries to encourage them to speak.

It is another dobash before there is any more movement. They speak in a circle, from Black Paladin to Red to Green to Blue to Yellow.

“Emptiness. Crucible.” Shiro's arm activates as he speaks, glimmering purple and black.
“Sentencing. Event horizon.” Something around Keith seems to thicken, red and heavy in the air.

“Birdsong. Destruction.” In the distance, beneath Pidge's skin, there is a falcon's cry.

“Trial. Odyssey.” Lance speaks like the tide, rushing and crashing.

“Beginning. End.” Hunk is steady and warm, a rock compared to the rush of the others' words.


“Well,” Coran announces as he purses his lips and furrows his brow, eyes widening a bit in an annoyed, slightly comical grimace, “This is decidedly not what we planned.”

“You don't say.”


“To clarify, has this ever happened before?” Allura snaps. The synced movements make the whole experience much more unbalancing. Their hands drop as she speaks, folding identically in each of their laps.

“As far as I remember? Never.”

“Oh, well that's just-”

Their eyes open. Shiro's right glows a deep purple, while his left is an emptiness that eats all light that comes near and spits it out as its opposite. Keith's right is silver, his left red. Pidge's right is a feather gray, her left poisonous green. Lance's right is white, his left is a blue that swims within itself, multi-shaded. Hunk's left is brown, with a left of yellow like a miniature star.
Their eyes close in a snap. It holds for a precious few ticks and then their posture shifts, from the identical configurations of before to something more natural and personal.

“Oh, thank Arkien,” Coran whispers.

“What just- just happened?” Hunk questions, blinking his eyes open and scratching an itch on the side of his nose, wincing at the motion but following through with it anyway.

“Your entire species is unnatural and, quite frankly deserves a thorough dissection and scientific study, but we're a bit low on your kind so I suppose we'll have to go without the first,” Allura snaps, “not for lack of enthusiasm on my part.”

“I appreciate the roast, little miss sassy,” Pidge returns with equal bitter heat in their voice, “but I have no damn clue what just happened either and I'd like to know if I'm going to die soon or if we just pulled some cool shit that'll help you win this war quicker.”

Coran steps between Allura and the paladins, make a soothing gesture with his hands. “Let's calm down,” he soothes, “and remove those circlets, hmm?”

“I think the fuck not,” Lance snaps, but angrily tosses his circlet down regardless, “What's going on? We deserve to know!”

Coran makes a smoothing gesture with his hands, leaning back a step before taking a purposeful stride forward. “We all would like to know what happened, but given that none of you seem to remember anything while you were merged and nothing like this has happened on our side before, you'll have to excuse the lack of explanation.” Coran lifts his chin defiantly, purple eyes shining. “We are not omnipotent, despite your assumption.”

Allura steps forward, proud and mighty and quite done with her own words being stolen from her mouth. “This has never happened before, paladins. It's an outlier case, but we cannot stop everything just for one strange occurrence. As the leader of Voltron, Shiro will be the only one to wear a circlet.” The remaining three with their circlets still on remove them carefully and place them on the floor, getting reabsorbed into the castle again. “It's obvious that the circlets amplified your bond to unforeseen lengths and overloaded the connection, so we'll just have to work with what we can.”
They stay, staring at the two Alteans for an uncomfortable amount of time. Finally the silence is broken by Keith saying, “You do realize that humans aren't psychic, right?”

Coran furrows his brow, and disagrees, “You obviously are. The circlets don't cause anything, they only amplify connections and energy. I don't know why you'd assume your species—oh—quiznack. How backwater is your planet? How many sentient species do you have as inhabitants? Oh, Arkien—you know what? We'll deal with that later. For now let's just try to get a decent connection.”

“That is in no way comforting,” Pidge responds, “let's do this shit.”

They close their eyes again, more hesitantly than last time, and simply sit for a normal, healthy number of ticks, bodies still adopting their own personal postures rather than the eerie, straight-backed sameness of their first attempt.

“Good,” Coran says softly, pacing a slow circle around the cluster of paladins, hands forming in ritualistic symbols with precision and passive grace, “Now concentrate and feel the edges. Hear the wings.” The paladins release a synchronized sigh and Coran snaps his head to the side from where he stared into the distance, checking to ensure that they haven't fallen into the same posture. He resumes his pacing once he ensures they aren't falling too deep into the connections, hands straying more into balance shapes than remaining with the traditional runes.

Allura moves forward and joins the circle halfway across from Coran, inclining her head in acknowledgment. She adds her own hand symbols to his, mirroring his own shapes and keeping her footsteps in time with his. “They do not beat, they flutter,” Allura describes, picking up where Coran left off, remembering the descriptions her mother gave of the butterflies edging them apart from each other, “They are a swarm, but you are singular, and that is the root of your power. Reach out—” her hands halt in the runic sign for 'symmetry' at the same time as her footsteps cease—“and push them aside.”

There is one moment of perilous tension.

One gathering of ticks stretching onward and onward.

And then, before each of the Paladins, there is a Lion, holographic and mighty, standing guard.
“Good,” Coran repeats, soothingly, his hands holding the same rune, pinky and ring fingers connected straight and diagonally up, middle fingers bent horizontal at the first knuckle and downward into a dip at the second to meet fingertips, thumbs and forefingers held straight up. “You see lights, yes?” Coran doesn’t expect a response and he doesn’t get one, just pauses to let them feel, then continues, “Reach your hand out—” The bodies of the Paladins respond immediately, each reaching out their dominant hand toward the center of their ring—“and touch the other lights.”

They do so almost unthinkingly, hands stretching those last few inches, fingers splaying to grasp the other four lights they see in their mind's eye. The same sigh goes through the group, and they open their eyes without prompting. The Lions guarding them twist shape into people they hold important.

Shiro’s twists into two figures, faces blurry and indistinct, but somewhat similar to Shiro’s own features. “Your mom and dad?” Hunk guesses softly, and Shiro, staring mutely at the projections, can only nod softly. A tear drips down all of their cheeks simultaneously, brought together by the bond.

Pidge’s is a sharp, clear image of a near copy of themself, slightly older and with a dimpled smile that Pidge doesn’t share. “Matt,” they say without prompting, “he’s my brother. He was on Kerberos.” Shiro’s hand, the human one still reached out toward the center, twitches slightly toward Pidge’s, and Pidge smiles, teary.

Both Lance and Hunk have large groups of people, all smiling and still. “Family,” they say at the same time, “I miss them.” No one says anything about the synchrony. It's hard to know if any of them even realize, caught as they are in the connection. It's a marvel truly, the level of connection and empathy the human mind is capable of, given the proper resources.

Keith still has the Red Lion in front of his, little frizzes of static on the edges, glitching sometimes into Shiro’s face and then into the red silhouette of a vaguely feminine face that changes itself periodically, as if searching, then back to his Lion. They close their eyes again, all of them grimacing slightly at whatever they feel through the bond. “I'm—” Shiro begins, and then is joined by Pidge, Lance and Hunk to say, “so sorry Keith.”

“It's alright,” Keith replies, using his free hand to wipe the tears off of his face hurriedly.

The projections change, from their most important people to their happiest experience, the lights before them condensing and flowing out in fluid lines to build the scenes in crude 3-D.
Shiro, made of purple light before his full-sized corporeal form, is hugging his parents, a letter on the floor that declares his acceptance into the Galaxy Garrison. He is so small, so unusually compact. He is a year younger than Pidge, thereabouts, in this memory, and he looks so incredibly foreign. Hunk lets out a small chuckle at seeing the five-foot nothing twig of their superior officer clinging onto his parents like a lifeline. Allura can't help but feel sad, just watching the proceedings.

Pidge – or who became Pidge, at any rate – is proudly placing an academic trophy on the shelf while their parents clap and their brother ruffles their hair – much longer than it is now. They crinkle the corners of their eyes, in a half-smile half-grimace of bittersweet happiness. “I'm sorry, Pidge,” Shiro states bleakly.

“Don't be,” they speak bitterly, “it's not your fault.”

Lance is a small blue figure dancing through wet sand as rain cascades down onto the beach, toes digging into the shore and spraying droplets of seawater into the air when his feet skim the top of the surf. He must be absolutely soaked, and Allura has to wonder about their temperature tolerance. Still, that doesn't stop the wide, slightly nostalgic grin that spreads across Lance's face in reminder of his happiest time.

Hunk is a small child – not even close to whatever the equivalent of whatever humans call Altean puberty. He is standing, wide and starry-eyed staring up at an old woman that shares a resemblance with him as she kneads dough beneath her knuckles, mouth moving, the light transferring no audio to the two witnesses to the quintet psychic bond. They all smile though, and someone – Allura can't tell who – gives a small laugh.

Keith's is, again, a fascinating glitch of mental energy. It's the only first person of the memories, demonstrating a deeply grounded connection to his own self. Pinpricks of bright red decorate a deep burgundy night sky, stars in constellations unfamiliar to Allura. It's an image blurry around the edges at first- and then there is foliage in the way and the stars have rearranged and everything is struck through with voids of pigment, where the red breaks off, the pigment fleeing to the pinprick stars and making them painfully bright. “Shit, man,” Keith mutters, “figures.”

Lance opens his mouth to ask a question, but closes it a split second before Shiro vocalizes with, “Ask him later, do this first.”

The projections try to switch again, to the next in the order of familiarity- their most difficult trial. Lance's begins to take shape – the back of a somewhat familiar jacket far before him – as does Pidge's – a pair of scissors superimposed over a somewhat primitive spaceship – and Hunk's – a seemingly never ending list scrolling by too quickly to read anything specific – but that seems to be where their luck runs out.
The course of digging up trauma never did run smooth, but this is more violent than most reactions.

The images disrupt in frantic bursts of color, spilling up and out in scorchingly vibrant webs of rushing shades. The Paladins yank their hands backward to clutch their heads, a harsh yell erupting from their circle and dying just as quickly as the lights fade and fizzle out.

Allura drops her hand sigil immediately, and Coran flashes through several quick signs to rebalance the energies and disperse them peacefully to end the ritual before joining her to check on the Paladins.

“What,” Lance hisses, hands clamped closed over his head, shivering, “the fuck was... that.”

Keith, dragging his hand down the bridge of his nose and wincing, responds, “Probably the amnesia.” He shrugs tiredly and winces, shaking out his arm as if trying to regain feeling in it. “It's mind magic, I don't think having two-fifths of your formation with very obvious gaps in their memory particularly helps.” He flounders for a few seconds, trying to come up with a good descriptor- “magic bullshit.”

“Hold the phone, back up, take it back now y'all,” Lance irately interrupts, shaking his hands in the air irritatedly while in the background Hunk whispers 'one hop this time', “I know Shiro has his problems, but who's the other fifth?”

Pidge facepalms, dragging their fingers painfully slow over the bridge of their nose and nearly launching their glasses from their face. “Lance,” Pidge whispers, “you dumbass.”

Keith raises his hand and gives it a little shake in the air to call attention to it, pulling his legs closer in toward his body to make himself more compact. “I guess it just, uh, never came up in casual conversation?” Keith winces and pulls further into his body as he speaks, “Uh, yeah. I can't remember anything before the age of eleven? Or so? Somewhere in that time period.”

“How did it happen?” Hunk asks.

Keith leans a hand up to scratch his neck and just lean on. “Um. Car crash. As far as I know my dad was a no-show and my mom- uh. She died in the- you know.” He makes a 'suprise!' gesture with his hands and then immediately tucks them back behind his neck. “That one's on me. Sorry for not mentioning it before.”
For a very long time no one speaks, Shiro staring shakily into the distance, Pidge with lips pursed and refusing to speak, Lance and Hunk both stunned and unsure how to continue the conversation, and both of the Altean observers feeling too unsure to break into the conversation.

Finally, Keith wipes his fingertips off on his suit and clears his throat awkwardly. “So, uh, what's the plan now?”

Allura knows that Coran planned to teach them some Altean Quintessence Moral Theory. Instead of continuing onto his next lesson, however, he is quiet for another bit, then says, “Now, we take a break. I need to recalibrate the training rooms to challenge and heighten your psychic senses and match and improve your physical skills. It will take a few hours, so I'd recommend that you go bond with your Lions some more.”

Allura knows for a fact that Coran is lying. Not about the calibrations being necessary, but about the application time. He is the designated Wayfarer of the Castle, it would take less than a dobosh to initiate the proper adjustments, a time which would decrease drastically as he gained more experience in interacting with the castle's quintessence. She doesn't know why exactly Coran decided to give the Paladins a break, and a part of her revolts against the idea, clawing at the walls and saying that they need more, need to be better.

But she is tired from holding the ritual together, and her hatred has been quelled with a quick touch to the back of her neck, the interruption to the natural flow of hate.

She says nothing as the Paladins sway to their feet and stagger out as a group, still silent and giving Keith his distance.

She says nothing as Coran presses his hand to the wall and initiates the changes, removing it before 30 ticks are up.

She says nothing as Coran tilts his head and whispers, “Pardon, Makkesh, but I think I need to be alone currently. Makksaula, Allura.”

She says nothing and stands alone in the training room, feeling oddly empty inside, drained and hollow.

She says nothing as she places her hand against the wall and silently requests a sparring partner.
from the Castle, her own dim blood-in-water meeting the bright electric blue of the Castle and almost falling dim.

She says nothing as the gladiator, fully armored and equipped to face her knives, forms from the ceiling and drops down to meet her.

She says nothing as she attacks.

She just feels- empty.

She thinks she missed something when the Paladins entered their first trance, some important piece of information she'll never know again. Something called and she-

She could not answer.

She could not say anything.

So she says nothing, and is hollow.

The tree is silent, and the thorned flowers fall to the ground, trampled into empty clusters.

There is only the ringing of blades, and the silent queen.

Chapter End Notes

I am very tired. Why do I do this to myself. I didn't even read this thing over, so Oops! All Mistakes. But hey, I got to do some stuff I wanted to do.

Hope this explains some of the confusion of last chapter.
In the process of making this, I had to make myself a dictionary of terms and names and words. I will probably wind up editing this a whole ton, but this is what my collection of terms looks like.

Random Facts:
Prophet - Thace's battleship
Sherrite - Holographic projecting material
Fortitude - Sendak and Haxus' battleship
Oreyu the Glorious - Powerful mind mage

Primordeities:
Luxis - Deity of Quintessence - Keith - Battle
Mikora - Deity of Fate - Shiro - Justice
Faevro - Deity of Time - Coran - Prophecy
Arkien - Deity of Psyche - Hunk - Peace
Vakyr - Deity of Crossroads - Lance - Change
Kalfe - Deity of Beginnings - Pidge - Knowledge
Seltaix - Deity of Turmoil - Allura - Love
Meister - Deity of Inevitability - Death

Various Lesser Deities:
Samtal - Goddess of Change - Vakyr
Caitius - God of Love - Seltaix
Doshye - Goddess of Knowledge - Kalfe
Xera - Goddess of Battle - Luxis
Proem - God of Justice - Mikora
Morais - God of Prophecy - Faevro
Festian - God of Peace - Arkien
Griemm - Spirit of Death - Meister
Vohre - Spirit of Luck - Unaffiliated

Alien Species:
Derytl - Common species with initiation scars
Ceryllian - ???
Petuqa - ???
Deitrian - Bioluminescent hair
Guishatch - ??? They attack????
Venemous Krygia - Name vaguely self-explanatory
Molretp - A high-intelligence species of hoarders
Tuthoie - a particularly dumb species of alien that looks like elephants

Alien Planets:
Duskeri - Keith's Home Planet
Jepis - Agriculture provider, Galra controlled

Alien Words:
Scheila - Galran for kitten
Aeksi - Altean species of bird
Kaljeet - Altean pet name roughly translating to darling
Maman/Fethar - Parental titles in Galran
Spacer - Nickname for someone visiting the planet/foreigner
Kaidel - First daughter
Shrieqq - Adversary
Ghyekip - Medic
Ksepoth - Mechanic
Keyaah - Altean honorific for someone younger than the speaker
Makkel/Makkesh - The highest honorary title in Altean, like your Majesty/Highness
Vrepit sa - Glory to, Galran, same order of words. Greeting and farewell in Empire
controlled areas.
Lesha Shriemm - Altean for 'little fighter'in the same order of words.
Koreth - Altean honorific for someone older than the speaker
Yaleith - Altean for chaser
Mieosaula - Galran mourning term, followed typically by:
'deka/diko/daku - Galran terms for close relations, in order platonic/familial/romantic

Titles:
Grandmaster - Balmeran, the eldest and most powerful of the clan
High Priest(ess) - Altean, genetic and passed down through generations, the most powerful
mage out there
High Court - Ruled by the High Priest(ess), a gathering of the most powerful mages
Mage - The standard term for a graduated Quintessence user
Acolyte - Magically sensitive, learning
Druid - A disowned Altean still practicing magic, usually with a Coven of magically
sensitive members

Kin Mark Meanings:
Red - Ferocity
Pink - Love
Blue - Loyalty
Green - Ingenuity
Yellow - Kindness
Orange - Luck
Silver - Power
Gray - Change
White - Purity
Black - Misfortune
Purple - Defiance
Brown - Stability

Previous Paladins:
Zarkon - Black Paladin
Merial - Red Paladin
Neimao - Blue Paladin
Sekhet - Green Paladin
Eiril - Yellow Paladin

Lions:
Black/Memory/Priest - Shadowed Underline Bold Speech
Green/Reasoning/Ophelia - Bolded Italic Overline Speech
Yellow/Honesty/Icarus - Bolded Italic Underline Speech
Red/Instinct/Eris - Bolded Speech
Blue/Intuition/Sammy - Bolded Italic Speech - Code L4P239
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