### Constellation

**by CheshireCity, chocolatemoosey**

**Summary**

In the wake of the coup, Keith - or, Emperor Lotor of the Galra Empire - is left trying to rally support for his new regime. But finding the rebel faction known as the Vesh is only the first step as new enemies threaten his reign. Facing civil war in the fallout of Zarkon's assassination, Keith must navigate the dangers of political negotiation in order to placate his divided people.

**Notes**

Welcome everyone to the third installation of the Leo Rising Series: 'Constellation'!

Thank you to everyone who has followed this series and has left kudos, comments, and even
fanart! We treasure each and every one of you readers and hearing from you these past few months has been such a joy. Your outpouring of support has really enriched our lives and we sincerely hope that you enjoy this next chapter in Shiro and Keith’s adventure!

(If you are new to the Leo Rising series we highly suggest you go to the series page and start with 'Pressure Suit', the first story in the collection. You can also find 'Pressure Suit' on CheshireCity’s page. While it is not by any means mandatory to read the stories in order, it will better help to set the background of Keith and Shiro’s relationship and better explain major plot elements to follow.)

<3
CheshireCity and chocolatemoosey
“GUYS,” an alarmed voice called over the coms, “I think we have company!”

Hissing through his teeth, the black paladin inclined in his seat, peering through the obfuscated viewport of the combined Lion. Ahead was nothing but a blanket of white, the landscape beyond bleeding through the snowstorm at irregular intervals. Shiro clenched at the thrusters, fighting to keep the Lion aright as heavy winds ravaged the craft.

“Where’s the target?” he called.

“Target is inbound at two o’clock,” Pidge replied swiftly, “But I keep losing him; I can’t see shit!”

“Stay close to Hunk,” Shiro ordered, craning around in vain to catch sight of the other paladins. As if to spite him, the flurries only seemed to pick up, the massive frame of Pineapple disappearing to his right altogether, Green tucked away behind her for shelter.

It had been Shiro’s call for them all to stay close, Keith and Red combining with him shortly after they had passed through the frozen planet’s atmosphere due to the voracity of the storms, the weather proving too much for the smallest Lion. But Pidge and Green weren’t faring much better and he wasn’t sure how much longer they could endure without needing to turn back.

“What’s the call, boss?” Hunk asked, and Shiro shook his head, witnessed only by Keith.

“We’ve got this, Shiro,” his fiancé’s voice coalesced soothingly in the back of his mind. “We’ve come too far to back off now.”

“It might be safer to hold back and regroup,” Shiro suggested privately.

“No time,” Keith countered, attention suddenly caught. Shiro tensed, following his gaze in an instant. In the distance flashed something bright and red, a wavering beacon that cut out with each howl of the storm.

“Shields up, now!” Shiro barked, yanking at the thrusters and shimmying the craft sideways as the familiar ripple of the cloaking device kicked in.

“Shiro?” his fiancé asked aloud, but the black paladin was shaking his head, silencing him. The red light followed their movement and then froze, slowly roving around as if in confusion.

“Did we lose it?” Hunk breathed.

“I’m not sure,” Shiro voiced at length. “Hold your ground; if we withdraw now we risk leading it back to the Castle of Lions – we don’t know what this thing can do. Pidge, your analysis?”

“Well from the fuck all I can see,” the green paladin drawled, “It’s probably another one of those damn Galra robot beasts hell bent on killing us. But it sure doesn’t seem to be as impaired by Glacimor’s storms as we are, I can tell you that.”

“Why’s that?” Keith frowned, shifting in his seat anxiously.
“Watch the light,” Pidge explained, “It doesn’t waver; either it’s got some sort of stabilizer equipped or the entire thing is really sturdy – it isn’t getting buffeted around like we are.”

“It doesn’t seem like it’s doing –,” Hunk began, only to be interrupted by a harsh crackle over the coms. The signal flared to life, the sound of distant voices warping and distorting with a rush of white noise. “There it is again!” the yellow paladin exclaimed.

“Pidge, hone in on the transmission,” Shiro commanded. “I think we –.”

“DOWN!” Keith yelled, and before Shiro had time to process much else, the combined Lion was diving. There was a jumble of white and Shiro fought for the controls, feeling the extension of his fiancé’s will and piloting in tandem alongside him. There was a distinct crack somewhere behind them proceeded by a metallic barrage against the side of the craft.

“What –?” Shiro made to inquire, but Keith was superseding control, the combined Lion bowing out to his will.

“Don’t lose the horizon!” the red paladin barked, eyes trained ahead. “It’s too easy to invert and that could mean crashing.”

“You guys alright!?” Hunk called worriedly. “It sounded like you got hit!”

“We’re fine,” Shiro assured quickly, “For now, anyway. It hit something behind us.”

“It’s coming back around,” Keith grit. The red light swiveled about, fixating suddenly on the center of their viewport. Without words the black and red paladins pulled at the thrusters, the combined Lion swerving away just in time to avoid another strike.

“How the hell is it doing this!?” Keith swore.

“The cloak isn’t working,” Shiro surmised grimly. “They must be able to read something else, heat signatures or something.”

“Should we lower them?”

“No,” Shiro determined. “The cloaks still buy us a little time; just enough to shake this thing’s tracking ability. Pidge,” he continued, speaking louder, “We came to this planet to see if you could get a clear reading of that transmission – if the Vesh really are camped out here then we’ve got to give this mission our all. Focus on that and leave the fighting to us: Keith, you break away and swap out with Pidge. Use everything Red’s got to beat back the storm; burn a path if you have to. Hunk, make use of that armor of yours and see how close you can get: we need to know what exactly we’re up against and I doubt it’s going to let anyone else get close.”

“Roger,” came the round of affirmatives.

“Good luck, babe,” Keith wished in parting as the Red Lion broke away, offering up a burst of fire as signal flare to their team. The creature locked on them at once and they fell away, an explosion tearing through the space they had just occupied.

“Found you!” Pidge called and the Black Lion admitted her presence, contorting to form Janus Beta as the green paladin appeared in the cockpit to Shiro’s left.

“Doing alright?” he asked concernedly.

“Yup,” Pidge nodded shortly, “Just don’t get us killed and we’ll be gold.”
“Yeah I’ll do my best,” Shiro returned anxiously, surveying the battlefield.

They had arrived on Glacimor during one of the few hours of daylight the planet had, the glow of its dying sun feeble against the blight of the storm. If they didn’t hurry they would risk losing their visibility altogether, and with as hard a time as they were having navigating, it wasn’t something they could afford to lose, either.

“Let’s make this quick,” Shiro called over the intercoms.

“Hunk, how’s it looking?” Keith pressed.

“Could be clearer,” Thace – the only passenger – spoke up on the yellow paladin’s behalf. “It’s definitely Galra-made,” he confirmed. “Oddly shaped, too. The light you’re seeing appears to be some sort of laser sight – I’m not even sure if it has eyes.”

“Wait just a minute, though!” Hunk added, and below Shiro could see the beast turn about as if trying to follow something. It hesitated, the red beacon of its sight flicking about in an attempt to lock onto a target.

“How’d you lose it?” Shiro asked excitedly.

“I think it’s got a blind spot!” Hunk crowed in response. “It’s dead opposite its gun-thing. It can’t sense anything directly behind it!”

“Nice work!” Shiro praised. “Try attacking from there.”

“You bet!” Hunk confirmed, a hailstorm of fire erupting from seemingly nowhere as Pineapple’s machine gun flared into action. Their enemy jerked, caught off guard by the barrage, whirling about quickly to prepare a counter attack.

“Careful!” Shiro yelled in tandem with the creature’s shot, a reverberating crack intermixing with the cries of the Yellow Lion’s occupants.

“Are you –!?” Keith began, but Thace was quicker, voice strained.

“We’re alright, kit,” he assured, the faint scream of alarms sounding across the intercoms. “He cracked the viewport, though.”

“Careful guys,” Shiro reiterated, barely audible over an indignant groan from Hunk.

“This thing’s out for blood!” the yellow paladin insisted. “It’s going straight for headshots – Pineapple’s got all this armor and it still managed to find the weakest point!”

“Another hit or two like that and it’ll break the glass,” Thace surveyed. “We’re going to hang back until we can get another shot in.”

“Did you hit it at all?” Keith chipped in, visible only by the occasional burst of flame. The enemy lurched about, trying to track his agile movements.

“I can’t tell!” Hunk yelled back. “Why don’t you try?”

“Gladly.”

The creature paused a moment, steadying itself as its sights began to lock, the Red Lion clearly within its range. It tensed, about to fire, and then was blown back by a wave of molten flames that cut straight through its path.
“NICE!” Pidge cheered, barely looking up from her work at Shiro’s side as the transmission continued to warble in and out of clarity.

“Great job, Keith,” Shiro adjoined, pulling the Janus form around to better observe the field. The enemy flailed about, the last licks of fire petering out, its metallic body singed but hardly worse for wear. Extinguished, it set after Keith, firing after a moment’s consideration. The shot rang out without hitting its target and Shiro breathed in relief.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Keith swore as he circled about and surveyed his work. “Barely left a scratch!”

“Its main weapon is a gun,” Thace reasoned. “The best counter to that would be water or ice.”

“I mean goodie,” Pidge pointed out. “We’ve got TONS of it around here; what do we do, commence a snowball fight?”

“Maybe we could if Lance were here,” Hunk added stiffly.

“Well he’s not,” Shiro shut him down quickly. “And without him we can’t form Voltron, either, so we’re going to have to make do.”

“I’ll keep leading it,” Keith offered. “I don’t think it’s fast enough to catch me; it looks like it has to aim up its shot before it can fire.”

“Works for me, just watch yourself,” Shiro affirmed, “Hunk, I’ll assist you in trying to find a weak spot, just be careful of friendly fire.”

“Understood,” the yellow paladin returned a bit sullenly.

“Pidge,” Shiro continued, “How’s that signal going?”

“Peachy,” the other sighed as the transmission produced an earsplitting keen, “But I think I’m getting somewhere.”

“Great,” the black paladin encouraged, “I’m going to see what I can do from our enemy’s blind spot.”

Making use of his fiancé’s diversion, Shiro urged the Janus Lion forward, drawing near until the oblong frame of the enemy’s body could be seen. It was nearly triangular with a flat back and pointed snout that seemed to terminate in the head of a rifle. The gun pivoted freely, following the mark of the laser sight as it tried to catch Keith in its crosshairs.

‘Come on, Keith,’ Shiro urged quietly. ‘Please, please be cautious – I don’t think you could take a hit like Hunk and Thace did without having some major difficulties.’

Taking a steadying breath, Shiro summoned the jaw blade, patting the center console affectionately. “Ready?” he asked under his breath, and then the Lion was lashing out, dual-sided blade striking out against the angles of the enemy’s body. The creature shrieked, its metal sides rending shrilly from the attack as it tried to turn back on Shiro.

“No you don’t,” Pidge grumbled, knocking at a thruster and making the combined Lion shake its massive head, pushing the beast aside a pace.

“Nice, Pidge,” Shiro breathed, hanging back before the creature could size them up properly.
“Let’s try that a–,” Shiro cut off, a metallic streak of violet passing between the viewport and their enemy in a dizzying blur.

“What the hell was that?” Hunk called out, right as the transmission came into range with a series of pops.

“– do you read me?” came a muted voice.

Shiro jumped to attention, watching with amazement as several craft came into view, each burnished and bright amongst the storm, their humanoid forms eerie as they circled around the beast. The largest of them – a silver mecha – took point opposite the creature, glowing faintly as it charged for attack.

“This is the Black Paladin of Team Voltron speaking,” Shiro spoke at once, “I read you.”

There was a burst of static, the reply clipping halfway through, “– great; we’re here to help.”

“Who are you?” Keith quipped, tone reserved. “State your intent.”

Another voice spoke up, even more muffled than the first. “We represent the Vesh,” the voice stated, “– must be the Emperor.”

There was an audible groan from Red’s cockpit and Shiro couldn’t help but smile at the sound. “Yes,” he spoke up, understanding the gaps in the other pilot’s message, “We have among us Prince – ah, Emperor – Lotor of Gal.”

Pidge made a small sound of derision to his left. “Stupid name,” she muttered.

“Focus,” Shiro chided, still smiling.

“We’ve confused the auto-targeting system,” another pilot spoke up, voice gruff. “Malachite, what’s the plan?”

“Well spotted, Helio,” the second voice praised. “Everyone keep active; the robeast doesn’t know who to lock onto right now and doesn’t have time to line up a shot so long as we keep moving.”

“So when do we attack?” Shiro asked, deferring power.

“Strategically,” Malachite returned. “What have you deduced thus far?”

“It’s got a blind spot along its back,” Hunk spoke up, drawing the attention of a bright green mecha who hung back from the battle interestingly. “And it’s got super tough armor all over – we haven’t found its weak spot yet so we’ve barely made a dent.”

“And you are…?”

“The Yellow Paladin.”

“Right, so, Yellow, this thing is built like a sniper,” Malachite postulated. “And given what you’ve told me I’m gonna bet that its weak spot is the same as its strong spot.”

“It’s gun?” Shiro concluded.

“Bingo!” the other pilot agreed. “If we can target that then we can at the very least disable it. I don’t see any joints on this thing so we’re going to have to be as precise as possible.”
“So in other words we need a marksman,” Hunk noted bitterly.

“That would be ideal, yes.”

“No can do,” Shiro sighed heavily, “We lost ours recently. What’s your plan of approach?”

“Well,” the other mused, the green mecha dodging an errant blast from the creature’s muzzle. “Landing a shot in the barrel isn’t going to be easy, so I recommend we bait it to the best of our ability and go all out. Whoever’s the most resilient should play the role of the dummy – or, bait, if you’d prefer. Stay still and wait for the robeast to shoot.”

“So you want one of us to get shot!?” Keith snarked. “That sounds solid.”

“Hear me out, Your Majesty,” the pilot laughed, unbothered. “That shot will give the robeast away – all we have to do is calculate where the shot came from and aim there. We all fire and see if we land our hit and just repeat this until the thing comes down; it’s fairly slow so we should have a few seconds to aim before it repositions.”

“A dummy?” Shiro repeated, wide eyed, “That’s like Hesketh Hesketh-Prichard’s technique! It’s how the British took out German snipers in the first World War - that’s brilliant!”

“You would know this,” Pidge laughed, reseating herself attentively. “Well come on, let’s see what this strategy can do!”

“My Lion’s the most durable,” Hunk offered resolutely, “I’ll play the bait.”

“Hunk you already suffered a pretty bad blow,” Shiro countered concernedly. “Are you really sure –?”

“Yes,” the yellow paladin interrupted, “Just get ready, okay?”

Shiro exhaled lowly, shaking his head. “Okay,” he promised, bringing the combined Lion into better range. Below him there was a ripple in the snowstorm as Pineapple came back into view, cloaking device purposefully dropped.

“Great job!” Malachite encouraged. “Everyone else keep moving or you’ll throw off the robeast’s targeting – it will go for the easiest hit.”

“Easier said than done,” Keith grumbled, seeming to speak for them all. The robeast swiveled about, locking onto Hunk and Thace rapidly as the other craft danced around it.

“Brace yourselves!” Shiro warned, and Pineapple shifted into a defensive crouch. The robeast recalculated, and then with a burst of energy released a large blast, knocking the Yellow Lion back several hundred meters.

“NOW!” Malachite called.

Shiro grit his teeth, grinding the fused Lion to a halt and reaching for the controls to the mouth canon. At a nod from Pidge he aimed as best he could, directing the attack toward the prone form of the robeast. There was a brilliant flash of light as the combined shots surged forward, the creature beyond obscured by their glow. There was a small boom, a pause, and then an explosive chain reaction of blasts, the robeast alighting from the inside out as it was torn apart.

A resounding set of cheers overtook the coms, praise and congratulations uttered from all around.
“Copper, analyze the robeast and have the report sent to Annis,” the tallest of the mecha ordered, turning towards the penny-colored mech standing beside it.

“Affirmative,” they complied, approaching the creature and fanning their arms out in front of themselves, summoning a soft blue glow before it.

“Annis?” Thace echoed the first mecha, interest clearly piqued. “Commander Throk is here?”

“Annis isn’t the only one from City Station here. There’s been a lot of changes in the last few myokokak,” the gruff-voiced pilot – Helio – supplied, approaching the Red Lion as it came around to stand beside Janus Beta.

Shiro watched as the Lion took a hesitant step back, the silver, green, and copper mech approaching the Red Lion as well. Shiro immediately felt his and Pidge’s alarm rise in tandem and they gripped their thrusters anxiously. However, the approaching quartet lowered themselves to one knee, each curling a fist against the chest of their mecha.

“Vol sa!” they saluted the emperor in tandem, Keith making a shocked little noise over the coms.

The silver mecha stood, facing the Red Lion, “Welcome to Glacimor, Your Majesty. I’d like to carry on with formal introductions, but I feel we’d be better off meeting face-to-face. If it’s agreeable to you, you can follow us to The Haven and we’ll fill you in from there.”

“I—,” Keith hesitated, the head of the Red Lion turning towards Beta’s combined form. “Shiro?”

“If it’s alright with the emperor, we’d be glad to continue proceedings at your headquarters,” Shiro responded with a kind smile. Keith made an indignant noise at being addressed as emperor by his fiancé and Shiro’s grin eked up the side of his mouth. Six weeks had passed since Keith had taken upon the mantle of emperor, and it seemed as if it was still processing for him – so much that it seemed to fluster him to no end to be called by his proper title.

“That’s fine,” Keith said resolutely after clearing away his embarrassment with a little cough. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“Anything for the Imperial Majesty of Gal,” Malachite’s warped voice cut across cheekily, the green mecha twisting itself into a fanciful bow. Shiro could hear Keith scowling across the line. Pidge snickered.

“You weren’t getting this flustered when you slam-dunked Zarkon’s head on a pike and declared yourself emperor,” she commented, helping Shiro to direct Beta closely behind the forms of the Vesh’s mecha.

“That is a gross over exaggeration—,” Keith argued, much to Malachite’s amusement.

“I don’t know, Your Majesty,” they said. “I think she has a point.”

“Don’t encourage her,” the Red Paladin grumbled. Shiro concealed a little smile behind his fist before finagling the controls on his dash – an image of Thace and Hunk appeared, the later looking as stony-faced as he had the past several weeks.

“How’re you holding up, Hunk?” Shiro inquired. The yellow paladin glanced at him, trying to force a smile, but merely producing an exhausted expression in the process.
“Hanging in there,” the yellow paladin informed him. “I’m losing a little heat due to the break in my viewport – but it shouldn’t be a problem if the HQ is close enough.

“You’re in luck,” Copper supplied, the four humanoid mecha coming to a halt before the Lions. “We’ve just arrived.”

Shiro frowned, squinting out over the vast plane of white that sprawled out in front of them. Even with limited visibility from the snow and encroaching darkness, he’d figured that the building would be relatively noticeable. But there was nothing on his or Pidge’s viewport that suggested any sort of structure anywhere nearby. Shiro gripped his thrusters anxiously, expecting a trap.

However, before he could voice any of his concerns, Helio spoke over the line: “Annis, open her up.”

“You got it,” a distant voice crackled through the coms, and suddenly the ground before them was shifting, beginning to rise from the earth in a massive sheet of white. Slowly the snow began to slide backwards, revealing the area below to be the top of a gigantic hatch. The maw opened up into the earth, a heat signature immediately reading on Janus Beta’s viewport as the Vesh’s base was revealed to them.

“No wonder the signal was so hard to get,” Pidge remarked as they followed the four Vesh into their home base. “With both the storm and the fact they were hiding underground, it’s kind of a miracle I got anything at all.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Shiro shrugged as they descended into what appeared to be the base’s hangar. Several Galra cruisers and battleships were housed within, repainted in shades of white and blue to show their alignment to the D’Zahtvesh. Farther away on the other side of the concourse was a small army of the same mecha suits employed by Silver and the others – many of them were in states of massive disrepair, some almost completely disassembled. Long-eared, antlered aliens dotted the bay around them, their arms full of tablets and spare parts; interspersed amongst them were the blue and purple hues of the Galra – members of the Vesh. Upon seeing the approaching Lions, they immediately abandoned their stations, obviously rushing to meet their emperor.

On Shiro’s command, Janus Beta separated, Kuro lowering her head to allow the black paladin passage onto the concourse. As he stepped out of the craft’s mouth, Shiro could already see the Vesh lowering themselves into the Galra salute, the crowd of people having curved around the front of the Red Lion. Her mouth opened, emitting the monarch within to disembark.

Upon seeing their emperor, the Vesh cried out their salute in unison. Keith hesitantly removed his helmet, raising a hand to greet them in a stately wave. For someone who had been so close to dying of embarrassment moments before, Keith had been fast to adopt his royal mien once more. Shiro smiled to himself as he approached his fiancé, knowing full well that it was for the benefit of the people before all else.

Hunk, Thace, and Pidge were quickly joining the red and black paladins from the left, while the four mecha pilots that had assisted them were disembarking from their crafts on the right, helmets still donned. The broadest of them dressed in a black flightsuit embroidered with silver removed his helmet, revealing a thick-furred and large-eared Galra within. He lowered himself to one knee and performed the salute once more.

“Emperor Lotor,” he smiled, standing to offer a hand to the young monarch. “I’m Sylvux, leader of the Vesh. Welcome to The Haven.”
Keith received Sylvux’s hand eagerly, stepping aside as Thace approached the pair.

“Sylv!” Keith’s father exclaimed, reaching out to grasp the leader’s hand in his own. The taller of the two quickly pulled Thace into an embrace, thumping him heartily on the back. “It’s been too long.”

“Too long indeed,” Sylvux agreed with a smile, glancing at Keith with a fond expression. “If I’m not mistaken, you were ‘the humble prince’ our young emperor referred to at his coronation speech?”

Thace beamed with pride, setting a hand on one of his son’s pauldrons, exchanging smiles with Keith.

“I suppose that would be me,” Thace chuckled.

“Your Majesty,” said another one of the pilots, removing her helmet as well – the Galra beneath was familiar, and Shiro soon recognized her as a former member of the Royal Guard.

“Nylan!” Keith exclaimed happily, reaching out to shake her hand. The Galra accepted it with a humble smile.

“It’s good to see you well, Lotor,” Nylan greeted him, clasping her spare hand over his. Beside her, a third pilot was joining Thace and Sylvux, removing his helmet as well.

“Commander Lusox, I should have known,” Thace grinned.

“It’s just Lusox now, or Lu if Annis has anything to say about it,” the former commander grunted, accepting Thace’s hand. He turned his head over his shoulder to address the fourth and final pilot, who was still in the process of approaching.

“Hey kit, get over here and greet the emperor and the paladins,” Lusox barked, although by the laugh the pilot emitted, this kind of treatment was not unusual or unwelcome.

“Please do,” Shiro smiled, finally approaching the others. “I’d like to meet the pilot that got us out of such a pinch.”

The pilot and Shiro met, hands outstretched towards one another – they shook hands, grips equally firm.

“Malachite right?” Shiro smiled.

“Well,” said the pilot, releasing Shiro’s hand and reaching up to remove their helmet. “That’s my code name.”

As his face was revealed, it took a moment for Shiro to process who, exactly, he was seeing. From somewhere behind him, Pidge released a noise somewhere between a shout and a sob. Familiar brown eyes scrunched in a warm smile as he glanced at the green and black paladins in turn.

“Hey there,” Matt smiled. “It’s been awhile.”

There was a split second of shared, stunned silence before the green paladin bolted towards him, already sobbing loudly.

“MATT YOU FUCKER!” Pidge screamed, immediately colliding with her brother. Matt caught her with an “oomf”, allowing his little sister to knock him over with the strength of her hug.
She sobbed into the shoulder of his flightsuit, banging his chest with a weak fist. “‘Hey there’?! ‘Hey there’?! Is that the only thing you have to say for yourself you piece of shit?!”

Matt laughed through his own tears, sniffing loudly as he buried a kiss into his little sister’s hair, ruffling it gently in his wake. “Well, I was thinking of saying something like, ‘miss me motherfuckers’, but I didn’t think it would be appropriate to curse in front of the emperor. But apparently it’s fine if your name is Katie Goddamn Holt.”

Keith snorted from nearby as Pidge pulled away from her brother, laughing and cuffing away tears.

“Damn straight it is!” she declared, smooshing his cheeks between her hands and placing kisses all over them. Shiro laughed softly, still reeling in disbelief as he dropped to his knees beside the siblings.

“Matt, it’s great to see y—,” he began, choking when one of Matt’s errant arms pulled him into a hug, his best friend pressing his face against Shiro’s chest.

“‘Great to see you’ my ass, Shiro. Don’t give me any of that formality crap,” the brunet mumbled against his armor. “Thank God you’re okay.”

Shiro smiled, ruffling Matt’s hair and rubbing a hesitant hand across the stretch of his friend’s back. He began to pull away, only to be yanked back in by the siblings for another fierce hug. Finally, Shiro relented and allowed himself to be sucked in by their shared warmth, squeezing Matt even tighter.

‘You’re here,’ Shiro thought in stunned relief, thoughts firing off in quick succession. ‘You’re here and you’re alive. I’m so sorry Matt. I’m so glad you’re still here, I could have—.’

“Where have you been?!” Pidge cut through Shiro’s thoughts, pulling away from Matt and tugging at the front of his flightsuit, giving him a shake as if to make a point. “Thace said he asked after you – said you were sold—.”

From beside them, Sylvux coughed awkwardly, turning to face away from the others. A nearly-cruel grin split over Matt’s features as he glanced after the Vesh leader.

“Oh yeah, I was sold alright,” Matt crowed, inclining his head backwards to look at the awkward Vesh commander. “Isn’t that right, Sylv?”

Sylvux cleared his throat again, but Pidge interrupted before Matt could continue to harass the Galra.

“Where’s Dad? Do you know where Dad is?!” Pidge demanded desperately, clutching Matt’s shoulders. To both her and Shiro’s relief, Matt smiled.

“Don’t worry Pidgeon, Dad’s safe,” he said, his sister giggling at the pet name. “We couldn’t risk leading any of the military or Druids to Earth, so he’s been living on what’s probably the most boring and innocuous planet in the universe. He’s well taken care of – he gets a great salary and everything for the repair work he does.”

“Salary?” Pidge echoed in mystification.

“Sylv bought Dad’s freedom,” Matt explained, glancing at the Galra fondly. “Both of ours, actually.”
“So that’s what you meant by ‘sold’,” Shiro observed, finally pulling away from his surrogate siblings.

“I guess you could say that,” Matt smiled mischievously at Sylvux, who glanced away sharply, ears pinned flat to his head.

Matt snickered and took to his feet – Pidge still clinging to his side – and reached up to gently pet Sylvux’s cheek.

“He saved my life,” he explained, bringing Sylvux down to press a kiss to his cheek. Matt turned to Thace and the other Paladins, gesturing towards the annals of the Vesh’s headquarters. “We’ll save the full story for another time, though. For now: welcome to The Haven.”

Chapter End Notes

Are you hyped? We certainly are!

Another big mecha fight and finally the return of Matt Holt! I hope this character reveal was equally surprising and exciting because there is going to be a LOT of Matt from here on out. A. LOT. We originally didn't want to tag him as a character because we didn't want to ruin the surprise but the truth is that Matt is a pretty major character in 'Constellation' - so how could we not? Hopefully you like the way he's portrayed and how he interacts with the rest of the cast. <3

On the other hand Lance is still missing and Hunk is NOT happy about it. Poor guy. ;/ I know a lot of you have been worried about Lance's fate and while I can't yet say what it is, I can promise that you will get an answer and soon.

I can also promise that you will see who another main character will be next chapter - he will have his own POV just like Shiro, Keith, and Thace!

Thank you as always for all of your readership and support. We hope you genuinely enjoy this new story!

<3
CheshireCity
“My lord,” Maray intoned as they slid a thick packet across the desk, “Here are the documents you requested.”

“Thank you, Maray,” came the tired reply. The lord regent scrubbed a hand across his cheek, frowning down at the paperwork skeptically. It was bigger than he had expected, a multitude of sheaves clipped together and waiting to be digitized. He trusted his advisor to check for any hang ups in the legal jargon but knew better than to not go over it himself – at the end of the day Maray was Vesh and he was not: insurrection was the last thing he needed.

“The hell is all this?” he asked, knocking his knuckles against the top of the file. He shot a wary glance to the clock hung innocuously on the wall. In less than half an hour he would be free to leave for his lunch, or, at least, would have been free if there wasn’t so much left to do. It wasn’t as if he had a schedule he was obligated to adhere to – as a matter of fact no one set that schedule but himself and, when asked, Maray. It was one of the few perks of gaining control of the empire.

Maray produced a small frown, looking to the packet frankly. “These are the finalization documents for the memorial,” they replied.

“Yes, I know that,” the lord regent sighed. “I mean why are there so many of them? How much red tape can one park necessitate?”

“Quite a lot,” Maray returned pertly. “And you know the Chief of Infrastructure likes to keep things tidy: she’s nearly as meticulous as I am.”

“And that’s why Ira still has her job,” the other hummed.

“Is that a compliment I detect?” Maray pressed coyly.

“Pointing out the facts is hardly worthy of being considered a compliment.”

“Oh Sendak,” the organizer mused, “Ever the same.”

The lord regent appraised them a moment, brow raised. “You never fail to get familiar with me,” he pointed out. “You’d have never acted this way with Zarkon.”

“I was under the impression you were markedly different from Zarkon?”

“I am,” Sendak growled.

“Well good,” Maray hummed, “That makes the whole occasionally-living-together thing all the more agreeable, then.”

“Careful who you say that around,” Sendak muttered, pulling the documents closer to him, “People might get the wrong idea.”

“What,” Maray posed innocently, “That the lord regent is so busy that he needs his personal advisor on call from time to time? I don’t see what’s so scandalous about that. After all, you let the
Captain of the Royal Guard live with you.”

“Zylo is the closest thing I have to a bodyguard right now,” the other shrugged, “Seeing as I can’t appoint an Imperial Sentinel on account of not being the emperor: she’s the best form of protection I have available to me. I would have banked on Nylan if she hadn’t left.”

“Well she’s hardly the only one to have left.”

“Clearly,” Sendak sniffed, “Else I wouldn’t have had to reappoint half my cabinet.”

‘Or conveniently create room where Zarkon’s allies still stood,’ he considered more truthfully. ‘The only way to end his regime was to pull it out by the roots – ten thousand years of corrupt ideology can’t be overturned so easily.’

“Indeed,” was all Maray had to say in reply.

“So,” Sendak began, flipping through the file and noting its careful annotations, “Explain to me what I’m looking at.”

“Well,” Maray perked up, pacing around the side of the desk to indicate, “After reading through this final proposal page by page I determined what the finer points were and marked them with these little pink tabs here: frankly they’re the only parts worth reading. That said, I know you’ll just go ahead and read every word anyway which is why this is actually the third draft that you’re seeing. Believe it or not this is the condensed version.”

“Incredible,” Sendak grumbled.

“Yes, Ira tends to be quite verbose.”

‘And you’re not?’ Sendak mused privately.

“All that’s left to be done is to sign where necessary,” Maray continued, “Some of the lines are easy to miss so I took the time to flag each of them with these little green stickers. Just peel them off when you’re done and I can have these documents sent over for archival.”

“Thank you for –,” Sendak began, cutting off at a sharp knock at his office door. He looked to the organizer, who frowned, looking to their tablet curiously.

“You don’t have any appointments right now,” Maray observed. The knock came again.

“Should I get that?”

“Please,” the lord regent permitted, sitting back in his chair as the door swung open to admit a sharply dressed woman with cropped hair, her two tails elegantly falling over her shoulders. Sendak straightened upon recognizing her, leaning over his desk with interest.

“Captain of Technological Affairs, Lady Ceris Zarturin nan Throk reporting,” she announced herself swiftly. “Permission to speak, sir?”

“Granted,” Sendak waved impatiently. “What have you to report?”

“It’s the Paladins of Voltron, my lord,” Ceris returned eagerly. “They appear to have arrived in the Mnemosyne System.”

‘Oh now that’s interesting,’ Sendak considered, appraising her subtly. ‘No doubt your cousin told you that. And should that be the case then it’s likely the Vesh have some sort of station within
“The Mnemosyne System is the last known location of the Convent,” he spoke. “There’s no way for the paladins to know this, however, which plays too well into Merla’s hands.”

“That was my concern as well, my lord,” Ceris nodded. “Presuming that Emperor Lotor is still among Team Voltron this situation could go very poorly. There are too many Druids aligned with Merla – should he try to challenge her head on there is no guarantee of his win or his survival. How should we proceed?”

Sendak looked to his hands thoughtfully, kneading them together above his desk. Things had been chaotic since Zarkon’s downfall, the entire empire falling into a state of uncertainty. The newly crowned prince – now emperor – had gained mass appeal overnight, not only formally uniting with the d’Zahtvesh but managing to overthrow Zarkon for all to see, all in the span of a day. His was the rule the people were clamoring for, but he had escaped City Station with the other paladins, no doubt for his own safety. It had been a good choice, Sendak decided, especially since the Druids had split off into their own faction, their self-appointed leader, Merla, taking advantage of the rebellion to make her own bid for power.

“She’ll kill him the second she has the chance,’ Sendak noted grimly. ‘Granted his death would mean my ascendency as emperor,’ he considered briefly, ‘But without public favor that position would be short lived. Besides, I have virtually no sway with the social elite – Haxus secured me that much, even if it was all he was good for. Still, with him dead I don’t have that kind of in anymore; if I’m to rule effectively and popularly then I can’t do it alone.’

“Try to establish contact with the Castle of Lions,” Sendak ordered. “I don’t know what the emperor is planning but it is imperative that we reach him before Merla does. The sooner we can ascertain his safety the sooner we can get City Station and the rest of the empire back on track: it’s time he returned home.”

“Understood,” Ceris bowed shortly. “When correspondence is reached should I relay the transmission straight to you, sir?”

“Yes,” Sendak approved. “Work with Maray on the matter; I will drop everything to receive that call.”

“Yes sir,” Ceris returned, blinking at him curiously. “It will be done. Permission to leave?”

“Granted,” Sendak nodded, watching as the captain struggled with how to make her exit. She settled for resting a hand to her breast, bowing once again before abruptly taking her leave. Sendak sighed as the door closed behind her, leaving him alone with Maray.

“No one knows how to salute nowadays,” the planner commented. “You really ought to do something about that.”

“Oh, ought I?” Sendak snorted, long since accustomed to his advisor’s outright means of speaking. He figured it was more a matter of Maray finally being able to exercise their opinion once out from under Zarkon’s thumb, but if Sendak was being entirely truthful he had come to appreciate the frank way in which the planner took to bossing him: it was a rare thing to find respect in equal measure with fearlessness.

‘I let them get away with too much,’ he scolded himself. ‘At least they have the presence of mind to only speak this way in private; it would really undermine my standing were they to talk like this before others.’
“So what do you suggest?” Sendak posed, inclining his cheek upon a palm casually. “What should the salute be? ‘Vol sa’, perhaps?”

Maray’s eyes narrowed suspiciously behind their glasses, much to Sendak’s delight. “Well that does seem to be a popular one right about now, doesn’t it?” the planner commented lightly.

“I just assumed it was one you would suggest.”

“You didn’t see me wearing a pin at the coronation, did you?” Maray countered. “That makes for quite an assumption.”

“I think your unwavering loyalty to Emperor Lotor more than compensates for a piece of metal,” Sendak returned. “It’s clear enough to me that you’re a sympathizer.”

“If that is how you feel then would you call this a case of keeping your enemies closer than your friends?” Maray suggested.

“No,” the lord regent refused. “That’s how Zarkon played things, and look where that got him. I acknowledge that many of my new appointments are likely Vesh – that doesn’t bother me. They chose to stay for a reason and so long as that reason is concern for the wellbeing and future of their home and their empire then that’s all I need hear. So long as we’re working towards the same goal then I couldn’t care less about their political differences.”

“That sounds like something Emperor Lotor would say,” Maray chuckled. “If only you let the people hear you say it.”

“Maybe that’s so,” Sendak considered, rising from his seat wearily and rolling the tension from his shoulders, “But it doesn’t take much observation to know that what our empire needs now is efficiency, forward movement, and cohesion. We’re too fragile to contest minor differences amongst ourselves. If the emperor and I are on the same page on that front then all the better: at least I have the experience he lacks.”

“And that is why the military backs you, I presume,” Maray quipped, gathering the files from the desk and tucking them beneath their arm. “Earned power is everything, is it not?”

Sendak quirked a brow, paused halfway between tugging on his coat. “Understanding the inner working of the government is everything,” he corrected. “I’m tired of the office; I’m going to finish up business at home. If I can’t take my lunch then I might at least be comfortable.”

“Should I accompany you, then?” Maray inquired.

“If you would,” Sendak allowed. “If Ira’s paperwork is anything to go off of then I can only assume how the rest of my day is bound to look.”

“Whatever would you do without me?” Maray smiled impishly, leading the way from the newly erected capitol building and into the streets of the First Ring. The Royal Guard posted outside the office followed silently in tow, hands resting readily atop their blasters.

Beyond the walls of the capitol the destruction of the uprising was still apparent, buildings pock marked from laser fire and crumbling in places from larger blasts. They had been cleaned to the best of the service worker’s ability, and yet dark black singes still blemished the façades. Even the streets were in need of repaving, a project that was only partially finished. Sendak surveyed it all with frustration – he had waded through oceans of paperwork just to get City Station back up and running and there was still so much farther to go.
“At least those horrid statues of Zarkon are out of here,” Maray remarked, noticing the other’s glum appearance. “Especially around the fairgrounds – how one was supposed to have fun with those things looming about like a nosy parent is anyone’s guess.”

“At least melting them down generated a bit of revenue,” Sendak nodded. “It’s the most good they ever did for the city.”

“Well it’s come a long way,” Maray returned kindly. “Care for an update?” they asked, waiting for Sendak’s approval. At a nod, they proceeded, “Well let’s go through the ranks then, shall we? Obviously Ira is at the top of her game, as per usual. She’ll be just as happy as you to have this memorial garden finalized, I think. As will the admiral. The Chief of Commerce will also be pleased: once the matter is digitized then they can move forward with distributing financial compensation for the families of fallen soldiers and civilians.”

“Dalith has had their hands full with that one,” Sendak agreed. “They’ve been incredibly tedious about working out the sums; it won’t bring back loved ones, but I think the people will feel cared for.”

“Well, where money doesn’t help the Chief of Civil Affairs will,” Maray mused. “Lylok has had their hands busy, too. The number of support networks that have cropped up are unbelievable.”

“Think it’s doing any good?” Sendak hummed thoughtfully.

“Undeniably,” the planner laughed, “There hasn’t been this level of care for the public in… well…” they shrugged.

“Since before we were born,” Sendak agreed.

“If you want my say, I think it also helps that you revoked mandatory reconditioning,” Maray continued. “Appointing Quinna to Head of Wellness was also a good move: she seems to know a lot about the old practices of treating the mind and it seems to have caught on well.”

“It’s not that I feel one way or the other about reconditioning,” Sendak frowned. “But?” Maray nudged.

“Well it’s a gamble, isn’t it?” Sendak explained. “Removing it means that there’s more room for dissent and dissatisfaction – without terminating those feelings the state of the government is a lot more variable. However letting the people feel organically also creates a foundation of respect for opinion, and that’s something no one’s really had the right to in a long time. We need fresh blood and fresh minds for a new approach to our government; restricting that will only default to bad habits and distrust, and we just can’t afford that happening.”

“You care a lot about what becomes of this empire, don’t you?” Maray observed quietly.

“Well I live in it,” the other checked, “As do you; one has to care.”

“Certainly,” Maray concurred, “But I mean to say that you care in the way Lylok does.”

“Don’t mistake me for soft.”

“Should I remind you of your homeless kit initiative?”

“Forgive me for having the sensibilities of a Gal native,” Sendak snorted indignantly. “On the
home planet we actually take care of our little ones – even those that aren’t ours by blood. I will never get over the indifference of City Station.”

“While I don’t disagree with you, I must say that one gets desensitized to it when wave after wave of soldiers turn up dead: of course we’ve got an abundance of orphaned kits. We just don’t have the societal infrastructure to care for them.”

“Then make it so,” Sendak scowled. “We’ve no business telling other planets how to command their people if we can’t take care of our own.”

“That doesn’t seem to stop you, though?” Maray returned boldly.

“Are you calling me a hypocrite?” Sendak glared.

“No, I’m calling you out:” Maray clarified, “You consider one prerequisite to the other and yet you’ve been juggling both in tandem.”

“I can’t very well drop off relations with those within our empire,” Sendak bit back.

“So you intend to lead by example?”

“I intend to do right by the common Galra,” the lord regent corrected. “If that’s considered ‘leading by example’ then so be it.”

“And here the papers feared you’d be another tyrant,” Maray smiled.

“Don’t be misled,” Sendak sniffed as they turned onto an avenue of upscale townhomes, “I’m still a complete and utter power hungry bastard: I just happen to give a shit about where I come from.”

“Well no worries, then,” Maray snickered, “I don’t think anyone’s forgetting that: your atrocities precede you.”

Sendak grunted in turn, unsure what to say. ‘I don’t need anyone to like me,’ he figured as they drew before the front of the manor, ‘But I do need respect, and respect out of fear only lasts so long. Still, I don’t think anyone will be forgetting the time I pushed that soldier out an airlock for insulting the Champion so soon.’

He stopped upon the manor’s steps, gazing up at his new home. It was freshly built and still smelled faintly of paint, nestled among the houses of the social elite and governing officials of City Station, Zarkon’s old palace demolished just after his death.

Sendak had risen to power naturally, fulfilling his role as second-in-command and taking over where Zarkon had left off – at least in terms of executive power. At the one emperor’s passing and the other’s escaping, Sendak had declared himself lord regent and the title had seemed to pacify many. Still, there were mixed reactions about the possibility of him staying on as ruler of the empire: he was certainly qualified but he lacked the definite charisma that Lotor did, and that alone had made significant strides with the public.

All things considered, there hadn’t been much squabbling over the seat of power: Sendak’s reputation did, in fact, precede him and combined with his role as admiral there were few who had the authority or martial skill to challenge him. In actuality, the worst of things had come from Haggar’s death: without an active Mother of Constellations the Druids were thrown into disarray, leading Merla – their own sort of lord regent – to assert control exactly as she wished. Which happened to be, of course, in complete opposition of the government.
‘I can understand not allying with Zarkon,’ Sendak pondered, ‘But how Merla thinks a Druid-controlled government is a good idea is beyond me – at least with the way she’s running things. She’s far too much like Zarkon for my tastes: worse, even, for having magick at her aide.’

“So Maray,” Sendak prompted, waiting for his advisor to climb the stairs beside him, “What’s on the docket for the rest of the day?”

“Well,” Maray read off, flicking their tablet to life and pulling up a calendar, “Since you’ve allocated more funds to the rebuilding effort, the Chief of Industry would like to get approval on where to concentrate the labor part of that decision. Gganna’s proposed the tramway and the Atmos system,” Maray continued, nodding up to the artificial sky above them.

“That’s simple,” Sendak hummed, “One is for transport purposes and the other is for aesthetics; we focus attention on the trams.”

“Need I remind you that the Atmos system also includes our simulated rain and keeps oxygen levels optimal,” Maray countered. “And we don’t yet know the full extent of the damages to those functions.”

“Then expedite analysis.”

“Hence a proposal for funding in that department,” Maray chided, “Which will need a thorough reading, I am sure.”

“Naturally,” Sendak sighed, “What else?”

“Thruvo of Foreign Affairs has been inundated with requests of secession from planets within our empire.”

“No surprise.”

“Some wish for a complete removal while others want more of a sovereign state,” Maray explained. “Frankly the whole thing sounds a mess – I don’t envy him his position. Or you, yours, really. Additionally, Orvaan from the Institute of Education is still pressing for how this whole uprising business should be covered in the classroom. So far there’s been a ban on that topic as Zarkon would have had it but clearly you run a much different ship.”

“And I take it there’s a folder worth of suggestions waiting for my perusal?” Sendak surmised, earning himself a brief nod. “Of course.”

“Oh, and yes,” Maray finished with a wry smile, “The admiral should be home by now.”

Sendak straightened, looking toward his front door eagerly, then back to Maray with derision. “You knew this whole time, didn’t you?” he accused.

“Well of course,” Maray admitted easily, “But if I told you so first off then how could I know you’d listen to the rest?”

“Manipulative.”

“Strategic,” Maray corrected.

“Hah,” Sendak returned ruefully, “It’s a good thing you can keep up with me.”

“I think it’s a better thing that I respect you.”
Sendak smirked, offering a short nod as he held open the door and allowed them both entrance. The interior of the manor was simple, if refined, decorated in thick plaster and elegant molding in cool shades of greys, blues, and lavenders. It wasn’t much but it was enough to call home and it suited the governing officials and aristocracy that visited it just fine.

Sendak progressed through the foyer quickly, making for the front-most sitting room to find the admiral lounging across one of the armchairs, legs swung over the rest. She brightened as he entered, popping up from her seat and setting aside what appeared to be a rather large mug of coffee.

“Welcome home,” she grinned, nodding in turn to the lord regent and Maray, who lingered at the doorway.

“Tora,” Sendak greeted, resting his hands over the admiral’s pauldrons, “You’re back early.”

He appraised her briefly; sharply dressed in an iteration of a uniform he once called his own. She stood much shorter than him, the close crop of her hair making her ears look all the bigger. She seemed tired, the crests of her knuckles worn from where she had worried them with stress – a bad habit he had unintentionally taught her. All the same, she looked happy and the regalia suited her well, making her look far beyond her few years.

“You look good, kit,” he murmured just loud enough for her to hear.

Tora paused mid whatever snide comment she was likely about to make, her expression melting into one of pride. “Thanks, Dad,” she breathed, holding her arms out a bit before her. “So can I hug you now or will that ruin your tough guy image?”

“I can hug my own kit in the privacy of my home,” Sendak laughed indignantly, pulling her close a moment. “That really speaks nothing to my competency as a ruler.”

Tora squeezed him tight in brief, stepping back and carding a hand through her short bangs. “So I fed our prisoner just now.”

“Tora,” the lord regent reprimanded at once.

Maray released a chagrined sigh from the doorway with a little exclamation of, “Oh dear.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the admiral threw up her hands defensively, “I know, we’ve been over this a thousand times – phrasing is everything. But no one is here to hear anything save for Maray and they don’t count.”

Maray released a resentful scoff.

“It’s really not that big of a secret that he’s our prisoner,” Tora continued. “I mean, I did kind of kidnap him and everything.”

Sendak released a low sigh, rubbing at a temple. “The fact that he’s been given housing and protection within my own home somewhat elevates his position,” he argued. “I’ve never heard a prisoner beg for so much ‘flan’ and get away with it before,” he added, stumbling awkwardly around the foreign word.

“Yeah, he’s pretty hard pressed,” Tora snorted, nodding her head towards the stairs. “Want to go see him?”

“I might as well,” Sendak assented, following his adoptive daughter to the lower floor where the guest apartments were situated. “I don’t suppose he’s said anything useful lately?”
“No,” the admiral shook her head. “You know how he is; when it comes to his friends he’s
tightlipped and defensive. Doesn’t even realize we’re on the same team.”

“Sounds like he’s warming to you, though,” Sendak countered.

“I don’t know,” Tora responded a bit sullenly, “He’s still pretty bitter that I betrayed Lo.”

“Does he know he took the emperor’s place?”

“No,” Tora admitted, “I didn’t have the heart to tell him.”

“Don’t get attached,” Sendak warned, touching her shoulder lightly.

“It’s okay,” Tora forced a smile. “I’m like you, Dad: all the friends I’ve made who haven’t
wound up dead I’ve managed to cross in some way; I’m used to it.”

“That’s not…”

Tora cleared her throat, ending their conversation abruptly. Motioning to the guards stationed
before one of the suites she gained them passage, knocking briefly on the metal door before giving
them both clearance to enter. The apartment beyond was simply constructed, a small kitchenette to
one side of a moderate dining room, beyond which lay a sizable living room. Out of sight to one side
was a bedroom and bathroom, a space that could be used for an office to the other.

Lance McClain stood in the center of the apartment; hands jammed into the pockets of his
jacket, appearing casual were it not for the guarded set of his shoulders. He regarded Sendak and
Tora warily, refusing to budge as they approached, watching just beyond them as his ticket to
freedom snapped closed.

“So what were you up to just now?” Tora accused, crossing her arms across her chest.

The paladin glanced back into the sitting room, a book spread open on the coffee table.
“Reading,” he answered vaguely with a ghost of a shrug.

“Uh huh,” the admiral hummed, striding past him for examination. She picked up the book
skeptically, setting his translator aside and paging through it. Lance stiffened.

“A biography of the Throk family’s technological inventions?” Tora surmised. “What, you
looking to be a programmer or something? I didn’t think that was your shtick.”

“It’s not,” Lance frowned, turning about so he could view both Sendak and Tora at once.
“But there’s fuckall to do in here; had to keep busy somehow.”

“What, setting fires wasn’t exciting enough?” the admiral cocked a brow, jerking her head
towards the still-charred remains of the kitchenette.

“Okay,” the human smirked, “You gotta give me credit for that one – I almost got out.”

“You’re not a prisoner,” Sendak stressed, drawing expressions of exasperation from the other
two.

“You keep me locked in here with guards outside my flat and I’m not allowed to go
anywhere without a really, really close escort,” the paladin pointed out. “And like, also I can’t
escape? So I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what a prisoner is.”

“You’ve been kept under protective custody by order of the emperor until you are fit to return
“Yeeaah, Keith?” the paladin snorted, “Pretty sure that’s not what he had in mind. Also if you haven’t noticed already my bullet wound is completely healed? Sooo?”

“We don’t want there to be any complications,” Tora spoke up with a smile.

“Complications?” Lance echoed. “Of what?”

“Of a gunshot wound,” the admiral explained. “We wouldn’t want it to open back up.”

“Sister, the only way this shit is opening back up is if you put a new one in me,” Lance pouted.

“Yeah,” Tora nodded, “And we wouldn’t want that.”

“You know, you are both the most and the least likely person to let me out of here,” the paladin sighed. “You’re kinda terrifying.”

“Thank you,” Tora chuckled. Sendak shot her a disapproving look. She scowled in turn, retreating to the dining room to the table where Lance’s lunch had been set.

“Lance,” Sendak emphasized, fighting to keep his tone civil, “The remaining Druids on staff have made it clear to me that you still need rest. Until you are given complete clearance by them, then there is nothing to be done for your stay here.”

“Wow,” Lance smiled forcibly, “Why do I get the feeling that that is complete bullshit?”

“It really doesn’t matter what you think,” Sendak returned tersely, “You’re remaining here.”

“Keith is gonna be so –.”

“Oh, damn the stars!” Tora swore, picking over the forgotten food tray.

“Problem?” Lance piped up, watching her closely. Sendak squinted at him with suspicion, looking back over to his daughter curiously. The admiral threw up her hands in exasperation, looking miffed.

“He took the damn fork again,” she explained. Then to Lance, “Would you quit it?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” the paladin shrugged. “I wasn’t given a fork today.”

“I brought you your damn meal,” Tora snarked back. “I know for a fact you had a fork.”

“A fork?” Sendak repeated disbelievingly. “I think we’ve better things to –.”

“The third one this myokokak!” Tora interjected pointedly. “Except the maids found the first two and they were bent to hell.”

“What are you up to?” Sendak barked, wheeling on Lance. The paladin flinched but remained where he stood, staring back at the Galra carelessly.

“I’m bored, what can I say?” he shrugged. “A few fucked up pieces of silverware never hurt anybody.”
‘What the hell is he playing at?’ the lord regent pondered. ‘Forks? And how could he bend them without... heat.’

“Excuse me a moment,” he muttered, turning from the other two and striding towards the east wing of the apartment.

“Yeah, sure, man, just go for it,” Lance called after him in annoyance. “I don’t have any privacy anyway.”

Sendak ignored him, heading for the bathroom and its industrial sized drying chamber. A quick survey of the room yielded precisely what he was looking for, apparently hidden on a high shelf in the single medicine cabinet. Sendak took the offending instrument, turning the fork over in his grip and noting the crude rearrangement of the tines.

“Of course,” he huffed, putting the pieces together. Returning to the living room he held the utensil aloft, finding some measure of satisfaction in the crestfallen look that crossed the paladin’s features.

“You think yourself clever, don’t you?” Sendak accused. “You weren’t reading about the Throk company’s hailer software, you were reading about something a little more pertinent, weren’t you?”

Lance paled, lips setting in a hard line.

‘Got you,’ Sendak noted victoriously.

“The doors,” Tora realized, looking between the open book and the apartment’s exit in surprise. “You little shit! You found out about the emergency override button, didn’t you? Whenever my doors jam I have to use a pen or something –.”

“Don’t give him ideas,” Sendak snapped. “And remember to contraband this in the future.”

“And you say I’m not a prisoner,” Lance grit.

Sendak bit back a scathing reply, trying without much luck to remain diplomatic. “Trust is something that is earned,” he stated instead. “And so far you’ve given me no incentive to trust you.”

“Yeah?” the paladin huffed a laugh. “Same could be said to you, buddy. I don’t know what you’re playing at but it isn’t gonna work. So until you figure that out I’m just gonna continue to be a thorn in your side.”

“You better hope your usefulness doesn’t run out, then.”

“Whatever, you’ll never get away with this, Sadsnack,” Lance shot back grumpily.

Sendak exhaled slowly, glaring all the while. “I know for a fact that you know my name.”

“Yeeaah not so sure that I do,” the paladin obviously lied. “Your names all sound so similar and they’re all weird, too. Can’t remember ‘em all.”

Sendak fought the urge to point out how completely ridiculous and alien human names sounded to him, but knew it was neither here nor there.

“If you weren’t such a valuable political tool I would have defenestrated you by now,” he threatened lowly.
“Man, really?” Lance beamed with mock interest, “That sounds fun; I’ve never been defenestrated before.”

“Do you even know what that means?” Tora snorted from beside him.

“No, not at all,” Lance shook his head innocently. “It’s not like I’m super good at literature or anything. I’m totally clueless.”

‘Cagey bastard,’ Sendak grumbled to himself, the urge to literally throw the paladin out a window only intensifying. ‘He’s far cleverer than I’ve given him credit for and I won’t be so quick to underestimate him again. Ceris better pull through for me with establishing contact to Team Voltron – if Lance is getting this desperate to get out then I can only imagine what extremes he’ll resort to next. If I don’t have him as leverage then this whole operation is sunk.’

“Hey Blue?” Tora quipped, diffusing the mounting tension. “You wanna talk to Lo, right?”

Lance perked up, looking uncertainly between the admiral and her father. “Yeah,” he hedged. “I mean, maybe not my first choice, but yeah. I wanna make sure that Keith and the others are alright.”

“Right,” Tora nodded kindly. “As do we. That’s why we keep asking you for information about how we might be able to find them.”

“Yeah, see, that’s the part I can’t deliver on,” Lance withdrew immediately.

“It doesn’t matter, Tora,” Sendak spoke up. “We have a possible location.”

Lance reacted immediately, expression rent in determination. “I swear to God Sendak if you hurt them I’ll –”

“At ease,” Sendak cut across dismissively, not bothering with the remainder of the paladin’s threat. “I’ve no intention of hurting them; while I obviously cannot provide you with unsupervised correspondence I can attest that I will have you there when they are hailed.”

“Yeah, I can imagine that you will,” Lance returned stiffly, anger simmered with resignation and fear.

‘You think I’ll kill you in front of them, don’t you?’ Sendak mused. ‘Torture you, at least. You don’t put it past me to do so, and you’re right to think that of me. However, hurting you would gain me nothing, whether you believe that or not; there’s nothing I can say at this point that will change that assumption.’

Sendak shook his head, pacing to the door and feeling far more tired than he had previously. “Come, Tora; he isn’t going to give us anything of use. I have too much to do today and clearly this is proving to be a waste of time.”

“The location of the paladins?” the admiral inquired, collecting the barely eaten luncheon tray and gathering by his side.


“W-wait,” Lance spoke up, expression drawn. He looked down at the ground, welling with frustration. “Let me make the call. When you hail them? Let me do it. I won’t try anything. I’ll tell them whatever it is you need me to say. Just… don’t hurt them.”
“I have only your word,” Sendak pointed out, intrigued.

“Yeah, I know,” Lance met his gaze determinedly. “So if I fuck it up then you can kill me.”

“I can kill you either way.”

“But only I can make it look like an accident,” the paladin answered grimly.

‘You’d do anything for those friends of yours,’ Sendak silently considered him a moment. ‘Having that strong a commitment to your beliefs demands respect and you shall have it – I’ll let you have your moment. But if making you think that the stakes are that high commands so much of your cooperation then I’ll do nothing to dissuade you of that notion. You play your part well enough and we might just all stand to benefit.’

“Very well,” he acknowledged simply. Lance wavered slightly in place, nodding his understanding.

“I relay what you want in exchange for their safety?” the paladin restated clearly. “If there’s any retaliation it will only be against me?”

“I swear it,” Sendak assented, realizing quickly that his words would hold little weight. “I’ll have a document drafted as contract,” he offered instead.

Lance nodded once more with a bitter smile, “Then it’s a promise.”

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUN!!!

Okay so a lot of shit just went down, yeah? First off this chapter marks the first time we get to see Sendak’s POV! What did you guys think? Moosey and I have received really positive feedback on how we depict Sendak so this is an entirely new way of examining his character - we actually get a feel for his thoughts and motivations. Personally I ADORE writing Sendak’s POV so I really hope you all enjoyed reading him. This chapter was nerve wracking to write but simultaneously really enjoyable because it is the first time we get to take a peek inside his head - I wanted to keep him in character while also highlighting that he’s a lot more complex than just some mysterious, roguish ex of Shiro’s, you know? Who Sendak is in private is definitely different than who he is in public: after all, Shiro saw SOMETHING in him, right? Ahhh I’m so eager to hear feedback on this!

Also we have Sendak confirmed for Tora’s adoptive dad! Do all the hints in Satellite add up now? :3

Naturally with that we have the return of Tora as well as the return of Lance! See? We promised there would be answers! Obviously, too, there will be many more to come.

<3
Ches
The Haven stretched out for what seemed like miles in a series of underground tunnels. Each was as tall and wide as the last, occasionally stretching into massive open caves that contained shops and towns, white buildings constructed seamlessly into the smooth, pale stone. The denizens of Glacimor – the Lepredae – slowly trickled out of their homes to observe the procession of Team Voltron and their allies through the intricate cave system. Evidenced from their long ears, they were clearly rabbit-like – their fur all in shades of ivory and grey – with pink and black eyes and velvet antlers. They were quiet, hanging back from the newcomers and observing them with critical stares.

Keith hesitated, unsure if he should wave. He’d only ever been exposed to the Galra and the other people living on City Station and had no idea what the proper protocol for any other foreign planet was. For all he knew, the Lepredae loathed the empire as much as any other planet did and he was just another tyrant in their eyes.

“The Lepredae,” Keith said softly to Sylvux, who was walking beside him at an even gait. The Galra’s ear swiveled towards the red paladin before he turned to face him fully. “How did you end up working with them? And… what are their opinions of me? Of the Empire?”

Sylvux hummed, gazing past Keith to the faces of the people that surrounded them.

“The Lepredae… have never been fans of the empire,” he concluded softly. Keith kept his posture straight, but the anxiety on his face must have been clear because Sylvux quickly added: “They are fierce warriors – one of the few people that Zarkon was not able to overthrow. However, they were still forced into a trade agreement some time ago – the coolant they manufacture is a highly coveted resource the galaxy over, and The Tyrant couldn’t let it slip from his grasp.

“That’s actually how the Vesh ended up here with them – our previous leader helped them to break the trade agreement some time ago and fight off the Empire’s resulting attack,” Sylvux continued. “It’s an ideal location for our base due to the storms and subterranean living – as you’ve learned, it’s almost impossible to detect. The Haven was a largely abandoned city when it initially became our headquarters, but as you can see —.”

He broke off with a smile as a young lavender-furred Lepredae with golden eyes jogged past them, calling out to their friends, “We made an impression. Many Lepredae have joined our efforts against the empire as a result. As for you, Highness…”

Sylvux smiled at Keith, clapping a large hand over his shoulder, “I cannot speak for all of them, but I feel the Lepredae have as much hope in you as all the others once enslaved by the empire.”

“They’re all free to leave,” Keith blurted suddenly, staring up at Sylvux with a serious furrow to his brow. “Everyone’s welcome to remain in the empire, but I won’t force them to stay or go.”

Sylvux’s grin warmed even further and he gave Keith’s shoulder a firm squeeze. “And that’s why the empire has so much hope in you – you’re just as kind of a leader as your father.”

Keith beamed, immediately brightening at the compliment. He glanced around Sylvux at Thace, and the older Galra flushed proudly. From Keith’s other side, Shiro touched his shoulder,
having finally joined him at the head of the procession. They were exiting another cave into the wide maw of what appeared to be a sort of city center; the interior was tiled with pale marble, arches of beveled glass hanging above them like canopies. In the center of the space was a tall building made of white stone, its roof terminating in smooth spirals, each door and window a perfect circle.

Within the foyer stood a conglomeration of tall Lepredae, each dressed in a white velvet cloak trimmed with sable fur, ornate birch bark masks obscuring their faces. The tallest of them approached Sylvux, tilting their head curiously.

“This is the Emperor?” he inquired in a soft voice.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Sylvux nodded with a deep bow. He gestured towards the man in front of him. “Emperor Lotor, may I introduce you to Prince Perét, the ruling monarch of Glacimor.”

“It is an honor to finally make your acquaintance,” said Perét, kneeling before Shiro in a single, silky motion and taking the black paladin’s hand in his paw. He pressed the mouth of his mask against the back of his hand in an imitation of a kiss. “I’ve heard so much about you – and such a handsome form allowed to you with your Altean roots.”

Shiro stared in horror while Keith watched the scene unfolding beside him with as much annoyance as amusement. He drew his lips into a thin line, shoulders shaking with the effort of holding in his laughter.

“I’m… ah…” Shiro began awkwardly, clearly not wanting to embarrass the aristocrat. The prince stood as smoothly as he had knelt, offering his hand to the flustered Shiro.

“Your Majesty,” Sylvux started, beginning to gesture towards Keith subtly, but the prince was completely hopeless, still regarding Shiro with a lackadaisical tilt to his head.

“Prince Perét,” one of the masked officials behind the monarch whispered.

“Hmm?” the prince inquired wistfully, raising one of his floppy ears. The official leaned in towards him, cupping her mouth with a paw as she whispered something urgent to the prince. Immediately, the Lepredae’s head jerked towards Keith, rearing back in shock. He looked back to Shiro, and then to Keith before clearing his throat.

“And… what a lovely fiancé you have, Emperor Lotor,” Perét coughed, gently patting Shiro’s hand with his spare paw and placing it back at the black paladin’s side.

“Thank you,” Keith nodded, smirking despite himself. Perét kneeled to the emperor, kissing his hand as well.

“Glacimor is happy to host both you and your fighters,” Perét explained as he stood. “Your coronation address and the defeat of The Tyrant were momentous, Lotor. The empire is eager to see what you have planned next.”

“Like I said, I’m eager to perform,” Keith responded, harkening back to his speech. It was all he could do to keep up with the political climate – several days of looking pretty at plays and cat shows had not been enough to prepare him for the mantle he had suddenly inherited overnight.

“Again, it was lovely to meet you but unfortunately I believe we both have duties to attend,” Perét informed Keith, touching a palm to his chest and bowing. Keith returned the gesture, bidding Perét farewell. The Lepredae monarch faced Shiro, coughing a bit awkwardly.

“Bridegroom,” he said softly, and then was swept away along with his entourage. Shiro
stared at Keith apologetically, clearly still completely flustered by the mixup. Somewhere behind
them, Pidge and Matt cackled.

“Great, now I have to deal with two of them,” Keith smirked over his shoulder at the siblings,
eager to change the subject. They scaled a set of stairs, turning and arriving in a large room full of
Galra. From the circular table in the middle it had clearly once been a meeting chamber of some sort
but the wires trailing over the floors and racks of servers crowding the area suggested that it had been
completely repurposed. Pidge was on the technology immediately, emitting a high-pitched squeal.

“Oh my God, on the Castle a rack a quarter of this size can hold over a petabyte,” she
gushed, petting the nearest rack reverently. “With ten thousand additional years of technology
working for you guys, I have no idea how much data a server like this could hold!”

“What would you need with anything over a petabyte?” Hunk gaped around the room.
“That’s not exactly practical!”

“Practical if you’re trying to store all the information the universe over,” a muffled voice
provided.

Suddenly, a fiberglass tile in the ceiling was jerked violently to the side, and the paladins
immediately took a defensive stance, Thace stepping back in alarm. However, nothing more
innocuous than a rope of wire slunk out of the disturbed tile, flopping loudly onto the floor.

“And to answer your question, each rack holds over one thousand yottabytes,” the
disembodied voice drawled through the ceiling, and a moment later a thin body was spilling down
onto the floor, a gangly Galra dressed in a filthy hoodie and leggings landing in a crouch beside the
green paladin. “Haven’t quite picked out a name for it yet.”

“Annis, you’re covered in fiberglass,” someone – the Galra named Lusox – chastised from
behind Keith. Annis tipped back his head, regarding the other Galra with a vaguely interested hum.

“Oh hey, you’re alive,” the thin Galra commented airily, to which Lusox grunted irately.

“Of course I am. Who else would keep your ass in line if I died?” Lusox sniped, jabbing a
claw at Annis in an accusatory fashion.

“I mean, true,” Annis shrugged, standing up straight and traipsing over to the table where a
collection of empty cans of what Keith could only assume were energy drinks was stacked. He
began to pick up each one, shaking them as he listened for which had the most fluid left.

“Annis!” Thace exclaimed warmly, stepping forward towards the addressed Galra. Annis
hummed again, dragging his eyes towards Thace before two sharp rows of teeth split across his face.

“Thace!” he cheered, colliding with Keith’s father in an enthusiastic hug, absolutely littering
him with little puffs of fiberglass. “Glad you could make it.”

“Glad to be here,” Thace smiled fondly as the pair broke apart. He rested a hand on Annis’
shoulder, gesturing towards him with his spare, “Everyone, I’d like to introduce Viceroy Annis
Saggarian nan Throk, former Commander of Special Operations.”

“Sup,” Annis said casually, draining one of the half-full energy drinks.

“Viceroy…?” Pidge mumbled dubiously.

Meanwhile, Hunk had drawn to attention, moving through the throng of people and up
towards Annis.

“Special Ops – that means you were in charge of Black Ops and Covert Ops!” the yellow paladin exclaimed. “We’ve spent weeks trying to get info on someone who was in your ranks, but nothing ever turned up.”

“I couldn’t even find where the Special Ops documents were located,” Pidge filled in, adjusting her glasses. “How’s that even possible?!”

Annis shrugged, withdrawing a cord from the inside of his hoodie, on which something like a thumb drive dangled, “I just took them with me.”

“But the files should have at least left some sort of trace, even if they were removed!” Pidge retorted dubiously. Annis grinned toothily once more.

“You really think the head of Special Ops is that amateur?”

“Okay, okay – technology is great blah, blah, blah!” Hunk interrupted the two techies, throwing his arms out to the sides. “But we really need your help! One of our friends – the blue paladin – was probably taken by someone who was in a Special Ops division. Do you have any information – anything – on someone who goes by Tora or Cora?”

“Tora?” Annis blinked owlishly, eyebrows rising immediately. “Of course I do. She’s our best sniper – she’s worked in both Black and Covert.”

“So you know her?” Hunk asked hopefully. “Do you have any idea why she’d take our friend? Or where they could be?”

Annis snorted, fiddling with one of the twin tails that slid into the back of his hoodie, “Well, if I had to guess she’s probably at home with her dear old dad. I’d bet anything he’s why she snatched the paladin of yours – probably to hold him ransom for political negotiation.”

“Her dad?” Keith blinked, recalling all the times that Tora had spoken of her adoptive father. She’d described him as gruff but awkwardly caring; an avid fan of Shiro’s. Keith wracked his brain for anyone politically important who could have fit that description, but thought of no one. “Who is he?”

“Her dad?” Annis said lazily. “Well, currently he’s the Lord Regent of the Empire, but you would know him as former Admiral Sendak.”

The room became deathly silent.

“Not surprising you didn’t know,” Annis shrugged. “They tried to keep it quiet, especially after she started getting him into political trouble – did you know they held her hostage so he’d be forced to compete in the arena? No offense, Vrepmyza.”

Keith looked to Shiro for answers, but his fiancé seemed just as shocked as he was, if not more. Shiro’s eyes were blown wide with disbelief, and he was shaking his head slowly, mouth working uselessly as he struggled for words. He finally managed to make a small noise before choking out a strained response:

“Sendak didn’t have a daughter,” he stated flatly. “I—,” he glanced to Keith nervously, and then to the rest of the paladins. Keith winced; no one other than him knew about Shiro’s past relationship with Sendak.
“Shiro would have known,” Keith cut in smoothly, not letting the topic linger on. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Positive,” Annis yawned, cracking open another energy drink and making to down it. Lusox stomped across the room and wrenched it from the taller Galra’s hand, to which Annis responded by making weak grabby hands at the confiscated beverage. He sighed in defeat, staring lazily at the shocked paladins. “I was a commander too, you know; I had dinner with them on several occasions. Unless it’s another Tora or Cora in Special Ops, then I’m pretty positive we’re thinking of the same person. Small, snarky, has lots of opinions?”

“Did you know this?” Keith asked, glancing sharply at Thace despite his attempt to remain neutral. But to his relief, his father seemed absolutely baffled.

“I knew Cora – Tora from the military. I was under the impression that she was just a private; I was the one who received and approved her recommendation for transferal to Hydrus,” Thace responded. “I easily could have seen her with him on several occasions; he was constantly surrounded by plenty of soldiers of varying ranks. But I had no idea she was Sendak’s kit.”

“Like I said, they kept it low key after she started getting invested with the Vesh. I doubt he told anyone; Sendak’s a private guy like that. Besides,” Annis glanced at Thace. “She was gone on that mission to Hydrus for almost four seasons. I was actually the one that requested her transferal there; it was a Covert Ops job.”

“What was she doing there?” Keith asked quickly. His eyes still flickered back to Shiro every few moments – he looked absolutely wounded.

“Doing work for the Vesh, actually,” Annis sighed, climbing up onto the table and sitting there casually. “I had her looking for something that would help us when we had to replace the Mother of Constellations.”

“What do you mean?” Keith asked, pulling up a chair and sitting near to where Annis was lounging over the table. The others in the room began to do the same, Matt clearing away Annis’ can stash with a nonchalant sweep of his arm.

“Oh boy, Majesty,” Annis grinned toothily. “Get ready for the info-dump of your life.”

Once everyone was settled, Annis retrieved a small tablet from his hoodie’s front pocket and drew up a projection. Three crests were displayed in the air: the jagged lines of the empire’s standard, the Galran character of the Vesh’s symbol, and something that looked similar to a lotus flower.

“So you see, the Druids have this weird system of ascendency,” Annis began, poking the floral symbol. Images burst forth around it, one clearly of Haggar. “Before Vrepmyza happened, old Haggs here was the HBIC – the Mother of Constellations.”

“What does that mean?” Pidge interrupted.

“The Mother of Constellations is the title of the head Druid,” Matt explained in Annis’ stead. “She’s gifted with incredible magical ability – but what sets her apart from the other Druids is the ability of restoration.”

“To bring back the dead,” Keith concluded, staring over at the still-shaken Shiro.

“Right,” Annis confirmed. “If a Druid is able to do this, all the others will immediately accept her as their leader. But only one Druid can do this at a time – there can only be one Mother living at any given moment. If a Mother dies of natural causes, or is killed by a non-Druid, then the power
will naturally pass to the Druid that fate deems most deserving of the power.” He frowned. “Or some cryptic bullshit like that. Magick isn’t my thing.”

“I remember this,” Keith spoke up. “It was in my mom’s diary – the other way to become Mother of Constellations is when another Druid murders her and essentially steals the power.”

“Bingo,” Annis snapped his fingers. “And if any of you were paying attention, Haggar was kind of a big reason that Zarkon was such a problem. Before Lo here showed up, the plan was to take her out and ensure the new Mother was loyal to the Vesh.”

“How would you be able to do that?” Shiro interrupted, eyes suddenly sharp. Keith didn’t need to ask to know that he was thinking of reconditioning.

“It’s a little dirty,” Annis winced. “But the new Mother is always really young when she inherits her powers. The idea would be to find her and have her be raised by members of the Vesh – instill ideas in her that would line up with ours.”

Keith immediately seethed, feeling his hair stand on end. He didn’t even have to voice his malcontent before Hunk spoke up in his stead.

“So you’d kidnap and brainwash a child?!” Hunk yelled, standing up in his seat. “I’m sorry man but that’s a lot more than a little dirty!”

“I never professed to be a saint,” Annis held up his hands in an act of defeat.

“That still doesn’t explain why Tora was on Hydrus,” Keith cut in, still incredibly dubious.

“So remember those pins we were all wearing at your coronation?” Annis inquired, playing with the projections and bringing up an image of a white flower atop a blue diamond.

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Keith snapped.

“Patience,” Annis chided, wagging a finger at Keith, who scowled and stood up, slamming his palms on the table. Shiro immediately set a hand on Keith’s back, softly uttering his name in an attempt to help ease his temper. Thace made a noise that was both displeased and exasperated.

“Ann,” he sighed.

“Fine, fine, whatever, I’m sorry,” the addressed Galra intoned airily. “So it would be kind of dangerous to have a Mother of Constellations floating around without any way to protect herself, right? So that’s where this comes in: this flower’s called the Mother’s Kiss.”

Suddenly, Shiro sat up straight to attention, “I know that flower.”

“Isn’t that the one Haggar used to control the ghosts?” Hunk asked, frowning at Shiro.

“That’d be the Mother’s Hands,” Matt explained. “The flowers are pretty closely related – the Mother’s Hands blooms in sunlight and grows in warm climates, it’s used in a lot of Druid spells and potions to guide spirits.”

“But it’s only has one use, however,” Nylan said from her seat, surprising Keith after her long bout of silence. “Its pollen is used to make a potion that will grant the Mother her full set of abilities early in life, rather than having to learn them traditionally. It’s said that the pollen
contains the memetic legacy of all of the previous Mothers’ knowledge.”

“That seems pretty convenient,” Pidge grumbled.

“It’s magick,” Annis snarked at her over one shoulder.

“That still doesn’t explain why Tora was on Hydrus,” Shiro cut in.

“I’m getting to that,” Annis sighed. “The only known place where the Mother’s Kiss grows is in the more frigid climates on Gal – and as you can imagine its location is pretty heavily protected by the Druids. Tora was one of many Covert Ops members sent out around the galaxy to look for a flower that could act as a replacement. Hydrus is pretty jungle-y and rich with flora, so it made sense to look there. But as you can imagine, it’s a time-consuming process to have to secretly collect samples and send them back to me while you’re juggling all your grunt duties – that’s why it took so long.”

“So she just up and left to follow me?” Keith sniffed.

“It’s,” Annis sighed, scrubbing at his face. “Long story short, she got reappointed to another Covert Ops job – bet you can’t guess which one.”

“Keeping an eye on me,” Keith scowled, sinking back into his chair. A moment later, he sat straight up, eyes widening in realization. “Wait – that means you assigned her there!”

“Guilty as charged,” sighed the accused Galra. “The Vesh had to keep tabs on you to see what you were about. And since ‘Private Cora’ was dishonorably discharged, that gave her a perfect excuse to be ‘reassigned’ as a lowly maid. Unfortunately I had no way of knowing she’d betray the Vesh for Sendak and use that position to her advantage.”


“She physically attacked a superior officer over a punishment dispute,” Thace filled in. “At least that’s the report I received when I returned to City Station.”

“Sad thing is, it actually happened.” Even though his irises were nearly invisible, Keith could tell that Annis was rolling his eyes. “If it weren’t for the fact that she was secretly their superior officer, then we’d be short one less player. Anywho —.

“This is where things get a little complicated for us,” Annis’ hand traveled back to the projected pictures, expanding one in particular. It displayed a Druid with long white hair draped neatly over one shoulder, her expression drawn. “This is Merla. She was the High Priestess essentially acting as Haggar’s second-in-command – I bet she’d like to have axed the old bitch herself if she’d had the power. I doubt any of the other Druids would have batted an eye at that – after all, Merla was one of Haggar’s two most notable apprentices and Haggar wasn’t exactly known for being a kind teacher. That said, after Haggar fell Merla rose to the top of the ranks. Even though she doesn’t have the powers of the Mother, she’s essentially acting the role.”

“And what of the true Mother?” Thace asked, tone clearly nervous.

Annis shook his head, “She hasn’t been discovered yet. I wouldn’t put it past Merla to kill every Apprentice Mage the Druids have, but then she’d be down an entire generation of Druids.”

There was a visible ripple of malcontent throughout the room, Keith hissing in disgust.

“I can pretty much guarantee you,” Annis told them. “That the second Merla finds out who it
is she’ll kill her on the spot to gain her powers.”

“Disgusting,” Thace snarled, clearly deeply affected by the other Galra’s words.

“Agreed,” Annis nodded sharply. “And what’s worse is that she’s broken the Druids off into their own little faction. She’s vying for political power over the empire.

“Back before the empire, Gal was ruled by a handful of aristocrats in their sovereign states,” he explained. “The Mother of Constellations essentially acted as their advisor. Merla wants that again, but in a bigger way – long story short she wants the Mother of Constellations position to work like that of an empress. So that’s your first group of opposition, Highness.

“Meanwhile, we have a whole other bundle of fun happening back home at City Station,” Annis collapsed the images and touched the hologram of the empire’s standard, bringing up a lieu of images. Keith felt anger swell up in his gut as he spotted Sendak clearly in the largest picture donning jet-black armor. “Like I mentioned earlier, Sendak’s taken over as lord regent in your absence, Highness. Unfortunately, since Zarkon left him as second-in-command, it was well within his rights to rise to this position once you escaped City Station. Not to mention, he’s known by the military and the people, so his rule is generally unquestioned. And he’s damn good at politics to boot – the guy’s a bastard, but he knows what he’s doing.”

Keith slumped in his chair, propping his face up in his hand. “Wonderful,” he mumbled into his palm.

“He’s got the entire Galra military backing him – or I mean, at least the vast majority of them – I’m sure some are Vesh,” Annis added in at Keith’s deadened expression. “So uh, that’s your second group of opposition. Thankfully Merla and Sendak aren’t aligned, so I’d get my ass in gear on trying to get on Sendak’s good side – he’s the one who’s going to be open to negotiations. Again – bastard, but well-liked. He knows you’re kind of beloved by the people, so for one, I doubt he’d do anything against you in the public eye. For two, he’s inevitably going to want your approval.”

“Negotiating with Sendak. Sounds fantastic;” Keith said very sarcastically. Weirdly enough, he was feeling the absence of Lance and his quips very keenly in that moment. Even though his antics often proved annoying, Keith couldn’t help but miss the blue paladin’s attempts to lighten the mood.

“Has any sort of plan been established?” Shiro asked instead. “Other than trying to align the Vesh with Sendak and the military?”

“Actually,” Matt spoke up. “That’s why we’re here at The Haven.”

“The Mnemosyne system is also home to a planet called Tirmania,” Sylvux spoke up at long last. Hunk perked up. “It’s a veritable gold mine for ingredients used in Druid potions.”

“I know that place!” the yellow paladin said. “I was stranded there after Pineapple got flung out of that corrupted wormhole.” His face took on a green hue, “It’s basically mushroom world – anything there that isn’t fungus is all yeasty. Even the locals.”

“The locals?” Keith quipped, cocking his head.

“Yeah,” Hunk’s nose wrinkled, and he looked positively queasy. “At night you’d see these tiny veiled aliens wandering around and none of the mushroom people would talk about them… Lance and I looked them up when I got back, apparently they’re like… sentient yeast called Scobies? They’ll dissolve your flesh right off of you if you so much as touch them,” he shivered. “No wonder
the Druids use that planet for their creepy witch spells.”

“Not even our mole in Merla’s ranks will talk about what it is they’re doing there,” Sylvux sighed. “But we were lucky enough to receive information from her that the Druids planned to come here. Thankfully, we were able to arrive before she did, otherwise we might have risked outright battle – however, Merla had some other stops to make first.”

“That said, I take it we’ve got some sort of ambush planned?” Pidge quipped. Nylan shook her head.

“No – the ideal situation would be a completely covert infiltration of the Druids’ ship, The Convent,” she said.

‘The Convent’? Okay now that just sounds like horror movie material,” Hunk commented after a particularly loud gulp.

“Our mole has let us know that the Apprentice Druids are all being closely monitored for any sign of the Mother’s abilities,” Nylan explained. “We plan to sneak aboard and rescue the kit who presents the abilities – from there, we’ll take her straight to Gal through a wormhole to attempt to retrieve The Kiss and have the potion made. Hopefully the Mother can provide us with more concise directions to its location. We cannot guarantee she will align with our ideals and provide us with assistance, but we will at least assure her safety in the ability to protect herself and make it that much harder for Merla to harm her.”

“Who’s going on this mission?” Keith asked.

“I am.”

The group turned towards Matt, where he sat with a resolute expression on his face. “I’ve been living with Sylv for over a year now, so I’m pretty familiar with the Galra culture necessary to navigate Gal.”

“Then why not just send a Galra?” Pidge asked, looking sincerely confused.

“Because,” Matt reached out to set a hand on his sister’s pauldron, his smile growing fond. “I want to.”

‘Matt has a younger sibling,’ Keith identified immediately. ‘He got to see Pidge grow up – of course he’d be sensitive to wanting to save a young kid.’

“Then I’ll go with you.”

Keith froze for a moment before turning to face Shiro – the black paladin’s expression was serious, mouth set in a determined line.

“Shiro?” his fiancé quipped, reaching out to touch his hand. Shiro wrapped his fingers around Keith’s, smiling at him gently.

“What?” Matt blinked in surprise.

“Someone with fighting experience needs to protect you and the Mother on that journey,” Shiro explained. “You’re amazing with that mecha, but I don’t think it would be exactly inconspicuous to fight with it – it’d draw a lot of attention.”

Keith frowned in confusion. He wasn’t hurt – he’d comfortably see Shiro do or go as he
pleased but he’d always assumed that Shiro would do anything to remain by his side, especially after they’d felt so separated during Keith’s fugue. He wouldn’t be the first to admit that they were more than a little co-dependent on each other; Keith himself absolutely clinging to Shiro after they’d spent a year apart, and Shiro responding in turn.

But soon the answer made itself clear as Keith felt Shiro’s earnestness swell up in his chest through their psychic bond.

“I need to do this for him,” Shiro told Keith, apparently having sensed his fiancé’s confusion.

“You feel like you owe it to him after what happened in the arena,” Keith realized; he turned his palm up, squeezing Shiro’s hand. “Shiro, you know it’s not going to undo what happened —.”

“But I can still make sure one of my best friends doesn’t get hurt again,” Shiro responded, eyes pinching with upset. “I don’t want to fail him again, Keith.”

“I understand,” Keith nodded silently, and then turned to address the table.

“Shiro and I will go with Matt,” he announced. Thace looked over at his son, frowning slightly, the rest of the members of the table wearing equal amounts of concern.

“Dad?” Keith asked, looking to Thace for answers.

“Keith, you need to be handling the negotiations with Sendak,” Thace told his son, touching his shoulder gently. “I know you’re used to taking on more physical sorts of missions, but as emperor your duties have changed.”

“I’m a paladin, though,” Keith responded, ears pinned to his head. “I have a responsibility to protect —.”

“You’ll be protecting a lot of people by securing that alliance, Keith,” Shiro assured him, rubbing his thumb over Keith’s fingers reassuringly. “Just because you’ll be talking instead of fighting doesn’t mean you’ll be doing any less.”

Keith bowed his head a little, almost embarrassed to have been called out on acting so rashly. He didn’t feel chastised, however – both his father and fiancé made solid points. And the people around him were obviously not judging his complete incompetence at being emperor – everything from Sylvux’s encouraging smile to Annis’ curious expression made that much clear. They wanted nothing more than to see the people’s emperor succeed.

“Okay,” Keith agreed, and squeezed Shiro’s hand once more.

Chapter End Notes

See, I told you guys there would be even more answers (as per the chapter title)!

So we finally get to see a bit of the inner workings of the Vesh! What did you think of The Haven? We also got the return of Annis, who will continue to be featured in this series as a prominent secondary character.

And he wasn't kidding about that info dump, was he? Hopefully all that information was easy to follow along with and didn't prove too boring - it's going to set up the events of
the remainder of the series, after all. I'll tease you with the knowledge that the next chapter will have an NSFW chunk, so with luck all the talking will be worth it! :3

<3
Ches
Keith absentmindedly stirred the remainder of his custard in his carafe, crushing a deep green berry under the round of his spoon. Across the dinner table Prince Perét stared curiously at him, white mouth stained bloody red with fruit.

“Is there something troubling you, Lotor?” the aristocrat quipped, his paw finding a tiny pot of milk to empty into the remains of his own dessert.

“Oh,” Keith mumbled. “Just… getting comfortable.”

The emperor shifted under Perét’s scrutiny, glancing at Shiro hesitantly out of the corner of his eye. The two had been invited to dine in with Glacimor’s leader, and a combination of politics and common courtesy effected that they couldn’t very well turn the prince’s offer down. It was easily the last place Keith currently wanted to be with Shiro’s impending departure for The Convent only hours away.

“How much longer is this going to take?” he thought at his fiancé begrudgingly.

They’d already spent the better part of two hours eating while the airheaded aristocrat had prattled on liltingly about the past political affairs of Gal. Keith supposed, on one hand, that it might have been a good idea to learn about the key players he’d inevitably come to face in the government, but quickly found that most of Perét’s stories repeatedly dissolved into meaningless scandals.

“It’s usually best to let your host excuse you,” Shiro thought back. “At least that’s how it was at the formal dinners in the Galra military. What do you remember about them from when you were out of it?”

Keith squinted in concentration, trying to recall the ends of the parties he’d attended while he was in his fugue, but quickly finding that he couldn’t. Most of them had terminated in him getting at least reasonably drunk before Tora carted him off back to his room, the prince usually whining for more alcohol.

“Maybe if we get sloshed enough he’ll let us go?” Keith thought, eyeing a decanter of liqueur near to his right hand. Shiro nudged his fiancé’s foot under the table, shooting Keith a clandestine smirk.

Perét’s attendant, however, seemed to be much quicker on the uptake than her lord, turning towards the heavily-polished wooden clock hanging nearby and quipping: “Your Imperial Majesty, did you and your bridegroom not have an early morning tomorrow?”

“Oh!” Perét gasped, ears going erect almost immediately. He turned towards the clock himself, wiping the fruit juice from his mouth with a cloth napkin, leaving a bright pink stain behind. “Is it that time already? I’m terribly sorry, I have a propensity to get carried away sometimes…”
“You don’t say?” Keith thought to Shiro sarcastically; Shiro responded by nudging his foot harder, clearly fighting back a smile.

“Be nice,” he scolded playfully, although Keith could easily tell that his fiancé was just as put out as himself. Shiro had been tense ever since their debriefing with the Vesh earlier in the day and Keith couldn’t blame him in the slightest knowing what Shiro had learned about his ex – not to mention the reappearance of Matt. Keith was eager to talk it out with him or, at the very least, to help Shiro to relax.

“It’s no trouble,” Keith lied, adopting the politest smile he could. The prince stood, rounding the table to offer the emperor a hand, helping him to his feet while his attendant helped Shiro to his. The rabbit-like aristocrat wrapped his arms around one of Keith’s own, tilting his head to one side curiously.

“Might I escort you to your lodgings, Lotor?” Perét inquired, petting Keith’s arm invitingly. Keith wrinkled his nose in confusion, uncertain of what to make of the offer. Physical contact seemed to make up a great part of Lepredae culture, and Keith wasn’t exactly sure how far that contact went – he wasn’t exactly keen on having a stranger snuggle up with himself and his fiancé.

Thankfully, there was an important rapping at the apartment door and Perét’s attendant quickly excused herself, returning moments later with an urgent expression on her face.

“My lord,” she began. “Your presence is requested with Sylvux as quickly as possible – he’s received news of the temporary Galra government’s updated trading agreements.”

Perét’s dreamy expression evaporated and he nodded earnestly, releasing Keith’s arm much to the emperor’s relief. He took the Keith’s hand between his warm palms, smiling pleasantly.

“It’s been an honor dining with you,” he said. “Thank you for allowing me your time, but I must be off now. Hopefully we’ll be able to see one another again in the near future.”

“You’re welcome,” Keith replied, gently touching the top of Perét’s paw with his spare hand. “Sleep well.”

“If I get to it!” Perét laughed, allowing his attendant to help him into his cloak and mask. He bowed to them once more before starting for the front door, stepping back in surprise when his handmaid opened it for their passage with a little, “Oh!”

“Sorry to bother you this late,” Matt apologized, stepping out of the prince’s way and waving to Shiro and Keith. “But you know how Sylv likes to stay on top of things…”

“Oh, it’s no trouble! I very much appreciate his thorough nature,” the prince responded as the assembled stepped out of his apartment. He peered at Keith and Shiro through his mask. “If it is not too much to ask, would you mind seeing His Imperial Majesty and his bridegroom to their chambers?”

“Not a problem whatsoever,” Matt grinned. “I was gonna offer anyway. Have a good night, Your Majesty.”

“You three as well,” Perét said, raising a hand in farewell as he headed down the hall alongside his attendant. Matt jerked his head to the other side of the hall, Shiro and Keith following him until they were out of earshot of the prince.
“Jesus Christ,” Matt mumbled, his shoulders slumping in relief. “I didn’t think he’d keep you that long.”

“Thanks for saving us,” Shiro surmised perceptively. “I’m pretty sure the trade agreement news could have waited until morning?”

Matt exchanged a knowing grin with him, “Oh no, you caught me. Yeaaaah, Perét’s kind of notorious for abducting guests, as you’ve figured out.”

“I’m pretty sure he was about ready to crawl into bed with us, too,” Keith frowned, following Matt to what appeared to be an elevator. The brunette fixed him with a thousand-yard stare.

“You’re joking but I seriously wouldn’t put it past him,” Matt mumbled, looking a little terrified as they stepped into the elevator. Three-fourths of the walls were glass, giving way to a grand view of the shell-colored government building where a massive central stairwell sparkled with pastel port lights.

Matt’s look softened. “Eh, but I shouldn’t be too hard on the guy. He’s can be a little… vapid at times, but he’s a good ruler. His armies managed to hold off the Galra forces after all.”

“That’s… pretty damn impressive,” Keith blinked in surprise. “It takes enough to beat back a fleet with the Lions; I can only imagine fighting the military hard enough to just make them give up.”

“Perét is kind of ruthless, believe it or not,” Matt explained as their elevator came to a stop; he hung a right, Keith and Shiro on his heels. “The Lepredae are ready to fight until they die and Perét isn’t beyond exploiting that fact – and neither were his forbearers. It’s how they’ve stayed a sovereign planet for so long —.”

“Geez, talk their heads off why don’t you?” Pidge’s voice cut in as the green paladin rounded a corner, propping herself up against the wall. “You only have over a year worth of dirt to fill us in on, bro.”

“Katie’s sad because I didn’t want to reiterate my tragic tale until all of us were present,” Matt explained, sidling up to his sister and draping an arm over her shoulder.

“‘Tragic tale’?” Keith repeated dubiously.

Shiro frowned, leaning around Matt and Pidge and glancing further down the hall, “Is Hunk with you?”

Pidge’s expression dimmed a bit in response and she sighed, crossing an arm over her torso and rubbing her bicep, “He crashed early again – said he was really tired.”

“He’s been ‘crashing early’ for the last six weeks,” Keith sighed. “He’s practically a ghost; we should drag him out of his room to come hang out.”

Shiro shook his head, “Give him time… he’s clearly going through a lot right now.”

“He said you lost the blue paladin, right?” Matt inquired, glancing around as he gestured the three down the hallway and into the open doors of a spacious apartment. “Come on, we’ll hang at my place for now.”

“Hunk and Lance are best friends,” Pidge filled her brother in, joining him on one side of a sectional couch, Shiro and Keith taking the other. “They’ve known each other since they were freshmen in the high school portion of the Garrison. It’s really, really taken a toll on Hunk.”
“I think I remember seeing them around,” Matt mused, glancing to Shiro for answers. “They were a few years behind us, right?”

“They were freshmen when I was a senior and you were a junior,” Shiro filled him in. “So that would make them a year behind Keith.”

Matt nodded, looking a little uncertain what to say, “I’m sure you guys will come across him eventually – besides,” he adopted a mischievous look, smirking over at Keith. “I’m certain the Most Illustrious and Wise Imperial Majesty—.”

“Do not,” Keith cut in, the Altean markings on his cheeks flaring bright blue. Matt continued on blithely, grinning toothily at the monarch’s distress.

“—Emperor Lotor of the Galra Empire has a little sway over the fate of his subjects,” the other concluded cheekily.

“Do me a favor and never fucking say that again,” Keith bit out, ears pressed flat to his head. Shiro reached over to pat his shoulder consolingly, but Keith could see how hard his fiancé was attempting to fight back a smirk.

“I still can’t believe you’re an emperor,” Matt shook his head slowly in disbelief. “And – you know – an alien.”

“All fun surprises for me, too,” Keith sighed.

“I dunno,” Matt shrugged. “I’d think you’d be pretty excited to be an alien.”

“It’s mad cool,” Pidge nodded with a matter-of-fact shrug.

“I mean it wasn’t exactly fun when I grew a new set of internal organs or the time my ears transplanted themselves to the top of my head,” scowled the emperor. “But at the same time, knowing that my entire existence proves a lot of Scullies at the Garrison wrong makes it just a little worth it.”

“Professor Langbehn would have a conniption,” Shiro smirked. “You two always got into it over aliens.”

“Well I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Professor Langbehn,” Matt smiled nostalgically, dropping his head onto the backrest of the couch. “Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.”

“Makes you feel weirdly old thinking back on the Garrison, huh?” Pidge smiled, bringing her knees up to her chin and resting it there.

“Shut up Pidgeon you’re like twelve,” Matt snarked at his sister, reaching over to ruffle her hair.

“I’m sixteen you fool!” she laughed, smacking Matt’s hand away. Her brother’s playful expression immediately dimmed.

“Sixteen…” Matt repeated softly, smile becoming wry. “You were only fourteen when I left. Has it really been that long?”

Keith could immediately tell that it wasn’t a rhetorical question, recalling that Shiro had no
idea how long he’d been held prisoner when he’d returned to Earth. Matt wouldn’t have had a
calendar for reference, and even if he had, Keith knew that the Galra timekeeping system didn’t
work the same.

“It’s February,” Keith filled him in. “It’s been seventeen months since you were captured.”

“February,” Matt repeated again, shaking his head. “I’ll be turning twenty-two pretty soon…
that’s so wild, I didn’t even realize I turned twenty-one.”

“What,” Shiro spoke up, his voice uncharacteristically small. “Matt, after you were sent away
to the colonies, what happened to you? How did you end up working with the Vesh?”

Matt sighed, leaning back in his seat once again; at the same time, Pidge sat up, looking at her
brother expectantly.

“Well,” he began, licking his lips. “After you took out my kneecap, it only took a few days
for me to be processed, thankfully. They gave me enough Quintessence where I could walk on it, but
unfortunately it was pretty jacked up for a while – don’t you dare make that guilty face at me
Takashi Shirogane, you saved my goddamn life,” Matt interrupted himself, gesturing accusatorily at
Shiro, who was beginning to whither into his seat. Matt produced a satisfied grin when Shiro righted
himself, subsequently erasing the expression from his features.

“The colony I was sent to was called Harfeld Nine – it’s part of a cluster of moons
surrounding a gas giant,” Matt explained. “They were agriculture-based; most of the work I did there
was planting seeds and harvesting by hand because their technology took a huge hit after an EMP
bomb was set off during an escape attempt.

“It took a long time and a lot of asking around and switching positions, but I eventually came
across Dad; but by then—,” Matt trailed off, wrinkling his brow. Pidge sat up straight, alarm painted
over her features.

“Matt?” she asked. “I thought you said Dad was—?”

“He’s okay now, but he was in pretty bad shape when I found him,” Matt admitted, although
he looked extremely guilty. “They had him working in redeveloping the machinery, and the
conditions were really wrecking his lungs.

“From there I started looking into ways we could get out, but when you’re a prentma, the
only way out is either dying or by —,” he hedged a glance at Shiro. “Changing professions.”

“Matt?” Shiro said urgently, his hands balling into fists on his lap.

“What do you mean by that?” Keith asked, already fearing the answer; the only ‘career paths’
for a slave, as it stood, were prentma, myzalta, or ylentma: workers, warriors, and sex slaves.

“Matt?” Pidge quipped again, reaching over to squeeze her brother’s hands. Matt flashed her
an exhausted smile.

“Basically, the gist of it is that you want to look appealing enough for an officer to want to
buy you,” her brother explained. “I had to learn a lot about Galra culture from the other prisoners and
officers in order to find out what was desirable to them and play that up as much as possible. And
then it eventually paid off.”

“God, Matt,” Keith shook his head in horror, but the elder Holt was smiling.
“It’s okay, I couldn’t have asked for a better outcome,” he admitted. “I was lucky, really – nothing even happened. I was given as a welcome gift to a visiting superior officer – Commander Sylvux.”

“So Sylvux is—?” Shiro frowned, eyes flashing warningly. Matt laughed, holding a hand up at his friend and shaking his head.

“It’s not like that,” Matt grinned. “He never even touched me – Sylv isn’t that kind of person. He’s… really gentle, and kind. And I mean,” he winked purposefully at his friends on the other side of the sectional. “There’s a reason he’s leader of the Vesh, you know. When we first met, we basically just spent the whole night talking about where we came from, how we’d gotten there… I guess I made an impression because he bought both Dad and I the next morning. He said he wanted to help us – get us medical treatment and make sure we were brought somewhere safe to work until he could find a way to get us home.

“But by the time he found somewhere safe for us, I’d already found out about the Vesh and Sylv’s cause and…” Matt smiled a little shyly. “I guess we got kind of attached to each other.”

“Sounds like he was touching you a lot by then,” Pidge snickered, to which Matt gasped dramatically in reply, slapping a hand to his chest in mock offense.

“Why Katherine, I would never!”

“This coming from the boy who was constantly waiting around in cornfields going: ‘oh no I hope no big, strong aliens abduct and probe me, how awful…’” Pidge squinted at her brother suspiciously. “I see you, alien fucker.”

“Jesus Christ, Pidge!” Keith laughed, collapsing back into his seat and covering his face with his hands. Matt just grinned.

Shiro huffed an embarrassed laugh, shaking his head. “It’s good to know that you found someone who cares for you so much,” he smiled softly at his friend, his hand instinctually finding Keith’s knee as he spoke. “You deserve to have someone who makes you that happy.”

Matt’s grin became almost shy and he reached up to readjust a section of his bangs. “Me, too,” he admitted. “He’s… Sylvux is… let’s just say I couldn’t leave him and the Vesh’s cause behind. Just knowing there were countless people out there like myself and Dad and Shiro…” Matt trailed off, shaking his head purposefully, eyes beginning to mist over. “Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“No,” Shiro shook his head whilst Pidge wrapped her arms around her brother’s shoulders, holding him tight. “You’ve been fighting so hard for so long, Matt; there’s no need to apologize.” He stood up, crossing the small space towards Matt and settling a hand on his shoulder, kneeling down to his height. “I’m… so lucky to be able to see you again.”

Matt sniffed, producing a watery laugh, “Bet you won’t be saying that for very long, Shiro – once I start tormenting you again, it’ll be five minutes before you’ll want to toss me out an airlock.”

“Believe it or not, I kind of missed you harping on me,” Shiro admitted with a wink. “You’re kind of my best friend.”

“Yeah, yeah get over here,” Matt reached out for Shiro, all but leaning out of his seat to embrace him. “I’m lucky to see you, too Shiro. And I wasn’t the only one to get put through all this space bullshit —.”

He looked over at Keith with a purposeful smile, “You deserve to have your happiness, too.”
“You’re gross,” Pidge finally spoke up after an elongated pause. Keith started to find that she was cuffing away tears with the backs of her hands. “You’re all so fucking gross.”

“Katie…” Matt smiled, releasing Shiro and pulling his sister into a tight hug. “Ugh, I haven’t even gotten in to how much I missed you, Pidgeon.”

“Oh God,” Pidge rolled her eyes, smacking impotently at her brother as he plastered kisses to her cheeks. “Get off of me you absolute walnut!”

“Maybe we should leave you guys to your own devices,” Keith spoke up. “Sounds like you two have a lot of catching up to do.”

“I mean I have like at least five more gross things to say to Katie,” Matt shrugged, casually putting his little sister into a headlock and beginning to grind his knuckles over her hair. His nonchalant expression sharpened. “And I bet you have at least twenty gross things to say to Shiro – and even more to do to him.”

“Shut the hell up!” Keith shouted accusatorily, grabbing an ornamental pillow from nearby and making to chuck it at Matt’s head. The pilot smacked it away with a triumphant noise, his victory short-lived as Pidge broke out of the headlock and tackled her brother to the couch.

“Your—your room is down the hall opposite this one, door on the end—Jesus, Pidge that’s cheating!” Matt snorted loudly as his sister jammed her fingers under his shirt, causing him to break into peals of laughter. He shoved at her head, flipping her off of the couch, to which Pidge responded with a melodramatic cry.

“Rose, I thought you said you’d never let go!” she swooned.

Matt rolled his eyes at her before facing his friends, “Don’t bother setting an alarm, I’ll come bang on your door when it’s time to get up.”

“Thanks Matt,” Shiro smiled, helping up Pidge before he and Keith headed towards the door.

“Sleep well you two.”

“I mean I’d say the same, but I doubt you’ll be getting much sleep,” Matt said, accompanying this with a lewd jerk of his fist. Pidge sat up, heaving her shoulders dramatically.

“Oh Shiro!” she cried pornographically, crossing her arms over her chest and tossing her head violently.

“So help me Matt and Katie Holt, I will throw another pillow at both of you!” Keith snarled with a blush, jabbing a finger at his friend before the brunet fell off of the couch laughing, bringing Pidge down with him again.

“Oh no, once again at the mercy of the Galra empire!” Matt decreed, flopping into repose.

Keith rolled his eyes, meeting Shiro’s embarrassed expression with one of his own. “Night you guys.”

“Night!” Pidge chirped back.

Shiro and Keith saw themselves out, quickly finding their room at the end of a hallway that mirrored Matt and Sylvux’s living space. The emperor released a heavy sigh, shaking his head.

“What is it?” Shiro quipped, only to be met by the withering stare from his fiancé.
“I literally have no idea how we’re going to handle two of them,” Keith grumbled, pawing open the door and stepping into the welcoming space. Instantly his eyes were on the stretch of the king-sized bed pressed up against the wall, looking about a thousand times more appealing than the shoved-together twin-mattresses that he and Shiro shared on the floor of the black paladin’s room.

“You look like a man starved,” Shiro joked, lightly touching the back of Keith’s cuirass. “Let me help you?”

“Please,” Keith said enthusiastically, rolling his shoulders as soon as the weight of the armor left his torso. Shiro’s hands slid down his arms, removing the white and red gauntlets before Keith turned around, helping his fiancé with his own protective gear.

“We really ought to start bringing extra clothes on missions,” Shiro quipped, fiddling with the zip of his flightsuit.

Keith wrinkled his nose, nodding in agreement, “I really don’t want to sleep in this.”

Shiro turned towards one of two doors in the room, opening it to reveal a linen closet – the other contained a bathroom, which Keith was inside hardly seconds after the door opened, rolling the body suit down his hips.

“Christ,” he mumbled, stepping out of the dirty clothes and setting to fumbling with the shower controls. “And I thought the showers back on Earth were hard to maneu—mm.”

Keith tipped his head back as soon as Shiro’s arms encircled his waist, the taller of the two settling his chin on Keith’s shoulder, “Hi.”

Shiro responded by pressing a little kiss into Keith’s neck, effectively distracting him from the shower controls and sending a squall of freezing water down onto them both. Shiro yipped, jumping backwards as Keith knocked into his chest, making a noise akin to a displeasured yowl.

“Sorry,” he bit out, braving back into the freezing water and manipulating the controls until finally the showerhead began to produce a warm stream.

“It’s fine,” Shiro returned quietly, reaching around him to grab what Keith imagined was a small bottle of shampoo. Keith glanced over his shoulder at his fiancé, sighing when Shiro tunneled his lathered fingers through his hair and began to scrub around the base of his ears.

“Feel good?” the black paladin inquired, the lilt of a smile tingling his voice.

“Yes,” Keith purred, tilting back his head into Shiro’s grip. “You’re going to melt me.”

Shiro produced a little chuckle in response, going about the soothing treatment.

“You’re always taking care of me,” Keith mumbled, leaning back into Shiro’s chest. “You ought to give me a turn sometime.”

“I certainly wouldn’t say no to that,” Shiro responded, and there was definitely a flirtatious edge to his voice. Keith pulled away from him, rinsing his hair of the suds before he grabbed the bottle that Shiro had gotten the shampoo from. He reached up, running his fingers and palms over his fiancé’s scalp, careful not to apply too much pressure with his claws. Shiro’s face went slack with relief as he leaned into Keith’s touch, pressing their chests together.

“How are you feeling?” Keith asked, using his pinky to wipe errant foam away from Shiro’s eyes.
“Exhausted,” Shiro responded almost immediately, bowing his head a little as Keith surged up against him, rolling onto his toes as he extended his arms to reach the back of Shiro’s hair. “There was… a lot happened today.”

“Do you wanna talk?” Keith asked, reaching up for the shower head and passing it off to Shiro.

There was a contemplative pause as Shiro rinsed out his hair, finally opening his eyes as he finished.

“I should, but I really don’t want to,” he said guiltily. “I know there’s a lot to be talked out what with Matt and…”

He trailed off purposefully, pupils darting to the corner of his eye. Keith immediately understood the unsaid implications.

“Sorry,” Shiro shook his head, reaching for the soap. “I shouldn’t be thinking about him when I’m naked with you.”

Keith smiled, gently wrestling the soap away from Shiro and rolling it between his wet palms. “It’s okay, it’s not like you said his name during sex.”

“Keith!”

The emperor laughed, setting down the soap and working the slick substance over Shiro’s chest, pausing only to tweak his nipples, drawing a sharp gasp out of his fiancé.

“Is this okay?” Keith asked, petting up over Shiro’s shoulders and rubbing his fingers into the nape of Shiro’s neck.

“More than,” Shiro consented huskily, groaning in appreciation as Keith gently turned him around and rolled the heel of his palms up the sides of Shiro’s neck, kneading out the tension there are he washed his lover. Gently, Keith skimmed his fingertips over Shiro’s back, dipping lower to gently take hold of his hips and roll his palms against the jut of the bone there. Shiro gasped softly, rocking back into Keith and moaning when he felt his hardness against the back of his thigh.

Keith keened into the sensation as Shiro ground back against him, twisting and groping for the showerhead before rinsing Shiro off, stroking along the planes of his body as he followed the hot torrent of water with his hands. Shiro turned his torso towards Keith, nearly slipping as the height disparity between them made it impossible for them to kiss. Keith snorted, immediately grabbing at his fiancé and helping to keep him upright.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work,” Shiro chuckled, humming in pleasure when Keith began to lave open-mouthed kisses to the column of his throat, nipping along the tension there. He fanned out his hands, fingers nimbly finding and working over Shiro’s pecs, rolling the hardened peaks of his nipples between his fingers. The soft noises that the black paladin produced in response shot liquid heat down between Keith’s legs and he ground his cock against Shiro’s thigh once more. Drawing one hand down Shiro’s chest, Keith fluttered his fingertips teasingly over Shiro’s lower belly, making him shiver and gasp with need.

Keith rolled up on his toes, drawing Shiro’s earlobe in between his teeth and tugging very gently. “Something you want, baby?” he continued to tease in a whisper, fingertips inching down to Shiro’s groin, just barely ghosting over his cock before he cruelly drew his hand back to Shiro’s hip, kneading him there harshly.
“Fuck,” Shiro bit out in a whisper, mouth falling open into a tremulous moan as Keith pulled him back by the hips, the tip of his cock rubbing between his thighs. Keith chuckled lowly, feeling the steam from the shower begin to crowd his lungs, the heat of the water combined with that of Shiro brining his skin to a flush.

Shiro glanced over his shoulder down at Keith, his expression an absolute wreck of desire, chest rising and falling under Keith’s palm, body trembling with want. Keith coyly pressed a kiss into Shiro’s shoulder, gazing up at him almost chastely.

“Well?” he pressed, the feigned innocence immediately evanescing into a look of sheer deviance. He pressed his cockhead deeper between Shiro’s well-muscled thighs, reveling in the needy noise his fiancée produced when he pulled back almost immediately, sighing at the friction.

“Keith please,” Shiro keened, throwing back his head and pressing his palms to the shower wall, gazing back at the red paladin in desperation.

“Please what?” the addressed grinned, drawing a look of embarrassed indignation from his fiancé. Keith laughed, his hand abandoning its post on Shiro’s pectoral and sliding down to loosely grip the base of Shiro’s erection, dragging the lax tunnel of his fingers up the length and finally rubbing the pad of his thumb against the sensitive tip. Shiro all but melted back into Keith, rocking his hips needily into his hand. Keith groaned, reaching back and using his spare hand to slide his cock back between Shiro’s thighs.

“Okay?” he checked breathily, rubbing Shiro’s hip before receiving an enthusiastic nod.

“Screw me, Keith,” Shiro groaned, and the chills that seized Keith’s chest and shot down to his cock were electric.

Keith pulled Shiro’s hips back into his thrust, moaning as his cock was engulfed by the tightness of Shiro’s thighs.

“You’re so goddamn gorgeous,” Keith hissed as he rutted against Shiro, littering the scarred expanse of his back with kisses. “You’re so good, I love you so much Takashi…”

He squeezed Shiro’s cock tighter, working his fist around it faster.

“Love you —,” Shiro choked out in response, pressing his forehead up against the tiled wall between his spread hands. His breath hitched as Keith thrust against him, the tip of his cock rubbing up against his perineum.

“I wanna be inside you so fucking bad, Takashi,” Keith hissed, rubbing his chest against Shiro’s back every time he drew his hips against his, toes curling with the friction against his nipples.

“Fuck—Keith…!” Shiro moaned, Keith feeling every bit of the shiver that tore through his body.

“—wanna feel you around me,” the monarch continued, his hips bucking as he thrust harder. “I want to feel your body milk me when I make you cum —.”

“God—,” Shiro choked out, his shaking hand gripping the base of his erection below Keith’s and beginning to pump quickly – he was beginning to shake. Keith abandoned Shiro’s cock and secured both hands around his hips, the sound of their bodies slapping together lewdly filling the steamy space. “Fuck, Keith I’m gonna—.”

“Come on,” Keith hissed. “Cum for me, Takashi.”
The tension in Shiro’s body mounted and he began to shake as he rode out his orgasm into Keith’s hand. His thighs twitched around Keith’s cock, causing him to stutter and swear as his own release was all but pulled from him, riding out his pleasure with several more sharp thrusts of his hips.

Shiro all but collapsed against the wall, Keith draping himself over his fiancé’s back as he attempted to get his bearings. Eventually, Shiro turned towards Keith, gently taking his cheek with his clean hand and drawing him into a deep kiss. His tongue pressed between Keith’s lips, the emperor gladly welcoming it in and brushing his own tongue against Shiro’s. They broke away a moment later, Shiro pressing their foreheads together and nuzzling his nose against Keith’s appreciatively.

“Thank you,” he sighed, kissing Keith’s cheek before pulling away, rinsing his hands under the spray of water before beginning to clean up his thighs. Keith took over, running his hand over Shiro’s sensitive sex and washing away his cum. Shiro knit his brows as Keith cleaned him, the latter gently releasing him a moment later before going in for another kiss.

“Of course,” Keith purred, feeling Shiro groping over his arm for the soap. “You don’t have to —.”

Shiro silenced Keith with another kiss, working the soap over Keith and scrubbing him gently. The motions were not as sensually fueled as they were tender, nearly reverent. Keith couldn’t help himself from melting under Shiro’s touch, sighing in contentment as he was swept out of the shower and into the embrace of a soft towel. Keith allowed Shiro to dry him off before he grabbed for a similar towel hanging nearby and returned the favor, cupping Shiro’s cheek in a gentle hand, his thumb rubbing an arch underneath his eye.

“I’m going to miss you,” Keith admitted softly.

“God, same here,” Shiro responded, wrapping his fingers around Keith’s wrist and pressing a kiss into his palm.

“Promise you won’t sneak back onto the ship?” Keith chuckled, Shiro grinning into the cup of his hand and shaking his head.

“I promise,” he said, cupping Keith’s cheek in his spare hand and guiding him into another kiss. Keith frowned into it, an inkling of anxiety working up his spine; Shiro pulled away, brow wrinkling in concern.

“Keith?”

“Promise not to leave without saying goodbye?” Keith said very quietly, unable to meet Shiro’s eyes. He winced then, shaking his head. “No, that came out wrong. I… I know how hard it is for you – if you don’t want to then —.”

Shiro drew Keith into his arms, tucking his fiancé’s face into the crook of his neck, stroking the back of his head and pressing a tender kiss into his shoulder.

“I promise,” Shiro said very softly. Not knowing what else to say, Keith just nodded and leaned into his warmth.

Chapter End Notes
Hello everyone! I hoped you enjoyed the love scene~ usually they come a bit later in our stories so I hope you were all pleasantly surprised! Shiro's always doting on Keith, so it was really fun to write about him getting spoiled~

Matt is one of my favorite characters to write we have VERY little to go off of canonically and got to shape his personality ourselves. He and Pidge's interactions are my absolute favorite, they're such shits to each other X3

Sorry I've been so absent from the author's notes as of late, my computer's out for repairs. Thank you all so, SO much for your love and support on this story and Leo Rising as a whole! Your comments are the highlight of my week and I'll be sure to set some time aside to properly reply to them all when I get my computer back <3

~Moosey
“That should about do it,” Pidge announced, wiping a streak of grease from her cheek. “This thing is no Lion, but it should work just as well.”

“Gee, thanks sis,” Matt grinned, popping up from his recline against the humanoid mecha, “You’re going to give Mal here self-confidence issues.” He gave the craft an affectionate pat, nodding to Shiro teasingly. “Is she always this charming?”

“I think you’d know better than most,” Shiro offered lightly, joining his friends before the open cockpit.

The craft’s body lay sphinxlike, the head bent to the ground so its pilot could easily step within. Pidge helped her brother inside, offering her hand to Shiro in turn so they could all huddle around the captain’s chair. At a signal from Matt, the hatch lowered and locked into place, eclipsing the trio in momentary darkness before the display of the controls and viewport began to alight in gem tone greens.

“HELLO, MATT,” the craft announced in a digital voice. The pilot grinned, petting the dash of the mecha.

“Hello, Malachite,” he greeted in turn. “Initiate Rest Mode.”

“REST MODE INITIATED,” it responded, and in an instant the display rearranged itself, prioritizing diagnostics over flight details.

‘I wish Kuro were this cooperative,’ Shiro considered with some envy.

He had always managed to get on well with the Lion, but there had been times of distrust and distancing from the craft’s end. It always worsened when his ability to lead or to act wavered, and – knowing that a moment of fear or indecision could endanger those he loved – Shiro often found himself bristling with anxiety each time he took the helm.

Though, in fairness, things had bettered between them. Shiro knew he wasn’t as experienced as the previous black paladins but Kuro had warmed up to him in his times of need. Despite initial resistance to Keith, Kuro had ultimately become more receptive to Shiro after the fusion of the Red and Black Lions. As Shiro’s mental link with his fiancé grew, the more his anxieties were ebbed and the more clearly he was able to pilot – and, therefore, the more respect Kuro showed towards him. The other paladins had all had their own effects, as well, each bolstering and emboldening Shiro in new ways.

‘I am so grateful for them,’ the black paladin reflected fondly, eyeing the other two. ‘They’ve helped to make me better: both as a person and as a leader. I’d really be lost without them.’

His thoughts turned briefly to Lance, and a flash of pain seized his heart. He hated not knowing where he friend was, or even if he was okay. Or… he didn’t like to consider the ‘or’.

‘If his last known whereabouts were with Tora,’ he assessed privately, ‘And if Tora is…’ he
stumbled, still unable to process the information. ‘If Tora is Sendak’s daughter then I can only imagine that Lance is under Sendak’s custody. I... I really don’t know what to make of that. I’d like to think I know Sendak,’ he thought, thoughts rippling with doubt, ‘And by that knowledge I would say that Lance should be alright – Sendak wouldn’t butcher a bargaining chip so easily, he’s too tactical and too clever. I just hope that he won’t run out of use for Lance; I’ve seen him depose of those in his command for lesser reasons. Still...’

He ground out the remainder of his hopes, knowing them useless. ‘The good news is that Sendak’s someone that can be bargained with, even if his costs are steep. We’ll get Lance back,’ he consoled himself, looking to Matt with relief. ‘We’ve been lucky so far.’

“Alright, Pidgeon,” Matt directed, unaware of his best friend’s private worries as he leaned over the console, “Show me what’s what.”

“So I’ve installed my cloaking devise on your mecha,” Pidge began, fiddling with the screens of the viewport. “Basically, it will make you invisible for thirty minutes once you activate it. It works just fine on all the Lions, but I don’t know what your charging situation is like so I can’t guarantee that it won’t eat up battery.”

“Shouldn’t be an issue,” Matt waved her off. “These babies were modelled on those Lions, after all – they can undergo days of fighting without needing a charge, so in some ways they might be even more refined. Granted, they don’t pack quite the same punch as your Lions do, but energy-wise, they’re pretty efficient.”

“Good to hear,” Shiro quipped with an anxious smile. “If we have to go straight to Gal following this mission then I can’t imagine there are many places to charge a one of a kind craft.”

“Yeah, the others were pretty worried about that, too, back when we were first engineering them,” Matt laughed. “Good thing I suggested using solar for a secondary energy source. Can you believe that that’s actually outdated tech for the Galra? They hadn’t even thought about it!”

“So,” Shiro breathed in relief, “As long as we’re on Gal the craft should charge during the day time?”

“Right-o,” Matt nodded with a grin, “So there’s no way we’re losing power unless the whole system ends up scrapped – not likely, given the materials and construction. I wouldn’t worry, to be honest.” Both Shiro and Pidge seemed to relax at that. “So, this cloaking mechanism? Can I stop it when I want?”

“Yeah,” the green paladin nodded, “You’re not locked in to the thirty minutes, so to speak: you can terminate whenever you need or want. Just know that you’ll need time for it to replenish itself between uses, otherwise you won’t get in the full thirty the next time.”

“Noted,” Matt affirmed. “While I think it’d be ambitious to assume Shiro and I could complete our mission within that time limit, it should at least cover our asses long enough to sneak into The Convent unnoticed. I sure hope the kid doesn’t give us too much trouble, though,” he added regretfully.

Shiro and Pidge shifted at his words, looking to one another uncomfortably. “Matt,” the green paladin hedged, toying with her glasses.

“I know,” her brother spoke up, sighing. “The whole thing is fiddly. I mean, with the right intention things can be just fine. But... yeah, I know how bad this whole idea sounds and seems. The Vesh have debated it pretty fiercely, if that makes you feel any better. Annis... well, he lacks a
certain finesse at times.”

“So what has the Vesh said?” Shiro insisted, drawing nearer. “Because while I would do anything to protect a child I’m less than in favor of…” he paused, wincing, “Well, I mean Hunk referred to it as ‘kidnapping’, and you have to know that doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Consider it putting her in protective custody,” Matt shook his head. “And no, I’m not just saying that to make you feel better or be more compliant. You have to remember that these young girls are in very real danger: Merla is dead set on killing whoever the real Mother of Constellations turns out to be. I mean, the only thing keeping her from wiping them all out is that losing a generation of Druids means potential instability in what she intends her reign to be: she needs and wants all the followers she can get. If anyone is doing any brainwashing, it’s gonna be her.”

“That was another word Hunk used,” Pidge pointed out. “Can you really say he’s wrong just because the agenda is in our favor?”

“I…” Matt frowned, discontented. “I don’t know, to be completely honest. But I promise you both that I mean well by this child and I’m gonna do everything in my power to protect her – from anyone. I’m not going to lie: coming under our care will mean being raised with Vesh morals and principles, but that’s kind of inevitable. That said, like hell would I let her autonomy be squashed – she’ll be free to think and act as she feels just… you know, raised within reason. She’s a young person and is still going to need guidance and parenting. The last thing the Vesh would let her become is a pet or a project.

“Besides, the Mother of Constellations used to be a position of great honor and respect once upon a time, before Druids were considered scary and ill intentioned. Their magicks were used in service to others and they were regarded highly in terms of a wide variety of knowledge. They were, well, benevolent. If anything, this girl is going to be seen as a practical saint among the Vesh – she’s a lot more likely to be spoiled than controlled,” Matt admitted with a laugh. “Still, I chose this mission for a reason, and that’s to ensure that she’s handled respectfully and compassionately. Someone like Annis? Well,” Matt pulled a face, “He’s a little too direct and crass to win over someone who might be scared and confused.”

“I certainly wish he’d told us even half of this,” Shiro huffed, fretting with his bangs. “It hasn’t set well with me since Annis brought it up and I know that Keith, for one, is having a moral panic over the whole situation. We ended up talking it over last night before bed but I really didn’t know what to say to put him at ease.”

“Well, looks like here’s your chance to clear it up with him,” Matt announced, nodding through the viewport to the entrance of the hangar from which the emperor had emerged. Shiro brightened at once and the siblings laughed, Matt flipping open the mecha’s head to allow his best friend through.

“Go,” Pidge urged him with a teasing flash of tongue, “Be gross with your fiancé – I have to say bye to Matt anyway.”

Shiro rolled his eyes good naturedly, disembarking and calling out to Keith. The red paladin straightened, attuning to his voice and smiling immediately.

“Shiro!” the thought reached out to him with ease.

“Hey babe,” Shiro thought in turn, drawing nearer. “How are you doing?”

“Better,” Keith admitted, stepping into the comfort of the black paladin’s arms. “I was afraid
you had already left.”

Shiro lowered his gaze in an admission of guilt, drawing Keith close to his chest and pressing a kiss to the crown of his head. “Not this time; I promised,” he murmured. It was a bad habit of his, he knew: leaving without saying goodbye. He hated the process, unshakeable fear creeping into the pit of his belly and nagging him incessantly until he saw the other person again. It was always the same with him: what if that goodbye was the last goodbye?

It had been with his mothers.

They had been all smiling faces and encouraging touches, helping him with his boxes and possessions as together they had transformed his little dorm into a livable space. At the time it was practically embarrassing – being fussed over by his moms like a little kid – but their presence and support had meant everything to him. He’d give anything to have it back again.

They had left later than most of the other parents, hesitant to leave their only child behind. Shiro was only fourteen, just ready to start at the Garrison and on his own for the first time. He was scared – his anxieties high the entire summer – and they knew it, offering as many reassurances as they could. They had taken the time to see a counselor in the interim, and the process had helped him considerably; still, the moment his mothers made to leave the anxiety came bubbling back.

All the same he had encouraged them to go, thanking them both for their help and hugging them off. They kissed his hair, telling him how proud of him they were, insisting they were only a short ways off in Santa Fe and that they were always just a call away. He told them he loved them and they parted, smiling over their shoulders and promising to text him when they got home.

Shiro had sat by his phone waiting, but the text never came. He knew it wasn’t like them to forget – that the drive back home was only about an hour – but still, he waited. Perhaps the traffic had been bad. So he waited another hour. Still, nothing.

Concerned, he called first one mother, then the other. Brigid was a little forgetful, he reckoned, so her phone was likely on mute. But Sayuri? She never missed a call, even if she was in the middle of three different things.

Shakily, he called again. Nothing. Then a third time and someone picked up.

“Okaa-san,” he breathed with relief. “Are you and mom home yet? You never texted, so I thought I’d check in.”

There was a pause, and then a strange man’s voice came over the line, tentative and apologetic. “I’m sorry, will you state who is speaking?” he asked.

Shiro recoiled, instantly on the defensive. “Who are you?” he asked instead. “I’m trying to reach my moms.”

The officer released a sigh, and then told him the news. There had been a drunk driver on the road and they had swerved out of their lane into oncoming traffic, striking his moms’ car and killing them almost instantly: they were both gone by the time the paramedics had arrived on scene.

The rest was a series of formalities and promises, ensuring that Shiro – now an orphan – would be processed through the proper channels. Shiro hadn’t even really heard the remainder of the conversation, answering automatically and unable to process his new reality. He hung up feeling numb, curling onto his mattress with the phone cradled close to his chest.

He wasn’t ready for his goodbye to have meant forever.
Subconsciously he squeezed Keith tighter, breathing in the gentle scent of him, trying to hold the moment in his mind. Keith allowed him the comfort, relaxing further against him, his hand soothing over the middle of Shiro’s back. He had been there before anyone else, the first person Shiro had opened up to about the accident. Their friendship had only just begun to grow genuine at the time, and Keith hadn’t known what to do to console Shiro when he had barged in on him crying on move out day, a blanket draped around his shoulders as he huddled on his bed in the dark. Keith had sat beside him quietly, offering him what solace he could, staying by his side until the tension and sorrow had eased from Shiro’s shoulders. He knew better than most how hard it was for Shiro to say goodbye.

Keith wiggled back a pace, just enough to look up to his fiancé, eyes burgeoning with questions. “Is everything okay?” he asked privately, expression intent.

Shiro nodded, determined to shake the anxieties from his heart. He knew a simple goodbye wouldn’t curse things, wouldn’t suddenly guarantee disaster. He knew it wasn’t somehow responsible for his mother’s deaths – that he’d feel the worse if something happened and he never got the chance to say farewell. He had realized as much when Keith had undergone his fugue and he had thought that he may never get the proper chance to say goodbye, the ambient regret gnawing at him for days: he wouldn’t be making that mistake again. What was more, Keith had deserved better: for someone who feared abandonment, Keith merited a proper goodbye, a chance for an assurance of love and also of return.

“Like I said, I promised. I didn’t want to miss seeing you off,” Shiro explained quietly, drawing a soft smile from his fiancé. “Besides, I know this isn’t the assignment you wanted.”

“What, doing emperor duties?” Keith laughed a little, looking pale. “I’m completely underprepared for them; I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“You won’t be alone,” Shiro encouraged him. “I know the others don’t know much more, either, but they’re there for you. You know, you may want to confer with Allura and Coran – course their opinions may be a bit counter to those of the Galra,” he added apologetically, “But they’re still invaluable resources when it comes to handling a political climate. Just… listen to what they have to say and chose the path that feels right,” he advised. “You may be a little rash at times,” Shiro admitted, “But your intuition is rarely wrong. Just… have patience.”

Keith nodded a bit, easing. “You’re right,” he agreed with a small smile, “As usual.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Shiro laughed. “I make plenty of mistakes, too.”

“Not when it really counts,” Keith countered. “Thank you. I just,” he exhaled slowly, “I just really hope we’re doing the right thing.”

“How do you mean?” Shiro queried. “With the Vesh, or…?”

“I guess,” Keith licked his lips. “I mean I trust dad and his judgements, and I trust you and Matt,” he began. “I just don’t know about this whole thing with the kid and –.”

Shiro perked up, interjecting quickly and sharing what Matt had explained to he and Pidge. “So as far as that goes,” he concluded, “I feel a lot more confident that what we are doing is right. Or, at least, for the best.”

“Well thank God,” Keith released in a rush. “I know we have to act in the best interest of the people but that girl is still one of the people, you know? I just wanted to be sure we were doing right by her, too. I don’t think I could have gone through with it otherwise.”
“I couldn’t have, either,” Shiro assured him, kissing his forehead lightly.

“Do you…” Keith murmured, looking away. “Do you think she has a family?”

“If she does then we’ll find them,” Shiro promised.

“What if they’re not Vesh?”

“I…” the black paladin hesitated. “I don’t know, Keith. We’ll work something out; you know I won’t let her be separated from her family, that’s too important.”

Keith nodded in understanding, still uneasy.

“Keith?” Shiro pressed, and his fiancé looked back to him nervously.

“So, uh,” he hedged, “Speaking of things Annis mentioned? Can we talk for a moment about Sendak – if you’re ready?”

Shiro shifted in place, trying to shake off the discomfort of talking about his ex. He knew it was something they had to talk about, but the news they had been given was still barely processing with him, enough to have caused him to avoid the topic altogether the night before. “You mean about Tora?” he sighed.

“Well, yeah,” Keith shrugged. “But, you know, also the entire fact that he straight up killed you and now we have to try and work with him?”

“Yeah…” Shiro trailed off, “That.”

“What…” Keith began uncertainly, “What do you think about what Annis said? That he was forced to do it? You… you didn’t know about Tora at all, right?”

“No, I didn’t,” Shiro answered, unable to keep from sounding bitter. “He never mentioned any kind of family to me, and certainly not a daughter. Well,” he paused, reconsidering. “He said what family he had was dead, so I have to assume that meant his nuclear family. He… he didn’t like talking about it, and, well, I didn’t press him on it, either, because I get that.”

Keith nodded quietly, waiting for him to continue.

“Sendak…” Shiro mused, “He’s a really private person when it comes down to it. Annis said that they kept their relation quiet, so I guess it only makes sense that he never said anything, even…” he worked his jaw silently, fighting down the rest of the sentence: even to me.

“Tora said that the guy she calls her dad is her adoptive dad,” Keith offered at length. “So that must be Sendak. She also told me that her biological dad was really abusive and that well… Sendak, I guess… took her in and raised her as his own in response. That he’s really good to her. Does that sound… I dunno, right? Possible? I mean, the person she describes definitely sounds like the type that would kill to keep her safe but… could that really be the same person?”

“Yes,” Shiro returned easily. “That was something he was always really straightforward on. He came from Gal, you see? A lot of the other Galra on board were born and raised in City Station, and he’d always lament about how different they were culturally from what he was used to, particularly about their attitudes towards family. From what he said, those from the home planet are a lot more closely knit and they place a lot more emphasis on their kids and their relationships with each other. You might think a guy like Sendak wouldn’t care about those things or would lie about it mattering to him, but that just wasn’t the case. If anything, he kind of looked down on other Galra for
rejecting those kinds of values – that is, if those other Galra didn’t look down on him first for being ‘country-born’ as he used to put it. So… yeah, given that, I really could see him being the sort of person to kill to protect whoever he considered family,” Shiro surmised, almost saddened.

‘Did she know?’ he wondered inwardly, recounting all the encounters he and Tora had shared only a couple months ago. ‘All those times she tried to reach out to me,’ he considered, ‘Was it because she knew I had been in a relationship with Sendak? Or was it because she knew that I cared about Keith? Maybe both. I don’t know what her aim is, but I do get the feeling that in the end she’s fiercely loyal to Sendak, and frankly I don’t know if that makes things better or worse.’

“I’m sorry,” Keith offered softly, drawing his attentions. “This… it’s got to be awkward for you. I mean, I know the others don’t know but… that doesn’t make the whole mess much easier, does it?”

“No,” Shiro admitted simply, “It doesn’t. I… is it wrong to say I wish I could talk with him? To just… sort these things out? I mean, I had a bit of a chance, after that last fight and everything,” he explained with a wince, “But I didn’t know about all of this. I guess…” he sighed, rubbing at a temple, “I guess ultimately it shouldn’t matter – it was in the past and it was his business. He was only trying to protect his family, I think. I… I guess in the end I really can’t fault him that, even if I wish he’d gone about it differently.”

“I mean, I don’t like it, either,” Keith huffed, “Especially since it upsets you. Especially especially the part where he full out killed you,” he added with a quiver of disdain. “But I also know at this point that I’d kill anyone to protect you and you’re my family. I’d say the same for Dad, but, well,” Keith gave a lopsided smile, “I already know that he’d force the situation somehow so I’d never be in that position, probably to his own endangerment. That’s just part of being a parent, I guess. So… well, Sendak was just doing what he had to, right?”

“Being a parent,” Shiro nodded quietly.

“So, on that note,” Keith broached, “Any ideas on how to talk to the guy?”

“Well,” Shiro returned earnestly, eager for the subject change, “The first thing would be to avoid any flattery or insincerity – he won’t buy it and he won’t appreciate it. He’s… ruthless and tactical with a dry wit and a valuation for order. You’re sarcastic already, which I think he’ll like,” Shiro admitted, “Just don’t forget to acknowledge his rank and talk to him with respect. He… well, he is a subordinate to you, really,” he added truthfully, “But I suppose treating him with some equality wouldn’t hurt, either. Don’t be afraid to press him and challenge him: he needs to respect you as openly as you do him, even if that’s…” Shiro trailed off uncertainly.

“I can’t say I exactly like Sendak,” Keith pointed out honestly. “He’s been a major dicklord to us in the past. But… I trust you and to be fair Sendak did do me a huge solid with the whole forcing Zarkon to hold a coronation for me thing. Even if that was ultimately for his own benefit, somehow. I guess I don’t really know him when it comes down to it,” Keith continued thoughtfully, “But I can say that I respect him: he clearly opposed Zarkon but managed to do so with finesse and grace for a really long time. He’s good at his job, too, and people seem to look up to him, if a bit fearfully – that part I could do without.”

“That’s fair,” Shiro assented.

“Still,” Keith insisted, catching his fiancé’s eyes, “I can respect him enough to work something out with him. Trusting him would be another story, but…” he shrugged hopefully, “We’ll see where this approach takes us, right?”
“Right,” Shiro agreed. “You’ll do fine.”

“Hope so,” Keith grinned nervously.

“Hey you gays,” Pidge announced herself, looking between the two of them expectantly. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Shiro confirmed reluctantly. He returned Keith to his arms, holding him close. “Take care, okay?” he ushered softly.

“I will, I promise,” Keith returned, reaching up to kiss him. Pidge made a mock noise of disgust and Keith laughed against Shiro’s mouth, batting at her distractedly with a hand.

“I’m proud of you, Takashi,” he offered quietly, and Shiro blushed at once.

“Proud?” he reiterated.

“You’ve really grown as a person lately,” Keith praised. “I promise this won’t be the last goodbye.”

Shiro nodded, biting a lip to tide back the surprised tears that threatened to form. “I love you, Keith,” he bade with a soft smile, “De luste da.”

“De luste da, Shiro,” Keith brightened, still unfamiliar with his mother tongue. “Good luck.”

Shiro returned the sentiment, watching his fiancé leave with Pidge from the hangar, following his form until he disappeared from sight altogether. The feeling of anxiety was there, but smaller than he had been expecting, an ambient discomfort that he knocked aside willfully.

‘Maybe Keith’s right,’ he wondered thoughtfully, ‘Maybe I have grown a bit.’

Matt made a small sound to mark his presence, drawing beside Shiro with cheeks pinked from tears.

“You alright?” Shiro asked him, turning to join him on the walk back to the mecha.

“Yeah,” Matt chuckled, scrubbing at his face with the heel of a palm. “Just not ready to leave my sis so soon,” he admitted. “But she’s in good hands – we both are.”

Shiro flushed at the subtle compliment, choosing to quietly nod his agreement. “We’ll be seeing Pidge and Keith in no time,” he offered, as much to himself as to Matt. “So The Convent, right?” he redirected as the mecha’s cockpit closed down around them.

“That’s the place,” Matt confirmed. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, not a lot of time to leave a note this time - Moosey and I decided to post this chapter early because we’ll be out of town this weekend for our best friends’ wedding! As always, we hope you enjoy and we absolutely LOVE to hear from you!
<3
Ches
Keith slumped against his seat, looking around the command room of the Castle of Lions. It seemed larger than usual, the missing two paladins making the space feel lonely – Keith wondered almost guiltily how his and Shiro’s absence must have affected their friends. Thace, too, was missing from the usual bustle of the ship, having been left behind at The Haven alongside Annis and Sylvux. Keith found that he missed the comfort of his presence, thankful all the same that someone he implicitly trusted would be partially responsible for monitoring the wellbeing of his fiancé.

“Keith?” a soft voice announced, and the paladin straightened.

“Hey Allura,” he greeted.

“I’m surprised to see you sitting in Shiro’s chair,” the princess commented, drawing to his side so they could better talk.

“Yes,” Keith shrugged. “I just figured this might be easier – give a better impression,” he explained, nodding to the viewport. “It’s positioned a lot better to talk. Speaking of which,” he prompted, “Any tips on how to approach Sendak?”

“Literally or conversationally?” Allura mused. “Because I’m still unsure how to actually reach the man. It’s unsurprising that I can’t just hail him directly: it’s not like I have his address, besides. The only other way would be to get within range of the City Station, but I’m not certain that that would be the safest move at this time.”

“So we can’t just hail The Intrepid?” Keith suggested. “I mean, Zarkon has been able to reach out to us just fine.”

“Yes, and you might be on to something there,” Allura brightened. “It makes sense that Zarkon would have had access to the castle’s communications: he spent a lot of time on this ship, after all, back when he was a paladin. Thinking about it, he must have disseminated our contact to his commanders, as well as that of the Lions. I imagine if we just look through our transmission history then we can gain contact in turn.”

“No dice,” Pidge spoke up from her seat to the left of Keith. “I’ve already tried working through that data and it’s encrypted,” she explained, pulling a face. “And I’m guessing that Annis’ encryption hardware was installed to all the ships because even I can’t seem to crack through it. The Galra really didn’t want non-allies to interfere with them.”

“I’m not surprised,” Allura sniffed. “I can only imagine how many angry transmissions they would receive otherwise.”

“So, what do we do, then?” Hunk chewed a lip. “I mean, if Sendak took over then don’t you kind of stand in direct conflict to his interests? You’re legally the emperor now, right? So, well, I mean, in that situation wouldn’t it be easier for him if you were dead?”

“That’s probably true,” Keith affirmed grimly. “And given our inability to reach him, I can only imagine that Lance is being used as a pawn to draw me in so he has the chance.”
“So then…?” Pidge began, but Hunk was on him faster.

“Okay, but we’re not abandoning Lance!”

“I’m not saying that we do,” Keith frowned. “First we just gotta figure out where Sendak stands. Annis said that he and Merla weren’t aligned, and that’s in our favor: we need to make it clear that things should stay that way.”

“Even as lord regent,” Allura considered, “Sendak still has to contend with the fact that Keith managed to become very popular among his people – and that’s not likely to be forgotten so quickly. At best, Sendak would be willing to work alongside us in taking out Merla, and at worst, then Keith should have a faithful following from at least part of the population. It would be chaotic, of course, but a division in public opinion may still enable Keith to reclaim his rule.”

“I wouldn’t want a civil war among my people,” Keith countered quickly. “I’d figure something else out before it came to that. Anything else.”

“Okay, so political entanglements aside,” Pidge persisted, “What’s our course of action? I mean, say this does go south – I didn’t exactly hear the Vesh talk about a backup plan. What recourse do we have to cover our asses?”

“We’re banking pretty heavy on this going smoothly, huh?” Hunk agreed anxiously.

“Yeah,” Keith smiled thinly. “Allura? What are your thoughts?”

“This is a delicate situation,” the princess admitted. “So it’s going to need to be handled gracefully and with care.”

Pidge made a choked sound of suppressed laughter and Keith shot her a dirty look.

“Uh, Keith isn’t exactly…” Hunk added in.

“I know, guys,” Keith returned hotly, only making Pidge giggle further. “It doesn’t matter; I’ve got to do this.”

“I have every confidence in Keith,” Allura stated calmly. “Even if he is inexperienced and… hotheaded,” she added with a quirk of her lips, “From what Thace has told me, he has a natural flair for leadership. Besides, he couldn’t have won over the hearts of so many without an outstanding amount of charisma.”

“What charisma?” Keith muttered.

“Yeah, and I don’t think Sendak’s gonna give a damn how charismatic Keith is or isn’t,” Pidge chipped in. “But that said, I believe in him too and all that mushy shit.”

“If Sendak can’t be swayed,” Allura ruminated, “Then we will certainly have to seek allegiance with other forces. Stell and O’shetal provided arms to the Vesh, so I’d have to imagine that they’d be the most likely to aid us – I wonder how much contact they’ve had with the Vesh since the uprising, however.”

“Annis didn’t exactly say,” Keith mused. “I guess it really depends what their aims were in helping in the first place. It could have just been a ‘fuck you’ to Zarkon and have that be the end of that. I mean, a lot of planets within the empire had something to stand from unseating him: that doesn’t mean anything about how willing they’d be to keep helping us.”
“That’s a valid point,” Allura sighed. “In that case, we need to try and ensure that our attempt goes as smoothly as it – oh?”

The paladins sat up in their seats as the viewport flickered, a screen spreading out across the center. A prim looking uniformed Galra faced them, her expression screwed into one of intense concentration. She blinked in delighted surprise as she realized her transmission had been received, rearranging her features into professional indifference.

“Greetings,” she began, folding her long fingers before her. “I am Captain of Technological Affairs Lady Ceris Zarturin nan Throk.”

“‘Nan Throk’?” Keith identified quickly.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Ceris bowed her head briefly. “I have to imagine you’ve been in contact with my cousin by now: Annis is to thank for my being able to reach you, after all.”

“What do you mean?” Keith bristled instantly.

‘If that gangly bastard has betrayed us…’ he thought warningly.

“Nothing of consequence, Your Majesty,” Ceris placated easily. “Merely he was seeking out a means for you to contact the lord regent, which suits both of our needs perfectly as the lord regent has been quite rigorously searching you out, himself.”

Keith exchanged a surprised glance with Allura.

“Lady Ceris,” Keith addressed, feeling fluttery, “Would you be so kind as to put me in contact with the him, in that case? We have matters to discuss.”

“Certainly,” Ceris nodded briskly, “Let me connect you now.”

The screen flickered, blacking out save for a series of blinking dots that indicated the call was going through. Keith released a low breath, trying to make himself look as presentable as possible. He had scarcely talked to Sendak in the past – the majority of the man’s attentions being diverted to Shiro – and he wasn’t entirely certain what to expect from him.

Allura placed a calming hand to his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. “You’ll do fine,” she encouraged softly. “Don’t forget that you have an advantage as the rightful emperor: stay respectful but also hold your ground where appropriate. I’ll be right here.”

“Thanks, Allura,” Keith breathed. The screen changed and Keith felt his stomach plummet in anticipation. But when the call became clear it wasn’t Sendak on the other line.

“Lance!?” Hunk exclaimed, jolting out of his seat.

“Hey guys,” the blue paladin greeted, giving a little wave.

‘He looks so relieved,’ Keith noted at once. ‘But weary, too. Even still, he doesn’t look like he’s been treated poorly.’

“Lance!” Hunk repeated, stunned. “Are you okay, buddy? What’s going on? Did you intercept the call? Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Lance nodded, his eyes flickering beyond the screen and back to it. Hunk made a noise bordering on a growl, his shoulders set.
“He’s right there, isn’t he?” he surmised. “Is he making you say this?”

“No,” Lance responded convincingly. “I’m really doing alright, honestly. I’m in Sendak’s office right now; first time I’ve been in it, actually. Uhm, I have this little apartment in the downstairs. Has its own bathroom and kitchen and everything although I, uh, kind of burned down the kitchen so I could try and get out. Not that I’m not let out,” he added somewhat hastily, “I mean I can go for walks around City Station, I just have fuckton of guards with me.”

“Not that I’m not relieved to see you,” Keith frowned, “But why isn’t Se – the lord regent –,” he corrected, remembering Sendak was off screen, “The one talking to us now? Also, what happened to your armor?”

“Confiscated,” Lance shrugged, “Along with my bayard, of course. Smart move on their part. Got these new digs, though,” he added, plucking at his jacket, “They’re pretty comfy.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess,” Lance mused, sending a glance past the screen. “I just had my flightsuit the first couple days, then they gave me a few changes of clothes, which was… nice,” he said, struggling around the last word. “But to answer your other questions, no, I didn’t intercept the call, and he’s not talking because I was the one who asked to speak to you guys first. I just… really wanted to make sure you were all okay,” he stressed meaningfully. He frowned, craning to get a better look at the ship. “Where’s Shiro and Thace?”

“They’re…” Keith began, not sure what was safe to say. “They’re busy attending to other matters,” he settled on. “They’re okay.”

“I hope,” he added privately.

“You look pretty good,” Hunk commented slowly. “You eating alright and everything?”

“Yeah,” Lance confirmed and there was an audible scoff beyond him. Lance scowled, rolling his eyes. “I mean, the food’s good, I just haven’t been eating a whole ton of it. Kind of hard to trust what I’m eating. Also the Galra diet is pretty meaty and I’m fairly sick of it.”

“We are not trying to poison you,” came Sendak’s chagrined voice. Lance made to reply but bit back the comment, settling back against the couch resignedly.

“Anyway,” Lance grumped, “Sendak talked to me in preparation for this call – I guess he’s been trying to reach you for a while now, so it’s not like this call came as a surprise. He says he honestly has no intention to attack you guys.”

Pidge gave an incredulous grunt.

“Yeah, right?” Lance agreed. “But, I don’t know, we signed a contract that he wouldn’t do it and I think it’d look really bad on his part if he broke his word so I really don’t think he’s gonna do that.”

“Okay,” Keith returned, “Providing that’s true, there’s got to be some sort of catch to this. If he’s not trying to kill us – kill me –,” he reconsidered, “Then there’s a reason for it. What does he want?”

“Honestly, I’m not entirely sure,” Lance sighed, “So you’ll have to ask him. I mean, he told me about the snafu with the Druids. From what he’s said, the military has sided with him and the Druids are their current enemy. I guess they’re pretty strong opposition because the military and
everyone seems pretty worried about it. Even the civilians are talking about it, when I go on walks and stuff? It’s been pretty big news.

“I mean, not all the Druids took off – there’s still some left around City Station, but most people don’t seem to trust them. Which sucks, really, because they’re the ones who are like the doctors around this place.”

Keith nodded in confirmation, subconsciously rubbing at his leg.

“So I mean,” Lance continued, “That’s pretty shit. But there’s this big bad named Merla and she seems pretty out for blood. I guess she wants to be the boss of the Druids, but it doesn’t sound like she wants to stop there. Consensus is that she wants the throne, or, at least, the same power as an emperor. Empress? Whatever. She’s one to watch out for, is what I’m saying.”

“I’ve heard about her,” Keith said vaguely. “Like the military, we also consider her to be an enemy.”

“Well I mean that’s great news!” Lance returned with forced enthusiasm. “Because Sendak wants to team up with you to take her out.”


Keith’s heart leapt, unable to keep from feeling hopeful. ‘Sendak working alongside us is exactly what we need right now,’ he acknowledged. ‘What’s more is that it sounds even better if he’s the one proposing this – I figured we’d have to really work at it to get him to comply. But…’

“I still don’t hear the catch,” he pointed out.

“Yeaaaaah,” Lance drawled. “I mean I’m kinda…” he paused suddenly, looking up as if for permission. “I’m kinda being held here until that’s a thing. At least, so Sendak says.”

“You’re being held ransom?” Hunk clarified angrily.

“I mean,” Lance winced, “Yeah, kinda. It makes sense, though, doesn’t it? It both keeps you from trying to attack him and City Station and forces you to try and comply with him.”

“So that’s why Tora kidnapped you?” Keith pressed. “So Sendak could use you as leverage against us later?”

“Pretty much,” Lance sighed, “Although I’m pretty certain I wasn’t their first choice.”

Keith frowned, realizing the implications. “Me?” he wondered, perturbed. “What would Sendak want with me, personally?”

“Lance,” came Sendak’s warning tone and the blue paladin paled.

“Point is,” Lance continued, eyes flickering between the lord regent and the screen nervously, “Is that one way or another this is a pretty good bargain. I mean, look, I really want to keep you guys safe and teaming up would help ensure that, at least for a while. Just don’t… don’t do this just to get me back, okay?” he smiled sadly. “It wouldn’t be worth it.”

“Of course it’d be worth it!” Hunk shot back indignantly. “Lance, don’t undervalue yourself – you’re important to us; of course we’d come help you!”

Lance flushed, looking at his lap. “Really, though,” he continued earnestly. “I know there’s
only so much that we can do as Team Voltron, but even so, Keith, you’re still the emperor and what you say and do matters. If City Station – Gal, even – has a fighting chance against the Druids they’ll need support and it doesn’t sound like Sendak can secure that on his own. I think they’re really banking on your help.

“Besides that, I don’t think it’d be a great idea to have the military as your enemy. I mean, given your popularity I don’t think fighting you guys would be too smart, but there are Special Ops and if they really wanted to take you out I have to imagine they could pull it off. I just really want you guys to be safe. So… please consider it?”

Keith bit his lip, nodding. “I won’t say one way or another just yet,” he warned, “Not without talking to Sendak first.”

“My lord?” came a female voice, and Sendak must have consented to the exchange, because the hailer was moved from its place before Lance and turned around to face the lord regent. There was a flash of the interior of the room during which Keith could make out the uniforms of the Royal Guard and he tensed, knowing that Lance would have no means of escape with them present. The screen took a moment to refocus and Sendak’s image came into view. He sat before a large desk, a hand resting against his mouth casually. He didn’t look much different, his usual armor replaced with a black set.

“Lord Regent,” Keith greeted stiffly.

Sendak gave a nod of acknowledgement, moving his hand aside. “Your Imperial Majesty,” he replied in turn, “It’s good to finally get in contact with you.”

“I would have appreciated if you had hailed me directly,” Keith pointed out, “Rather than going through Lance.”

“I assumed you would want to ascertain your friend’s safety,” Sendak mused. “That aside, it was his request to speak to you first and I had no reason to deny him that.”

‘I should really ask more about this truce,’ Keith inwardly sighed. ‘But if I fuck that up I won’t get to hear about anything else. I’ve got to play my cards carefully.’

“How are my people?” he asked instead, drawing a small hum from the lord regent.

“They are still recovering from the attacks,” he answered honestly. “I’ve made motions to compensate families for their losses, both civilian and military. Granted, that only does so much but they need to know that they are cared for in such a tumultuous time.”

Keith could only nod, surprised by the answer. ‘That’s weirdly kind of him. Maybe he cares more for the people’s wellbeing than I gave him credit for.’

“You may be surprised to know,” Sendak continued, “That despite the empire’s massive size our economy is still carefully meted out; there is only so much allocated to City Station, and to Gal, itself. Given that ours is a consumer culture rather than a producer, we only have so many means of generating external revenue.”

“Then it’s made by conquest?” Keith assumed and Sendak raised a brow.

“In part,” he admitted. “What I mean by this explanation is that funds here in City Station have had to be rerouted to the most pressing issues. I’ve taken spending from programs like Research and Development – which the remaining Druids are not happy about – and from areas we are already excelling at: namely technology and military. This may seem counterintuitive given our
current situation with Merla, but the fact still stands that we’re not gaining any recruits at this time so there is little need for an emphasis in training.”

“That sounds very well thought out,” Keith praised, reeling.

’He really has a handle on things,’ he realized. ‘I must look so incompetent in comparison. I don’t even know the first thing about the government, nonetheless what programs there are. How am I supposed to take care of my people if I don’t even know who the major players are? Who’s going to be there to teach me? What if I don’t have enough time to learn it all?’

The thoughts curdled in his stomach unpleasantly.

“Where have the funds been redirected to?” he inquired, hoping that Sendak couldn’t sense his anxieties.

“Outside of the compensations I mentioned, namely infrastructure,” Sendak replied. “There was a lot of damage to the First Ring; the other two suffered some harm, as well, but significantly less so. Rebuilding has been a chief priority, as has getting the trams back up and running. The work, at least, has generated some jobs, which the people appear grateful for. Given the fallout of the attacks, the community has banded together rather nicely. There has been real a climate of charity lately, and I’ve been certain to take advantage of that fact.”

“’Take advantage of’?” Keith repeated critically.

“Yes; you may not be aware but the Second Ring has a poverty problem, particularly among the young. Because mortality rates are so variable, we tend to have periods wherein there is an influx of orphaned kits.”

Keith made a pained keen, interest peaking.

“I’ve been making strides to amend that problem,” Sendak explained, “Which for once is being met favorably by the people; there is a sense of philanthropy nowadays.”

’I’m surprised he’s so invested in such a thing,’ Keith considered. ‘Then again, Shiro did say that Sendak was different than most on City Station for caring about families so much. After all, he apparently fought to the death just to protect Tora. I guess that it only makes sense that he’d use his power to enact his own ideals. Still, it’s just weird to see him admitting to caring for anything or anyone – he’s self-serving enough I’d think it would be shameful to him.’

“What about those who were loyal to Zarkon?” Keith asked. “What’s become of those people?”

“Nothing,” Sendak returned casually. “They are allowed to have a difference of opinion; I’ve done away with reconditioning so they have a choice to dissent. That said, their neighbors will be distrusting of them and they’re no longer likely to be promoted through the ranks. Zarkon is dead so there is no one left to follow in his stead; no one is left to continue his ideals. I’ve replaced what cabinet members that remained that still upheld those ways as they’ll do nothing but block legislation. Perhaps that in itself is a bit tyrannical,” he mused, “But forward movement is far more important at this time.”

“And what became of Zarkon?” Keith pressed. He could still remember the weight of the emperor’s head held aloft in his hand, the hideous way that his body had distorted as it tried to heal itself too rapidly.

“His body was moved to a safe location the day you left,” Sendak answered, “And it was
buried shortly thereafter. He’s beneath the ossuary now in an unmarked grave – I presume it would have been robbed or otherwise vandalized if it had been any other way. I’m sure there is a Druid or two that would love to get their hands on his bones, if only to make some strong spell or another. At least that’s one enemy cleared.”

“You say that like you’re Vesh,” Keith pointed out.

“I’m not,” Sendak clarified, “But I suspect that you and your entourage are?”

Keith considered him uncertainly, unsure how much to divulge. It made sense to protect his association with the Vesh, but it was also no secret that he had used the Vesh’s salute at his coronation, or that Shiro had been wearing their pin. He still wasn’t sure how his fiancé had gotten a hold of one of them, only noticing it after the ensuing chaos. He hadn’t really thought to ask, what with Lance missing and then Shiro’s proposal.

“We are allied with the Vesh, yes,” he confessed with a sigh. “Although I doubt that comes as any sort of surprise.”

Hunk and Pidge looked to him worriedly.

“I’m not sure how that news will settle with the public,” Sendak hummed. “Certainly some of them will be in support.”

“I take it, then, that the people want me in charge and the military is content with you?” Keith analyzed quickly. “Hence the division?”

Sendak made a small laugh, nodding ruefully. “Yes, that seems to be the consensus. Ultimately, few were in favor of Zarkon, so the Vesh were initially welcomed as their focus was to unseat him. Now that he’s gone many people fear that the Vesh are too radical, that they’ll disrupt our way of life too much. At the same time, many are in support of your succession to the throne. It’s a complicated state of affairs.”

“So they hated Zarkon but still want me to rule similarly to him?” Keith frowned.

“In some aspects, yes, I suppose so,” Sendak considered. “There’s already been a lot of social and political upset: change at this point is frightening to them.”

“But there needs to be change,” Keith argued. “Everything I saw – the social iniquity, the violence, the way mixed race peoples were treated – all of that stands to be righted.”

Sendak made an expression as though he didn’t completely agree. “Change is only effective in moderation,” he countered. “Too much too soon leaves people with no time to adjust, no matter how well intentioned. These changes you’re proposing must be gradual or they’ll only stand to backfire.”

Keith quieted, feeling chastised. ‘That’s exactly how I’d do things,’ he lamented. ‘But Sendak’s probably right – he has way more experience, after all. How the hell am I supposed to do this?’

“Lance said you wanted to work together?” Keith mentioned. “That would also mean working with the Vesh.”

“I realize,” Sendak conceded. “And I imagine that such an alliance would make the public far more uneasy if you didn’t come part and parcel with it. Overall I feel that this is the right move to make for their safety and for that of the empire. Moving against Merla will be no easy feat
considering she and her followers are magick users: as large as our military may be you must remember that they are dispersed across the galaxies. They can’t be called back at a moment’s notice – they don’t have Druids that can open wormholes, of course – and most are stationed to hold the peace.”

“Or to keep owned planets complacent,” Keith muttered.

“Regardless,” Sendak stressed with annoyance, “Only so much of our military will be prepared to fight against Merla. That means that we would have to rely on outside forces,” he continued, looking as though the sentiment pained him. “As you can imagine, those planets within the empire tend not to have military – certainly not a standing army.”

“So you would need me to strike treaties with those that do,” Keith surmised.

“The Vesh clearly did not manage their coup alone,” Sendak pointed out. “You must have allies somewhere.”

“I can think of a few places I could request assistance,” Keith returned neutrally.

“Have the Vesh made any plans regarding your enemies?”

“Are you asking if they’ve been conspiring against you?” Keith accused.

“Are you considering me your enemy?” Sendak shot back. Keith bristled, unsettled by the iciness of the lord regent’s demeanor.

‘Alright,’ he cautioned, ‘Time to back down, this is getting dangerous.’

“I’m not considering you anything at the present,” Keith worded carefully. “If you want us to work together then I’m not going to consent to anything until I fully understand the terms. Until then I’m just regarding you as another player in this confrontation.”

Sendak settled, looking appeased. “You are right to be reserved,” he conceded. “However, working together also entails a modicum of disclosure: so far I have been forthright with you and it would be in good keeping for you to do the same.”

Keith grit his teeth, feeling the subtle manipulation. ‘That’s literally the worst thing about Sendak,’ he realized. ‘He doesn’t outright force anyone to do anything, he just uses his words as traps and lets the other person fall into them. He did the exact same thing with Zarkon, forcing his hand so he didn’t lose face. Ultimately, Zarkon always had the freedom to refuse his offer but in some ways he really couldn’t, either. If I don’t come forth about the Vesh then this deal might be off the table for good and he knows that. What’s worse is that he’s set it up so that if this falls through it’s ultimately my fault. Clever bastard.’

“The Vesh are making motions against Merla,” he confessed. “Rather than attacking her directly, however, they’re making efforts to undermine her hold on the Druids. If you’re concerned that the Galra military is not enough then I highly doubt that the Vesh have the firepower needed to take her on, and they’re not ones for making half assed decisions.”

Sendak nodded thoughtfully, scanning the room a moment. “Lance mentioned that both Thace and Vrempyza are missing,” he observed. “I take it then that when you said they were busy you were alluding to that directive?”

Keith pursed his lips, feeling resigned. ‘Am I giving away too much?’ he wondered nervously. None of his friends had tried to stop him, but then again he wasn’t certain that they had
the ability to, either.

‘All the same,’ he reasoned, ‘I have to earn Sendak’s trust somehow, just as he has to earn mine. If I sacrifice a bit of confidentiality then so be it. After all, if this goes well then he’ll be privy to this information anyway. And if it doesn’t then I don’t think he can really use this against us, either. As it is Shiro and Matt should be out of The Convent before Sendak would have a chance to betray their location and it’s not like he’s going to know that they even went to Gal afterwards, nonetheless where on the entire planet they ended up. Hell, none of us knows that right now.’

“My father and Shiro,” Keith stressed indignantly, “Are doing two different tasks. But yes, ultimately they are involved in opposing Merla.”

Sendak searched him for a moment. “Did he go alone?” His tone was even but quiet. Keith knew instantly that he was asking about Shiro.

“No,” he answered solemnly. He could feel Pidge and Hunk shooting him questioning looks but he didn’t meet them – it wasn’t his place to talk about Shiro’s past relationship, after all.

Sendak nodded to himself, satisfied with the answer. “What is it that the Vesh needs most at this point?” he queried.

Keith hesitated, genuinely uncertain what to say. He hadn’t really thought to ask, and if he was going to be of assistance to them he didn’t want his bargaining to go to waste. “A reliable military background could always be of service,” he thought quickly, “And without access to either Druids or Quintessence some medical aid could also go a long way.”

“I take it your technology is sufficient?”

“I don’t know if it’s on par with City Station,” Keith admitted, “But only because we only have access to so many resources. That said, we’re in a pretty good position.”

“I can guess as to why,” Sendak replied dryly. “Given how well the Vesh’s base is hidden in conjunction with the mysterious and sudden disappearance of Commander Throk I have cause to believe there is a correlation. Unless, of course,” he added after a pause, “He’s hiding in the ventilation system again, which seems to be an odd habit of his.”

Keith released a small laugh, recalling the way Annis had descended from the ceiling. He could only imagine the gangly Galra inching his way through City Station, perturbing his fellow soldiers with his strange and spontaneous appearances. The thought, too, of seeing Sendak caught off guard was particularly amusing.

“And what does the empire require?” Keith asked in turn, bracing himself for the answer. Sendak released a sigh, looking begrudging.

“A diplomat that other planets might have an easier time trusting,” he returned.

“In other words, me,” Keith clarified.

Sendak’s lips thinned and he offered a brusque nod. “Yes,” he concurred, “You.”

‘Now that’s interesting,’ Keith thought cockily. ‘As it turns out it seems as if he needs my help even more than I need his. Given that dynamic, he may be more willing to concede to terms that better suit my interests. Lance had a pretty clear view of the arrangement – I do stand more to gain from teaming up, at least for a little while.’
“As simple as that sounds,” Keith fielded, “I highly doubt that your cooperation comes without some cost. While I agree that working together would behoove us both, I’m not about to consent to a truce until you tell me plainly what your terms are. As it stands, your position as lord regent is no more than a placeholder for my return – that said, I highly doubt you’re anxious to relinquish that kind of power, so what is it that you’re looking to gain?”

Sendak barked a laugh, an amused smirk splitting his features. He relaxed at the other’s words, resting his chin thoughtfully against a palm. “You know,” he commented, “I think you’re coming to understand me more than I’ve given you credit for. It’s good to see that I’m not underestimated.”

“To do so would be a mistake,” Keith shrugged. “Just because you’re compliant doesn’t mean you’re trustworthy.”

“Indeed,” Sendak drawled. “You’re certainly right in your accusation – I am precisely where I want to be and I have little motivation to surrender my claim. It goes without saying that I am better suited to the position by way of experience, no doubt something the people would quickly determine should you supersede me. You have absolutely no training for this role – determination and good intentions will only get you so far. So do not think that I am ready to step down merely because I wish to work with you; I won’t do the public that disservice.”

Keith grit his teeth, feeling the insults acutely. ‘What’s worse is that he’s not wrong,’ he growled. ‘It’s more than pretentious to wave that in my face but it’s more than bravado too – he really does seem to have a handle on the leadership role. Still…’

“Feel as you wish,” he answered tersely, “But that doesn’t change the fact that I have the popular vote. You say that you need me and I know that that’s not just for foreign relations. I may be new to this but I care for my people and I’m not about to give up my right to the throne.”

Sendak released a small hum, looking pleased despite Keith’s words. “No one can say that you aren’t committed,” he praised lightly.

‘Yeah, no kidding,’ Keith internalized. ‘And like hell I’m letting you take over: for all I know you’ll turn into another tyrant. The shit thing is, though, is that he literally is keeping this empire together right now. Loathe as I am to admit it, I think I need him to retain some of that power – if things are on the precipice of falling apart then I’ll let him take the fall.’

“Well, seeing as we’re both at loggerheads,” Keith proposed, licking his lips, “I suggest the following: until the situation with Merla is resolved, you and I share an equitable amount of power.” Hunk made a noise of distress but Keith continued, undeterred, “No decision will be made unless we are both in agreement over it. You handle the military and I handle the Vesh. You will assist the Vesh in terms of both manpower and medicinal aid and in exchange I will be compliant in gathering support from planets within the empire. Lance will be returned to us unaltered and unharmed, else his confinement will be seen as hostile action against Team Voltron and thereby the Vesh itself. During this period we will be allies and if violence is done against either of us by the opposite party then we have grounds for dissolution of this treaty. You and I will both draft our terms and exchange them; if agreeable, then we’ll arrange them in a contract and sign it so this alliance is binding. Is this befitting to you?”

Sendak huffed a laugh, expression unreadable if nearly approving. “Yes,” he allowed, surprising Keith. “That certainly sounds tenable – I’ll have Maray begin the process at once.”

‘Maray!!’ Keith brightened. ‘So they’re okay. I never got to find out. Even if they are working with Sendak, I’m relieved to hear that they survived the uprising.’
“And Lance?” he pressed, not wanting to derail his progress.

“You may come and collect him from City Station at your leisure,” Sendak answered indifferently. “As it stands, I highly doubt you will invite me to the Vesh’s hideout so I might as well invite you back home. Your presence will be welcomed here, besides.”

‘Home,’ Keith reiterated, the word a punch to the chest. ‘I guess City Station really is my home. …I wonder how the others feel about that, particularly Shiro. Would that upset him? Still… it’s nice to think that there’s some place that I truly belong. That someone else acknowledges that I belong there. It’s strange, really.’

Still, the thoughts filled him with warmth.

“Once this treaty is signed we’ll be on our way to you,” Keith affirmed. “Remember, though, that any hostility towards myself, Team Voltron, or the Vesh will mark the end of our cooperation – we will behave ourselves so long as you do.”

“Understood,” Sendak returned with a smirk. “That’s only to be expected.”

“Good,” Keith asserted. “With that said, I look forward to receiving your terms.”

“As do I yours,” Sendak assured. “I believe that will conclude our conversation for the present; I will be in contact with you again in the near future.”

“Until then, in that case.”

“Until then,” Sendak nodded, pausing uncertainly. “…Vol sa,” he uttered, and then the transmission came to a close.

Keith let out a huge breath, melting against his chair, limbs trembling with adrenaline. “Well,” he laughed with relief, “I’m glad that’s over.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, Moosey here! My computer is FINALLY back from getting repaired so I can finally resume posting and making notes. I'll also start replying to comments again; I've really gotten behind fkjajfksdkjl Sorry that there wasn't much of a note last chapter, we were out of town at our best friends’ wedding, it was really beautiful!

FINALLY the paladins are reunited with Lance! ...Sort of! And Keith gets some of his first political interaction with Sendak -- I promise there's going to be a LOT more of that to come! What do you think Sendak's terms are going to be? I'm really curious to see your theories~

Thank you to everyone for your kudos and sweet comments! My favorite thing is waking up on Saturday morning to find reviews in my inbox, it puts a smile on my face every time <3
Tirmania hovered in the distant blanket of space, the planet a hazy orb of sickly greens and ambers against the black expanse of sky. Shiro glanced out through the dome of Malachite’s screen, thin green lights indicating a foreign object in orbit around the planet. Matt leaned back into the captain’s seat as he reached out to toggle the controls, bringing the mecha around the dark side of the planet’s small moon.

“Allright,” the brunet mumbled to himself, reaching up to activate a small holographic screen before him.

As Matt worked, Shiro leaned towards the viewport from where he was settled into one of the two smaller passenger seats that flanked the captain’s. The image of the object orbiting Tirmania was magnified, displaying a massive, sleek craft composed of blacks and purples – silver Galran letters ran along its bow, neatly spelling out The Convent. With a flick of Matt’s wrist a set of blueprints was drawn up beside the image.

“We’ll be meeting our contact here,” Matt explained, a panel of the blueprint lighting up in red. “It’s a small emergency hangar near the aft hold. Once we give her the signal, she’ll be able to keep the hangar open for about five minutes – so we have to get in there during that time span.”

He leaned back in the captain’s seat, covering his mouth with a thoughtful hand. “Ideally, no one will come across Mal while we’re in there – since this hangar isn’t used very often, there’s not a lot of attention given to it security-wise. But I’ll be keeping the cloak on all the same just in case.”

“So we’ll want to give the signal, get in, and then get out all during the span of the cloak’s duration?” Shiro inquired.

“Like I said, it’s ambitious, but that would be the ideal, yeah,” Matt confirmed. “Once we get out of there, we really won’t have to be concerned about staying invisible because we’ll have given the princess the signal by then and be able to jump straight into the wormhole.”

“Right,” the black paladin confirmed with a nod. “Are we meeting the mole in the hangar?”

Matt nodded, “Yeah. But in case something happens, she’s let me know where the Apprentice Mages and Mages are being kept.”

Another portion of the blueprint lit up, indicating a space several floors directly above the hangar, “We can get to it through the ventilation system if need be. But hopefully it won’t come to that.”

Matt didn’t elaborate, instead withdrawing what seemed to be a small, red button from the pocket of his flight suit, “Ready?”

“Ready,” Shiro confirmed, and Matt pressed the button. It blinked red several times before adopting a purple sheen, blinking back twice in response.

“That’s the all-clear,” the younger of the two nodded, and triggered the cloaking mechanism.
Malachite smoothly rose above the moon, rocketing towards *The Convent* in a graceful arc. Shiro watched the massive form of the ship approach, an uneasy feeling climbing in his gut. Most Galra ships were teeming with pods traveling to and from the planet they orbited, drones and robotic sentinels combing the outside of the vessel to make small repairs. But *The Convent* was eerily still; there was nothing to suggest that it housed anything living within.

The ship itself was much bigger than most Galra-made cruisers, easily three times the size of what Team Voltron faced on a regular basis. From the smooth arcs of its exterior and the distinct lack of weaponry, it was clearly a vessel for habitation – not war – but there was still something offsetting about its presence that spoke of something much worse than cannons or blasters within.

The mecha glided underneath the vessel’s belly, both Matt and Shiro glancing anxiously upwards as they searched for the open hatch, the pair of them upholding the complete silence that they’d maintained since taking off from the moon.

“There,” Shiro said, gesturing for Matt to see. He followed the line of Shiro’s sight, twisting and pulling the thrusters in order to travel straight up to the small opening above them. The hatch was barely large enough to accommodate Malachite and although Shiro missed the control of piloting Kuro he had to admit that any Lion – let alone the Black Lion – would be impossible to fit into the emergency hangar.

Inside, the majority of the space was occupied by what seemed to be supplies and stores, metallic crates roped together and draped in dark tarps. There was only one escape pod, next to which stood a tall, robed figure. Shiro watched her anxiously as Matt docked, Malachite contorting to allow them departure. The dome of the viewport slid back and Matt rose from the captain’s seat, Shiro following suit as he stared down at the mole. Nothing but a glint of silver reflected back at him – the mask she wore was nothing but a smooth, curved mirror. Shiro reached for the bayard clipped at the back of his cuirass, ready to face the potential traitor.

But his anxiety ebbed away as the Druid reached up to remove the mask and the dark cowl of her robes fell away to reveal a familiar – if exhausted – face.

“Zuna,” Shiro smiled, happy to see the Ovate once more. He climbed out of Malachite, easily accepting the embrace that she offered to him.

“Vrepmyza,” she greeted him happily, relief etched over all of her features as she pulled away and embraced Matt as well. “And you must be Sylvux’s ilbe – I’ve heard a lot about you, Matt.”

“Hopefully more about my personality and less about my chocolate-hoarding tendencies,” Matt grinned, causing the trio to share a brief laugh.

“All good things, I assure you,” the Ovate smiled kindly, kneeling to the ground and pulling a small trunk out from under the escape pod from which she withdrew a pair of dark blue robes and clear masks.

“The masks will go opaque once you put them on,” she explained, handing off the disguises. “The uniform denotes your rank as Witches, so it will not be suspicious if you remain silent and I answer in your stead.”

“Thank you,” Shiro said, pulling on the mask. It was surprisingly lightweight and breathable, his vision remaining perfectly unchanged as he secured it around his face. He trusted Zuna, but couldn’t help but feel completely vulnerable without being able to gage the mask’s opacity for himself.
He and Matt stored their helmets within the trunk, which Zuna slid back under the pod. Shiro pulled his cloak on, glancing beside him. Matt had finished donning his disguise, the robes pooling awkwardly around his comparatively tiny form. Zuna glanced at him, raising her hand and causing the outfit to alter itself. The mask turned pitch, the robe itself becoming a pale shade of lilac and shrinking to meet his proportions.

“You… will be a Mage,” Zuna pronounced awkwardly, dipping her head apologetically at Matt. “I’m sorry – I always use Galra heights as a constant – I forget that not all are as…”

“You didn’t realize I was tiny. It’s okay,” Matt’s voice was altered by the mask to sound deeper, but his joking tone still shimmered through, his identity made even more apparent through the nonchalant shrug he produced. Shiro was momentarily surprised to hear the dip in tone before recalling its purpose – the masks made the Druids' voices all identical, just like their uniforms. It was an almost-militaristic tactic used to prevent favoritism among the ranks, but he’d often observed the Druids recognizing each other despite the precautions.

“Alright,” Zuna nodded, turning on her heel to face the exit. “Please follow me.”

They started off behind her at a clipped pace, Zuna closing the hatch behind her before leaving the small hangar. The lower bowels of The Convent were empty save for the strange orbs of purple light that seemed to float independently in the air. The halls were all made of the same black marble as the Druid temple on City Station, the tap of their footsteps echoing dissonantly in the otherwise silent corridors.

Zuna pulled close to a pair of doors run through with veins of gold, pressing her palm in a panel beside it and calling for an elevator, returning her mask to her face. The doors slid open, Shiro having to repress his instinct to adopt a fighting pose as the dark form of a Priestess was revealed within.

“Zuna,” she greeted the Ovate curtly.

“Myone,” she responded, ushering in Shiro and Matt.

“I was coming down here to check on the opened hatch in the emergency hangar,” explained Myone, the several pairs of sightless eyes on her mask boring into Shiro. The black paladin struggled to keep his breathing steady, averting his gaze in what he hoped was a respectful manner. “What happened?”

“Another escape attempt, unfortunately,” Zuna explained, reaching out to settle a hand on Matt’s shoulder. “The little ones are becoming frightened. I took this one for backup.”

Zuna gestured towards Shiro, who nodded his head in indication. Myone continued to stare at him before rearranging herself.

“Do not let Merla hear of this,” the Priestess ordered before directing her gaze towards Matt. “I’m sorry it’s like this little one… but you’re putting yourself in more danger trying to escape. If Merla had discovered your attempt, you might not have survived.”

Matt bowed his head in understanding, stepping close to Zuna for comfort.

The Priestess sighed as the elevator stopped and she stepped off, holding the door open to glance over her shoulder at Zuna, “May the stars be with you, Zuna.”

“May they be with all of us,” Zuna responded sadly.
Myone lowered her head in exhaustion before taking her leave, bidding farewell to the occupants of the elevator before the doors closed between them.

“Almost no one is happy with the way things are going,” Zuna explained to Matt and Shiro softly. “When the previous Mother fell, we all believed there would be a return to the old ways. We were never meant to be killers…”

She was cut off as the elevator opened once more and they stepped into a busy hall. Many of the Druids here had their masks tied to the sides of their faces, observing tablets or small projections that they’d conjured between their palms. Zuna led Shiro and Matt to a tall set of doors, this pair seemingly crafted of solid bloodstone. A pair of Witches flanking the doors stepped aside for Zuna, one of them shaking her head in disappointment.

“Another one…” she sighed sadly. “Zuna, what are we going to tell Merla —?”

“We won’t,” Zuna cut in sharply, glancing at the Witch. She did not respond, clearly already haven spoken out of turn. However, she was suddenly staring at Shiro, head cocked to the side. But before the Witch could ask permission to speak, Zuna had pressed her palm flat to the doors, sigils bursting to life around her hand in a brilliant orchid glow. The doors swung open before them, the sound of dozens of fearful little voices calling out in response. Zuna, Shiro, and Matt stepped in, the doors closing behind them.

The room itself was massive and split-story with rows upon rows of bunks built into the upper level. On the main floor was a collection of comfortable looking chairs and tables, all of them cluttered with abandoned projects. Shiro’s heart immediately sunk as he spotted the occupants of the room pressed against one of the walls in terror.

‘They think we’re here to kill them,’ he realized, wanting more than anything to be able to reach out and comfort them – to tell them that they were there to help.

The vast majority of them were clothed in ivory robes, mesh white masks partially obscuring their faces – Apprentice Mages. Several were dressed in the same manner as Matt – lilac robes with blacked-out hoods. These girls were slightly taller than the others, one of them stepping out boldly from the crowd, her arms spread out protectively to either side.

“What do you want?” she demanded bravely – her voice was warped like the other Druids’, but clearly still youthful: she couldn’t have been older than thirteen. “Who is that with you? We’re all here, no one’s escaped. Is this a trick?”

Zuna reached up to push back her hood, removing her mask and causing the girls to deflate in relief.

“Lady Zuna!” several of them called happily, making towards the Ovate. The Mage that had spoken stopped them with a flash of pink energy from her palm.

“Wait, it could be a trick,” she warned, urging them back. She turned back towards the three newcomers, lowering her head in suspicion. “Who are you?”

“Shiro, Matt,” Zuna said, gesturing towards her companions. “You can remove your masks.”

The two men did as directed, revealing their faces to the curious girls. One of them let out a little shriek, dodging behind the eldest girl who spoke for them.

“Vrepmyza…” she said fearfully, her voice unaffected by any sort of alteration. Shiro winced at her reaction, recalling the actions of the kit that Keith had comforted in the Druid Temple back at
City Station. It seemed that his reputation as a killer preceded him, even here.

But while several others reacted to the younger kit’s utterance immediately by shying away in fear, others seemed to gravitate closer to Shiro in awe.

“Vrepmyza!” one girl cheered, hopping up and down excitedly. “Vrepmyza’s here to save us!”

“Is Lotor with you, too Vrepmyza?” another girl asked, surging against the barrier of the eldest girl’s protective arm.

“Are you gonna marry him?”

Shiro blinked, completely taken aback by the sudden shift in tone as the girls peered up at him expectantly.

“Well?” one pressed.

“Ah. I —,” Shiro began awkwardly, only to be cut off by Zuna.

“Yes, Vrepmyza is here to help you,” the Ovate explained kindly. “This is Matt; he’s also working with the Vesh.”

“He looks familiar…” one of the girls piped in, much to Shiro’s horror. If they knew of Keith, chances are they’d seen the Coliseum battles leading up to the rebellion – they would have seen Shiro murder the shadow version of Matt.

But thankfully, they didn’t elaborate any further, the girl in charge hushing them sharply before she peeled off her mask and dropped her hood, revealing the face of a half-Stellite. She affixed Shiro with a defiant glare.

“How do we know he’s really Vrepmyza?” she asked dubiously. “And why should we trust you at all?”

“Threah —,” Zuna began, only to be cut off by a sharp hiss from the elder girl. The small Apprentice Mage behind Threah whimpered in fear, the elder girl turning to her with a consoling pat to the shoulder.

“It’ll be okay, pattit,” she said sweetly, tone shockingly different from the one she adopted in order to talk to the strangers in the room. She looked back at them, eyes hateful. “Well?”

“You’re going to have to trust us, Threah,” Zuna explained. “I know you’re adept enough to spot an illusion.”

Threah did not respond to the compliment with anything other than a stronger glare.

Matt spoke up at length, addressing the girls with a calm tone, “We’re trying to find the Mother of Constellations so we can take her somewhere safe —.”

“She’s not here,” Threah snapped. “None of us have shown any signs of being the Mother; she’s probably just a baby back on Gal.”

“You know that’s not the case, Threah —,” Zuna sighed, only to be interrupted by a loud bang.

Immediately, the girls shrieked again, Zuna fitting her mask back into place and gesturing for
Matt and Shiro to do the same. Matt quickly joined the group of girls to blend in, some shirking away from him while others easily allowed him to meld into the ranks. Zuna held up a hand for their silence as the doors gave another loud noise and swung open to reveal a Priestess flanked by one of the Witches that had been guarding the door.

“Zuna,” she greeted, and Shiro could immediately tell from her tone that this was a different person from the Priestess they’d met earlier.

“My Lady Tira,” Zuna responded, voice completely neutral. “What may I do for you?”

“Guama here told me that you were returning an escaped Mage to her quarters,” Tira said smoothly, stepping towards the group of kits huddled up in fear. “Which one was it? I wish to make an example of her.”

Shiro’s fingers clicked as his hands tightened to fists below the billowing sleeves of his robes. Unfortunately, even this softest noise seemed to draw Tira’s attention, her mask nearly swiveling over her shoulder in a disturbing movement as she faced him.

“You…” she began slowly, drifting over the ground towards him with fluid movements. “What is your name, Witch? Were you assigned to assist Zuna or did she remove you from your duties?”

Shiro opened his mouth to respond, but Zuna quickly filled in for him.

“This is Allu, she’s stationed—.”

“Tell me, Witch Allu,” Tira cut Zuna off with a thoughtful hum, raising a delicately clawed hand. “Why you would happen to be in possession of this?”

Suddenly, her hand burst with white light and – terror seizing his chest – Shiro felt his prosthetic burn to life in response, the sleeve of his cloak disintegrating around it. Shedding the robe, he immediately grabbed for his bayard, the weapon expanding to its full form as he stood with his back to the kits, protectively bearing the length of the naginata before them. Tira stared at him impassively, expression concealed behind her mask.

Zuna sparked with a brilliant pink glow, lashing out against the Priestess as massive claws formed in the aura around her, raking over Tira’s form. But Tira disintegrated to smoke in their wake, the black spot of her energy twisting with Zuna’s until the Priestess coalesced into a solid form, arms locked with Zuna’s in a desperate grapple of power. The magicks backfired, both Druids thrown to opposite sides of the room. A new wave of Druids began to spill in from the door, their hands alight in the glow of their magick. Crying out, Zuna swept her arm out before her, sending them flying back out of the room alongside the Witch Guama, the door slamming in their wake. The kits cried out at the noise, Shiro turning to them with a gently raised hand in an effort to calm them.

“Please!” Zuna called to them, picking herself up off of the floor to square off with Tira. “The Mother needs to go with Vrepymyza!”

“The Mother isn’t here!” Threah cried angrily, her own fists glowing with pale pink energy. She stepped forward, rearing back her hand and throwing a punch into midair, sending the feeble orb of magick hurdling towards Tira, who deflected it with a flick of her wrist.

“MOVE!” Matt shouted, diving to protect the Mage, but the bolt of energy had already collided with her chest, sending her hurdling back into the arms of the small kit cowering behind her. Matt immediately pulled off his disguise, struggling to get closer to the injured girl, but he was barred
by a barrier produced by the Apprentice Mage that cradled Threah in her arms.

Shiro immediately rounded on Tira, the charge of his arm extending out into his bayard and setting the weapon alight with an orchid glow. Tira caught the descending blade with a hiss, the glowing magick in her palm meeting it with a violent spark. Shiro pulled the slice through to the best of his ability, more flashes of energy emerging as he cut across her front, slicing open Tira’s mask to reveal her enraged face.

But the fury was blurred a moment later, overtaken by awe as she spotted something over Shiro’s shoulder. The black paladin took the moment of surprise to rear back for another attack – but the naginata simply sliced through black smoke, barely disturbing it as he turned to face whatever had shocked Tira so.

Behind him, a beautiful rose gold light had encapsulated the Apprentice Mage holding Threah – her hood had fallen, head tilted back and eyes half-closed in concentration, alight in the glow of her own magicks. Her hair and clothing rippled out around her as if floating, the very image of serenity. The brightest glow was emitting from her palm, which was pressed against Threah’s chest, repairing the dark singe that the attack had left there.

“The Mother,” Shiro heard Zuna utter from behind him, her voice full of awe, and then: “NO!”

Black smoke had begun to gather beside The Mother of Constellations, dark bolts of magick collecting in Tira’s hands as she adopted a solid form above the little girl, poised to strike. But something was entwining with her – ribbons of pink magick seized her arms and wrenched them back, the charging energy in her palms drawing down the length and causing Zuna to shriek as she accepted the attack in the Mother’s stead. Shiro and Matt turned to face the Ovate, watching as black crackles of electricity snapped around her arms and chest, leaving dark welts in their place.

“Shiro!” Zuna screamed as Tira turned towards her, sending wave after wave of deadly energy pulsing down the syphon of Zuna’s magicks. “Take her and go!”

Nodding in understanding, Shiro returned his attention to the Mother, wondering how he was going to break through the barrier she erected around herself and Threah. Matt was standing just outside it as well, looking completely at a loss – but the rose gold light was beginning to dim, the little girl shutting her eyes and slumping forward to catch her breath. Without missing a bit, Shiro ducked forward into the throng of Mages to gather the girl in his spare arm, tucking her against his chest as she sprinted for the door.

“Shiro – the vents!” Matt instructed, catching up to Shiro’s side at a sprint and leading him up a staircase. The black paladin followed, going as fast as he dared without jostling the little girl. Thankfully, she didn’t seem interested in struggling, weakly gripping onto his armor as they scaled the staircase.

Matt withdrew what looked like a tiny can from the belt of his flightsuit, flicking it to expand it to a baton which sparkled with heat at the end. He ran to a fairly sizable vent beside one of the bunks, melting down the screws that kept the grate bolted to the wall. While he worked, Shiro turned over his shoulder to look down over the bannister into the lower room.

Both Zuna and Tira were completely gone, their forms having been replaced by a mad swirl of pink and black light – garbled, arcane words and noises were emerging from the fray, hardly intelligible as language. Shiro glanced back to Matt at the sound of rending metal, the brunet urging him and the girl forward into the vent. The black paladin dismissed his bayard, clipping it to his cuirass and climbing in.
Thankfully, it was large enough to handle Shiro’s bulk plus that of his charge in his arms. It declined slide-like for about a story before concluding in a long stretch of metal that branched out into several different ducts. Matt smacked his palm against the wrist of his flight suit, a small screen projecting itself from the material.

“This way,” he directed, gesturing towards the rightmost passage. Shiro nodded, sliding down the chute and landing in a sprint, Matt hot on his heels. The mecha pilot caught up quickly, grabbing Shiro’s shoulder and stilling him.

“Do you hear that?” he asked, and the black paladin glanced behind them anxiously, bracing himself as a distant rumble became ever louder. Suddenly, a silhouette still dimly pulsing pink slid down the shaft behind them, Zuna shakily taking to her feet.

“Keep going,” she panted. “I’ll be right behind you.”

The two men agreed, taking off through the vents in accordance to Matt’s directions. Finally, they met another grate below them, which Matt made quick work of with his baton, kicking it out onto the floor of the emergency hangar. He leapt, followed by Shiro and then Zuna, who collapsed to the ground when she jumped, releasing an agonizing noise.

“Zuna!” Shiro cried towards her, immediately dropping to her side. The Ovate shook her head, pointing towards Malachite, which was now fully visible.

“Go! Take the Mother!” she directed.

“No, we’re taking you with us, you’re hurt —,” Shiro began, gripping her shoulder with a steady hand. For a moment Zuna seemed to hesitate and then she reached into her cloak, withdrawing one of the flash drive-like chips that the Galra used for storing information. She held her hand out to Shiro, who withdrew his grip from her shoulder, allowing Zuna to deposit the chip in the cup of his hand and curl his fingers around it.

“No. I’ll stay here to make sure you get away safely, but —,” she began hoarsely. “If… if you ever have the chance, please… give this to Nylan for me.”

“Of course,” Shiro nodded, clenching his jaw before storing the chip within his cuirass. “Is there anything you’d like me to tell her?”

Zuna looked down at the floor.

“Just…” she whispered, tears clearly gathering in her eyes as she struggled to her feet. “Tell her that I meant everything I wrote.”

Shiro nodded, jerking when he heard the entrance to the hangar begin to open. Matt called out for him and Shiro rearranged his grip on the Mother, turning on his heel and sprinting towards Malachite, passing the little girl off to Matt, who quickly loaded her into one of the passenger seats.

Before he hefted himself up into the cockpit fully, Shiro turned his head to glance over at Zuna one last time. The Ovate had picked herself up, standing like a marionette supported by only half of its strings. As the doors slid open fully, the dim pink glow around Zuna sparked white before igniting hot magenta, the aura of magick pouring off of her like flames.

“Thank you, Zuna,” Shiro said quietly, climbing fully into the cockpit and accepting his retrieved helmet from Matt. Immediately accessing the coms, he established a line with Allura.

“Princess, we have the Mother and we’re departing!” Shiro informed her, struggling to strap
himself into his seat. A blast of magick glanced off Malachite as the mecha’s cockpit closed around
them, jerking them violently to the side. The kit cried out in fear, Matt securing an extra helmet over
her head before making to strap himself in.

“Alright!” Allura replied earnestly. “I’m opening the wormhole now, Shiro – good luck!”

“Thank you,” Shiro responded, Matt bringing Malachite out of rest mode and drawing the
mecha to its feet. The black paladin bit his lip, hands twitching at his sides and fingers curling
anxiously as he sought thrusters that weren’t there for him to grip. Malachite reached for a panel on
its leg, withdrawing a blaster built into the limb and shooting out at the Druids crowding the hangar.
Below, a brilliant pink flare was approaching the control panel on the wall, slamming up against it
and opening the hatch below. Matt engaged the thrusters, Malachite hovering for a moment before a
wormhole spiraled into existence below them, and the mecha dropped.

Shiro glanced up at the top of the mech’s dome, watching as the hangar was overtaken by the
pink flames, the burning bodies of Druids sucked into the void of space as the hatch opened below
them. And then the carnage was gone, replaced with the odd half-light of the upper atmosphere of a
planet. Matt pulled back on his thrusters hard, the flicker of fire around the craft roaring to life as it
approached Gal’s surface. In the distance, Shiro could see the familiar curves of City Station
hovering in the mesosphere and the bright blue of Gal’s moon before they were enveloped in thick
cloud cover.

Matt grunted with effort, wrenching the thrusters and leaning his body into the action as they
approached the ground, hurdling between the thick lines of two mountain ranges running parallel to
one another, the ground approaching fast. The mecha rotated, its shoulder taking the brunt of the
impact as they collided with the surface of a massive lake, darkness overtaking the cockpit a moment
later.

Matt released a shaking breath, releasing the thrusters and falling limply back into the
captain’s seat.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, reaching up to his chest in order to grip a handful of his flightsuit.

“You did great, Matt,” Shiro praised, leaning over and clapping a hand on his teammate’s
shoulder.

“Thanks,” the brunet panted, gently urging the craft upwards, where it finally breached the
lake, floating there in repose. The pair looked over to their new charge sitting on Matt’s right – her
claws had absolutely shredded her armrests and she was shaking violently in place, gentle sobs
audible from beneath her helmet.

“Hey,” Shiro addressed her softly. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t respond, merely casting aside her helmet and pressing her palms to her eyes, sobs
growing in volume. Matt and Shiro exchanged concerned glances.

“Here,” Matt said softly, raising Malachite from the water and landing on the rocky shore.
“Let’s get some fresh air while I figure out where we were.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” the black paladin agreed, standing once the cockpit was
close to the ground. Matt opened the glass dome, fresh air and silvery-gold sunlight flooding Shiro’s
senses at once.

The area around them was a stark contrast to the cold halls of *The Convent* – the air of Gal
was much fresher than that on Earth, carrying with it the scent of redwoods. Massive trees similar to sequoia rose high above the lake, protecting it from sight. Their limbs were stark white, covered in a fresh powdery layer of snow. The mountain ranges curved up neatly on either side of the lake, their peaks dappled in white, green, and grey. Somewhere on the shoreline a flock of densely-coated deer-like creatures was beginning the approach the craft curiously, strangely unshaken by the impact. Beneath their fur their skin shimmered in pink fragments in the winter light.

   Shiro rounded the cockpit, waving at the girl inside that Matt was attempting to console. Upon seeing Shiro, she immediately flinched back, stripping off her safety belts and curling into a ball against the back of her seat, flipping her hood up over her head. Shiro sighed, Matt frowning at him uncertainly.

   “What’s the prognosis?” Shiro inquired instead.

   “Well,” Matt looked town at his projected tablet. “Looks like we’re not too far off from our target location – we landed in a country called Axana, a bit south of where we needed to be.”

   “Where are we headed?” Shiro asked. Matt jumped out of the cockpit, showing him a map of Gal; he pointed to where they were – a thin valley between a small, forested mountain range and a taller bare one that bordered the coast.

   “We’re right here,” he indicated, tracing his finger up the valley and into the densely wooded mountainous border of another country. “We need to be up here, on the border between Axana and Ennor – just north of the town of Loletta in a place called Purra Valley. Unfortunately, we’re going to have to avoid any towns on our way there, so we’ll have to take the scenic route, which will take a little longer.”

   Shiro nodded in understanding, glancing at Matt curiously, “Who’s in Purra Valley?”

   “Sylv’s family, actually,” Matt explained. “He said they’d be happy to give us shelter, should we require it. We’re going to start our search for the flower up north, unless the kiddo can give us directions.”

   The pair checked over their shoulders at the kit still huddled in the cockpit.

   “…Which doesn’t seem all that likely right now,” Matt observed with a sympathetic wince. “Let’s give her awhile to cool down before we try to talk to her.”

   “Agreed,” Shiro nodded. “Have you checked in with anyone yet?”

   “I gave the Castle the all-clear,” Matt explained. “But unfortunately we’re way out of range with The Haven – not surprising given its pretty much impossible to get in contact with due to the winter storms.”

   “It was pretty much impossible to get into contact with you guys unless we were right above the place,” Shiro responded, quirking a hesitant eyebrow. “Unless you’re suggesting there’s an easier way?”

   "Of course,” Matt bragged, looking more than a little smug. “What, you think we’re all just floating around space independently? Naturally we have a way to get into contact with each other, it just takes a little finesse – oh son of a biscuit!”

   Shiro started, watching as the kit made a bee-line for the forest, tripping in the fresh snowbanks as she went. Matt had immediately torn after her, Shiro following suit.
‘Well,’ Shiro thought just as he lost sight of the little girl diving into the tree line. ‘This is off to a great start.’

“He-ey!” Matt cried out desperately, trudging through the snow. “Please don’t run!”

“We’re trying to help you!” Shiro supplicated, cupping his hands around his mouth to project his voice. “We just want to talk – agh!”

Something lightweight but very solid bounced off of Shiro’s helmet with a crack. He looked down at his feet to see a broken pinecone resting in the snow. He brought his eyes farther up the tree line, spotting a purple face floating amongst a swath of white. Unfortunately for them, the Apprentice Mage’s uniform helped the Mother blend almost perfectly into the snow, making her nearly invisible up in the branches.

“Hey!” Shiro cried out again – for a moment he considered using his jetpack to reach her, but he quickly realized that would probably just serve to further intimidate her. He gestured for Matt, indicating to where the kit was huddled high in the branches of a tree.

“Hi!” the pilot waved, making his voice as comforting as possible. “I bet you’re pretty scared, huh?”

The kit responded by plucking another pinecone off of the branch above her and tossing it down at Matt, who sidestepped it with ease.

“I know you’re really upset, but we didn’t want you to get hurt!” the brunet reasoned.

The little Galra was still silent, but now seemed to be listening. Shiro stepped forward.

“Do you need help getting down – wait!” he held out a hand as she armed herself with another cone, poised to strike. “We just want to help you!”

“Will you tell us your name at least?” Matt inquired, stepping closer to the tree. “I’m Matt, and this is Shiro. Do you know who the Vesh are? We’re working with them – they’re nice people who want to help keep you safe from Merla.”

Again, the girl remained silent, her face pinched in distrust.

“I don’t think she knows who the Vesh are,” Shiro told Matt softly. He blinked, recalling the other Apprentice Mages’ reactions when he’d been announced by Zuna. Maybe they didn’t know who the Vesh were, but they clearly knew about himself and Keith.

“I’m Emperor Lotor’s ilbe,” Shiro explained – and this certainly got a reaction out of the Mother. Her ears visibly pricked up beneath her hood and she leaned over the bough of the tree towards him, eyes widely curious. “He was really concerned about keeping you safe, so he agreed to send Matt and me to help you.”

The Mother finally pushed back her hood, staring down at Shiro dubiously. Her hand sought a little charm dangling around her neck and she began to fiddle with it anxiously, head turning from Matt to Shiro and back.

“We’re trying to find the Mother’s Kiss,” Matt continued. “That way we’ll be able to make sure you have your powers earlier so you can protect yourself better. That’s why we came to Gal.”

“Will you come down?” Shiro pleaded gently. The kit frowned, looking down at the ground before leaping down to the branch below her. Shiro acted as soon as he heard the crack, diving to
catch her as she emitted a little cry of shock, his jetpack bolstering his actions. The Mother landed safely in his arms, delivered gently down to the snow. Shiro set her down on the soft powder, crouching to meet her height.

“Are you okay?” he asked, relieved to be met with a nod.

“Do you think you could tell us your name?” Matt inquired softly, coming to crouch at her other side. The girl stared down at her boots, clicking the toes together anxiously.

“…Nanan,” she said after a little pause, still worrying the charm between her fingers.

“That’s a pretty name!” Matt complimented her, offering Nanan a hand to help her up. “That’s the name of one of the periods of time in Mamogsain, right?”

Nanan nodded again, still keeping her eyes averted from them both. She glanced warily at Matt’s hand before taking it hesitantly, allowing him to help her up.

“There we go!” Matt cheered softly before continuing to make comforting small talk. “How many seasons do you have, Nanan? I’ve almost got forty-two.”

“Um,” Nanan mumbled, tucking her hands behind her back; she dipped her head lower, a stream of loose curls obscuring her face. “…Sixteen.”

“She’s only eight,’ Shiro realized with a jolt to his chest. He couldn’t comprehend having to endure something so traumatizing at such a young age – all things considered, Nanan was taking the situation relatively well. They hadn’t crashed twenty minutes earlier and she was already free of tears, clearly doing her best to respond to their questions.

“Wow!” Matt responded enthusiastically. “You’re pretty tall for someone who only has sixteen seasons.”

“Not really…” Nanan murmured, dropping her hands to the skirt below her cloak and beginning to worry the fabric.

“You cold, Nanan?” Matt asked. “I got some coats back in my mech if you need something warmer.”

Nanan shook her head, plucking at her cloak, “It’s magick.”

“My clothes are, too, I guess!” Matt chuckled, pulling at the collar of his flightsuit. He looked at Shiro with a smile, attempting to include him in the conversation. “What about you, Shiro?”

“My armor keeps me warm, too,” the black paladin confirmed. He quickly began to go over the psychological training he’d been offered back at Galaxy Garrison – which was unsurprisingly very little, just enough to aid someone in shock. “Do you need to sit down for a while? Are you thirsty?”

Nanan shook her head again, shirking away from Shiro and hesitantly taking Matt’s hand. The black paladin remained crouched in the snow for a moment, watching the pair of them retreat back to Malachite, Matt chatting on conversationally while Nanan hung her head, occasionally glancing over her shoulder to stare at Shiro suspiciously.

He had never felt the expanse of snow between himself and others so keenly.
Happy Friday everyone! This week we get back to Shiro and Matt and we finally get to meet the Mother of Constellations -- Nanan! We hope everyone will come to like her as more about her character is revealed.

I'm really sorry if anyone was particularly attached to Zuna -- but she really got to go out with a bang, and that's what she would have wanted. If anyone is confused, Zuna was the Ovate in charge of Keith and Shiro back when they were recovering on City Station.

It's really fun getting to write about the Druids and their practices, and also about how the Galra react to Shiro from a cultural standpoint <3 I'm so pumped to get more into the culture of Gal and how different it is from City Station.

Again, thank you all so much for your kudos, comments, and support! I'm FINALLY making my way through both Satellite and Constellation AND replying to comments, so keep and eye out for that <3

Much love!
~Moosey
Distrust

Chapter Notes

And we're back!

Sorry for the delay in posting - I hope it has been worth the extra week’s wait. For those of you who did not see the explanation I posted on the series’ tumblr (voltronrising.tumblr.com) here it is in full:

"Hey there readers and followers of the Leo Rising series, Ches here! I wanted to drop by and let everyone know that Moosey and I did go off our regular posting schedule for this past week. Chapter Eight of Constellation would have been posted on Friday, July 14th at around 5:30 PST but we intentionally skipped it this time. Why?

Well, believe it or not Moosey and I are overhauling Constellation - even though it is already completely written at 26 chapters as I type. When going on to write the fourth and final story, Nova, we decided that we weren’t as satisfied with the stories as we could be and so we decided to rewrite everything from here out, leading to us scrapping about 90,000 unpublished words of Constellation. Thankfully we were able to salvage parts of what were already written of Constellation so it won’t take nearly as long to catch up/get ahead.

So what does this mean for you guys? First, it means that you missed a week of posted content and for that we’re sorry! Second, it hopefully will mean that you get a more satisfying and cohesive final two stories. The seven chapters of Constellation that are online on AO3 will remain canon to the story so don’t worry about rereading or having to backtrack - we’ve taken that trouble out for you and nothing will look any different from your end! The only thing that you may notice is a slight delay in our posting but we will do our best to keep that as regular and uninterrupted as possible and buckle down and work really hard this week so that we can continue on this coming Friday (July 21st) as usual.

Thank you for your patience and for coming on this journey with us! Moosey and I appreciate all of your readership and support and are constantly touched by the outreach we’ve received from the Voltron fandom."

So that's that! We've made a lot of progress so far and we hope that you enjoy the new content we have come up with! Now without further ado, here is Chapter Eight!

<3
Ches

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sendak sighed as he stared down at the papers littering his desk, his forehead braced in the outstretched y’s of his palms. He’d been in his office all day, the simulation of sky just beyond the window indicating that the day was drawing to a close around him. Usually he’d be preparing to head home by now, saving the remainder of his tasks for when he had a bit more energy but it had taken approximately one glance at his inbox to arrive at the conclusion that he’d be working self-
“This is worse than I anticipated,” he admitted aloud, repositioning in his seat and drawing the nearest packet towards himself. “Trying to sort out these requests in a timely manner without somehow playing favorites is going to prove nearly impossible.”

“Well,” Maray hummed from their own desk, eyes never leaving their tablet, “I can only imagine how poor Thruvo feels, then.”

“I realize,” Sendak exhaled, counting the stacks of paper under his breath before turning more fully to the planner. “And it isn’t as though I thought the emancipation of the empire was going to be an easy thing, either. Those planets seeking secession have every right to be pissed and to try and make demands of us – the only problem is how Gal is supposed to satisfy all of those demands without prioritizing time or resources.”

“You can’t help it if some planets claim bigger reparations than others,” Maray frowned. “Let them decide what they think is fair.”

“Were it that simple I would,” Sendak dismissed.

“Oh?” Maray arched a brow, staring pointedly at the lord regent over the rims of their glasses. “Are you about to school me on the fine tune workings of the government?”

“It’s not like that,” Sendak countered, unable to keep from smiling. “Moreover… let’s look at it in sums. Say I pay out a million GAC to one planet – I know that’s small, just bear with me for the sake of example – and then, say, half a million GAC to another. I pay them each this because that’s what they’ve claimed for themselves. Well the planet that receives literally half the sum is going to look at the other and feel that they’ve been cheated – after all, why are they less worthy when they’ve undergone just as much?

Ideally, the solution would be to come up with some sort of formula that would be applied across all seceding nations. Start with a baseline sum and then adjust for differing factors: how long the planet has been in the empire, what resources we’ve farmed from them, what kind of loss of life they’ve suffered from us. But then, of course, you’d have to adjust that formula for things like the personal economies of each planet otherwise we risk hurting far more than we’re helping and causing all sorts of runaway inflation and market crashes…” Sendak trailed off tiredly.

“As you can imagine,” he continued, “It’s a nightmare to calculate when there’s so damn many planets that are involved in the process. And the fact that they all want different things doesn’t help, either. There’s no ceiling to speak of when it comes to their requests so if you adhere to one’s wishes then the other is just going to drive their terms to higher stakes. Unless these planets are holding some sort of council with one another first there’s no way to create terms that will be fair to all of them that won’t spur on an essential bidding war.”

“So even though there’s next to no way to appease everyone it’s still our responsibility to mete out what’s due?” Maray surmised.

“Precisely.”

“Where is one to begin with a task like that?” Maray asked pityingly.

“Thruvo has sent ahead the first secession requests that have hit his desk,” Sendak explained, gesturing to his own. “I suppose we have no other choice but to operate under a first come first serve basis. To be frank I’d much rather wait until all the requests were in and try to process them all at
once – it would be a bit of a pain, I admit, but at least that way our ‘formula’ could be as tailored as possible. Even if that would ensure the best chance at fairness we’re in no position to wait around like that. Understandably these planets would get anxious and skeptical of our promises to let them exit the empire, and that would only breed grounds for war and you and I know that that’s the last thing the emperor wants.”

“Even still,” Maray cautioned, “Don’t we run the risk of being accused of favoritism by going about it this way? I mean, thinking about it, even if we were to draft some sort of formulaic repayment plan like you say, it would need to be adjusted as time goes on. Likely the first to leave the empire would stand to benefit most because the system is so young and untested and that’s going to inspire discontent in those that follow, won’t it? Unless,” they ended thoughtfully, “They actually have formed a council of sorts?”

“That’s just the thing,” Sendak threw up a frustrated hand, “I can’t really tell and there’s no one coming forward to declare that such a thing has been created – all I can see are the individual petitions and their subsequent terms.”

“But you’re getting the sense that there’s some continuity between them?” Maray pressed, setting aside their tablet and rising to stand by Sendak’s desk.

“Yes,” the lord regent confirmed. “It isn’t… distinct, exactly. More of a hunch, if anything. But after reading through some of these documents it almost seems as though some of these planets are banding together. The things that they’re trying to claim as reparations and some of the language they’re using – it’s almost uncanny to me how similar they sound. That just doesn’t seem likely unless they’re actively in talks with one another.”

“Who’s involved?” asked Maray, rearranging the papers more neatly so that each could be seen. “Any real threats?”

“I’m not about to discount anyone as a threat,” Sendak countered. “Even the weakest planets can be cause for trouble if enough of them band up – and we’re not dealing with the weakest, either: Apis, Stratus, the Harfeld Moon System, hell even Qurm is in here and not least of all Stell and –.”

“Stell?” Maray interjected anxiously. “I mean, I can’t say as I’m surprised that they’re rallying to exit the empire – they’ve been the biggest dissenters since day one – but to think that they might be grouping together with other nations can’t bode well, can it?”

“Not at all, no,” Sendak assented quietly. “They’re our nearest neighbors and the first to be registered into the empire. Zarkon betrayed them, no less, and they probably have one of the largest and fiercest militaries next to ours. Even Altea would have paled to them, were they still around.”

“Almost makes me grateful that they aren’t.”

“Don’t let the emperor or his friends catch you saying that,” Sendak warned neutrally. “Especially with that princess of theirs. Still, the fact remains that Stell is a force to be reckoned with,” he continued, drumming his fingers across the heftiest packet. “And from what I’ve read Thruvo is getting fairly anxious about their next moves.”

“How so?” Maray queried, craning their neck to read the stack’s fine print.

“For starters they’ve been extremely outspoken and persistent in their dealings with him,” Sendak listed, drawing an indignant snort from Maray.

“It’s Stell,” they spelled out. “Doesn’t that go without saying?”
“I would agree with you but I think that might be casually racist,” Sendak commented.

“Yes and that would be an absolute first for you,” Maray smirked. “Regardless?”

“Regardless, there’s something going on with Stell politically behind the scenes,” Sendak explained. “Thruvo believes that their determination to make arrangements for secession goes hand-in-hand with whatever they’re trying to accomplish in parliament.”

“They’re holding sessions?” Maray frowned, teasing attitude forgotten. “I take it we have no intel on what over?”

“Correct, unfortunately,” Sendak concurred. “But their ceremonial head has a lot more sway over the parliamentary leaders than their last one did.”

“Who, Rhanvar?” the planner hummed. “He’s fairly young – as far as Stellites go, anyway – so it’s unlikely that he’ll be listened to that much. After all, the parliament itself is namely all the eldest members of their planet – they’re esteemed as such. Surely they can’t care too much what some upstart has to say?”

“He was elected primarily by the youth of Stell,” Sendak shook his head. “What Rhanvar lacks in experience he makes up for in hotheadedness and charisma – not unlike our Lotor, coincidentally. It’s that sort of ambition that drove the populace to vote for him, but unlike Lotor it was his nationalistic pride that won him favor with the elders in the end. They haven’t forgotten the wrongdoings our empire has wrought on them and Rhanvar is the kind to bear those in mind, as well. He’s going to be someone to contend with moving forward and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s at the helm of these similar appeals for secession.”

“So you think he’s responsible, then?” Maray mused, flipping through the report on Stell to find an image of its leader. “Rhanvar would be the sort to angle for war.”

“He would but he’s not necessarily the culprit I’ve in mind,” Sendak corrected. “Rather, I think he’s operating under someone else’s instructions. After all, the last planet I was about to name was Tirmania.”

“Wait, Tirmania?” Maray recoiled, eyes round with distress. “But isn’t that where –?”

“Where The Convent is stationed?” Sendak filled in knowingly. “Yeah, it is. And I don’t think that’s a coincidence, either.”

“See what your last appointment of the day has to say about that, hm?” the planner sniffed, folding their arms across their chest. “Must be something interesting – I was surprised enough that she asked for an audience in the first place.”

“Well she’s late, at that,” Sendak grumbled. “Although knowing Merla that’s an intentional plot just to annoy me.”

“Well don’t let her know that she’s winning in that,” Maray shot back wryly. “The last thing that woman needs is an ego boost. Not that she acts self-absorbed, which is probably the worst thing about her.”

“Oh?” Sendak hummed, thankful for the distraction as he pushed back in his chair. “Coming to see things my way, are you?”

“Sendak, I was never against you,” the planner corrected, resting against the edge of the desk. “But I’ve never really had much of an opinion on Merla before now, to be honest. I mean, I
know she’s a very adept Druid – else she wouldn’t have been Haggar’s second-in-command – but all
the same she never really stood out terribly much, you know?”

“She’s certainly standing out now,” Sendak returned, brow furrowed. “I know she has about
as much sway over the Druids as I do over the empire but I can’t help but think that she’s looking for
more.”

“Too much like yourself?” Maray suggested and Sendak cut them a glare at once.

“I don’t know how to respond to that,” the lord regent replied after a beat. “But I’d rather not
be compared to the likes of her. We may both have drive and be opportunists but I would never sink
to the level of things she’s been rumored to be doing. Killing kits? It’s deplorable and I won’t have it.
She’s a danger in more ways than one and mark me I’ll see her stopped yet.”

Maray nodded slowly, gnawing at a lip. “Still, Sendak, you have to bear in mind that those
are just rumors. I know that they come from good sources but there’s no proof that we can come
forward with publically yet and –.”

“And the Vesh have the same suspicions as I do,” Sendak cut across earnestly. “When
Emperor Lotor admitted his affiliation with them he also confessed that the Vesh are too weak in
power and number to be launching any sort of attack without complete conviction in their actions.
There’s no way that they’d be targeting Merla unless they had evidence beyond reasonable doubt –
and it isn’t as if that evidence is being handled or collected by just anybody, either. Even if the Vesh
are working with limited resources they still have some of the best people in the empire on their
side.”

“You mean Annis?” Maray interpreted.

“Commander Throk may be a nosy little bastard but he does his job well – better than most,
really, as loathe as I am to give him due credit. But the fact still remains that if he’s involved then it’s
a near guarantee that my suspicions are on the mark.”

“So then you believe that Merla is not only looking to depose you and the emperor but is also
going around drumming up support from expatriates to do it?” Maray calculated.

“You yourself noted how unusual it was that Tirmania was involved,” Sendak reminded
them. “But yes, that is my theory. Hopefully working together with the Vesh will only further prove
me correct – not that I relish having this kind of conflict to work through, mind you. Merely…”
Sendak shook his head, tugging at one of his ears fitfully. “Merely it would tie up a lot of loose
threads for me. As it stands I can’t just arrest Merla – I mean, I could by technicality, no one could
really stop me. There’s just no hard evidence against her right now and it would just look really
unbecoming – I’d have to imagine a fair few citizens would object.”

“Well the people tend to like Merla,” Maray acknowledged, “So I wouldn’t think they’d be
too pleased with you, no. She may be strict but she’s always gone out of her way to be helpful and
benevolent. I mean I think she kind of makes herself out to be a martyr… but all the same.”

“That’s what I don’t trust about her,” Sendak growled.

“What, that she might be an okay person? Having disingenuous motives doesn’t inherently
undo good acts, even if it’s a shitty way to be,” Maray laughed. “Sendak, that’s a personality flaw,
not damning evidence of political warfare! That’s hardly grounds for –!”

A knock at the door interrupted them, the two exchanging a knowing look as Maray slipped
off the desk and over towards their own. Sendak straightened up in his seat, hating the way he could feel his pulse sing, startled by the sudden intrusion.

“Come in,” he beckoned, watching with a sinking feeling as the door parted to emit none other than Merla.

“Good evening Lord Regent,” the Druid bowed her head demurely. “I apologize for my lateness – I hope I’m not intruding on anything?” she ended in question, looking worriedly between Sendak and Maray. Sendak fought from narrowing his eyes in derision.

‘How much of that did she hear?’ he wondered darkly, searching her expression for any sign of deceit. ‘Merla’s clever and we’ve always been at odds with one another so it wouldn’t surprise me if she was eavesdropping for a good while before making herself known.’

“No at all,” he offered in strained tones, indicating for the woman to take a seat opposite him. “Maray and I were just debating a bit of politic. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

From the corner of his eye Sendak could see Maray’s lips quirking into a smile, clearly amused by how pained hospitality seemed to make him. Forcibly he turned his attentions on Merla, searching for the most welcoming thing he could say despite his reservations: “How was your trip back to City Station?” he asked, easing into a more casual register.

“Thankfully brief,” Merla said thinly, settling down in a plush seat opposite Sendak’s desk. She smoothed down her skirts over her legs, resting her hands in her lap as she politely intoned: “And how has your time here been?”

“Hectic,” Sendak replied shortly. “But I doubt running an empire is ever anything but. I’m more curious, however, in what brings you here today: you said it was pressing?”

“Indeed,” Merla agreed, looking relieved to be free of the small talk. “Forgive me for my straightforwardness Sendak, but I’ve recently been made aware of your spending cuts to Research and Development,” she withdrew a tablet from the folds of her cloak, placing it gently on the desk before him. “As such I’ve drafted several alternative plans for your perusal. I’m hoping that you will, at the very least meet me halfway.”

‘Like hell I will,’ Sendak inwardly swore, reaching for the tablet with as much grace as he could muster. The figures swam vaguely before him for several moments before he forced himself to focus on each neatly outlined plan.

‘Funny that none of these propositions affect the City Station-bound Druids in the slightest,’ he noted after a moment. ‘Only those on The Convent would be seeing these funds, the allocation of which appears vague at best. “At the very least meet me halfway”,’ he repeated with distaste. ‘As if I can’t tell that you’re trying to force my hand - you can’t beat me at my own game, Merla.’

“Well,” Sendak began neutrally, purposefully tailoring his language from sounding too curt, “First I must preface by acknowledging that my budget plan has affected the Druids as a whole, which was something I had hoped to avoid. As you can imagine there have been funding requests from many of our heads of state in the wake of the regime change and as such I have tried to allocate where need was most dire, particularly where citizens were concerned - I’m sure a philanthropist such as yourself can understand.

“This said, Druids are also citizens and I want to ensure that their needs are cared for; I assure that you won’t leave empty handed. I am curious, however, about some of your suggestions: could you specify for me exactly where these funds would be allotted? I notice there is quite a sum
dedicated to inter-empire aid but the nature of that aid is unclear. Curiosity aside, the Chief of Commerce will also need to know when a final proposition is made otherwise he won’t approve of the request so we might as well iron out the details now.”

“I appreciate you taking this matter so seriously,” Merla responded with a humble bob of her head, “In consideration to the inter-empire aid I specified: quite simply, I wish to spread the Druids’ goodwill to those planets that the former empire so thoroughly ravished.”

She stood, fingers steepled before her, “I must admit, however, I am at quite an impasse with the High Priestess Tira, who was left in charge of The Convent in the wake of my departure,” her benevolent expression clouded over, mouth drawn into a tight line. “I’ve come to you today as an intermediary between the Druids and the empire as it were – while Tira seeks monetary aid for her experimentation in Research and Development, I’m more interested in allotting the funds to my aforementioned philanthropic work. As it is, the Druids could very well be on the brink of a civil war between those who were loyal to Haggar and wish to continue her research and those like me, who wish to provide reparations the galaxy over.

“I can only hope,” she paused, her eyes falling on Sendak pleadingly. “That by acquiring this monetary support I am able placate Tira and thus avoid further hostilities like those present on the day of Emperor Lotor’s coronation. And furthermore, the allotted funds would aid both myself and the Druids working under my ideals with carrying out the emperor’s ethics.”

Sendak appraised her wordlessly a moment, fingers resting over his lips in thought. ‘She plays the part well,’ he allowed, taking in the worry of her brow. ‘And she’s better at forming traps with her words than I once gave her credit for which makes her all the more suspicious in my mind. Beyond that she’s avoiding answering my questions and no amount of appeal to emotion is going to throw me off course. Still, I can’t afford to look completely callous, even to her.’

“I am sorry to hear that situations among the Druids are so dire,” he returned openly, genuine concern lacing his words.

‘A division of ideology is one thing but a civil war amongst magick users is a recipe for disaster. If this gets too out of hand it will be at the detriment of everyone involved.’

“And while I hope to do my part in preventing tensions from reaching a peak,” Sendak continued, “I also would not wish to intrude on the autonomy of government that the Druids have a long history of upholding. I will gladly mediate if it is requested of me but unless both parties wish for my intervention then I’m afraid it’s beyond my authority to intrude. This would likewise apply to financial backing, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

‘Well, at least it’s not a lie,’ Sendak mused. ‘Haggar covered her bases well while she had the chance and Zarkon was either fool enough or desperate enough to let her. Legally speaking there is little I can do in a situation like this, for good or ill.’

“Beyond this,” he pressed, “Whatever funding changes I make will be made known to the public: even if it is to appease another Druid for the sake of future peace I cannot in good conscience fund projects like those that Haggar conducted - Emperor Lotor has made it clear that these experiments will no longer be tolerated and it would be a sign of bad faith to undermine his will.

“As for your own appeal,” he went on, “I would need legally binding assurances that the money in question would not be used for interpersonal dispute between the Druids. Our law clearly states that sub-governmental conflict be resolved by the resources of said administration alone; it would be an infringement on these policies were I to grant you money for these purposes. Not to be circuitous but I will still need to know the specifics of how you intend to use these funds: in what
manner will you be carrying out Emperor Lotor’s ethics?”

Merla regarded Sendak coolly; her mouth concealed behind the curve of her finger as she closed her eyes and considered Sendak’s words. She opened them a moment later, narrowing them for just a fraction of a second before continuing: “As I’ve said, the Druids are interested in using the funds to aid planets that were negatively impacted during Zarkon’s regime - quite simply what we desire is to aid in healing the sick and injured, helping to rebuild destroyed towns and cities, or even providing basic needs such as food and water. In his work as the red paladin, Lotor made it abundantly clear that he stands against Zarkon’s subjugation and tyranny of other planets. I am merely attempting to uphold those ethics to the best of my ability.

“As for funding Research and Development, I was acting under the belief that by allocating both parties of Druids with equal sums that we would be able to avoid coming to blows,” she concluded. “But Sendak, I must say that under your current jurisdiction I find myself obliged to ask for your assistance. For someone so keen on preventing the Druids from taking their previous seat of power, you certainly seem determined not to provide reparations for what you took.”

‘So now I’m expected to pay deference to her?’ Sendak nearly sneered. ‘I’m supposed to be contrite? I’ve pushed her limits and now she’s starting to show herself for how she really is. Just because the emperor wants to make changes from Zarkon’s regime doesn’t mean that we’re reverting to the old ways in everything. She thinks she deserves the crown? That it’s somehow her right? Fine, let her hubris be her downfall. With luck she’ll reveal something usable to me, something that I can turn against her and neutralize her with.’

Sendak thinned a smile at her, eye flashing dangerously. He could make out the rigid silhouette of Maray to the side of him, ears pricked aright in anger. ‘This hit a nerve with them, too,’ Sendak observed, somewhat placated by the thought. ‘No doubt Maray is just itching to roast her later; at least I’ve that much to look forward to.’

Sendak made to reply, half-formed sentences in mind but the event organizer was quicker.

“Merla,” Maray addressed, voice clipped. The Druid turned at the sound of their voice, blinking back her surprise.

“Forgive me if this is speaking out of turn,” Maray pressed, not waiting for her reply, “But that sounded nearly mutinous of you. Clearly you have your pride as a Druid but we wouldn’t want people to get the wrong impression, would we? I mean it didn’t play out very well for Haggar, after all, and wording is everything. Now I know that you wouldn’t try to persuade the Lord Regent to disobey imperial law but I really must question why you’ve not taken this query to Thruvo? Surely the Captain of Foreign Affairs would be more than happy to receive assistance and consultation when it comes to nations both seceding from and remaining in our empire and it seems as though the nature of your cause falls under his jurisdiction,” they outlined with a placid smile. “I imagine the implementation of a Druid task force could be arranged for these purposes, don’t you? After all it’s the good will that counts and that charity would still be attributed to your name, wouldn’t it?”

“You make me sound like a tyrant,” Merla frowned, the pretty lines of her face sharpening as she regarded the advisor. “I’m not interested in having my name associated with anything; what I’m advocating for is righting what Zarkon has done to these innocent people and I will not have my intentions misconstrued by the likes of you.”

“You make me sound like a tyrant,” Merla frowned, the pretty lines of her face sharpening as she regarded the advisor. “I’m not interested in having my name associated with anything; what I’m advocating for is righting what Zarkon has done to these innocent people and I will not have my intentions misconstrued by the likes of you.”

“Nothing will be misconstrued so long as everyone is straightforward,” Sendak asserted. “Which is not to say that we can carry on without proper respectfulness.”

‘Chiefly by you,’ he finished inwardly, leveling a particularly long look at the Druid. ‘Don’t
think I’ve forgotten exactly how that coup went: when Haggar fell the Druids ceased fighting. All of them, that is, except for you and those you’d gathered alongside you. You tried to stop the paladins in the hangar and ended up fighting me and I won’t so readily let that knowledge slide. You may try to excuse that behavior for fear of Haggar’s retribution but you would have known by then that she had been killed. Your only saving grace is that I don’t have any proof that you’re lying. You have your own objective and I will find it.’

“Now, if we can all remain civil,” he paused meaningfully, “Then let us continue. Merla, it is clear that we share the objective of upholding the emperor’s attitudes in the realm of foreign affairs. Reparations must be dealt out and it is no secret that this will be more than a simple financial matter. These seceding nations will need other resources, some being as basic as food and water as you say while others will be more specific like certain types of medical attention. While I can appreciate that this crosses into the realm of philanthropy, Maray isn’t wrong to suggest that it also has large interplay with Thruvo’s office.

“A Druid task force may be just the solution to everyone’s problems - you would have the freedom to operate with autonomy and assist those nations that need aid and I would have the freedom to allocate you the funds you need to bring this to fruition judging by the fact that it would be under no threat of imperial infringement. I feel as though those nations receiving aid will furthermore be put at ease knowing that so many levels of our government are working towards the same cause,” Sendak added genuinely. “The empire has a lot to make up for, but little can be amended if loyalist and expatriate states alike have no faith in Emperor Lotor’s regime: coming together like this may provide them the peace of mind that they deserve. How do you think, Merla? Is this agreeable to you?”

Merla met Sendak’s stare evenly, finally gracing him with a gentle nod. “I was merely under the impression that Thruvo’s department currently has its hands thoroughly tied, so to speak,” she explained. “I have often found it advantageous to go directly to the source in consideration to these manners, but it appears as if you have your attentions…” she paused, eying Maray meaningfully. “Elsewhere.”

The priestess stood, gathering up her tablet and making to excuse herself, “You may have adopted the mien of a diplomat, Sendak, but you and I both know the kind of blood you spilled in order to claw your way to this position; I shouldn’t be surprised that you’d be so quick to turn away a sincere bid for philanthropy and pin it on a department that is already congested beyond belief.”

She leaned forward across his desk, dropping her voice to low intonations as she set a familiar palm upon Sendak’s ruff, the side of her lips quirking up ruefully, “You’re not watching the little flames, Sendak. When you refuse to quell a fire, you’re likely to cause an inferno.”

“Then I’d say it’s a good thing that I have experience in extinguishing even those, isn’t it?” Sendak returned stiffly, rising to stand to evade her contact. “I make no secret about the man that I’ve been or the man that I intend to be,” he continued pointedly. “Maintaining a code of transparency is the only truly effective means of governing. It seems to be Emperor Lotor’s approach, anyway.”

Merla appraised him wordlessly, forced at length to withdraw to her full height, eyed fiercely all the while by Maray. Ignoring the planner she made a tight smile, collecting her tablet once more as if readying to go.

“I was curious, however,” Sendak mused, claws trailing over the documents layered atop the desk between them, “Where it was that you were planning on concentrating efforts first? Stratus? Qurm? According to these reports you’ve already made quite the bit of headway on the behalf of the empire - it would be beneficial if we were all on the same page of where we will be putting our
resources next. Perhaps Stell? If anyone has been wronged it’s them."

“I wish to provide aid to any and all planets that require it,” Merla replied smoothly, turning on her heel to leave. “Stell, O’shetal, and Qurm were some of the first conquered due to their proximity to Gal and I doubt you have any illusions about the treacherous conditions on Qurm. That being said,” she paused in the doorway, glancing at the pair over her shoulder. “I’ll be contacting Thruvo about my next steps. Good evening, Sendak. Mx. Planner.”

Sendak nodded in turn and watched her go with level gaze, the door clicking closed sharply in her wake. “Wait,” he intoned, holding up a hand the moment he saw the shift in Maray’s body language. In the distance there was a muffled ping of the elevator and then the definite sound of the lift descending.

“The absolute nerve!” Maray exploded at once, lip curled in a sneer. “Speaking so highly all the while trying to drag your name through the proverbial mud. And then to just touch you like that? What kind absolute wretch –!?”

Sendak exhaled slowly, just letting Maray reel on for the both of them.

“And I know for a fact that she knows my name! ‘Mx. Planner’ – what kind of absolute garbage is that!?”

“Well she’s certainly done nothing to endear herself to either of us,” Sendak ascertained, flexing his hands in annoyance. It had taken most of his willpower not to slap her hands away on instinct, the ruff of his neck still prickling as though spiders were crawling across it.

“Yes, I’d say she fucked up catastrophically, don’t you?” Maray returned, anger fizzling in place of sincere concern. “Though I don’t suppose we gained anything on her, did we?”

“Not this time,” Sendak agreed, rubbing at his neck a moment before sighing and scooping all the papers on the desk into the satchel sitting beside it. Slinging it over a shoulder he tugged at the strap, too mentally exhausted to consider much more. “At the very least she conceded to work with Thruvo, so that’s a victory in and of itself.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Maray nodded, looking over their own workstation and collecting their things. “She’s less likely to get up to trouble like that, knowing that we have an entire agency watching her every move. Anything suspicious will be questioned by Thruvo and his lot and subsequently reported to us.”

“Unfortunately that means all we can do now is wait for her to slip up,” Sendak concluded, hovering at the light panel and waiting for Maray to join his side. The advisor shook their head, looking up to Sendak and crooking a knowing smile at him.

“So is tonight a wine night or a whisky night?” they joked.

Sendak laughed, throwing wide the door and shutting down the office behind them. “Whisky,” he intoned, locking the room with a pass of his hand. “Neat.”

Merla’s threat still echoed in his mind, the curl of her lips making him itch with disgust.

“You’re not watching the little flames, Sendak,” her voice taunted. “When you refuse to quell a fire, you’re likely to cause an inferno.”

‘Well,’ he considered as Maray led the way to their shared home, ‘At least I’m not fighting it alone.’
Here she is: our antagonist! So what did you guys think of Merla? She's undergone a lot of changes behind-the-scenes to get to who and what she is now so hopefully the end result is satisfactory to everyone. For those in the know, this version of Merla really only shares a name with the one from the original Voltron series so any similarities between the two beyond that are entirely coincidental.

And speaking of Merla... Moosey and I did something pretty unique with this chapter. While I wrote the majority of it the actual conversation between Merla and Sendak was co-written. And by that I mean that Moosey wrote Merla's dialogue and then I would reply for Sendak and we went back and forth like this until the chapter was more or less complete. I think the end result was surprisingly cohesive but I'm wondering if anyone noticed before my saying~

Just to confirm, chapters will continue to be posted regularly on Fridays around 5:30 PM PST so you can expect Chapter Nine out on July 28th!

<3
Ches
“Well damn it anyway,” Matt swore under his breath for the millionth time that hour. He sat stiffly in his pilot’s chair, craning forward and frowning through the front viewport as if it would better help him see through the snow that obfuscated everything around them. Malachite plodded slowly onwards, carving a path through what had to be at least three feet of drift.

Shiro shot his friend a helpless if encouraging smile, uncertain of what to do with himself. He was once again wedged between Matt and Nanan, awkward silence stretching between them for hours at a time. It had already been some hours since the pair had managed to coax the Mother down from her safety amongst the trees and proximity hadn’t served to better acquaint them any further. Shiro couldn’t blame her, just as much impressed as he was frustrated by Nanan’s iron will to resist their attempts at friendliness.

Sighing, Shiro followed Matt’s line of vision to the blurry scape of Axana beyond. Despite the snow he could tell that it was growing dark and that they’d need to make camp soon, preferably before it grew too hard to find shelter.

“Matt,” he signaled warningly, only to be met with a sigh.

“It’s about that time, right?” the brunet agreed, chewing at a lip. “I keep looking for a place we can crash but it’s next to impossible with this storm – it’s practically a white out.”

“Can’t we just stay in Malachite for the night?” Shiro offered, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“‘Fraid not,” Matt shook his head. “You’ve got to remember that your Lions are powerhouses – anything you can do in those you can do in a fraction of the time or power that any other craft would require. Malachite’s got an incredible ‘battery life’, so to speak, especially since he collects solar energy during the day, but even so, running the temperature regulator nonstop is going to have an effect at some point – I’d rather we conserve our energy in case we need to make a quick getaway, or – stars forbid – get into a fight.”

“Right,” Shiro reluctantly assented.

“You’ve probably noticed already,” Matt continued with a guilty glance, “But I’ve already taken the regulator out of automatic – manually controlling the temperature is less taxing on Mal’s system and helps conserve energy. So that’s why it’s been a little… uncomfortable.”

“You mean ‘cold’?” Shiro corrected.

“Weeell…” Matt drawled, only to be shrugged off.

“Don’t worry about it,” his friend insisted. “You made the right call; being a little chilly isn’t going to kill us.”

“It will if we can’t find a place to bed down, though,” Matt frowned. “That’s the rub, right? If we try a cave or something, we could very well be snowed in. We need somewhere sheltered but also defensible. And I still can’t see a gosh darned thing.”
“Try the radar?” Shiro suggested, nodding to a part of the console. “It has a pretty far reach, right? It might help us get a feel for what’s around us.”

“Yeah,” Matt agreed instantly. “Hit it and see what pings – we’ll investigate any abnormalities; I don’t know about you but I’d rather cash in early than get stuck out here in the dark.”

Shiro gave a nervous laugh, leaning forward in his seat to fiddle with the controls. A corner of the viewport flashed to life and a whirling red line swept its surroundings as it made a scan of the area.

“Anything?” Matt anxiously asked as the scan emitted a cluster of beeps.

“I…” Shiro hesitated, trying his best to judge the reading, “I don’t think so. It looks like it’s just the mountainside to one side and more trees to the other. Although…” he cut off, squinting at a point bordering the map. “Don’t quote me on this but there might be something ahead of us, say about two o’clock?”

“Oh hell yeah!” Matt cheered, subtly nudging the mech in the appropriate direction. “Keep checking the radar; see if you can get a better sense of what it is.”

“Probably rocks,” Nanan spoke up for the first time in well over an hour. Shiro shot her an apologetic look, instantly causing her to glance away, ears swiveling down.

“We’ll find something soon,” he promised, glance skipping between the viewport and the readings. “I think we’re onto something here,” Shiro insisted, grabbing Matt’s attentions. “What do you think this might be?”

“Hmn,” his friend hummed, leaning over in his seat thoughtfully. “I mean it could be a rock –.”

Shiro shot him an exasperated look, nodding imperceptibly towards their passenger as if in warning.

“– Or it could be something really great!” Matt finished quickly. “Like… I dunno, some kind of building?”

“A building?” Shiro echoed, frown creasing his features. “That could mean other people are around. Maybe we should avoid it?”

“I don’t think we’ve got that kind of luxury right now,” Matt countered, lips thinning grimly. “We’re pretty close now; let’s park here and proceed on foot with caution,” he decided, slowing Malachite to a halt and initiating the disembarking sequence. Unclipping himself from his chair, Matt turned about, expression softening. “Hey Nanan?” he addressed gently. The girl started, watching him uncertainly.

“…Yes?” she pressed at his continued silence.

“Shiro and I are going to go and check things out but we’d like for you to stay here until we get back, okay? Can you erect a little ward or barrier in the meanwhile? Something to keep you safe?”

Nanan pouted down at her hands as they twisted around the fabric of her cloak, plucking at stray threads fitfully. “Yeah,” she acknowledged at length. “It’s not very big, though.”
“That’s okay!” Matt encouraged, rising from his seat as the craft settled firmly into place. “Will you look after Malachite for us, then? It’d be a big help.”

Nanan’s ears perked in interest, her eyes growing rounder. Matt gave a small laugh, touched by her kittenish behavior. Shiro watched with interest as his friend beckoned the child over, pointing out the basics of the ship’s controls.

“You can press this to call either Shiro or I,” he indicated, depressing the button in question so the static feedback between the ship and his helmet could be heard. “It’s easy, right?”

Nanan nodded eagerly, scooting closer to the dashboard. “What’s that one do?” she asked quietly, pointing out a bar lever.

“That’s the power to the guns,” Matt explained seriously. “Don’t use it unless you absolutely have to, okay? If it’s in the down position then the thrusters at my seat can open fire. Be very careful with this. Promise me?”

“I promise,” Nanan returned fervently, keening in surprise when Matt ruffled a hand between her ears.

“Thank you, Nanan,” he praised briefly, opening the hatch and leading Shiro into the snow beyond. “We’ll be back soon, okay?”

“Okay…” the child echoed, the space around her rippling with pinkish light as the door to the craft began to reseal itself.

“Think she’ll be alright?” Shiro muttered as he and Matt fought to get their bearings.

“With the mech?” Matt shrugged. “Sure! I mean I let Katie do stuff like that all the time, take the car around the block when I was learning, whatever.”

“Malachite is a little more dangerous than a car,” Shiro pointed out flatly.

“Yup.”

“You just showed Nanan were the guns were and how to use them.”

“Well, yeah,” Matt returned frankly. “Say we can’t protect her for some reason: she has to have a fighting chance, right? This is a period of war now and beyond that she’s a wanted person in particular – I wasn’t just going to leave her to her own devices.”

“I mean…” Shiro winced, knowing what his friend was saying bore weight. He sent a nervous glance over his shoulder towards the looming form of the mech. “Aren’t you a little worried she’s going to, I don’t know –?”

“Run off?” Matt finished for him. “Naw, I can literally summon Malachite from my hailer. There’s a numerical sequence and everything so only I could do it. She couldn’t get far.”

“I was going to say ‘try and kill us’,” Shiro corrected worriedly. “You know, with the guns you showed her how to use.”

“Huh,” was all Matt had to say.

‘I can’t believe this,’ Shiro marveled to himself. ‘I’m going to get murdered by an eight-year-old.’
But the distance between he and the craft grew and no attack came, Matt struggling along in the snow beside him. They stumbled forward a few more yards, the darkened outline of a small structure cropping up before them.

“Careful now,” Shiro warned, the familiar tingle of his prosthetic warming to life and surging through him. “Looks like it might be some sort of… cabin, maybe?”

“Probably a hunter’s,” Matt surmised, falling into a defensive stance of his own.

They pressed against the side of the building, Shiro naturally taking the lead. Slowly they cleared the perimeter, finding a window around the back of the home that had been damaged by the weather, one of its panes shattered. Shiro slipped his arm inside, grateful for the protection of the prosthetic as the broken glass scratched at his limb. With a little tug he unlocked the window and hefted it open, entering the cabin as quietly as he could before turning and assisting his friend inside. A careful sweep revealed nothing further, the place clearly abandoned for the season.

“Looks like a safe enough place to crash,” Matt breathed at length, scuffing a boot along the cracking floorboards. Flowering weeds had crept between the wooden slats, undisturbed by the snow outside. Matt wrinkled his nose, examining their surroundings critically. “Though this place sure is dusty,” he observed.

“I have to think that it’s been out of use for a few, uh, seasons,” Shiro assessed, adopting the Galra time keeping system. “Why don’t you go and get Nanan? I’ll try and start to straighten up around here.”

Nanan, it seemed, was the least impressed with their camp. “This place doesn’t have a service droid?” she frowned, looking dubiously at the broom she’d been given.

“Doesn’t seem like,” Matt returned, coughing a moment as he tried to beat the dust out of the drapes. “Sides,” he continued, regaining his breath, “There’s no place to charge one.”

“What?” Nanan returned dubiously, squatting down to look around for any sort of outlet or wall charger.

“We’re in the middle of nowhere,” Shiro chuckled, pausing in his cleaning to watch the kit hunt fruitlessly for a power source. “I’m kind of surprised there’s even running water.”

“There must be a well on the property,” Matt mused. “We’re SOL when it comes to light around here, though.”

“SOL?” Nanan repeated curiously.

“Uh… seriously out of luck,” Matt fibbed quickly. “Let’s look for some candles, huh?” Nanan nodded seriously, joining him in his hunt around the cabin until they had assembled a hodge podge assortment of candles, all in different heights and colors. She arranged them carefully on the coffee table, kneeling beside them thoughtfully as she lit each in turn. Wordlessly she scraped a claw along the surface of the table, digging up old layers of colored wax.

“Why am I here?” she asked aloud, examining the shavings she was creating absently. Matt and Shiro froze, looking to one another uncertainly.

“Well,” Matt tried first, licking at his lips. “I guess that depends how you mean.”

“Why did you kidnap me?” Nanan asked more plainly.
Shiro paled, guilt hammering straight through him. Matt looked about equally affected, expression sinking considerably.

“We didn’t… well… we… uhm,” Matt began to speak in their defense, unable to make much justification for their actions.

“It’s because I’m the new Mother of Constellations, right?” Nanan continued softly.

“Yeah,” Shiro answered simply. “Remember before how we told you that we had some friends that call themselves the Vesh?”

“I know them,” Nanan stated quietly, nodding a little to herself. “My dad used to talk about them a lot.”

Shiro blinked, slightly taken aback by the kit’s admission, “Well we and our friends wanted to keep you safe. We…” he looked a little helplessly to his friend who could only shrug in turn. “We didn’t know how else to protect you, honestly.”

“The Vesh thought through everything we could do to protect you from Merla,” Matt spoke up, speaking with an earnestness that drew Shiro’s attentions. “We considered trying to make some sort of trade or deal or… anything, really. Since Emperor Lotor is our friend, too, we even tried to think of things he could mandate or order. But the problem is that – even if the public don’t really know what she’s about yet – Merla ultimately doesn’t listen to anyone, right? She wants to be in charge of things so when it gets down to it she doesn’t really care about breaking any laws or agreements.”

‘That makes sense,’ Shiro considered privately. ‘Annis made it seem like the Vesh didn’t really care what method they took to separate Nanan from The Convent but when Matt explains it like this it sounds like there was a lot more care put into their process. I guess I should have figured, besides, seeing as that Sylvux guy is in charge now. He does nothing but exude friendliness and compassion. An odd choice for a leader, maybe, but at least he inspires trust.’

“Well because of that,” Matt continued, “There wasn’t really anything we could do or say that would make Merla care, save, of course, for doing something impossible like joining with her. But that would defeat the point, right? We’re trying to keep Merla from hurting people and we want to help Emperor Lotor establish a new kind of empire, one that people actually want to be a part of.”

“But what about what I want?” Nanan prodded and again her companions fell silent.

“What do you want, Nanan?” Shiro asked gently, reclining against the kitchen hutch in lieu of going to her side. He wanted to offer her what comfort he could but he knew, too, that physicality would only serve to scare her further, especially considering who he was as far as she was concerned.

Nanan made a small sound of thought, running her claws along the grain of the table. “I want to see my dad,” she answered at length.

“Do you think could tell me about him?” Matt pressed gently, “Like, what his name is and when the last time you saw him was? I could ask someone from the Vesh for help finding out exactly where he is right now – especially if you said he knew of them. We don’t know if he’s still on City Station.”

“Oh,” Nanan hummed in affirmation. “The last time I saw him… it was before things started getting kind of weird.”
“Weird?” Matt questioned. “Like how?”

“It was…” the Mother hesitated, seemingly taking pause to remember the events. “It was right after Prince – Emperor Lotor came to City Station. Dad left right before the Vesh started to attack – he was visiting with me before he had to go back out to his sector.”

“His sector?”

“Yeah, my dad has a pretty high rank in the military I guess, so he’s gone a lot. I boarded with the Druids in the compound on City Station when he wasn’t there to take care of me,” Nanan explained.

“Do you remember what rank he was?” Shiro asked. Nanan hummed thoughtfully.

“I think… Ensign?” she filled them in.

“Ensign,” Matt repeated, committing the information to memory. “And his name?”

“Oh,” Nanan chirped. “His name is Vektor.”

It was like the cabin was fading out around Shiro in the half-light – behind him he could feel the chill radiating off of the tiled walls in the execution chamber. The light, sweet taste of ozone after a gunshot was slick on Shiro’s palette, hand still shaking with adrenaline as he squeezed his knuckles white around the pistol used to take the lethal shot.

Shiro stepped backwards, shaking his head as he willed himself out of the memory – but even as the flashback washing over his mind’s eye waned, the memory of the noises persisted, replaying in Shiro’s head in repeat, like a mocking dirge:

“Vol sa!”

And the wickedly abrupt noise of laser fire cracking once.

Shiro didn’t remember running from the cabin, but still found himself crouching in the dark of a nearby copse of trees. His entire body was trembling, fingers writhing violently in the snow. He tunneled them through his hair, nails pressing blunt crescents into his scalp as he opened his mouth and heaved ragged breaths through it. His lungs were on fire, his heart hot, cold, and acidic all at once as it made to burst through his ribs. Shiro’s limbs went numb with adrenaline that he couldn’t use in the onslaught of the panic attack; there was nothing to run from. Nothing to do but rock with his hands over his head, eyes blown wide open and painful as undeserved tears fell from his face unchecked.

Someone was gasping, sobbing – deep, ugly noises welling up from within their gut and bursting out with every exhalation Shiro made. It was him, wailing in his panic like a trapped animal, caught by the unforeseen circumstances of the pull of a trigger.

“The assassin has been identified as Ensign Vektor.”

“Shame about Vektor, too. A single father and everything. It’s tragic.”

“You said he wasn’t a martyr.”

“I lied.”

Shiro rolled to his side and held his chest as he struggled for breath, knowing on some level
that he’d begun to hyperventilate but completely unable to do anything for it. He was going to be sick. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t known – as if he hadn’t looked down the sights of the pistol and been blissfully unaware that he was about to erase a life, take away a man’s chance to see and help his child grow. Shiro didn’t have the same luxury of ignorance as the person who’d collided with his mothers’ car seven years ago. He’d known exactly what he was going to do and he’d taken the shot either way.

And once he’d made his decision, he hadn’t even stopped to regret it.

“Shiro?”

The sound of his name had Shiro jolting to attention, wide eyed as he met Matt’s soft expression. The brunet had followed him out of the cabin and into the copse of woods. There was a look of gentle concern on Matt’s face as he approached his friend and crouched down beside him, reaching up to brush the tears off of his cheeks with his thumb.

“Hey buddy,” Matt spoke softly. “You bolted out of there pretty fast – are you alright? What can I do to help you?”

“I…” the paladin trailed off uncertainly, feeling entirely too much and not enough at once. Guilt and panic swirled in his gut alongside a nasty suspicion that everything around him would melt back into the execution chamber in the fade of an illusion. Nothing seemed tangible anymore, his own sense of self floating somewhere above his physical body as the world grew surreal.

“Shiro,” Matt directed, catching his attention once more. “Stay with me buddy. Here, uhm…” he thought quickly. “Alright, take a deep breath, breath in slow.”

Shiro nodded, following suit and feeling the inhale catch in his throat raggedly.

“Okay, again,” Matt insisted. “Slow and steady. Feel how cold the air is? It almost burns, right? In your lungs? It’s so cold out here it’s almost a little painful, isn’t it?”

Shiro nodded once more, trapping the air in his chest, letting the icy sting fill his awareness. The sensation fanned out across his body: the bite of the cold flushing his cheeks, the tip of his nose, the pads of his fingers. Bit by bit each sensation dragged him back down inside of himself, grounding him in the present moment. Shiro exhaled rhythmically, letting the tension ebb from his body.

Matt talked to him throughout, easing the minutes until Shiro was able to stand without shaking. “Any better?” he asked, and when their eyes met Shiro could feel the warmth and compassion that exuded from his friend.

The paladin nodded shakily, finally feeling himself become grounded once more. But still, anxiety sat behind his sternum like a hot ball of lead, threatening to stifle every breath he struggled to take. Matt was still looking at him with a mixture of concern and confusion, gently stilling Shiro by his biceps.

“Are you okay?” he asked, expression serious.

“I,” Shiro paused to wet his lips with his tongue, uncertain how to answer.

“Ensign Vector,” Matt said softly, “He was the leader of the Vesh before Sylvux. He was the person who attempted to assassinate Zarkon.” His eyes clouded in understanding, “You knew he was dead. Is… is that why you panicked?”
“It’s…” Shiro swallowed the tense sphere of anxiety attempting to work its way up his throat. “It’s more than that.”

Matt nodded encouragingly, waiting for Shiro to continue on his own. He opened his mouth to speak, but managed to only produce a small noise, the execution repeating in his head over and over, beating against his brain in an intrusive spiral. He crouched in the snow again, attempting to get ahold of himself, but to almost no avail. White noise pressed on his ears from the outside in, muffling his own words as he explained. He was hardly a part of the ensuing conversation, hearing both his and Matt’s voices as if they came from behind a thick barrier.

Matt raked a hand through his hair, face scrunching in guilt as he intoned something to Shiro, who shook his head ‘no’. Matt buried his face in his hands, gesturing towards the cabin. Shiro nodded.

“You really think it would be best to tell her?” Matt’s voice surfaced from behind the block of Shiro’s mind.

“There’s… there’s really no use in dragging it out,” Shiro admitted, bowing his head. “I don’t know if I could live with myself lying to her and if we put it off… she’ll only come to hate me even more in the end.”

“I don’t want to lie to her either,” Matt nodded, propping his forehead up in his palm. “I really don’t. But… would it just scare her more?”

“I don’t know,” Shiro shrugged, shaking his head. “What I do know is that Galra – as a society – are fairly stalwart in the face of death. Coming from a military people, the death of a loved one is a really present possibility – kits are raised from a young age to accept that they’ll probably have to see their parents die,” his mouth twisted ruefully. “But I don’t think anyone’s prepared to be kidnapped by their parent’s killer—.”

“Shiro,” Matt cut him off almost immediately, urgently grasping his friend’s shoulder. “You can’t think of the situation that way. Despite what you had to do, you’re still a good person.”

‘Even now you have so much faith in me,’ Shiro thought, the guilt in his gut growing two-fold. The Druid-created Matt from the arena began to fill his mind like water. ‘But would you still feel that way if you knew what happened in the coliseum?’

“You wanted a monster?” the taunt haunted him. “You wanted something the Druids twisted to shit? Well you’re in luck because you already fit that description perfectly.”

Shiro could see him then, backed by fire and sneering, blade readied against him.

“You left me for dead. You left my father for dead.”

The acute memory of anguish flooded him, of sorrow and desperation.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Pain. Cuts from Matt’s blade. Stinging welts from the kiss of the fire.

“I know I mean nothing to you.”

Knowing nothing he said would matter.

“It’s too late for apologies.”
Feeling his arm sink through Matt’s back, feeling him jerk in death, grow still.

“Hey,” Matt’s presence gripped Shiro once again, a gentle hand laid over his shoulder. “We don’t have to tell her now.”

“Tell me what?”

The pair jumped almost in unison, their sight slowly developing in the darkness as they turned towards the source of the sound. Nanan stood at the edge of the copse, just barely silhouetted in the weak candlelight pouring out of the cabin.

“Hey kiddo,” Matt started uneasily, pushing up off of the snowy ground to approach her. “You should get back to the cabin; it could be dangerous out here.”

The Druid lurched back, her ears pressed flat to her head as she drew a trembling hand to her chest. “Tell me what?” she repeated, voice picking up in pitch as she continued to move away from them.

“Nanan,” Shiro said softly, standing as well in order to approach the kit. She hunkered down, ears drooping alongside her head as Shiro drew close, resolving to take a knee several feet from her. His thoughts were clearing, adrenaline from the upcoming admission helping to reclaim his focus. “I know… I know you’re really scared and confused right now, but… Matt and I…”

“Yes?” the girl pressed, tilting her head to the side – her hand sought the charm at her neck as she began to fiddle with it anxiously.

“I think it would be better if we talk inside,” Matt suggested, only for Nanan to shake her head vehemently.

“No, whatever it is I wanna know,” she insisted, staring at each of them imploringly. “What’s going on? I said my dad’s name and you both started acting really weird…”

“Nanan, your dad…” Shiro began – and for a moment he was fourteen again, gripping his cellphone with all of his might as the officer over the phone informed him of his mothers’ death.

“Your dad did something very brave,” the black paladin continued, watching as the girl’s face clouded in confusion. “Do you remember a few myokokak ago, someone tried to shoot Emperor Zarkon while he was seeing a play?”

“Yes…” Nanan replied hesitantly.

“Your dad was the person who tried to shoot Zarkon,” Matt explained, stepping up beside Shiro. Nanan glanced between them in mounting confusion and upset. “Zarkon did really, really bad things – like hurt entire planets of people, and even the Galra – so your dad tried to shoot him so someone good like Emperor Lotor could take his place.”

“At the time I was working with the Galra military to try to help free people from Zarkon,” Shiro continued, “And when I was there I had to… I had to do some pretty awful things so that no one would suspect that I was trying to help get rid of Zarkon.”

Nanan was silent, the wind picking up her cloak and fluttering it like a flag.

“Because your dad was caught…” Shiro said thickly. “…Nanan, do you understand what an execution is?”
“Why are you telling me this?” the kit asked in a tremulous little voice hardly carried over the howl of the winter winds.

“Nanan, you have a right to know what happened to your father,” Matt said, stepping closer to the little girl. She didn’t move away this time, instead she crumpled down into the snow. “We don’t want to lie to you.”

“He’s dead,” Nanan croaked, her hands falling limply beside her in the snow. “My dad’s dead, isn’t he?”

Matt crouched in the snow next to her, tentatively offering his open arms. Nanan fell forward listlessly, completely still and silent in the freezing air. “I’m so sorry, Nanan. Yes, your dad passed away—.”

“Vrepmyza killed him.”

Shiro recoiled from her words, biting back the overwhelming urge to succumb to tears. He took a deep breath to still himself, beginning to speak in a tremulous voice: “Nanan I’ll never be able to convey to you how sorry I am that—.”

“Vrepit sa.”

“What?” Matt inquired, pulling away from Nanan. Her head hung limply forward, white hair falling over her face in sheets as she began to shake.

“It’s victory,” said the little girl chillingly. “Or death. And my dad died.”

“No Nanan,” Matt shook his head, gathering her up again and pressing the kit close to his chest. “No, your dad didn’t fail. Zarkon is gone and Emperor Lotor will—.”

“Don’t,” Nanan cut him off. “I don’t wanna hear anymore.”

They remained like that for a long while: Nanan stock-still in Matt’s embrace while Shiro knelt beside them in the snow. Eventually Nanan’s breaths began to pick up in pitch and she collapsed further onto Matt, her cries hidden beneath the shrill howls of the ongoing storm.

Chapter End Notes

Well... that answers that about Vektor's kit, doesn't it? A lot of you have inquired over the course of the series about this kid - turns out she's actually a player in how the story unfolds. Kind of a heavy chapter, but a necessary one, too.

On a slightly different note, does anyone know what day it is today? I mean, yes, it is Lance's canonical birthday, coincidentally, but that's not what I'm getting at. Believe it or not today (July 28, 2017) marks the one year anniversary of the Leo Rising series! Exactly a year ago I posted the first chapter of Pressure Suit and kicked us off on this journey. Thank you thank you THANK YOU to EVERYONE who has ever read, subscribed, commented, bookmarked, left kudos and even left fanart. Fanart. Moosey and I are still reeling with gratitude and fondness over that one. You guys have all been amazing and we couldn't ask for a better readership.

This said, Moosey and I both really wanted to do something special for today's
anniversary but had a little bit of trouble coming up with something suiting. We've considered putting out a "bonus chapter" with some extra content: things like character backgrounds and extra info and more notes on Galra culture or LR series canons/headcanons. What do you guys think? What would you be most interested in hearing about? Maybe it's about the families we've crafted for the characters, maybe it's additional details on original characters, or even on planets we've created: we'd be thrilled to hear what interests you most and share a bit more of this world with you - after all, not everything could be organically fit into the story proper!

We look forward to hearing from you and ardently hope that you continue to enjoy Constellation and the Leo Rising series! Thanks as always for coming on this amazing ride with us!

<3

Ches
Keith slumped against his seat, fingers tapping listlessly against the tabletop. Before him sat the Altean equivalent of a laptop, the projection showing a mostly blank document. Keith bit at a lip, glaring at the screen and the scant lines he had managed to draft:

“On this day, the thirty fifth of Pattitan in the year one Veshmog, I, The Most Illustrious and Wise Imperial Majesty Emperor Lotor of the Galra Empire, hereby proclaim the following treaty to Protector and Keeper of the Galra Empire, Lord Regent Sendak, and swear to abide by the tenants and promises therein.”

That much, at least, was solid, but Keith could take no credit for the drafting. After ending his call with Sendak – and giving himself the better part of the previous day to collect himself – he had asked Allura how best to proceed and, taking pity on him, she had instructed him seek somewhere quiet while she retrieved a device for him.

“An interesting choice,” she had quipped, entering the kitchen and placing the computer before him.

“I dunno,” Keith shrugged, pulling the keyboard towards himself determinedly, “It’s relaxing in here and I figured Hunk could use the company.”

The paladin in question gave a little wave, expression somewhere between angry and anxious. No doubt he was worried about Lance, having already expressed his intense distrust of the lord regent and his schemes. He forced a smile at Keith and the princess, trying to distract himself through sheer force of will.

Keith had pulled up the necessary applications, preparing to type before stalling, staring wide eyed at the projection. “Um,” he voiced, “Allura? How do I write a contract?”

Allura blinked at him, a soft giggle falling from her lips. “Right, that,” she teased, “Sometimes I forget that you’re so new to all of this. It must be a bit much, yes?”

“Yeah,” Keith nodded gratefully. “To say the least. I mean, I…” he swallowed down his nervousness, unable to keep from feeling embarrassed at being so woefully unprepared. “I really have no idea what I’m doing,” he admitted after a pause. “I mean, there’s a lot that I want to do, I just don’t know how. And… well… I’d do things my way but I know that there has to be a proper protocol and I don’t want to just fuck everything up by charging ahead in spite of those methods.”

“Understandably,” Allura assured him. “And you should take pride in the fact that you’ve considered those complications: it would be all too easy to just do as you wish. Even if you’re new to... well, everything, really, your people will feel all the more trusting in you if they know that you’re taking this post so seriously. As I’ve said,” she added kindly, “I’m here to help you in whatever capacity I can. I can’t proclaim to be very well versed in Galra culture – especially seeing as so much must have changed while I was asleep – but I will support you in any way that I can.”

Keith relaxed, a smile easing onto his lips. “Thanks, Allura,” he returned, touching her hand briefly. “It’s a genuine relief to have your guidance.”

The princess blushed, surprised by the compliment. “Now,” she addressed, still smiling
Despite her determined expression. “Let me show you how to begin your document.” With her help, Keith managed to draft the first several lines, laying out a skeleton of what the treaty should include.

“The rest is up to you now,” Allura encouraged in parting. “I need to go confer with Coran on some things; let me know when you’re finished and I can proof read for you.”

Gaining a grasp on what was needed, Keith let her go, beginning to fill in the outline with rising confidence. Within twenty minutes, however, he was kicked back in his seat, forehead braced in a hand and feeling defeated.

“This is no good,’ he assessed privately. ‘This sounds like a middle schooler wrote this. The intro is so officious and fancy and the rest…” he scanned the document fretfully, wincing. ‘No one is ever going to take this seriously. I know it doesn’t mean much, but I still don’t want Sendak to judge me.’

“Doin’ alright there, Keith?” Hunk spoke up from the neighboring seat, hands glistening from his work.

“No,” the red paladin returned mournfully. “I am definitely not doing alright.”

“Can’t be that bad, can it?” Hunk placated, rolling a mixture of filling into the shell of a dumpling. “I mean, no one expects it to be perfect. And it’s kind of informal, besides, right? Like, this is just for peace of mind for the both of you. I doubt it’s going to be filed away and recorded forever, so who cares?”

“Yeah but that bastard is slippery,” Keith frowned. “And I know that you trust Sendak even less than I do.”

“Yeah,” Hunk admitted, expression clouding. “You’ve got a point there.”

“I just want to make sure this contract is watertight before I send it off to him,” Keith explained. “I don’t want to leave any loopholes for him to exploit. Also I don’t want it to sound like a child wrote it.”

“Well that’s something you shouldn’t have to worry about, right?”

“Hunk,” the other groaned in embarrassment, “I failed freshman English twice. This shit is not my strong suit.”

“Oh,” the paladin replied shortly. “Okay, but your speeches are really good. Those always sound really eloquent.”

“I dunno, I’m quick on my feet, I guess,” Keith shrugged. “Public speaking isn’t my favorite but it’s never been hard for me, either. Also, thanks.”

“Yeah,” Hunk nodded casually. “Well, maybe you can pretend like it’s a speech? Just write down what you would say. Or, I dunno, maybe you could record yourself saying whatever you want to convey and transcribe the parts that you like.”

“Huh,” Keith mused, “You know, I might just try that.”

“See?” Hunk smiled, “Nothin’ to worry about. And Allura said she’d help out, too. If you’re really worried I bet we could always find a space lawyer or somethin’.”

“Space lawyer!” Keith laughed, suddenly distracted as his screen flashed a message. “A live
video request?” he murmured aloud, tapping the accept button with a finger. The screen flickered and the recipient leaned forward, frowning.

“Where…?” Sendak mused, looking about the castle’s kitchen.

Keith jolted upright in his seat with a choke of surprise, trying to school himself into a look of professional indifference.

“I expected the control room,” Sendak stated frankly.

“And I expected Pidge, really,” Keith returned in measure, looking past the screen to Hunk who shrugged at him uncertainly. “I didn’t know I could receive the ship’s calls from here. Is something the matter?”

“There will be soon, from what I can tell,” Sendak answered. “Although this may require a small bit of explanation depending on what you know. How familiar are you with the planet Stell?”

“They’re a part of the Vol system, same as Gal,” Keith returned with ease. “And I doubt it’s any mystery to you that they assisted the Vesh in their uprising.”

“Correct,” Sendak nodded curtly. “That said, I don’t believe the Vesh should count on them any longer.”

“Why’s that?” Keith frowned. “Is there some bad history with them?”

“I believe it’s safe to say that Gal has a bad history with everyone,” Sendak quirked a smile. “But regardless, one of my captains has informed me of a transmission that has been intercepted on route to The Convent. Now this in and of itself wouldn’t be of much interest given that Merla has been sending Druids out to provide aid and we know Stell to be one of those recipient planets.”

“Aid?” Keith echoed in disbelief. “Why would she do that? From everything I’ve heard of her that would be really out of character, wouldn’t it? So what’s the ploy?”

“I’m about as dubious on the matter as you,” Sendak acknowledged. “And if you ask me I’d say it’s just the nice façade she puts forth in order to better manipulate others. The Vesh may not have made it clear to you but Merla isn’t a known threat, per se – at least not as far as the public is concerned. Being charitable wouldn’t raise suspicions in their eyes.”

Keith cocked his head, confusion lacing his brow. “Not to sound ignorant,” he began carefully, “But what is it, then, that you and the Vesh know that the citizens don’t? What information do you have on Merla that is simultaneously convincing enough to act in opposition to her and yet not solid enough to come forward with publically? Because from the way I figure she’s got a significant advantage on us as things stand.”

Sendak hesitated around a wince, his lip screwing up in disdain. “You’re not wrong on that,” he admitted at length. “And to be entirely truthful you’ll have to ask among the Vesh for what evidence they’ve amassed. All I know for certain is that we’ve got congruent beliefs about her. As for my reasons?” the lord regent mused. “Do you remember back to when we came across one another in the hangar, right when you were making to leave in the wake of the coup? Do you recall the Druids that came in after you?”

“Yeah,” Keith returned slowly. “I thought about it later, too. It was odd, wasn’t it? After Shiro defeated Haggar all the other Druids seemed to just… stop. We weren’t expecting any of them to come after us. Maybe they just wanted revenge?”
“Maybe,” Sendak allowed, “But given who was at their helm I highly doubt that was their reasoning.”

“Merla?” Keith guessed.

“Yes. And while she may have been second in the chain of command there was no love lost between her and Haggar – no one could make the argument that Merla would have lashed out in retaliation over her death.”

“Then when Merla chased after us,” Keith pieced together, “It was to try and kill me? The Vesh say that she wants to reinstate the Mother of Constellations as governmental head, same as it was way back when. If that’s true then with both Zarkon and Haggar out of the picture the only one standing in the way of her seizing control would be me, right? And now, I suppose, you.”

“That’s correct,” Sendak sighed. “Only problem is, of course, is that there’s been no hard fact to base these claims on – except, perhaps, now. Ever since the coup Merla has been working under the radar, using the secrecy of the Druids to veil her actions. Because they are legally seen as a subgovernment of the empire they’re beyond my jurisdiction to interact with: I can’t subpoena Merla to know what she’s been up to so I’ve had to rely on just keeping close tabs instead. But as I’ve said, it appears that that’s paid off.”

“Because of this transmission from Stell?” Keith prompted. “You think they’re working together with Merla?”

“Yes,” Sendak confirmed. “Stell is chief among a list of planets that want independence from the empire and they’ve been the most vocal and aggressive about it, at that. I think Merla has been taking advantage of her inter-empire relief effort in order to drum up forces to oppose you and I have cause to believe that there are already several planets enlisted in these efforts.”

“Stell would fit the bill, then,” Keith admitted darkly. “Given what happened at the time of Zarkon’s takeover they would be the last to support a monarchy – anything would feel safer to them, even Merla.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Sendak hummed. “Now this transmission from Stell was sent straight to The Convent, particularly to a Druid by the name of Allux. Thing is, this person doesn’t exist – no one by that name and rank has been recorded by the Druids so either they’re deep undercover or her inbox is a dummy account and I’m betting on the latter. What’s more is that the message was encrypted – if this were just follow up to charity work then there would be no need for that level of secrecy.”

“So was the transmission decrypted?” Keith pressed, leaning forward in his seat. “And has anyone tried accessing that inbox? Is there anything that could tie it to Merla?”

Here Sendak split into a fanged grin, lips curled with satisfaction. “Yes and no,” he prefaced. “Technological Affairs was able to decipher the majority of the message. From what can be discerned Stell is intending to launch an offensive against the empire and there’s context enough to believe that they’re not alone in their efforts. The transmission reads as if it’s in response to a prior correspondence, calling out The Convent by name as well as listing the Mnemosyne System as a point of contact.

“While no one has tried to access the inbox at this time the name ascribed to it stands out. When Merla and I last spoke she told me that I wasn’t watching the little flames and that things would get out of hand soon if I wasn’t careful. Can you guess, then, what the name ‘Allux’ means? It’s an old name now largely out of use but it can be transcribed as ‘many fires’ and I fail to believe
that that’s merely tangential chance.”

“If that’s the case then she’s playing with you,” Keith warned. “There’s no way that she’d slip up like that unless she wanted to call your attention to it. Maybe it’s a trap?”

“Or,” Sendak offered, “It’s a miscalculation on her part. There’s no cause to believe that Merla knows we’ve already been in talks. Likely she doubts that we’d ever be able to come to terms on anything and this calling card is just her mocking me over what she thinks will be an easy victory for her.”

“How do you mean by that?” Keith returned. “An ‘easy victory’?”

“If things are as we suspect then Stell is ultimately at Merla’s command and with her vying for the throne their chief focus will be on the two of us. Frankly? You’re the weaker target.”

Keith shot the lord regent a glare, unhappy to admit that he was right. “So you’re suggesting that they’ll go after us first?”

“The contents of the message alluded to a preemptive strike,” Sendak continued, “So yes, I interpret that to mean that they’re going to pursue you and your group. All things considered, it’s the sensible approach to take: you are far more important to remove from the equation than I am in terms of seceding power. With you out of the picture Merla would only need to incite a few laws to boot me from office. You’re certainly making things simple for her.”

Keith made to comment, forcibly biting back a scathing retort. He tumbled it over inside his head, trying to find the least inflammatory means of communicating his frustration. “Might I remind you,” he began stiffly, “That things would be considerably less simple for her if Lance hadn’t been abducted. I notice that people are less likely to fuck with us when we can successfully form Voltron.”

“All the more reason for Lance to be abducted, then,” Sendak pointed out coolly, and beyond the projection Hunk tensed in anger. “With one paladin removed from the equation Voltron couldn’t be employed against myself or City Station as a whole and the more likely you would be to comply to working together.”

“At the cost of my safety,” Keith pointed out.

“Consider it motivation,” Sendak returned. “With or without Voltron Stell won’t be an easy foe. Beyond having an excelled military, resentment runs deep in Stell’s cultural memory: you should know that they were the first planet to be incorporated into the Galra Empire,” he continued neutrally. “And that until recently the red paladins all descended from Stellite aristocracy.”

‘Orkah,’ Keith acknowledged sadly. ‘At least I know now that he wasn’t forgotten, not if his people are still angry about what happened. They, at least, had to have known that Zarkon was in a Stellite body. How offensive must that have been?’

“So everything they’ve done has been in direct opposition to Zarkon?” Keith surmised. “Which would explain why they initially sided with the Vesh.”

“And why they now side with the Druids,” Sendak emphasized. “In opposition to you.”

Keith winced, catching the insinuation. “My father is Thace,” he stated flatly.

“In your position no one gives a damn who you claim as family,” Sendak countered. “All they will see is your lineage and you will have to fight uphill ceaselessly to prove your
trustworthiness. As far as Stell sees things you are Zarkon’s heir and son and little more than a replacement for a tyrant. They certainly may be more willing to hear what you have to say given that you weren’t raised within the empire, but they are going to be wary all the same. It doesn’t help,” he added purposefully, “That you are incredibly young and inexperienced. Stellites live an extremely long time – even by Galra standards – and they will likely not take you too seriously. It only makes sense that they would ally instead with the Druids, with those familiar with politics and domestic and foreign culture.”

“But Merla’s terrible,” Keith said without thinking. To his surprise Sendak laughed, considering him a moment.

“I don’t necessarily believe that they are siding with Merla per se,” he mused. “Moreover, they are siding with the party that used to act as a governing force over the Galra. They’re looking to reinstate a system that worked to everyone’s benefit. I wouldn’t be surprised if they are looking to depose of Merla – and that motion would likely not be protested by too many Druids, either. Like Zarkon, in ways, Merla isn’t very popular but she is powerful and well connected. People follow her because she’s efficient and ruthless and thereby is bound to bring about stability for good or for ill. Stell also knows this and will probably try to make use of her.”

“Then,” Keith assessed, “If that’s the case Stell might yet be persuaded to switch alliances. If they want to get rid of Merla then we still have a common goal. If we can manage to get them to cooperate with us then we may have a chance of working out some sort of peace. If Merla considers them worth siding with then I can only imagine they’re the type we wouldn’t want to have as enemies.”

“You judge correctly,” Sendak nodded, “However, don’t assume that swaying them will be so easy. At the end of the day you are still the emperor and Stell is not in favor of that. Chances are they won’t want an emperor at all, even a moderate one: they may decide that changing the government of the empire is more important than seeking aid in removing Merla. Frankly, they’d be right to.

“You must remember that no matter how strong the Galra Empire once was it is now extremely fragile: planetary systems all over have already been requesting different and varying things and it should come as no surprise if they decide to take their chance to dismantle what has been built. Stell is not the only issue we will face, that much is certain. As far as I’m concerned, Stell has bitten off more than they can chew: if they wish to align with the Druids so be it; they know what the Galra Empire is capable of.”

“I’m not so certain I like that,” Keith countered at once. “If they wish to leave the empire then they are free to do that: that is my will. Aggression cannot be the only viable answer.”

“You’re free to exhaust yourself if you wish,” Sendak sniffed in amusement. “To be perfectly racist Stellites have a reputation for being stubborn – that changing their minds is as likely as catching stars in your hands. Their government is incredibly old and remembers a lot of the transgressions done against them: if you wish to bring them in as an ally it will take a considerable effort to do so. I advise you keep an eye on them and their wants but focus more so on the pressing issues: namely Merla.”

“And I don’t suppose we can avoid killing Stellites if they’re fighting for her,” Keith grimaced knowingly. “Which will only further put us in their poor opinion; they’re forcing our hand. When did you receive the transmission?”

“Last night,” Sendak answered. “Not long, in fact, after Merla had physically come by my office and we had our little disagreement. It wasn’t until today, however, that we were able to discern
the contents of the message, hence why you didn’t hear of it until just now. I realize that –.

Keith jerked in alarm as sirens flooded the Castle of Lions, the interior strobing red. “Paladins!” Allura called over the coms, “There are enemy inbound ships approaching! Get to your Lions immediately!”

“Fuck,” Keith swore lowly, looking back to Sendak.

“I take it that’s them, then?” the lord regent suggested.

“Given where we are it could hardly be anyone else, save maybe the Druids themselves,” Keith returned, anxiety swelling. Hunk was already scurrying away from the table, wiping his hands on his apron and casting it aside hurriedly.

“Meet you in the hangar?” he asked, pacing by the doorway.

“Yeah,” Keith affirmed. “You and Pidge suit up; I’ll be there shortly.” He watched his friend go, turning to Sendak in seriousness. “Is there anything you know about the Stellite army that could give us an advantage?”

“Given your fighting style, I’m uncertain,” Sendak hummed. “However, consider this: you send me your location and I will deliver you military aid. I realize that our terms of agreement have yet to be exchanged so consider this a sort of ‘trial run’ on our partnership. This seems as good a time as any to team up.”

Keith grit his teeth in frustration. ‘What other choice do I have?’ he considered. ‘Without Voltron I have no idea what we’re really going up against. There’s only three of us now, plus what cover the castle can provide. Allura didn’t disclose how many ships were on the way, either, but I have to imagine it’s sizeable. If Merla wants to take us out I have a feeling she’s going to be thorough about it. And yet…’

He studied Sendak’s impassive features, trying fruitlessly to gauge his intentions. ‘No matter how agreeable and forthcoming he’s been I still can’t say that I trust him. If I give him our location I’m just as well giving away the Vesh, too. If he betrays us then he’ll have the ability to completely destroy us. That’s a huge gamble. I just don’t know Sendak well enough to feel that we have insurance against that kind of thing. Still, I don’t see any other way through this situation and we can’t reach the Vesh remotely because of the damn storms. Someone would have to go back down there to alert them and then there would only be two of us.’

Keith took a steadying breath, nodding sharply once. “I accept,” he affirmed, rising from his seat. “We’re situated in the Mnemosyne System, near to Glacimor. You had better deliver,” he threatened evenly, “Because we will make it through this attack and seek retribution if you take this opportunity to try and kill us.”

“Consider me warned,” Sendak grinned.

‘Cocky,’ Keith thought, ‘But I think he’s coming to respect me.’

“We’ll establish contact during the battle,” he informed. “Vol sa.”

Sendak cocked his head in interest, still smiling. “Vol sa,” he repeated amusedly and then the call ended.

Keith made for the armory immediately, briefly considering skipping suiting up altogether before changing into his panoply. The last thing he needed was to get injured, especially if it was due
to cutting corners. He took the zipline down to Red, staring through her viewport at the still forms of Blue and Kuro across the concourse, their eyes eerily dim in lieu of their typical golden glow. Keith took a moment to steel himself before takeoff, drawing in a deep breath.

It was no secret that Shiro intended Keith to lead if ever he was unable to: it simply hadn’t been discussed as of late and with Shiro having to leave for Gal so suddenly, Keith’s leadership of Team Voltron was implied at best. He only hoped he could perform under the pressure of two missing paladins as well as the lack of the combined Lions and thereby Voltron as a result. As Red made to launch, Keith’s viewport pinged with an incoming message, which the red paladin readily accepted. Sendak appeared towards the side of the screen a moment later looking pensive in his office, a dissonant image to the oncoming battle.

He didn’t bother with formalities: “I’ve summoned a squadron from the nearest military outpost. However, without the Druids assisting us we don’t have the ability to implement wormholes; you’ll have to hold off the Stellites until your reinforcements arrive.”

“So in the meantime what do you have for me?” Keith inquired as his Lion rocketed out of the hangar.

“To give you an impression of the size, one of the largest offenses Zarkon ever provided against you was the fleet you faced above Hydrus,” the lord regent explained. “It appears that Stell has assembled a flotilla about a tenth of the size.”

“Keith, who is that?” Allura inquired, her face appearing on the other hand of the screen; Keith switched over to vocal-only mode as Hunk and Pidge began to voice their confusion.

“Sendak is providing us with provisional military aid,” Keith explained, much to Hunk’s immediate disdain.

“Keith. Buddy. Are you sure about this?” the yellow paladin cut in, already sounding upset. “How will you know if he’s trying to —?”

“We’re trying to work together,” the emperor explained. “If Sendak delivers, we’ll know that he’s capable of being a trustworthy ally.” Keith paused, before adding lowly: “I’ve already made him aware of the consequences if he decides to double-cross us.”

Hunk said nothing, but Pidge made a quick noise of assent. Keith continued, addressing the lord regent again:

“Sendak, if these reinforcements end up taking too long… do you think it might be a good idea for us to retreat through a wormhole now? You know we’re down two men and that puts us at a severe disadvantage when it comes to defending.”

“Agreed, but I don’t think that retreating would be a wise choice at the moment,” Sendak responded. “To do so now might make you seem cowardly in their eyes.”

Keith quirked a brow, “I thought you said they already weren’t fans of me?”

“As stubborn as the Stellites may be, there’s no reason not to make a good impression,” Sendak settled decisively. “I’d suggest meeting them as far away from Glacimor as possible in order to avoid any casualties.”

“Right,” Keith nodded, now addressing Allura: “Princess, have the castle follow us – Hunk and Pidge, we’ll fly in v-formation with me at the head.”
“Right,” Pidge responded at once, Hunk’s wary agreement coming shortly thereafter.

At Sendak’s suggestion, the convoy moved away from Glacimor and into the empty space that separated the other planets in the Mnemosyne system. Rapidly Keith’s viewport began to register the approaching flotilla, magnifications of the long, flat, pyramid-like ships beginning to crop up around the sides of the screen. Keith braced himself, but was quickly drawn to attention by an uncertain chuffing noise from the Lion before she became still. Hunk and Pidge raced beyond Keith before realizing that they’d lost their leader, both pulling their Lions to a halt.

“What?” Keith frowned, tugging on the thrusters; but they didn’t seem to have an effect on the Lion, who was completely unresponsive. The hackles on Keith’s neck rose. In front of him the flotilla drew to a stop.

“Keith,” Allura reported immediately. “You have an incoming message.”

“Allow it through, it looks like they want to parlay,” Keith observed. “Hunk, Pidge, draw back behind me.”

As soon as they did, the viewport was overtaken by an image once more. This time it was a sleek-faced Stellite – her skin was grey and worn, brow settled heavily over her silver eyes. For the moment she was smiling through some ancient sort of exhaustion.

“It’s been a while my old comrade,” she said, a tired look crossing her features. Keith nearly responded in confusion, but the Red Lion released a low noise of uncertainty, head ducking as it drew back.

’Sendak said the red paladins used to be descended from Stell’s aristocracy,’ Keith recognized at once. ‘So that means this person could have worked alongside Orkah or one of his predecessors.’

On screen the woman’s eyes hardened as she met Keith’s gaze. “Finally I have the honor of meeting The Tyrant’s progeny.”

Her tone was icy, bit through with embitterment and Keith nearly snarled at the implications. He took a deep breath through his nose before addressing the newcomer, “I’ll denounce Zarkon at every turn if need be – I may be his heir, but that man wasn’t my father.”

The stranger cocked an eyebrow, but didn’t make any further comment. Keith took the silence as a sign to continue:

“You’re clearly aware of who I am,” he said hesitantly. “May I ask you your name?”

“I am Captain Vaneer of Stell,” was her answer. “And I’ve come to ask you to relinquish your title as emperor.”

‘Straightforward, aren’t you?’ Keith thought, resisting the urge to glare but settling on a look that he hoped was confident.

“Unfortunately I can’t do that Captain Vaneer,” the red paladin replied. “I have too many of Zarkon’s mistakes to correct. I’ve been made aware that you’ve had contact with Merla and the Druids,” he continued purposefully. “Am I to interpret that you’re working together, then?”

Vaneer regarded him coolly, drumming her fingers on her command console, “That is not for me to say. The Druids have proven to be a rare balm in your otherwise festering empire but their importance among us has yet to be decided. Stell may have aided in the takedown of The Tyrant, but
we by no means uphold any allegiance to his progeny. Given the choice we’d far rather seek to see the Mother of Constellations in Gal’s seat of power once more.”

“I’m open to negotiation —,” Keith began, but this appeared to be a mistake. The captain’s expression hardened immediately.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand,” she informed him. “We’re not here for negotiations, Lotor. Relinquish your title or there will be more than just a flotilla for you to face.”

Keith winced, feeling the pressure of the situation acutely. The line was silent and Keith cursed Sendak in his head – he’d been explicit in the fact that he would provide Keith with military assistance, not political.

‘Sendak said Stell would be hard to sway once they had their minds made up,’ Keith recalled bitterly. ‘This would be the perfect opportunity for him to observe my political ability – or lack thereof. Fucker.’

Biting back his rage, Keith pressed on, parsing out his words carefully: “I don’t want to fight you, Captain Vaneer.”

“Then you’ll surrender the crown?” the Stellite returned at once.

“Like I said, for the benefit of all, I want to make a compromise,” Keith reiterated, hoping his preface would change Vaneer’s mind – but this seemed to just irritate her further.

“Based on the way you fled City Station, you hardly seem to want to benefit anyone save for yourself,” Vaneer sniped in return, expression completely hateful. “You’re hardly better than your bastard father. I’m finished hearing a coward hatchling ramble on brokenly.”

Keith felt the blow deeply, wincing in guilt – the captain continued to glare, expression completely void of sympathy, “To think the Red Lion would let such a person be her pilot.”

The Red Lion roared, reflecting the hurt that shot through Keith – Vaneer’s mouth twisted into a smirk that was nearly cruel, “Oh? You think he’s worthy of you? Fine then: show me.”

The transmission cut off there and the points of the pyramid-like ships began to glow with the energy of their lasers charging.

Chapter End Notes

Now I don’t know about you, but I think “space lawyer” sounds like a damn legitimate profession.

So how was it? More political intrigue, more Sendak (my fave), and an introduction to Stell via Captain Vaneer! Next chapter will have some good old fashioned space battle in it so we hope you look forward to all the action!

Moosey and I are in quite a writing mood and hope to knock out a bit of Nova (the fourth and final story of Leo Rising) this weekend so wish us luck~ Seeing Season Three early this morning put us into a right state - so much packed into only seven episodes! Are you shook? We're shook. I'd say more but I don't wish to spoil anyone. Ahh! So many feelings, though.
That said... did anyone else notice that Keith's final line of the season was, "no matter what"? Because Moosey and I kind of freaked out over that one. I know it's little and probably completely coincidental buuuutttt - and this is completely yelling into the void perhaps - we've noticed that there are several similarities between LR and what's come out since season two and if by some crazy wonderful chance someone on the Voltron team is reading this series and likes it? Please, please, PLEASE get into contact with Moosey and I because we would LOVE in all seriousness to write official spinoff novels for the Voltron universe. I'm just sayin...

In any case, thanks to everyone as usual; Moosey and I will be posting bonus content on the LR tumblr as soon as we can in honor of the one year anniversary. Look forward to more info on Galra culture, as was requested! See you next chapter!

<3
Ches
"Scramble," Sendak directed, finally choosing to speak. Keith took to action, a relieved breath whooshing past his lips as Red finally responded to his commands. He dropped, Pidge initiating the cloaking mechanism and ascending while Hunk dashed diagonally, using the side of his Lion to catch the brunt of the attack. Keith righted himself as quickly as he could.

"Where should we focus our attack?" he asked.

"It would be in your best interests to take out the corvettes first," the lord regent responded. "Vaneer’s using a relatively simple formation: five corvettes in front, four larger combat ships in the middle, and the massive one in back is a fireship."

Sendak paused, "Be wary of that one."

‘Again, a great time to have Lance,’ Keith thought at the lord regent bitterly. But the smallest ships – the corvettes – were already attacking. Immediately the red paladin initiated the invisibility function, rising out of his dive in an elegant swoop. But – to his shock – the corvettes pursued.

"Pidge?!" Keith cried out, searching for an answer as he rounded on the smaller warships and made to charge his mouth cannon.

"They must have the same sort of heat-sensing technology the Lions use in order to see each other," she explained. Keith watched out of the side of his eyes as she barrel-rolled away from a charging combat ship. Hunk was already firing, bullets glancing off of the enemy ships in a sparkling barrage. Keith pulled the trigger on his thrusters, the mouth cannon emitting an impotent flash.

"What?!" he hissed, swearing as the ship that he had been aiming at charged him head on. He swung the thrusters, pulling the Red Lion out to the left as a lancing blast from the fireship collided with the craft’s chest. Red howled as she was thrown back spinning, Keith echoing the sentiment with a shout as he was inverted, head smacking into the rest painfully.

‘They knew I wouldn’t be able to fire,’ he realized, struggling to gain control of Red. He reached out to her in the same way he did when he sought to combine her with Kuro, but the response was not her usual cool concentration, replaced instead by a flailing panic as Red struggled to protect two opposing forces at once. Keith reeled, trying to charge the tail laser, but Red thrashed, the controls grinding to a near halt as she evaded another oncoming blow from the fireship.

"Come on, come on…” the emperor hissed, trying for the lava cannon to no avail.

"Keith, what’s going on?!” Hunk asked immediately. “I’m having some trouble over here, their armor is wild —.”

“I can’t get control of my Lion,” Keith explained.

“What?” Pidge countered, coming around his side and staving off a blow aimed for him with a crackle of Green’s mouth cannon.
“Red won’t attack her old allies,” Keith explained in short bursts as he struggled to balance speaking with avoiding attacks. The flotilla had quickly recognized his difficulty, the ships turning the majority of their assault onto him. Red pulled against the thrusters, writhing when Keith attempted to access any part of his arsenal. “She won’t make any offensive moves.”

“The Red Lion is incredibly loyal,” Allura’s voice finally returned to the conversation. “I’m simultaneously unsurprised and shocked. A Lion going unresponsive with the paladin in the cockpit,” she marveled. “Other than Shiro’s one-on-one confrontation with Zarkon, I don’t believe we’ve ever had a situation such as this before – and in that case Zarkon was overpowering Kuro, bending her to his will. But in this situation, the Red Lion is acting of her own accord, attempting to protect both of her allies from one another.”

“You can’t perform a manual override on your vessel as Zarkon did?” Sendak’s voice cut through the fray.

“No, only the black paladin has that ability,” Keith informed him. “And Shiro doesn’t override – he asks them for permission.”

“So what I’m hearing is that if you’re in command of the Black Lion, you are in command of the other Lions as well?” Sendak inquired.

“Technically speaki—PIDGE!” Keith cut himself off with a shout, watching as a massive ball of cannon fire collided with the Green Lion’s front arm, her paladin crying out in pain as she was thrashed about her cockpit.

“I’m okay,” Pidge replied quickly. “But that hit disconnected the controls from Green’s front right leg – I can’t move it anymore.”

“Shit,” the red paladin hissed.

‘I don’t know if we can take much more of this – without Red responding, and the bulk of their ships’ armor preventing any damage from Hunk, there isn’t much we can do to them offensively, especially now with Green having such a big handicap,’ he glanced out of the side of his viewport to where the Green Lion was avoiding another attack, Keith diving to miss it as well. ‘I’ve already made enough of a fool of myself as it is with failing to pilot the Red Lion – at this rate retreating will just reassure them of my cowardice.’

Keith bit his lip, shaking his head in upset as he defaulted to his aid, “Sendak, what’s our next course of action?”

“I’m not one to interfere with your political actions,” said the lord regent after a short pause. “But I’m sure you’ve figured out the kind of reaction Stell will have if you retreat.”

“What other choice do we have?” Keith countered a little more sharply than he intended. “I can’t have my team getting hurt.”

“Then consider your options,” Sendak retorted, his voice equally cold to match Keith’s. “You said your Lion won’t respond, so why not use another? I know you have two others at your command.”

Keith shot out to the left, wincing as his side absorbed a blow aimed for Pidge’s injured leg, “That’s not how it works.”

“Is it?” Sendak replied smoothly, and Keith could hear his brow crooking. “Military intel led me to be under the impression you spent the majority of your time fused with Vrepmyza’s lion.”
“Keith, he has a point…” Hunk’s voice provided, surprising the red paladin with his words. “They’re not even going full tilt right now. You’ve probably figured out that fireship has some massive power behind it, and soon it’s going to stop playing with us and get serious.”

“The only way we can withstand that sort of attack is going to be forming Cerberus Epsilon,” Pidge agreed.

“Not only that, but we can get you back to the castle safely with that injured leg,” Keith concluded, pulling a lip between his teeth. “I know the three of us have fused before in different forms, but I don’t know if we’ll be able to pull it off like this – we don’t even know if Kuro will let me pilot her.”

“This isn’t the time to second-guess yourself, Lotor,” Sendak stressed. “You pilot that Lion or you retreat. The only other option is failure. Make your choice.”

Keith furrowed his brow, weighing his options as the hail of fire continued to fall on the three struggling Lions. The controls shuddered under his grasp, Red’s agony lancing through their mental link. He was fully aware he couldn’t force her to continue to go against her old allies. The logical option was retreat – it ensured Pidge and Hunk’s safety, but it came at the price of Stell’s dismissal. Keith’s first instinct was to protect his friends, but Vaneer’s accusation of cowardice bit through him once more. He’d already retreated once to save his own skin and that of his friends, and a repeat performance could damage his reputation the galaxy over.

‘I have to start giving a shit about what people think of me,’ Keith told himself, blocking Pidge from another assault, much to her upset. ‘The empire needs a leader confident in their abilities, not someone who constantly retreats. The people’s opinion of me matters because their approval allows me to stay in power – and protect them as a result. And if I have to be both a paladin and a leader, I know what I need to do.’

Keith raised his head decisively, contorting his thrusters to direct Red back towards the ship, “Hunk, do your best to shield Pidge – rely on evasive maneuvers until I get back; only shoot when you’re sure you see a weak spot.”

“Right!” Hunk assented.

“Pidge, you stay behind Hunk and try to analyze the enemy’s attack patterns,” Keith guided. “Try to form a plan of attack while I’m gone.”

“Right!”

“Sendak…” Keith hesitated, swallowing hard. “I’m leaving you to aid Hunk and Pidge for now – if you could work with them to keep them out of the line of fire and aid Pidge’s plan that would be ideal.”

“Understood,” Sendak agreed, the ease with which he responded catching Keith off guard.

“Good,” Keith pushed his thrusters forward, rounding the Castle of Lions and heading for the hangar. “Allura, I’m going to see what I can do.”

“Good luck, Keith,” the princess told him, dropping a portion of the Castle’s barrier in order to allow him access. Keith pulled back on the thrusters, Red coming to a rough halt halfway through the concourse, struggling to slow down from her paladin’s rapid approach. Keith unclipped himself from the captain’s chair, pausing and resting a hand on the Lion’s dash.

“I’m not abandoning you,” he promised quietly. “But right now I need to protect the team,
and I won’t force you to hurt your old allies.”

Red rumbled, lowering herself down to allow Keith passage into the hangar proper. He ran towards the back of the Lion’s head, dropping down the hatch that led to her mouth, and sprinting towards the Black Lion sitting directly before him.

As Keith approached, the Lion’s eyes took on an aureate glow, although she remained perfectly still. He drew back hesitantly, wincing as he removed his helmet, Sendak’s orders and Hunk and Pidge’s responses going quiet as he focused his energy on the craft before him. Keith closed his eyes, recalling the time he and Shiro had spent meditating in Ovo’s home, feeling the same sort of apprehension he’d experienced when opening his mind to Shiro alone, attempting to establish a telepathic bond.

The bond came so easily to Shiro and Keith that the red paladin barely had any idea where to start with Kuro. He recalled that – at first – it had taken him and Shiro using a shared experience in order to complete the psychic link. The only events Keith could remember “sharing” with Kuro as it were, were the moments he spent piloting the combined craft with Shiro – and even then, Kuro had been known to resist Keith, ever since the beginning. Her distrust had become all the more reasonable considering that he was Zarkon’s son and what the previous emperor had done inside of the Black Lion the last time that he’d been at the helm.

Keith’s hands tightened into fists, recalling the details in Serro’s diary. Anger and sorrow poured off of him, and suddenly were reflected back to him in spades, a low rumble of rage working up in his chest. Keith opened his eyes at the unfamiliar sensation, gasping as he realized that Kuro had lowered her head down to his in response to the intense emotion, golden eyes boring into him.

Hesitantly, Keith took another breath, reaching out to press his hand over the craft’s nose. He couldn’t let himself control the Black Lion with his rage and upset – that’s what Zarkon had done. Pointedly he fixed his thoughts on his experiences that had taken place in the combined Lion – the comfort he’d felt in Shiro’s presence, the confidence in being able to pilot in tandem, the distant realization that he’d come to love another person. Kuro rumbled again, this noise much more like a purr than a growl, resonating in the young monarch’s bones.

“I need your help,” he implored the vessel. “I know you don’t like me and I can’t blame you for it, but right now Red can’t fight and I need to help Pidge and Hunk. And my performance in this battle could make or break the empire. If I’m going to protect my friends – my people – everyone – I need you to do it with me.”

“Please,” Keith begged aloud. “Please let me in just this once.”

There was another rumble and Keith opened his eyes, Kuro’s jaw parting to allow him admittance. The emperor smiled, boarding the craft and climbing into the cockpit.

“Thank you,” he said as the captain’s chair brought him towards the dash. The controls around him glowed to life and Keith replaced his helmet, drowning out the noise of the others and offering the Black Lion his full concentration. He felt the controls in his palms – much bigger than Red’s to reflect the difference in size, heavier to reflect the power required to pilot her.

“Allura,” Keith said, startling the others into silence. “Open the Black Lion’s hangar.”

“Did you manage to gain control of her?” Allura inquired, sounding completely stunned.

“No, but I think she’s willing to work with me,” Keith surmised, the answer providing itself to him through the psychic link. “Even if she isn’t, I have to try.”
There was a pause, and Allura consented: “Alright.”

Behind him, the hangar opened up and Keith sucked in an anxious breath, moving Kuro’s thrusters to turn her around. To his relief, she assented, crouching in anticipation of the launch.

“Come on girl, don’t let me down,” Keith reached out to her, and shoved his arms forward with a shout.

Kuro responded immediately, vaulting into the expanse of space and through the lowered portion of the castle’s barrier. For a moment Keith held himself completely still in anxiety, uncertain if the Lion would ultimately reject him, but golden eyes flashed in his mind’s eye, the heavy controls growing lighter in his hands as he traveled back to the battlefield.

“Keith!” Pidge cried out happily.

“You did it!” Hunk cheered, sounding genuinely joyous for the first time in weeks.

“Nicely done,” Sendak provided, surprising the emperor with his commendation. “But this is no time for further congratulations – the Yellow Lion’s armor has taken a considerable hit in the interim. If you are able to combine, I’d suggest doing so now.”

“Alright,” Keith agreed, calling up Pidge and Hunk’s images towards either side of his viewport as he approached them. “Are you ready?”

“More than,” Pidge smirked, turning her Lion to face Kuro.

“You know it!” Hunk flashed a thumbs-up. Keith focused, searching for his teammates’ feelings across the amplified physic link of the Lions—

Alarm shot through him unexpectedly, instinct immediately taking over as Keith charged beyond the other two Lions, Kuro roaring in defiance as the emperor turned to shoulder a massive cannon attack from the fireship, Hunk and Pidge crying out for him in concern.

“I’m fine,” Keith told them, righting Kuro and facing down the flotilla, the mouth of the fireship’s cannon still dying down. “Kuro can take a punch, and she’s in a lot better shape than you guys.”

“There are weak points in their armor – a lot like with that robeast back on Glacimor,” Pidge reported immediately, using her tail laser to ward back several oncoming ships.

“There are long chambers in the ship that their blasters fire out of – the type of weapon they use can be changed out at the end of those chambers, creating moments of severe structural vulnerability,” Sendak provided to Keith.

“That’s great to know, but there are ten of them and firing at those chambers on the smaller ships is going to take an extreme amount of accuracy,” Keith said, igniting his cannon and accepting another blow in the other Lions’ place. “Hunk have you tried –?”

“The vulnerable parts are too small for me to lock onto,” the yellow paladin shook his head. “I don’t think even Lance could snipe them out considering the way they like to scramble.”

“Then we’re just going to have to aim at the fireship,” Keith told him.

“My suggestion exactly,” Sendak agreed. “As the largest vessel, the fireship also carries the most sizable weapons and, therefore, has the biggest chambers.”
“We can’t get close to it as long as I have to hang back protecting Pidge,” Hunk explained. “But since you’re here now—.”

“If you go on the offensive, each of the ships is going to turn their firepower onto you,” Sendak began.

“It’s worth it,” Keith growled, his eyes narrowing. “I want them to see that I’m not fucking around.”

“If you’re thinking of using this attack to argue against your supposed cowardice,” Sendak began. “Don’t. A hotheaded—Lotor!”

Keith leaned into his thrusters, barreling towards the largest craft as he charged the mouth cannon, “I asked you for military assistance, not political. I need to prove I can lead my people and if this is what it takes for them to see I’m serious—.”

A glance of bright orchid connected with the helm of the fireship, sending the debris of its armor flying into space. From above the battlefield, a Galra battleship was descending into the chaos, its cannon firing rapidly into the enemy ship.

“Commander Brax,” Sendak said, and Keith could hear the sharp grin in his voice. “How punctual.”

“Incoming signal!” Allura reported.

“Allow it!” Keith assented with a sharp nod of his head; around him a dozen Galra cruisers were flooding the battlefield in neat lines, their weapons glancing off of the smaller ships as the Yellow Lion’s had done earlier.

“Only our cannon is getting through, My Lord,” a new voice spoke over the coms.

“Brax, commence a full frontal assault on the fireship with your vessel,” Sendak commanded at once. “Order your troops to pick off the corvettes; they’re the smallest and will break eventually under heavy fire. Lotor, I suggest the green paladin retreat—.”

“No way in hell!” Pidge cut in.

Sendak continued, ignoring her, “And yourself and Yellow assist in the assault on the corvettes. Once they’re picked off we’ll turn our focus onto the battle ships. This is a full barrage rather than the previously-mentioned precision strike. We have the firepower to burn them out, now.”

“Hunk, Pidge,” Keith addressed his teammates. “Mouth cannons on the smallest ships!”

“Right!”

“Okay!”

Keith wheeled on the nearest corvette, charging the Black Lion’s mouth cannon and letting loose a massive blast which sent him flying in reverse, completely unused to the heavier kickback. Straining against the thrusters, the emperor righted himself and braced for the second attack— only for a white light to pulse rapidly on the dash to his right.

“This?” he inquired out loud as if the Lion would respond in plain English. Kuro instead gave an approving rumble and Keith reached out to press his fingertips against the glowing panel. Immediately, hundreds of little pinpricks appeared on his viewport, forming neat clusters on the
noses of Stellite ships. Keith pressed down, and a hail of starlight rained down from around the Black Lion, small but potent explosions pouring onto the enemy ships.

‘Why show me that and not Shiro?’ Keith wondered, avoiding oncoming fire and repeating the attack. He blinked in realization as he shot again, the Lion hardly rocking in response to the attack, ‘It’s because he can physically handle the kickback of the mouth cannon while it’s significantly harder for me – so Kuro gave me another option.’

“Nice trick Keith!” Pidge cheered, firing off a mouth blast of her own.

“Well done!” Allura added in.

It was arduous, but the Stellite corvettes began to fall, the battleships quickly being chipped away at as fire was turned onto them. Brax’s ship dodged the larger fireship’s assault in slow arcs, its charging cannon firing off at steady intervals, causing the fireship’s armor to flake away.

“Lotor,” Sendak spoke suddenly. “There’s been enough damage to the ranks that you can head in for a precise attack on the fireship’s weak point. Brax – focus your attack on the battleships and allow Lotor to finish the job.”

“Right away, sir,” Brax consented, and the Galra ship immediately hung back, Keith wheeling on the undefended fireship. The little points of the starlight cannon began to light up the vulnerabilities on the fireship, and Keith reached out to activate the attack.

“Hold your fire.”

Keith’s hands froze as Vaneer’s voice cut through the line.

“Hold,” Sendak echoed, and the Galra ships fell still beside their Stellite counterparts.

The Stellite ships retreated, taking on their initial formation, now riddled with holes. The captain appeared once more on Keith’s left, her face clouded with confusion, a hand obscuring her mouth. The glare of the starlight cannon died down, but remained softly aglow along the sides of the Black Lion, illuminating Keith’s face oddly in the dark of the cockpit. Vaneer regarded him with an almost-curious tilt of her head.

“Emperor Lotor,” she said smoothly, “I have decided to retreat for now.”

Keith watched her image uncertainly, the mistrusting slant of his mouth a hard line. The captain quirked a brow.

“Unless you’d like to butcher the remains of my fleet?” Vaneer raised a clawed hand, gesturing casually as if she weren’t fleeing the battle, defeated. Keith felt himself grow frustrated at her nonchalant airs in light of the death of her men.

“Is this some sort of test?” he inquired, hands gripping the thrusters in suspicion.

Vaneer ignored the question, “Do not consider my opinion swayed, Lotor. Like I said I wish to see the Mother in a seat of power, but I know full well what the Galra army is capable of. I’ve seen it cut down ships twice this size. You have my surrender for now, but not my compliance,” Vaneer concluded.

“So Lotor,” Sendak’s quipped from his side of the line where Vaneer was unable to hear him. “Will you take this opportunity to strike her down or allow her retreat?”
Keith bowed forward, releasing his grip on the thrusters, fingers still aching from the force with which he had been squeezing them. He glanced up at Vaneer’s image warily. Keith knew full well that Sendak was waiting on his answer as well; the emperor already knew what he would suggest considering the way the lord regent had deprioritized Stell’s power before. But that’s what Zarkon would have done.

“You have my assent,” Keith agreed after a pregnant pause. “We’ll both retreat for now.”

“Very well,” Vaneer agreed, casting Keith one last indecipherable glance before her image cut away.

Everyone on Volton’s coms was silent as they watched the Stellites’ retreat. As soon as the flotilla increased their speed and disappeared from the horizon altogether, Keith went limp in his seat, limbs feeling heavy and exhausted. The experience of piloting the Black Lion left him feeling weak and drained, a headache beginning to form behind his eyes.

“Brax, my commendations,” Sendak began after a short while. “You and your squadron return to your posts.”

“Yes, my liege,” Brax returned smoothly. “It was an honor fighting alongside you, Your Imperial Majesty. Vre… Vol sa,” they ended a bit awkwardly.

“Thank you for your assistance, Commander Brax. You have my commendation as well. Vol sa,” Keith responded, and Brax cut out of the line. The Galra retreated, the Lions hovering in the astral sphere as the battlefield cleared. “Well Sendak,” Keith addressed the lord regent, fatigue evident in his tone. “How did I do?”

Sendak was silent for a moment, clearly contemplative. After an extended pause, he sighed.

“Admirable, given your situation,” Sendak admitted. “If not too forgiving and naïve. Captain Vaneer had close ties to Duke Ryder of Stell, who held a considerable amount of power there even during Zarkon’s reign – even though Stell is operating as a parliament, Ryder’s opinions are often popular enough to sway the tide. This would have been an ideal time to disrupt both their military and political influence by taking Vaneer as a hostage.”

“But it would have tainted me in their eyes,” Keith retorted immediately. “Stell could never come to respect another tyrant – Vaneer made that much more than clear.”

“So it would seem,” Sendak responded a little evasively. It was almost as if he was disappointed. “But you have to recall that Stell aggressed you initially.”

“You sound like a kit trying to defend a schoolyard fight,” Keith grinned, finally taking up the controls and returning to the hangar. Sendak snorted.

“Hardly,” he retorted. “I just have Gal’s best interests in mind.”

“And you think I don’t?” Keith grumped; he was too tired to jump at Sendak’s jabs.

“My point is that you need to choose your allies wisely,” the lord regent extrapolated. “If you’re looking to change Stell’s mind, they mightn’t be the most trustworthy after this incident.”

“I’m willing to give chances if it prevents casualties,” Keith argued, settling Kuro back into her charging dock.

“Oh? So a second unprecedented attack —.”
“I appreciate your wariness,” Keith pressed out in lieu of a frustrated sigh. “But I think this was for the best. We don’t need any more enemies at the moment.” He released the tension in his body, allowing himself to sink further into the pilot’s chair, arms hanging limply from the rests. Keith sniffed, a little smirk playing on his lips. “Tell me more about that ‘admirable’ performance of mine, though. I liked hearing about that.”

Sendak laughed softly, although it was not unkind: “You don’t want to hear anything unless I’m singing your praises, hm?”


“You managed to pull through with no casualties despite your initial disadvantage,” he said. “I know that commanding the Black Lion is not as simple of a task as I implied; being able to pilot it was an impressive feat.”

“Thanks,” the red paladin pressed out, exhausted. His smile eked up the side of his mouth. “And thank you for pulling through, Sendak.”

“Of course,” the lord regent replied with a politician’s ease – as if he hadn’t just been offered a vulnerable Team Voltron on a silver plate. “I imagine you’d like to extend your thanks to Brax’s ranks as well?”

“Please do,” Keith replied.

“I will be sure to,” Sendak paused for a moment before returning: “Have you made any headway on your contract?”

Keith grimaced, glad that Sendak wasn’t using a screen to see his expression. “It’s getting there,” he lied.

“Good,” Sendak responded evenly. “We’ll exchange documents when you’re prepared. Until then.”

“Until then,” Keith echoed, and Sendak’s voice cut off, leaving him to the soft whirr of the Black Lion’s cockpit.

Chapter End Notes

We’re so sorry this chapter is a day late! Ches just started a new job, so our schedule is a little topsy-turvy and my alarm reminding me to post was subsequently forgotten. If it makes you feel any better, I shot straight up in bed at like 2 am this morning and gasped “WE FORGOT TO POST”.

So here’s an action-packed chapter for you! And we get to see Keith confident and strong in the Black Lion <3 Don’t worry, this is a one-time thing and he’ll be piloting Red again from now on. What do you guys think of Sendak and Keith working together? Based on what we’ve seen thus far, do you guys trust Sendak? I’m curious to know!

I found it surprisingly easy to write Sendak in this instance, which was really cool because Ches usually sticks to writing Sendak, so hopefully I did him justice :’D
It's hard to believe we're halfway done with Constellation! As it stands, Constellation is currently the shortest story in the series. But uh. Nova. Will. Not be short. And that's really all I can say on that matter, lmao.

Thank you all so much for your kudos and comments, every time I get an email from Ao3 it brightens my day!

Much love!
Moosey
As they traveled, Nanan sang a soft mournful song in a language that the translator on Shiro’s armor couldn’t process. It was the first time he had ever seen or heard a Druid pray up close.

Back when he’d lived on City Station with Sendak, the Druids would very rarely perform their prayers outside of the temple. On the rare occasion that they did pray in public, it was always at some ungodly hour, even before Shiro awoke to attend his military training. They would traverse slowly down the halls of City Station, their sublime voices carrying on like the wet edge of a wine glass, fading in and out of range. Shiro could never quite decide if the phantom prayers were beautiful or eerie.

But hearing it now, with one small voice and so near, there was a sort of clarity to the ancient words that Shiro had never been able to experience before, the silvery quality of the notes fluttering up the nape of his neck. But Nanan’s song was much different than the other prayers he’d heard, carrying with it a profound sort of grief that Shiro doubted could be translated into plain words. It was a dirge, a mourner’s cry.

The trio traveled in a line, Matt separating Shiro from Nanan as he fruitlessly attempted to start up conversation. Aside from her prayers, Nanan had been completely silent since the night before, hood pulled up over her head and eyes pointed directly down at her shoes. Shiro couldn’t profess to be faring much better. Completely wracked with guilt, he’d been hardly able to sleep the night before and had spent the majority of the day on the verge of vomiting.

They’d left Malachite behind in a cave nearby to the cabin, choosing to travel down to their destination – Purra Valley – on foot. Matt had explained that the vale bordered a fairly large military town and base called Loletta, and that using Malachite outside of Axana’s protective mountain range would be bound to garner attention.

It had been a trying downhill hike and had taken much longer than Matt had initially calculated due to the aftermath of the storm. More than once the brunet had to carry Nanan on his back down treacherous snow drifts and across gullies formed beneath broken bridges. Shiro had offered to help numerous times, but the kit had quite vehemently refused his every attempt at kindness by pointedly attempting to trek forward on her own, doing a fairly good job at pretending that Shiro wasn’t there.

Eventually, just as dusk was beginning to break low alongside the winter clouds, they emerged from beneath a covered bridge and onto a gentle decline sporting a large vale sparsely populated by little copses. They hadn’t progressed much farther before Shiro suddenly became aware that Nanan had fallen behind, edging intently towards the tree line. Shiro frowned, approaching her at a quick step. The kit’s eyes were huge, rounded out like a cat who had seen a bird.

“Nanan?” Shiro asked, immediately wary of the girl’s strange behavior.

Nanan surprised him by providing a reply: “Something’s in there,” she said, her voice low and unwavering – Shiro immediately stepped out in front of her. Matt called after them and Shiro turned to him sharply, pressing a finger to his lips and creeping forward.
Nothing unusual presented itself for a moment—and then Shiro caught sight of something weaving through the trees: a glimpse of silver white just darker than the snow that flocked the copse. Shiro immediately feared a feral creature, his limbs going tense in response. Reaching behind him, Shiro unclipped his bayard, but the creature struck first, pouncing out at him with a considerable amount of speed and smashing its nose right into his cheek. Immediately it began to purr, the rumble stronger and more violent than Nai could have ever hoped to produce. Shiro attempted to pull out from under the massive gal’sstaræ, but found that it was near impossible with its giant paws pressed to his chest.

“Lykki, you silly baby!” a voice chided, and the pressure was immediately removed from Shiro’s chest. “Sorry about her, she’s kinda — holy crap!”

A fluffy kit stared at Shiro in awe, their eyes as moony as Nanan’s were moments earlier.

“Rin you gotta put a GAC in the swear box,” another kit chided, jogging out of the woods to meet the first. She glared at them before turning to Shiro with a dramatic sigh. “I’m sorry, they’re just sooooo imma— oh shit!”

The second kit froze beside the first, staring at Shiro in awe. A third kit joined them, panting loudly and squealing her words: “What’d I miss?”

“Shut up Tyrla!” Rin snapped as Shiro stood, waving at them in what he hoped was a nonthreatening manner. He dreaded seeing them cringe away from him like Nanan did.

“Hi,” Shiro said in a friendly manner. “I’m—.”

“You’re Vrepmyza!” Rin gushed, pumping little fists in excitement before they flung themselves at Shiro, wrapping their arms around his legs. “I love you!”

“Woah, okay wow hi!” Shiro laughed, patting Rin behind the ears before the elder girl affixed herself to his waist.

“Oh my stars! Wow! Hey!” she replied happily. “I’m Zambrina, and that’s Rin and that’s Tyrla—.”

“Hi man!” Tyrla chimed in cheerfully, also affixing herself to Shiro’s legs. She pulled away, smiling up at him brightly. “Who are you?”

Shiro couldn’t help but smile, offering pats for her as well. He slowly lowered himself to his knees, the kits coming with him and still enveloping him in hugs and nuzzles—they were much friendlier than the military brats on City Station that he was used to.

“My name is Shiro,” he introduced himself properly, smiling around at the three enthusiastic kits. “I’m here with my friends—Sylvux asked us to—.”

“Cousin Sylvux sent you?!” Tyrla pulled back from her hug, her eyes saucer-like. She pawed at Shiro’s arm needily. “Did he send presents?”

Shiro laughed, “Unfortunately not.”

“Tyrla you dummy!” Rin snapped. “Vrepmyza is only the most coolest best guy in the world! We don’t need any dumb presents.”

Tyrla screwed up her face and immediately began to heave with oncoming sobs, “I’m not dumb!”
“Rin, don’t call her dumb!” Zambrina scolded the other kit, whacking them on the arm. She turned to Shiro, making a great show of rolling her eyes. “Like I said I am sooo sorry for Rin, they just don’t happen to be as mature as me.”

Rin pulled away from Shiro, giving Zambrina a push in retaliation, “I am too mature!”

“Hey, hey,” Shiro said, holding up his hands and gently separating the kits. Tyrila came up beside him and resuming hugging him arm while Lykki attempted to climb into his lap to no avail. “No fighting, okay?”

“Okay,” Rin and Zambrina said in perfectly identical tones, staring at Shiro as if his word was gospel.

“Hi!” Matt called over, finally approaching. Nanan was hidden behind his legs, peeking out at the other kits shyly – apparently she’d run away once the other kits had appeared and Matt had gone to fetch her. The three smothering Shiro with affection perks up immediately, Tyrila tugging Shiro’s hand in order to bring him with her. He took to his feet, hunched over to be able to hold her tiny hand as she led him over to Matt.

“Hi!” Rin greeted. “I’m Rin, and this is Zambrina and Tyrla!”

“I’m Matt, I’m Sylvux’s ilbe,” the brunet introduced himself, and Tyrila immediately began to hop in place.

“Uncle Sylv got an ilbe!” she informed Shiro happily and turned to Matt, who was accepting hugs from Rin and Zambrina both. Tyrila continued to tug on Shiro’s hand, not wanting to let go of it as she hugged Matt as well.

“I love you!” she reported happily.

“I love you too!” Matt smiled, giving her a tight squeeze. He glanced over at Shiro. “You got a new friend there, Tyrla?”

“Yeah, um,” Tyrila began, taking huge breaths between her words. “This is the – the man named Vrepmyza – and – he came here to be – my friend – and now you’re here to be my friend, too!”

“That’s awesome!” Matt beamed before giving Shiro a completely perplexed look. Shiro shrugged in return.

“So if you’re staying here,” said Rin, jabbing a finger at Matt’s nose. They turned towards Shiro, pointing at him urgently as well. “Does that mean Vrepmyza’s staying, too!”

“That would be the plan,” Shiro laughed. Rin gaped at him in delight before dramatically swooning, pretending to faint onto the snow with a violent convulsion.

“Oh stars, Rin get up you’re embarrassing me,” Zambrina professed very loudly, peeking around Matt’s legs to spot Nanan. The Druid ducked back, lowering her head. “Hi! I like your cloak!”

“Hi,” Nanan said in a very small voice, all but hopping backwards when Rin jumped up off the ground and sidled up to her, grinning.

“What’s your name? Are you a Druid?” they asked, gesturing towards her cloak.
“Oh, I’m…” Nanan dropped her hood. She attempted a smile, but it came across as watery as could be. “I’m Nanan… and yeah I’m an apprentice mage.”

“Oh wow!” Rin gushed, slapping their hands to their cheeks.

“Are you gonna be a magic person?” Tyrla asked, dragging Shiro to Nanan’s side.

“Someday,” Nanan shrugged, pointedly stepping back from Shiro, her mouth a hard line.

“I’m gonna be a witch one day, like the lady on the mountain,” Tyrla reported to Shiro with a smile lacking several of her fangs.

“Lady on the mountain?” Shiro echoed in confusion as the kits continued their introductions. ‘That sounds… ominous.’

“You don’t have to be shy!” Rin said, offering a friendly hand to Nanan. “It’s nice to meet you, Nanan!”

Nanan accepted their hand, smile growing stronger when Rin gave it a little squeeze. Zambrina offered her hand as well, squeezing Nanan’s when she presented it. “It’s okay, we’re all super friendly!”

“You want us to show you to the house?” Rin asked Matt, staring up at him.

Matt nodded, almost tripping when the husky-sized gal’s tara pressed into his legs amiably, “Yeah, thanks I’d really appreciate that!”

“Okay!” Rin nodded enthusiastically, shooing of Lykki towards a herd of little cows in the distance.

“Vrepmyza can come too,” Tyrla decreed, tugging Shiro towards a shoveled path that cut its way across the property.

Rin immediately started up a conversation about Shiro’s time in the arena.

‘Please, please don’t say anything about my fight with Matt’s shadow…’ Shiro thought desperately as the kit chatted on and on. However, they seemed to be much more caught up on Keith than anything else.

“But I mean – you are so cool but Lotor is like – wow!” Rin waved their hands enthusiastically. “I wish that the end of his fight with the vine lady wasn’t cut off, I was so bummed! And my mom wouldn’t let me watch the news but my friends in town showed me the video of Zarkon’s head cut off and it was all bloody and Lotor was so bad-butt!”

“Uh,” Shiro began awkwardly, staring down at Tyrla, who couldn’t have been more than four years old. “Maybe you shouldn’t—.”

“Emperor Lotor is also very refined, though,” Zambrina cut in as they approached a massive cabin at the foothills of the valley. Shiro heard Matt choke back a laugh and shot him a glare. “We talked a lot about his speech in class once the teaching ban was lifted.”

“We saw you guys kiss on the broadcast – do you loooove him?” Rin asked, turning around and facing Shiro with a massive grin spread across their face. “Are you gonna maaaaarry him?”
Shiro laughed, feeling his face heat up despite himself.

‘Goddammit Pidge,’ he thought, cursing the green paladin; she must have broadcasted their kiss after all.

“Well,” he smiled. “Yeah.”

Rin’s smile brightened as they spotted something over Shiro’s shoulder, inhaling deeply before screaming at the top of their lungs: “UDI! THEY’RE HERE!”

Shiro winced from the pitch, turning to see who the kit had addressed. A tall Galra with a dense coat of lightly colored fur was advancing towards them from a large cabin in the distance, their bulk nearly doubled by their thick parka.

“I thought I told you to come get me before you talked to anyone?” they quipped, arching an eyebrow at their kits. Rin and Zambrina laughed nervously, prancing up to their parent with placating mews and trills. Their parent rolled their eyes, gently shaking the kits off and approaching the newcomers with a friendly hand outstretched. Matt approached them, surprised when they secured their large hand around his lower arm and squeezed.

“I’m Myzalta,” they introduced themself, turning towards Shiro and repeating the greeting.

“Shiro,” he returned in a friendly manner, gesturing towards his companions. “This is Matt and over here is Nanan.”

Myzalta nodded, dropping to one knee to grasp Nanan’s upper arm as well.

“You’ve already met the kits, I see,” they quipped, smiling at Tyrla, who was still secured around Shiro’s leg. Myzalta tapped towards the back of their own shoulder. “This one is Lula, but they’re sacked out at the moment.”

Shiro frowned, rolling onto the tips of his toes to observe a little poof of lilac emerging from over Myzalta’s back, where a barely-visible baby was bundled up. The eldest Galra turned, jerking their chin towards the cabin.

“We should head in; it’s going to get dark out soon and there could very well be another storm tonight,” Myzalta explained, beginning the short hike up the hillside. The rest of the party followed, Shiro crouching down momentarily in order to untangle Tyrla from his legs and carry her for the rest of the brief trek.

Once they entered the cabin, the next several minutes passed by in a whirlwind tour of the cabin, during which Shiro was traded Lula in exchange for Tyrla before Myzalta entered the kitchen to begin cooking. Myzalta then shouted inquiries about their trip from the stove while the kits proceeded to show off every toy in their possession to their new friends. Eventually, Matt, Tyrla, and Nanan collapsed on the couch while Rin and Zambrina made to set the table and Shiro took a moment to process everything.

‘They’re wonderful,’ he thought, exhausted. ‘But it’s kind of nice to have a moment to myself.’

Shiro paced around as he bounced baby Lula in his arms, looking for something to occupy himself with – he wasn’t keen on allowing the down time to cause him to slip back into his near-constant state of anxiety.

He quickly found the side of a set of stairs completely overcrowded with family photos. Shiro
smiled as he scanned their happy faces – candid shots of family members holding pygmy cows, a pair of young Galra hefting a massive fish above them triumphantly, what appeared to be Sylvux at a spring festival with flowers in his fur, happily shouting something at the person holding the camera, his arm slung around a younger Galra—

Shiro froze, frowning and returning to the photo. The baby flailed at it, leaving smudges in their wake as their fingertips grazed the glass.

‘Is that?’ Shiro frowned, looking closer at the other Galra in the frame. He looked considerably less happy to be at the festival, staring off at something beyond the frame. Shiro shook his head, convinced it was just a familiar face – but the photos beside it told another story.

There was another of the young Galra being taught how to properly hold and aim a gun, another of him standing beside what Shiro assumed were two younger siblings and in front of a squat man and tall woman that could have been his parents, and the final was a formal military photo taken some years down the road:

Standing elegantly in the golden oval frame, dressed in the formal fatigues of a Sergeant, was Sendak.

‘What?’

Shiro stood beside the stairs for a long time, tracing his eyes over the pictures of Sendak blended in with the happy family. But his eyes were continuously drawn back to the portrait of what appeared to be his immediate family – it was the only picture in which Sendak looked genuinely happy.

‘I’ve… never seen him like this before,’ Shiro realized, studying the other people standing beside Sendak. He was holding his little sister’s hand, his other arm slung around that of his little brother. Behind him stood a tall, beautiful woman, her hands resting proudly on Sendak’s shoulders, and next to her a rotund Galra was ruffling his youngest son’s hair.

“Care for me to take them off of your hands?”

Shiro glanced up as Myzalta stepped out of the kitchen, reaching out for the little one in his arms. Lula squealed, happily kicking their legs and waving their arms out at their parent, who smiled kindly at them in turn.

“Thanks for holding them,” Myzalta said as Shiro handed the baby off. The Galra stepped back from Shiro and smiled, setting down Lula and watching them crawl off towards their siblings. Myzalta watched the baby go before turning back to Shiro. “Not every day you get to meet the man who saved the empire.”

Shiro’s eyes widened and he looked away, scratching awkwardly at his neck. He wasn’t used to being praised for the rebellion – only for what he’d accomplished as the champion, “I – I didn’t do it alone, most of it was Kei – Emperor Lotor. But thank you.”

Myzalta’s grin spread and they turned their attention to the photos.

‘At least they seem attuned enough to know when someone’s embarrassed,’ Shiro figured with a little smile, expression growing concerned as Myzalta’s grew wry. They settled their eyes on the family portrait containing Sendak – their mouth going slack – and reached out to straighten the frame, looking pained.

“Are you alright?” Shiro inquired. Myzalta sighed, folding an arm across their chest.
“Don’t see much of this one anymore,” they said, pressing a finger to Sendak’s image.

“Who,” Shiro began hesitantly, licking his lips. “Who is he?”

“Oh, Sendak?” Myzalta blinked. “Actually, he’s the acting lord regent from what I’ve heard. Kind of a shock to the rest of us when we heard, but the damn boy couldn’t keep in touch if it killed him. He’s my cousin. Didn’t you two—?” Myzalta’s mouth slanted and they glanced away, clearing their throat; they’d clearly seen the match. Shiro filled in the unspoken question: ‘Didn’t you two fight one another?’

‘I don’t want to pry,’ Shiro thought guiltily, ‘But this could be my only chance to learn about him. I doubt we’ll be talking again in the future.’

“Why do you think he doesn’t come around?” he finally asked.

Myzalta’s mouth curved down into a frown and they shuffled a little awkwardly. Shiro apologized, only for the Galra to wave away the notion.

“It’s fine; we just don’t talk about it that much,” Myzalta shrugged.

“What happened?” Shiro gently pressed. The Galra sighed, leaning against the wall.

“Sen’s family… they were a military family – lived down on the base in Loletta. Kind of kept to themselves, you know? His dad died from chemical pneumonia,” they explained, pointing at the man and tracing their finger down to Sendak’s younger siblings. “Nana and Ennor went a few seasons later; they were in the same battalion, so they died in the same battle. Their mother was just…” Myzalta’s face clouded with sadness. “She wasn’t – she wasn’t right after that. The last time Sen came back to Purra Valley was to be with her for the twins’ memorial, and I can’t blame him for never wanting to come back after what happened to his mother.

“Our Aunt Merny was helping to take care of her, but – Sen’s mother had access to a lot of military grade weapons,” Myzalta said in lieu of an explanation. Shiro winced, feeling the implications.

‘Suicide,’ he recognized, staring at the visage of the woman who looked down upon her children so sweetly.

“Merny found her, wouldn’t even let anyone see the body,” Myzalta explained, “Said it was too gruesome. Sen never came back after that, poor bastard. It really breaks our hearts; but we know he needs time and space to heal.”

Shiro stared back at the portrait, completely mystified.

‘Sendak hardly ever spoke about his nuclear family – only to mention in passing that they were dead – let alone his past,’ the paladin thought. ‘But... weirdly enough this makes everything with Tora hurt a lot less. I doubt even Sendak’s family knew that he’d adopted a child.’

It was surreal seeing Sendak’s dour face mixed in with the sharp-toothed smiles of his relatives, and Shiro idly wondered how different things would have proved to be had Sendak decided to remain a part of the family. Would he have been happier for it? Shiro couldn’t say for sure; even in consideration to the intensity of their past relationship Sendak had been private and even distant at times. They may have been perfectly communicative as to their feelings towards one another, but Shiro could only guess at the emotions that Sendak kept off of his sleeve. A daughter, a family – Sendak felt more like a stranger than ever.
“Exuuuuse me,” a little voice interrupted his thoughts, and Shiro turned to see Zambrina leaning out of the doorway to the dining room. “We just finished setting up the table, so everyone can go sit down.”

“Thanks kiddo,” Myzalta grinned, running over to ruffle their daughter’s hair; they gestured for Shiro to head in to the dining room while they left for the kitchen.

“Hey guys, it’s dinner!” Zambrina chirped, waving her arms in a great arc as she went to fetch the three others passed out on the couch.

A room along the back of the cabin made up the dining room, occupied by an old wooden table, which was completely overcrowded with plates. The majority of the spread offered – naturally – was meat, the centerpiece a tray of seared fish slathered in sauce.

“Vrepmyza can you sit next to me?” Tyrla asked from where she stood on one of the bench seats, helping herself to a ridiculous amount of bread rolls.

“Of course,” Shiro smiled, settling down between her and an empty chair. Matt sat across the table beside the other kits, who were already gnawing into bread rolls which appeared to be full of meaty sauce.

“Wait until everyone’s served, you little stinkers!” Myzalta scolded as they hauled a massive pot in from the kitchen, settling it down onto the table roughly. They lightly pushed away Rin’s hand as the kit made to grasp for the ladle, instead dishing out the thick stew to Nanan and then to Zambrina.

“Cream soup is the best,” Tyrla explained, clinging onto Shiro’s bicep. “There’s, um, there’s cream in it, and birdy, and gourds…”

“Thank you,” Shiro told his host as the bowl at his plate was filled with stew. He turned to face Tyrla, hand searching absently for a spoon. “What’s your favorite part of the soup?”

“Um,” Tyrla screwed up her face, reaching into her own bowl as soon as it was poured for her and pulling out a chunk of dark meat. She shrugged and popped it in her mouth, saying around the food: “Bird.”

Shiro smiled, grabbing at a napkin and making to wipe Tyrla’s hand off, but quickly noticing that the other kits were picking the meat out of their stew as well, alternating between that and slurping the broth straight from the bowl. Nanan and Matt were staring at Shiro, mystified.

‘That’s right,’ the paladin reminded himself, watching as Myzalta sat down beside him with Lula on their lap, both sticking their fingers in the soup. ‘Things must be a little different between the home planet and City Station.’

Not wanting to appear rude, Shiro peeled off the gloves below his gauntlets and set them aside, and then dipped his fingers into the warm soup. Slowly, Nanan began to mimic him, and then finally Matt. The table was silent for the first few moments of the meal before Tyrla turned to face Shiro with a large smile and proudly announced:

“My mommy left because she hates us.”

Myzalta choked on their soup, groping around for a napkin as they struggled to clear their throat.

“Oh,” said Shiro, completely taken aback. “I—.”
“Yeah it’s true,” Rin continued conversationally. “Mom hates Udi so much that she’s not their ilbe anymore and now she doesn’t want us anymore.”

“Rin, that is not true!” Zambrina scolded as Myzalta waved a desperate hand at their kids, groping around for a glass of guamnop juice, which Matt helpfully handed to them. “You know mommy left because she hates non-Galra more than she loves us and fought with Udi about it all the time.”

“Kids,” Myzalta choked out at last, dropping the cup of juice onto the table. “You know that’s not the case. Maybe we could talk about this a different time?” They turned towards their guests, clearly embarrassed, “I’m so sorry, I’m going through a separation right now and the kits…”

“Oh no, it’s totally fine, I understand how kids can be,” Matt nodded kindly, Shiro agreeing alongside him immediately.

‘Not that I have much experience,’ he thought a little guiltily.

“But things will be different now, right Udi?” Rin asked Myzalta, frowning at them importantly. “Lotor is going to fix everything with the non-Galra, right? So people like mom won’t be mean?”

Their parent smiled at their child gently from the other side of the table. “Your mother isn’t… she isn’t bad or mean, pattit, she’s just… she has different opinions than me. And yes, Lotor is very kind and good,” they began. “But he’s just one person – he can only do so much, pattit. Zarkon was in charge for a very long time, so things won’t change overnight.”

Rin frowned down at their food, scraping their fork across the surface of their plate contemplatively, “When Zarkon was in charge, all the other kits used to tell my friend Veko that he’d have to leave Gal because he was half… you-know-what. Even the teachers were pretty mean to him some of the time. But now Veko won’t have to leave, right?” Rin looked at Shiro hopefully, a smile spreading across their features. “Emperor Lotor almost freaking died to save Vrepmyza! That means he cares about non-Galra.”

“And that means everything will change, right Udi?” Zambrina asked Myzalta brightly.

“Like I said, things are up in the air now, sweetie,” Myzalta said, smiling kindly at Shiro. “A lot just changed, but we haven’t gotten a formal address from the new emperor about his plans.”

“Then it’s going to stay the same?” Zambrina frowned, ears flattening.

Myzalta sighed, “I didn’t say that, pattit – I just don’t want you to think everything is going to be completely different overnight.”

“Why can’t it, though?” Rin mumbled into their drink.

Shiro looked around at the family as they ate; he could feel their eyes on him as he tucked in to his food.

‘That’s right,’ he realized, ‘I’m the closest thing that they had to a direct link to their emperor… and it looks like they’re trying pretty hard not to overwhelm me with questions.

‘But…’ he wondered, frowning slightly. ‘Why not inquire with Sendak about that?’

The answer was fairly clear. It seemed as if they rarely spoke of their estranged cousin, and it was almost as if they weren’t even willing to consider his position of lord regent. It seemed that all
eyes and hopes were on Keith.

Keith knew full well the ideals that he wanted to uphold as emperor and the changes he wanted to make, but Shiro would not be the first to admit that his fiancé had no idea where to start. Of course, Keith had the support of Shiro himself, Thace, their friends, and the Vesh, but Myzalta was correct in understanding that change would not happen overnight. Keith first needed to secure the crown – let alone learn about running an empire – before he could make any outstanding changes to the empire at large.

“Well,” Myzalta’s stilted voice cut through Shiro’s thoughts. “I think that’s enough politics for tonight. Now that you lot are here, where’s your next stop?”

“That we don’t know yet,” Matt admitted sheepishly, glancing out of the corner of his eye at Nanan. The Druid’s ears flattened before she opened her mouth just a bit.

“I—,” she began hesitantly. “We came here to get a special flower that’s grown up in Ennor.”

Both Matt and Shiro sat at attention, surprised to hear the admission from the kit.

‘Ennor?’ Shiro thought. ‘This is the first time she’s mentioned a location.’

“Up north?” Rin echoed curiously, brow furrowed in confusion. “But it’s always all snowy up there, wouldn’t the flower wilt?”

“Like I said, the flower I need is special,” Nanan explained. “It can only be grown in a really specific climate – somewhere where the water is frosty, but not completely frozen over. There’s an old Druid temple up in Ennor where the climate is like that year-round and they grow the special flowers there, but—.”

Nanan glanced anxiously over at Matt and then Shiro, her ears drooping, “But I don’t know how to make the potion we need.”

Shiro blinked, exchanging startled glances with Matt.

“Potion?” Shiro echoed Nanan with a frown – he hadn’t heard a breath about a potion to be made from the flower. To his slight horror, Matt looked completely perplexed as well, shaking his head slightly.

“What do you mean, Nanan?” the pilot pressed her gently.

“I need to make a special potion with the flower in order to get the powers I need,” she explained. “But you don’t learn about advanced poultices and potions like that until you’re at the rank of a Witch; and the Mother’s Tears is a potion that can only be made by a High Priestess.”

‘By someone like Merla,’ Shiro recognized with a wince as Nanan looked over at Matt apologetically.

“I’m sorry Matt, but I really don’t think it’s going to work,” Nanan said. “I… really can’t do it. Only someone really powerful would know how to make something like that, and everyone like that wants me to—.”

She cut off, looking down into her lap and beginning to play with the hem of her cloak, ears pressed flat to her head as her eyes filled with tears. “I’m really sorry to disappoint everyone.”
‘She’s trying so hard,’ Shiro recognized, his heart breaking for the kit all over again. ‘Even in the wake of her father’s death, she refuses to give up.’

The family looked over at Nanan pityingly, Zambrina enveloping her in a hug from the side.

“I really don’t get what’s going on, but I’m sorry Nanan,” she said, nuzzling her friend affectionately. Rin butted the side of Nanan’s face with their forehead as well, patting her shoulder.

“You seem really sad,” they offered.

Nanan nodded, allowing herself to be comforted. Shiro sighed sadly at her reaction, wanting to reach across the table and offer a hand for comfort. If what Nanan was saying was true, they really were at an impasse.

‘There’s got to be someone on Gal who can make this potion,’ Shiro thought a little desperately. ‘But… it’s going to be too much of a risk ask around about it. As far as we’ve been made aware, all of the Druids are loyal to Merla.’

Myzalta cleared their throat and Shiro turned to face them, only to be met with a smile.

“If I may suggest,” they began. “Why don’t you pay a visit to Asaara?”

Suddenly, the kits burst into thunderous agreement. Shiro looked around mystified, shrugging at Matt when the other looked to him in pure confusion. The brunet leaned across the table to address Myzalta.

“Hey,” he began, smiling at them a little awkwardly. “Who’s Asaara?”

“She’s the lady the on the mountain!” Tyrla chirped, squirming happily in her seat.

“Asaara is an eclectic who lives up in Ennor proper,” Myzalta replied. “Since health care is really only affordable for military families, our family has been relying on her for healing for some two hundred years.”

“An eclectic?” Matt echoed in confusion.

“Asaara was a Druid at one point,” Myzalta responded. “But she left the sisterhood and settled down at her family home in Ennor. Her practices are considered eclectic because she takes from many of the different old teachings.”

“That is not a home,” Zambrina commented, eyes going moony-wide. “That’s a palace.”

“She’s a nutty witch who lives alone with her twenty gal’stara and thinks that rocks help her talk to the stars,” Rin explained pointedly, only to be silenced by a swift look from Myzalta.

“Alright, I think it’s time to clean up the table and get ready for bed,” they announced, standing up from the table. “Tonight’s cold, so let’s bundle up together, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, finally~!! I'm so excited to introduce the Purra Valley family <3 I'm so glad I got to keep them after we reworked this story, although I had to cut (literally) a dozen
family members to make this portion of the story more compact.

So what do you think of Myzalta and their kids? And also you know the fact that they're related to Sendak? I noticed that a lot of you were showing definite distrust in Sendak in the comments I received this week, but what do you think of the concept of him being a loving son and brother? I'm really curious to know what you guys think of this chapter <3

Thank you, thank you, thank you all so much for your kudos and comments! As always, every Ao3 email in my inbox warms my heart and I hope you guys are enjoying reading this story as much as we enjoyed writing it!
At the prospect of bundling up, Rin, Zambrina, and Tyrla began to whoop in unison, scooping the dishes off of the table as quickly as their little hands could handle. Meanwhile, Myzalta ushered their guests into the living room before leaving to gather up some pillows.

A little hand papped Shiro’s leg and he shook himself from his thoughts, staring down at Lula who was rocking from foot to foot, arms outstretched towards him.

“Up!” the kit demanded sweetly, and Shiro met their demand immediately, crouching down to gather them up in his arms.

Rin and Zambrina were collecting massive armfuls of blankets from wooden chests surrounding the living room, dumping them unceremoniously onto the couch before they began to tug imploringly on Matt’s arm.

“Oh, okay,” Matt’s voice carried across the room, and the kits all but dragged him onto the couch. Zambrina pulled herself up onto his lap and began to comb her claws through his hair. Hesitantly, Nanan climbed up beside them, licking her hand and smudging it across her cheeks. “I guess this is a thing that’s happening now.”

“Oh,” Shiro said very eloquently, looking around as the kits began to snuggle up with each other on the massive couch. He blinked, feeling something wet against the bare hand he had propped up on Lula’s shoulder, only to find that the baby was absentmindedly lapping at his skin.

“Goom!” the tiny kit informed him, presenting the top of their head for licks. Shiro stared at the expectant expressions of the other kits in abject horror. Not wanting to appear rude, he hesitantly licked the side of his hand and brushed it along the back of Lula’s ears.

On City Station, most Galra kept their grooming strictly private. Usually only teenagers groomed to this extent in public and never in such… massive quantities. For Sendak, grooming had been expressed in mutual hair and fur washing in their morning showers together; although Shiro knew him to surreptitiously leave combs lying around whenever he was in the mood to be brushed, but could not bring himself to ask.

There was a soft laugh from beside Shiro and Myzalta appeared to relieve him of their kit, handing them off to their siblings.

“Here,” Myzalta grinned at the black paladin, who was still standing awkwardly behind the couch, a bit at a loss. They beckoned him over to the stairs. “I’ll show you to the guest room.”

“Thank you,” Shiro said, immediately grateful. He turned to the kits, thanking them for hospitality as well.

“You’re welcome!” Zambrina and Rin chirped happily.

“Sleep well Vrepmyza!” Tyrla wished him well.
“You sure you don’t wanna stay?” Matt teased, beginning to braid Nanan’s hair.

“I… I think I’m good,” Shiro smiled awkwardly.

He followed Myzalta up the stairs, the elder Galra grinning to themself and shaking their head.

“Even as far as ‘country people’ go, we’re a little cuddly,” they admitted, guiding Shiro down the hall. “You looked like you’d appreciate the privacy.”

“Thank you,” Shiro laughed a little sheepishly.

Myzalta unlocked the door, gesturing him inside; it was a decently sized bedroom complete with a big round bed piled in furs and heavy blankets. The walls adorned with hand-painted pictures and home-woven quilts, bringing a strangely homey atmosphere to the room. Myzalta began to pick through a desk, retrieving a tablet and a remote.

“Feel free to turn on the broadcast,” Myzalta said, setting them on top of the bed. They turned to Shiro, sizing him up. “You need to borrow some pajamas?”

“No thank you,” Shiro returned. “My flightsuit can be surprisingly warm – and I think that I’ll be pretty cozy under all of the blankets.”

“Just let me know if you change your mind,” Myzalta smiled, walking over to the wall and tinkering with the heat.

“Thank you, Myzalta,” Shiro said, beginning to remove his panoply.

“Sleep well,” they waved, and stepped out of the room. With it went the breath that Shiro hadn’t realized he’d been holding, feeling far more drained than he’d thought. Without much grace he flopped down onto the bed, laying on his back and staring up at the intricate paneling of the wood ceiling.

“What the hell?” he murmured aloud, tracing the designs with his eyes. It was overwhelming enough having to sort through his feelings in consideration to Nanan and her father, but the anxiety didn’t seem to have any room to taper off after being exposed to a group of new people.

Shiro had always been anxious around unfamiliar people, often muscling through it for the sake of his parents, the Garrison, and now his team. But Team Voltron wasn’t there to be strong for and there was a whole other layer to his discomfort: after all, it was a completely different thing to find himself among Sendak’s family.

“Gotta tell Keith,” he decided, rolling onto his side and extracting his hailer. Laying it on the quilt beside him he fiddled with the projection, waiting as the dial tone began to sound. The sequence completed without being answered, only for his hailer to ring seconds later, a flush-faced Keith panting on the other end of the display.

“Hey Shiro,” he greeted, clearly having run to pick up the call.

“Hey babe,” Shiro smiled, readjusting so his arm curled beneath his head. “How are you doing? I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you, too,” Keith exhaled, the scenery behind him shifting as he carried the hailer to somewhere more private. “Glad you’re –” he made to say, but the audio cut off as the video lagged, the rest of his sentence garbled: “– really worried.”
“Hey, babe, there’s –.”

“Shiro?”

“Yes?”

“You there?”

“Bad connection,” Shiro sighed, sending an accusatory glance out the window. “Must be the oncoming storm or something.”

“What?”

“There’s –,” Shiro made to explain, giving up quickly. “Switch to voice-only.”

Shiro sighed, propping himself up as he adjusted the call settings, Keith’s voice spilling over the speaker a few moments later.

“How about now?” he queried.

“Much clearer,” Shiro confirmed with relief. He had sorely missed Keith’s company and the comfort that his presence brought him. “There’s supposed to be a storm coming in,” he rehashed. “I think that’s what the problem was. You’re in the castle, right?”

“Yeah,” Keith replied. “And you? Did everything go okay?”

“Matt and I are both fine,” Shiro assured. “The Mother, too: her name’s Nanan. All of us are okay, but…”

“What do you mean ‘but’?” his fiancé inquired as Shiro trailed off. “What happened?”

“It’s…” Shiro began uncertainly. There was a twinge in his chest, the now-too-familiar sensations of guilt washing over him once more. “Things got a little complicated. We’re fine, like I said, but Nanan isn’t my biggest fan and I can’t really blame her.”

“Is it because of…” Keith began pointedly, unsure how to complete his question.

“Because I’m the Champion?” Shiro finished with a saddened smile. “No, although I’m sure it doesn’t help any. It’s… do you remember back when we were first on City Station, before the coup? We would meet in the arboretum with your dad and talk; this was after you came out of your fugue.”

“After we got caught?” Keith chuckled guiltily.

“Yeah,” Shiro returned with emphasis. “That’s actually what led to… all this. After that I was given an assignment, I think to prove my loyalty to the empire or something like that. It didn’t end up being my punishment, though; it was in addition to it. But… I was tasked with killing the guy who tried to assassinate Zarkon at the play.”

“That’s right,” Keith returned slowly. “I do remember you mentioning that. I guess we never really talked about it, though. Are you alright? I mean… that couldn’t have been the easiest thing to do and oh…” he trailed off again, realization beginning to dawn on him. “He would have been Vesh, wouldn’t he? Do the others… do they know?”

“Likely, yeah,” Shiro exhaled shakily. He could feel the anxiety roiling in his gut, just beneath the surface of his awareness. “There would have been reports on it that Sendak filed seeing as he had to handle that case. I have a pretty good guess that Annis would have found out by now especially
providing who that assassin was.”

“What do you mean?” Keith audibly frowned. “Who was he?”

“Ensign Vektor, previous leader of the Vesh.”

“Oh shit…”

“I know I didn’t have a choice, but…” Shiro began, closing his eyes and willing away images of the execution chamber.

“The Vesh knew what they were risking,” Keith offered tentatively. “And they would have known the situation you were put into. They don’t seem to resent you for it, and as you said Annis likely knows already so –.”

“I didn’t regret it, Keith,” Shiro cut in, voice pained. “I don’t know how to explain it. Something in me just clicked. Being in that situation… I knew what I wanted for myself. I knew that it was the only way forward, the only way I could protect you. And I didn’t regret taking his life because like it or not someone else would have, anyway. I couldn’t just… just refuse. I think Sendak was afraid that I would and that he’d have no other choice but to stop me. But I didn’t. I took the shot. And I also took that shot knowing that Vektor had a kit. That I’d be breaking apart a family the same way mine was. And I still did it. It gave me pause at first but… but fuck, Keith, I still went ahead and did it, even knowing the consequences.

“And I guess I was complacent in that because in a way that blood was on Zarkon’s hands and I was the messenger of his rule. And I know that that doesn’t make me innocent, it doesn’t mean I’m not accountable for what I’ve done. But I also never thought that I’d have to deal with the outcome, have to see the damage and pain that I’ve caused. And that just… I feel horrible but am I feeling that for the right reasons? Or is it just because it’s so uncomfortable to have to bear the responsibility of my actions? Because when it comes down to it I’d do it again, especially knowing that it did enable me to get back to you, to eliminate Zarkon, protect more people, the empire itself. I just feel sick all the time and maybe I deserve that to some extent but I know that Nanan has every right to hate me now and I don’t know what more to say to her. I can’t take it back, and part of me knows that I wouldn’t, either. But it does kill me knowing I hurt her in this way. I don’t know how to fix it. I don’t think I can.”

“The Mother was Vektor’s kit,” Keith surmised quietly. “I’m guessing you told her?”

“Yeah,” Shiro answered hoarsely. “I panicked when I found out who her dad was and Matt had to come find me and calm me down. She followed us and overheard part of our conversation so we really had no choice but to explain. I mean, we had already resolved that we had to be honest with her but… I wish it could have gone differently. Not like there’s any good way to admit to something like that.”

“I’d say to give her time,” Keith murmured, “But I don’t really think that’s going to make much difference, to be honest. Is she still willing to work with you guys?”

“Somehow,” Shiro bit his lip. “I think that’s mostly to Matt’s credit. She seems to have bonded with him somewhat, though I guess given her choices that’s unsurprising. I guess being the daughter of the Vesh’s leader made her sympathetic to us, even if…” Shiro swallowed hard, not wanting to finish his sentence. “Keith, you’ve been pretty quiet. Tell me what you’re thinking? You don’t… you don’t have to be nice about it. This probably isn’t the sort of thing you want to be hearing from your fiancé.”
“If you think I’m judging you for this, don’t,” Keith asserted at once. “Shiro, we’ve been over this kind of thing before: I don’t think you’re a bad person and that still stands. This is like the arena all over again, isn’t it? You did what you had to do. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with acknowledging that you’d do it again, either. It’s not like you operated out of malice or cruelty, right?”

“Right.”

“You had something you had to do,” Keith continued kindly. “You were trying to protect those you loved and you were trying to protect the entire empire. It’s hard when it becomes personal, when you have that kind of emotional distance taken away from you. I mean… yeah, it’s got to be hard to compartmentalize something like this when you’re face-to-face with his kit. I just want you to know that I still love and support you, okay? I can’t promise things with Nanan will ever iron themselves out but at least you did the right thing and were honest with her.”

“Yeah,” Shiro reluctantly agreed. “I know it’s up to her whether or not she forgives me and don’t get me wrong I certainly don’t expect her to. She’s got to process this in her own time but it’s just hard in the meanwhile. Not that I really have the right to complain.”

“I mean,” Keith hummed, “I can’t really be the judge of that but at the very least you’re entitled to your emotions.”

“Even if they’re inherently selfish?”

“I think it’s more important how you interact with her,” Keith explained. “There’s nothing wrong with feeling what you’re feeling but maybe let that take a backseat when you’re talking with her. In this case her feelings are more… I don’t want to say important, but…”

“No, I get you,” Shiro nodded. “And I agree. It’s just…” he released a puff of breath. “It’s been so tense and awkward and I have no idea how Matt feels about it, really. There’s not been much of a chance to talk with him one-on-one and I feel like I have to justify this to him somehow. I really hate feeling like this and having all this ambiguity but again I recognize that I really don’t have anyone else to blame but myself.”

“And Zarkon.”

“And Zarkon,” Shiro conceded with a small laugh. “But he’s dead now so it’s kind of a moot point. I know I should talk this out more but I don’t really think I’m in the position to push the conversation providing my role in things. I don’t want to make either of them uncomfortable or give them the impression that I’m begging for forgiveness or that I’m trying to force them to feel okay with things. I guess I just don’t really know how to convey myself right now.”

“How are you doing?” Keith asked in turn. “I know you said you’ve been feeling sick lately and I know how you are with stress. Are you doing okay?”

“As much as I can be, I think,” Shiro admitted. “And it’s hard to quiet that terrible little voice in my head that says that I deserve all this and more, says that I’m a terrible person not worthy of anything.”

Keith made a pained noise but Shiro continued: “I suppose those feelings will ebb with time and as we get busier. I’ll be distracted, at least. Mainly we’ve just been traveling though we finally did make it to our contact. It’s Sylvux’s cousin, actually. Their name is Myzalta and they’re really hospitable, welcomed us into their home and everything. I’m in their guest bedroom right now but Matt’s still out front with the rest of the family. Nanan, too. There’s a couple of kits here, as well.
They’re really friendly but a bit, uh, outspoken.”

“How young?” Keith queried with interest.

“The oldest is around eight, I think, about the same age as Nanan. At least in human terms so that’d make her sixteen seasons. Next oldest is close in age so maybe seven or so? And then there’s like a four-year-old and a baby. They’re all really sweet but they’re kind of having a rough time because Myzalta’s going through a divorce, basically. I guess they and their ex disagreed too much on social issues and the political climate. Makes me wonder how many other families are in the same boat now that there’s been such a shift in things.”

“No idea,” Keith replied thoughtfully. “I mean I’d hope that my people are happier for it but change is still change, right? And as much as I’d rather not say that he’s right Sendak did say that it has to happen slowly.”

“Funny,” Shiro mused, “Myzalta said the same thing, as well.”

‘Guess they really are family,’ he thought inwardly. ‘I know they’re estranged but it makes me curious how Myzalta views Sendak’s current rule. They certainly didn’t seem keen on bringing it up, though.’

“Well they may be boisterous but at least everyone sounds friendly,” Keith surmised. “But you sound uncomfortable – are they like too friendly? Like creepy friendly?”

“No,” Shiro hesitated, “It’s not that. They’re very well-meaning. I think they’re just accustomed to different levels of physical affection – it must be a cultural thing. I left when they started grooming each other.”

Keith coughed out a laugh. “What?” he chuckled in disbelief. “You mean like cats?”

“Uh, pretty much, yeah,” Shiro replied. “Makes it hard to believe that they’re related to…” he quieted, suddenly uncertain. He knew Keith wasn’t the jealous type and he had been more than explicit in the fact that things were over between himself and Sendak but the situation was awkward at best, improved at least by the fact that the family appeared ignorant of his prior relation.

“Hmn?” Keith pressed interestedly.

“They…” Shiro groaned, turning his face against the mattress so that his voice became muffled. “Turns out they’re Sendak’s family,” he admitted.

“What?” Keith returned, and Shiro could hear the frown in his voice. “I thought they were supposed to be Sylvux’s family. Right? That’s what Annis and Matt said, at least.”

“They are,” Shiro explained, turning back to the projection of his hailer. “I was looking at the pictures in their house and I found some of Sendak when he was… well, a kit, I guess. Myzalta was able to confirm my suspicions. I guess Sendak and Sylvux are cousins or something.”

“And no one thought to mention this?” Keith returned, flabbergasted. “Wouldn’t that kind have been pertinent information? ‘Oh, by the way, my cousin was also once my political enemy.’”

“Don’t ask me,” Shiro shrugged. “They probably knew I’d be less likely to go along with things if I knew ahead of time. Guess they’d be right. …Are you alright with this?”

“Alright with what?” Keith questioned. “That you’re staying with your ex’s family? I mean it’s a bit weird but it’s got to be way more uncomfortable for you than it ever would be for me – not
that I really mind it. Do you think they know about you?”

“No,” Shiro answered thankfully. “They know me as the Champion, and that’s uncomfortable enough, but they haven’t made any mention of any kind of relationship. From what I was told Sendak really hasn’t talked to them in years and there’s not much communication between here and City Station, I guess.”

“Hmn,” Keith mused. “Have you been doing alright?” he asked meaningfully.

“With the ‘Champion’ thing?” Shiro interpreted easily. “I… Yeah, for the most part. I won’t lie, I’ve had a few episodes lately, but that’s about the whole Nanan situation and what’s happened within the last month more than anything in the past.”

“Because of being around Matt?”

“Yeah,” Shiro confessed quietly. “We haven’t talked about it. I don’t even think he knows. To be honest I’m kind of scared for him to find out.”

“Better you tell him before he finds out,” Keith advised.

“I know,” Shiro agreed. “It’s just not a conversation I relish having, especially after everything I had to tell Nanan. That, and there hasn’t really been a good opportunity to bring it up – we’ve been around the family all day and prior to that we’ve been with Nanan. She already hates and fears me so much… I don’t want to give her any more reason to feel afraid.”

Keith made a saddened sound, voice softening, “Just give her time to know you. You’re so good.”

Shiro made to object but closed his mouth, knowing his doubt would get them nowhere. “I’ve been trying,” he said instead. “She definitely likes Matt more.”

“And Sylvux’s family?” Keith inquired. “You said that they recognize you… are they…?” he trailed off, uncertain of how to delicately phrase his question.

“No,” Shiro returned thoughtfully. “They’re not afraid. They’ve been very welcoming. Curious, even. I think they want to ask about you but are afraid of being rude.”

“About me?” Keith repeated with surprise. “Why?”

“They see you as the emperor,” Shiro pointed out. “They really look up to you after what happened during the coup. I guess a lot of it was televised – even here. Like…” he laughed, hardly able to wrap his mind around the scope of things. “One of the kits was saying they talked about it in school. About us. They look at us like… heroes. I don’t really know how to handle it.”

Keith quieted a moment, tone serious when he finally spoke. “I’m really trying to do right by them,” he began. “I’m trying to make the right choices. I… I don’t really know if I am, though. I got in touch with Sendak like we planned. He… he approached me first, actually. He wanted there to be an accord of peace between us with legal contracts and everything. I accepted,” he swallowed. “I just hope that was the right decision.”

“It’s what we were aiming for,” Shiro returned slowly. “So let him continue to play into our favor, I guess. Just…” he exhaled, feeling the tension knot in his stomach. “Be careful, okay? Sendak is really strategic in how he plans things and he’s always angled for a shot at power. I… just be on guard for any signs that he’s about to double cross you.”
“You’re worried he’ll try to kill me at the last second?” Keith figured. “I’ve thought about that, too.”

“And?”

“And I don’t think he’ll do it,” Keith mused. “I mean, I’ll be on the lookout for it, but I really don’t think he’d take that kind of risk. It sounds like he really needs me alive and popular with the people in order to maintain how things are going for him. I don’t think he’d jeopardize that so easily. Besides he’s been…” Keith paused around an uncertain inhale.

“I highly doubt you’re about to say ‘friendly’,” Shiro assumed.

“No, I wouldn’t say ‘friendly’,” Keith hedged. “But he’s been… I don’t know, helpful? Attentive? I clearly frustrate him at times but he doesn’t give up on me, even at that. He seems to respect me, I think. Maybe that’s going too far. He kind of joked around with me at points. He certainly helped me out in our battle,” he continued, launching into an explanation of what had transpired on his side.

“I’m amazed that Kuro let you pilot her,” Shiro shook his head as Keith finished. “Although I can’t imagine she’d let anyone other than you be in control in my stead.”

“Like I said,” Keith reminded, “She didn’t really let me take control. I was just kind of a passenger and I fired a bit. I wouldn’t exactly say that I was in sync with her, not like with Red.”

“Still,” Shiro hummed, “It’s an impressive feat.”

“Yeah, especially given how she’s reacted to me in the past,” Keith huffed. “I think she only tolerates me for your sake and I really doubt she’d let me get away with this again.”

“I really couldn’t say,” Shiro mused. “But I’m thankful to hear everything panned out.”

“Thanks to Sendak, if I’m being honest,” Keith muttered.

“You need to give yourself more credit, you’ve come a long way,” Shiro praised. “You’ve… calmed down a lot.”

“I mean I am significantly less of a hot mess,” Keith laughed. “But yeah, I’m really trying not to just take off on a whim, make rash choices. It’s just hard not to feel like I’m not doing enough.”

“Well I can attest that you are,” Shiro countered, rising from the bed and shaking the numbness out of his arm. He crossed the room towards the bathroom, flipping on the light and observing the contents. “I just want you to know that I see it, too.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Shiro caught his reflection in the mirror and paused to take in his appearance on the whole. Dark circles ringed his eyes and his lips were chapped from the snow. The crests of his cheeks were reddened with sunburn, the rest of him generally bedraggled and dirtied. “I look absolutely horrible,” he assessed, wrinkling his nose. “I really need a shower.”

“Well I’ll let you get to that,” Keith yawned. “We’ve been on for a couple of hours, anyway, and you probably need your rest.” He paused for a moment, “Everything will work out with Nanan… you – you did what you had to do, Shiro and you made the right choice in telling her.”

“I hope so,” Shiro sighed, scrubbing a hand over his worn face.
“Take care, okay?” Keith obliged him gently.

“I will. You take care, too, alright?” Shiro returned. “Love you; sleep well.”

“De luste da,” Keith replied sweetly. “Talk to you later?”

“Of course,” Shiro smiled. “And Keith? Things will be okay. Everything with Sendak? You’re making the right decisions. Things will work out; I have faith in you.”

Keith made a small noise of surprise, tone warm when he replied, “Thanks, babe. That… that really means a lot.”

“I stand behind you in all your decisions,” Shiro pressed.

“Thanks,” Keith repeated. “I just don’t want to end up disappointing you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Shiro insisted. “You never could.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry again for the late chapter, we’ve had a few schedule changes IRL, so new chapters are going to be posted on Saturday nights around 5:30-7:30 PM PST. Thanks so much for your kudos and comments! Much love!!!

~Moosey
“Come on Dad, you’ve got to eat.”

Sendak started in reply, sighing a moment later and dropping his spoon entirely. He’d been picking at his breakfast ever since he had sat down and it seemed that Tora had finally taken notice.

“What you mean?” she pressed, ears cocked in concern.

“Distracted,” Sendak returned, bracing his forehead against the y of his hand. “Although I suppose you’d know better than most how I tend to get when I’m trying to work something out.”

‘Save, perhaps, for Shiro,’ he added as an afterthought.

The thought of the paladin still pained him, loathe as he was to admit it. It was more than clear that Shiro’s affections lay elsewhere but Sendak couldn’t bring himself to feel slighted. He had expected things to be different – he had expected, at least, for the Champion to remember. But that had come after and far too late.

‘I’m being pathetic again,’ he chided himself. ‘Moping like a kit; it’s not like anything could be salvaged after what happened between us in the arena. Even if he did know why I had to act…’ he considered, looking at his daughter with a twinge of protectiveness, ‘Even if he knew it wouldn’t matter. His relationship to the emperor far supersedes anything that I knew with him; the least I can do is keep Lotor safe.’

“You’re thinking about him again,” Tora hummed perpectively, turning back to her meal. “Don’t try to deny it, either: you always get the same look.”

Sendak made to defend himself, quickly finding the effort fruitless. “I don’t want you getting the wrong impression about me,” he muttered instead.

“What?” Tora returned with a smirk, “That you have a heart?”

“No,” the lord regent replied stiffly.

“Yes,’ he countered internally.

“I don’t want you to think that I regret what I did,” he pressed, insistent on drawing her gaze. She looked to him hesitantly, words catching in her throat.

“You come first, Tora,” he argued firmly. “You always will come first.”

“Gettin’ sentimental on me,” the woman laughed, shifting in her seat.

“You’re deflecting,” Sendak pointed out.
“Well you’re hurting!”

“That…” her father began, sighing and falling silent. He wanted to say that it didn’t matter, that nothing mattered more than her safety. He would never forgive Zarkon for holding her life as leverage against him, forcing him to kill his ex-ilbe for the sake of her survival. Even still he could never regret his actions, knowing that he had kept his family safe.

But what could he say to his daughter? He knew at once that she would combat him for disregarding his own feelings, pointing out that the attempt was hypocritical in relation to the advice he often gave her.

‘She would be right in that,’ he admitted begrudgingly.

“I… am not good in dealing with these things,” he admitted slowly.

“Feelings?” Tora suggested.

Sendak fought the urge to roll his eye, settling for a chagrined glare. “Yes.”

“I know,” Tora shrugged. “Me, too.”

“I’m a bad example,” Sendak sighed, easing into a more relaxed position.

“Well, yeah,” Tora teased. “But I’m pretty sure it was a preexisting condition. Then again, abuse will do that to ya.”

“Tora…”

“You know how it is, Dad,” she asserted.

He did. No matter how much he tried to comfort her or take away the hurt he couldn’t undo the impact her biological father had made on the first few seasons of her life. She had come a long way and he hoped that one day she would be free of the doubts and insecurities she carried with her and yet he knew, too, how deep the mental scars ran. He understood that she didn’t doubt his feelings or attentions and yet he could also recognize the fleeting moments of uncertainty, the fear that she somehow wasn’t good enough for his love.

She had come to speak more frankly of her experiences, often darkly joking about what she had gone through. It helped her cope, he realized, to work through accepting her past. That didn’t mean it didn’t pain him, however, but he tried to check his impulses to coddle her – invalidating her was the last thing he wanted, after all.

“Sorry,” he murmured, knowing he had slipped up.

“I know,” Tora responded in turn, offering a little smile. “It’s fine, I forgive you.”

“Well that’s one person,” Sendak mused, and Tora’s grin widened.

“Well maybe more people would forgive you if you didn’t act like such a condescending ass all the time.”

“I don’t need anyone’s pity.”

“Ugh!” Tora scoffed, still playful. “You’re impossible.”

“I’m steadfast.”
“Hardheaded, more like.”

“Coming from you?” Sendak cocked a brow.

“You got me there,” his daughter laughed. “But come on, you’re stressed and I don’t like it. Doubt you’re sleeping much and that’s going to be of no help to anyone, especially not yourself,” she accused. “So the sooner you’re back to a decent schedule the better – let me help you; I doubt you made me admiral for nothing.”

‘I made you admiral because it was your life’s dream,’ Sendak privately answered.

“Are you suggesting that I have self-motivated intentions?” he sniped instead.

“Yup,” Tora nodded. “So let me be useful to you. What’s been troubling you?”

“Vaneer,” Sendak groaned, glaring into his breakfast. “The emperor did what he could to sway her but she’ll take more convincing than his mercy.”

“Concerned she’ll attack City Station?”

“It’s less that and more the influence she has on Stell’s government,” Sendak corrected. “Just because we have the military strength to oppose her flotilla doesn’t mean we have the same ability to oppose Stell.”

“They are masters of warfare,” Tora hummed. “Even while being under Galra control. Given Lo’s declarations that our territories are free to exit the empire there’s been a definite shift in our forces. Many have just defected and there’s really no recourse to stop them, at least not without compromising his wishes.”

“Precisely,” Sendak concurred. “What’s more is that I’m neither at liberty to draft more soldiers nor to increase military spending despite the potential threat that both Merla and Stell as a whole present. If we are in talks with Stell then the last thing we can do is appear threatening. Being peaceable, though… that doesn’t really suit me.”

“But you’ve gotta be,” Tora concluded. “Or else you’ll lose Lo’s support.”

“Between the two of us he is the charisma,” Sendak ruefully assessed. “And having a lighter hand at this juncture will get us much farther ahead than straightforward politic. Still, he’s inexperienced and needs someone to guide him; a misstep now may tarnish his reputation with the public forever.”

“You’re getting soft on him,” Tora smirked.

“I don’t like what you imply by that,” Sendak frowned. “But it is within both of our interests to work together.”

“You’ve got to cinch it though,” Tora surmised. “That contract has to be watertight.”

“I do not wish to force him,” Sendak countered.

“I know,” Tora conceded, looking saddened. “I’d like to consider Lo a friend, although after what I pulled getting Lance to you I doubt that he feels the same. I don’t want him to feel forced either, but I don’t know if he realizes how critical this union would be. Honestly, it’s probably going to take some sacrifices on his part. I mean, he’s going to take time to come into his own as emperor so whatever you put in that contract has to be long reaching – for his sake as much as yours. You
know, even if your sake is more self-interested.”

“I just want decent legislation to pass,” Sendak muttered. “Someone has to push for it.”

“And?”

“And I’m just as motivated by power as you are,” he added with a wry smirk. “You shit.”

“Someone’s gotta keep you on your toes,” Tora laughed.

“I don’t think I’m at a lack for that these days,” Sendak countered tiredly. “There’s been a lot to juggle and it’s all been in a delicate state of flux. It’s taking more finesse than I’d care for.”

“If Vaneer wants to see cooperation then show her that,” Tora advised. “Starting with this business with Lo. She’s going to be watching him more than us. I hate to play this way but maybe Lance can be used as leverage after all; just because Lo is playing nice now doesn’t mean he won’t retract his support. Another paladin might incentivize him to stay on course.”

“Manipulating him won’t win any favors, either,” Sendak shook his head. “We’re past that point now, anyway. The emperor is smart enough to know that siding with us is more in his favor than trying to manage on his own and he’s also wary enough to assume that Lance won’t be returned to him unless he delivers on his word. I’ll let him believe what he wants but I won’t bend his will, either – it means nothing if it’s not his choice. That said, it’s not like he can avoid City Station forever. Vaneer was wrong to assume he simply ran away – if he hadn’t his life would have been at the mercy of Zarkon’s remaining loyalists and there would be no one left to lead these people.”

“There’s always you,” Tora sniffed. “I mean, you’re becoming well liked enough.”

“But I’m not the emperor,” Sendak disagreed. “I am not the one that assassinated Zarkon, even if I played a considerable role in making sure that could come to fruition. I do not have the kind of adoration he has with the civilians. My influence is almost strictly military-based and frankly that wins me no favors in the public eye, regardless of the policy I’ve tried to introduce. I think Lotor realizes this now, himself. Considering my open invitation – and if for no other reason than to spite Vaneer – he’ll be here before long.”

“Hah, well that’s for sure,” Tora replied fondly. “Even before the coup with Druids digging through his brain he ran on spite and determination. I’ll tell the staff to prepare a room for him on the way out; it’s about time I left for work.”

“Have them prepare three,” Sendak suggested, rising from the table and abandoning his picked over plate. “I imagine he’ll bring the remaining paladins with him so they’ll need space of their own. Here, let me walk you out.”

“Commander Brax will be filing his report today,” Tora announced, waiting for her father to join her before leading the way through their home. “It’s a good thing Lo agreed to a mutual retreat or our losses would have been much higher. I’m unsure of the numbers just yet but I will be sending those figures on to you this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Tora,” Sendak nodded, thinking back on his conversation during the battle. The emperor was far more forgiving than he had assumed, hotheaded but not so prideful that he wouldn’t back down when the situation called for it. It wasn’t the course that Sendak would have taken, but, then again, his was also what Zarkon would have done and the monarch was anything if like the last emperor.

“I’m willing to give chances if it prevents casualties,”’ Lotor had determined, the weariness
of the fight evident in his tone. 

“**We don’t need any more enemies at the moment.**”

Maybe he was foolish to let such a key player in the Stellite government go, but he was also kindhearted.

‘**Maybe I’m the one who’s foolish for not pressing him to take Vaneer captive,**’ Sendak mused, drawing up before the front door. ‘**This decision will call for a different sort of approach altogether. I just hope that Lotor is capable of dealing with the consequences of his actions.**’

“Hey,” Tora interjected softly, a hand placed to his chest. “Stop fretting so much, okay? Your brow’s all creased up. Things will work out; you and I are both clever enough to pull through this – we’ve made it this far, after all.”

“It’s more than just us on the line this time,” Sendak sighed, pulling his daughter close and laying a brief kiss to her crown. “But I have faith in you. Have a good day at work and try to behave yourself.”

“Yes Dad,” Tora laughed, batting him away. “I’ll only be a little snarky.”

“I doubt it,” Sendak grinned, shooing her off. “Now don’t be late.”

He watched her go, lingering at the threshold before closing the door after her, worries slowly melting away. She always seemed to have that effect on him, no matter how stressful times became. Her love, though veiled, was enough.

Turning back into the house he progressed to the sitting room, finding Maray reclining on the sofa, one leg crossed over the other as they tapped furiously at their tablet. Their sleeves – usually meticulous – were rolled partway up, a wrapping around one wrist which Sendak assumed likely to be due to a bad cause of carpal tunnel. His advisor looked up at his familiar footstep, pulling their clothes into better place and drumming irately on the tablet’s casing.

“Busy?” Sendak asked, knowing the answer was obvious.

“Yes,” Maray replied, using a clipped tone that only they could get away with. “I have a strongly worded message to send to a certain Captain of Foreign Affairs.”

“Oh?” Sendak frowned, growing wary. “What’s Thruvo been up to? This is about the last thing we need right now.”

“Apparently he’s been holding up requests of secession from planets within the empire. I know that he has been flooded with them lately but there is no excuse for this kind of delay.”

“You think it’s deliberate?” Sendak translated.

“I think,” Maray sniffed, pausing in their typing to level the lord regent with a serious look, “That Merla may have gotten to him and made him change his mind about how he’s running things. It appears as if Thruvo is waiting to gain clearance from Emperor Lo before he processes any final papers, which is only serving to undermine your authority.”

“You’re probably right; this feels like exactly the sort of thing that Merla would attempt,” Sendak realized with annoyance. “Especially after how our meeting went: she seemed determined to get back at me so it would only make sense that this is how. But if I release Thruvo from his post then it will just hamper things further and put the entire department in a state of disarray.”

“But if he doesn’t think your word is good enough?” Maray pressed. “It’s not like I can
harass Merla any further without proof that she’s behind this. She’s making Thruvo into a threat on her behalf and unfortunately he’s the one we now have to deal with.”

“In that case then he’ll hear from the emperor directly,” Sendak threatened. “Even if they have to have words over hailier. I’ll see that it’s done.”

“Well I’ll see that he receives my complaint,” Maray insisted, resuming their typing. “No doubt Thruvo fears that Lo will come after him as Zarkon did if he makes a choice that falls outside of imperial wishes. All the same, he must know that we are on to his little rebellion – I hardly think he’ll wish to draw your ire.”

“So you intend to threaten him?” Sendak cocked a brow.

“Not threaten,” Maray corrected swiftly. “Merely inform him that such resistance does no benefit to the empire at large and that his inaction may force others to think that his allegiances fall with the old regime. That should be incentive enough to amend his choices, don’t you think?”

“Clever,” Sendak praised, hinting at a smirk.

“I only ever strive for perfection,” Maray returned proudly, finishing their letter and tapping the send button with a flourish. “Now,” they addressed, setting the tablet aside and turning their full attentions to the lord regent. “Are you here to inquire about your schedule for the day? Or perhaps you simply wish for some company?”

“Familiar as ever,” Sendak chided, although his tone did little to reflect it.

“If you really minded it I would know it,” Maray shot back with a smile. “So I will continue to be ‘familiar’ as you put it until I see otherwise.”

“You’re quite confident in that.”

“Entirely,” Maray agreed, drawing from the couch and smartly tucking their tablet beneath their arm. “Now before you inquire, you have a public appearance to make later this afternoon regarding the changes to the empire and the implications these will have for our citizens of mixed or non-Galra heritage. I ensured that Lylok sent you a briefing earlier in the myokokak – it should include a thorough explanation of the protections that should be passed into law, along with information on how visas and interplanetary travel to expatriate nations will be handled. I trust that you’ve perused it?”

“I have,” Sendak began with a frown. “But I was under the impression that that conference was slotted for tomorrow?”

“It was,” Maray admitted, offering an apologetic smile, “However it had to be moved due to a scheduling error.”

“An error?” Sendak repeated incredulously. “You’re usually so meticulous.”

“Oh it wasn’t my fault,” Maray snorted. “Although I suppose I should have known better than to trust those buffoons in the Department of Commerce to get it right. For being so skilled with numbers they are absolute louts with dates. You know they scheduled your collective board meeting for the very same time as the appearance? The very same! Well, of course, I didn’t want to risk them complicating anything else so I made the new arrangements myself. I hope this doesn’t disadvantage you in any way?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Sendak assured. “Although it seems I will have to talk to Dalith about how
they run their department; this isn’t the only oversight they’ve had.”

“Hmn,” Maray mused, “Well I thought as much: I’ve never met anyone so on top of paperwork as you. You overwork yourself, you know?”

“I don’t see what other choice I have,” Sendak countered. “The state of the empire is too fragile to afford any slacking off: I owe it to these people to do a good job, especially after the mess that Zarkon made of things. I believe this broadcast will be well-met seeing as it concerns a sector of our public that rarely receives notice. It will prove a marked change from the old regime.”

“Are you ready for it?” Maray inquired, tone kind. “You and I both understand how important this speech is to get right, especially as it will be televised.”

“You know I’m not about grandstanding,” Sendak answered neutrally. “Honest opinion and plain fact go a lot farther than overblown sentiment. So long as I get the details straight and convey the importance of these people to the empire – to society – then I will mark that as a success.”

“So you’re not nervous, then?” Maray pressed.

Sendak faltered, looking to his advisor critically. “I would not say ‘nervous’.”

“Anxious?”

“You know as well as I do that I don’t convey myself well,” Sendak sighed. “I… I am not one to easily endear myself to others – I’m not like Lotor. I am only concerned that I will not come across as sincere enough.”

“You manage it more than you may think,” Maray replied softly. “Would you only show the public this more relaxed and earnest side of you –.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I thought you would say as much,” the organizer chided. “You have the solution within you, if only you weren’t so afraid to show it.”

“‘Afraid’?” Sendak repeated harshly, the advisor recoiling in turn.

“Are you not?” Maray pointed out boldly. “There is no shame in having emotions, Sendak. You are not going to be judged for expressing them.”

“On the contrary the very hint of a weakness –.”

“Fear is not a weakness,” Maray interjected sharply. “If anything it is a symbol of sincerity – of caring – and it can be a great motivator besides. Too often you turn it into a weapon but you can’t afford to do so now. The people need to see –.”

“I am not afraid.”

“Then drop this routine!”

“What?” Sendak bristled.

“You are not as callous and exacting as you make yourself out to be,” Maray shot back. “Sure you are cunning and sure you may fight for every scrap of power you get but you have a heart Sendak and it would do you well to show it.”
“You know nothing of –!”

“Don’t I?” Maray cut across. “How you are with Tora, how you are with me – you think I don’t see that? You think I don’t see you? Who you are beneath all that toxic bullshit? If you could just abandon your pride and all these ridiculous notions of what it means to be strong then you could actually be happy! You could have those things that you think are so out of reach.”

“Like what?” Sendak growled. “The love of my people? The adoration of the empire? And at what – the cost of my credibility? Of my standing with other diplomats? If I am to maintain any semblance of power then I know how I must be. I am not… benevolent,” the lord regent spat. “I am not some bastion of good will: I know where my flaws lie.”

“Is it so impossible to believe that you can be both?” Maray insisted. “That you can be kind without being ‘good’ or that you can be self-interested without being ‘bad’? Are these parts of you so irreparable that you cannot acknowledge that they both exist? I don’t understand what you find so shameful about it. Zarkon is dead, Sendak, and so are the old ways. You aren’t the ruthless commander you once were, nor do you have to be. You’d get a lot farther if you could just come to accept that.”

“Don’t you dare try and lecture me.”

“If I don’t talk to you frankly then who will?” Maray asked sternly. “Tora? She may be flippant but ultimately she is your daughter and she looks up to you – she doesn’t doubt a single one of your actions and your approval means more to her than countering your methods. No matter how strong your relationship she is not your peer or equal regardless of how much respect you reserve for one another.”

“So why you?” Sendak accused. “What makes you feel you have the right to talk to me this way?”

“Because for whatever reason you allow it,” Maray exhaled. “You allow me to challenge you and tell you when you’re wrong and I don’t have the answer for that. I am not about to allow you to destroy yourself with your own bad habits while I sit back and do nothing.”

“Why?”

“Because!” Maray groaned, throwing up a hand. “Ugh, you difficult man! You’re my friend. Maybe you don’t agree, but that is how I feel – like we’re equals. You act differently around me than you do around anyone else. So you tell me why that is.”

Sendak quieted for a moment, the ruff of fur at his neck settling.

Why. It should have been a simple answer, something that easily came to mind.

‘Why do I let them get away with this?’ he considered uncertainly. ‘Better yet, why do I tend to listen? Because they give good advice? Still, if it were anyone else I would threaten them within an inch of their life. There’s no good reason why I should tolerate this.’

He examined Maray, all hard lines and stiff shoulders, brow furrowed in determined frustration.

‘Why do they care?’ Sendak wondered. ‘They referred to us as friends – is that what this is? The relationship that we share? The friends I had in the past, well… it was different, wasn’t it? Drinking buddies, hook ups, bored and lonely people merely thrown together by the circumstance of being in the military. None of them stood up to me like this, took this active an investment in my life.
He could see Maray give in before him, mouth twisted in disappointment and annoyance and he knew it was solely his fault.

“You don’t have to answer,” the advisor sighed, running a hand through their hair, tugging at the ends fretfully. “I have about a million things to organize before your press conference today and I really shouldn’t waste any more time with conversation. I will be in my room if you need me.”

Sendak nodded wordlessly, at a loss for how to amend the situation. He had never quarreled with Maray before – not in seriousness, anyway – and he suddenly found that he felt absolutely horrible. Maray forced a disheartened smile and turned away, swiftly making for the back part of the manor.

“Great,” Sendak murmured aloud, running a hand along his jaw.

“Trouble in paradise?” a voice quipped and Sendak nearly jumped for how caught off guard he was. He spun around rapidly, eyes fixating on the single other occupant in the room.

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Not much,” Lance shrugged, hands shoved into his pockets. “Just the tail end, really. That, uh… sounded pretty rough.”

“Where are your guards?” Sendak scowled, looking about for the missing sentinels.

“Ditched ‘em,” the paladin shrugged again.

“What? Where?”

“Outside,” Lance explained. “We were out for a walk and I gave ‘em the slip. I mean, I feel kinda bad because they’re probably frantic.”

“So you came back here?” Sendak pointed out dubiously. “Why not the hangar? You know from experience where it is.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lance concurred. “But I realized something: scary as you may be – which is kinda a lot, actually – you’re not in the position to kill me like I thought you were. Keith is counting on my being here and being alive and well and you’re not about to fuck that up, are you? So I might as well wait him out in relative comfort.”

“Does that mean you’ll actually start eating the food that you are given?” Sendak sighed.

“Guess it wouldn’t hurt,” Lance returned thoughtfully, slipping into one of the seats.

“Get off of that,” Sendak frowned, crossing his arms before his chest.

“What? I can only touch the things in my apartment?” Lance sniped, only settling into the chair further.

“That is not what I said.”

“So what, it’s an antique or something?"

“Get off the settee.”
“Oh, fancy!”

“Lance.”

“Jeez, fine,” the paladin shot back, standing up defiantly. “And here I thought we could have a civil conversation.”

“I have had enough of being sassed, lectured, and condescended for one day,” Sendak snapped. “The last thing I need is more bullshit from you.”

Lance quieted, knowing better than to aggress further. “Look…” he began, frowning down at his shoes. “It’s not like I trust you or anything but I like Maray and I don’t like seeing them hurt. You don’t have to listen to me but they care about you, so… maybe don’t treat them so harshly? They may be kinda blunt but they don’t mean anything bad by it.”

Sendak exhaled slowly, looking pointedly at anywhere but Lance.

‘It’s bad enough that I feel guilty for what was said without having to know that my sentiments fall in line with this kit’s,’ he thought with annoyance. ‘Though trying as he may be he doesn’t deserve my temper, either.’

“Maray…” he began, uncertain of how much to convey. “Maray has more license to speak their mind than most,” he explained. “And therefore they tend to see the worst of me more than others.”

“So are you gonna apologize?” Lance asked curiously.

Sendak sniffed, turning to meet the paladin’s earnest expression. “We’ll see; I think we both need time to ourselves before anything like that.”

“Why wait?” Lance countered calmly. “It’s not good to let that linger any more than it has to – then you’ll both just feel like shit.”

“Don’t assume how I feel,” Sendak returned, lacking his usual venom. “You should return to your rooms.”

Lance pulled a face, making it clear that he didn’t like the idea but had little else better to do. “Look, man, I’m just sayin’: a simple gesture will do. I mean you do you but don’t say I didn’t warn ya.” With a parting shrug and a look that could only mean “your move”, Lance exited the sitting room, leaving Sendak in complete solitude.

The lord regent released a groan, head hung in overwhelmed frustration. Too much had elapsed and it was only morning, the brunt of the day still looming ahead. He had a speech to fine tune and a briefing to study, not to mention a decent dig through his closet for something suiting to wear.

‘No doubt Maray already has something in mind,’ he considered, instantly feeling a twinge of guilt. ‘Though I wonder if they’ll bother with it given what was said.’

“A simple gesture will do’, huh?” he mused, already heading for the kitchen. “Then I guess I’d better make some tea.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm so, so sorry this chapter is so late! I have no excuse other than the fact that The Adventure Zone is amazing and that I got completely distracted while marathoning it this weekend.

I'm really curious what you guys think of this chapter, especially in consideration to Maray and Sendak's argument -- Ches always does such a lovely job with their interactions <3 I know a lot of you are really hesitant to trust Sendak and I especially want to know what they are thinking after this chapter. I think that here we get a really good idea as to who Sendak is as a person.

As always, thanks so much for you comments and kudos, they really make our day! We'll see you on Saturday!
Sosettar Castle rose alongside the cliff faces of the Ennor mountain range, a cold, white sentinel from another era. A river rushed beneath it, gushing out between two ivory stone turrets and crushing down the rocks below. It was an eerily thin palace with several sharp spires, small with sweeping archway walls embracing it on either side. The highest point – a tower – was crowned with a crystal bulb that had frosted over in the depth of winter.

Matt held up the screen of his hailer, comparing the projected path to that which led up to Soettar’s silver gates.

“I uh,” he grumbled, dropping the screen and glancing up at the stalwart castle towering above them. “I guess this is Asaara’s place?”

“Zambrina did say it was a palace,” Nanan frowned.

“Just didn’t think it was so literal,” Shiro concluded, leaning forward out of their borrowed sleigh and attempting to gauge the energy level of their team as it were.

The ‘team’ was composed of ten pygmy cows from Purra Valley’s ranch, each trussed up in bells and velvet belts like Santa’s most confused little reindeer. Even in their numbers, it had seemed incredibly unlikely that the tiny animals would be able to pull a massive handmade sleigh suitable for carrying several Sendak-sized Galra. But even though half a day had passed, the little cows looked none the worse for wear, staring around the mountains lazy-eyed and shuffling casually in place.

Shiro took up the reins and led the sleigh team through the open gates and onto the grounds proper. The courtyard before the castle was particularly barren of plant life; the majority of it dedicated to stone and metal sculptures glinting hazily beneath a layer of frost. The centermost point of the courtyard was occupied by a massive stone statue of an ancient gal’stara, its exterior worn nearly featureless.

Shiro stopped the sled beside the effigy, hesitantly stepping out of the conveyance to survey their surroundings. Almost immediately, he was startled by the sound of a shrill mew piercing the air, his Galra arm alighting in shock as he turned to face the source of the noise. A tiny gal’stara, black as jet, trotted up towards him through the snow and promptly pressed up against his legs, crying out importantly.

“What’re you doing out here?” the black paladin frowned, crouching to pick up the little animal. He went happily into Shiro’s hands, meowing loudly again; the paladin took a moment to observe the cat, finding that it was dressed in an awful little hand-knit sweater and booties to match. “And… what are you wearing?”

The little animal seemingly took offense to this, squirming out of Shiro’s hold and trailing down the steps, stopping to meow over its shoulder at him.

“I think it wants you to follow,” Nanan suggested, stepping out of the sled and closer to the gal’stara. The cat moved forward again, stopping to meow as if beckoning them along.
“The cat better not be the witch,” Shiro grumbled, urging the lead bovine forward with a gentle touch as Matt joined his side.

“At this point I can’t even be sure,” Matt shrugged as the animal brought them around a corner and into a smaller courtyard, running up to what looked like a stable door. “Based on the things I’ve seen out here in space, I wouldn’t put it past her.”

Shiro and Matt took a moment to get the cows settled in before meeting back up with Nanan, who was now standing alone in the inner courtyard, staring up at the tallest tower that jutted out of it alongside the castle. She pointed towards the doors, which were frosted glass cut through with spiraling silver patterns.

“The gal’tara climbed in through a window,” she explained, staring up at the ominous building. “Should we…?”

“Yeah,” Shiro nodded, and Matt took the advance, knocking on the ancient panes of glass, only for the door to glow dark grey and swing open a moment later. The brunet looked over his shoulder at his companions with a shrug, which Shiro promptly returned before they stepped inside. Their stinging-cold skin immediately melted in the warmth of a fat iron stove pressed up against the wall.

Silently, the door closed behind them and something hanging from the ceiling on the other side of the room began to twist. Shiro squinted through the darkness, uncertain of what to make of the shape until a hand flung a scrap of knit wool out of it, landing in a heap on the floor amongst about twenty sweaters worth of fabric strips. Slowly, Shiro recognized the structure as a hanging cocoon bed, and nestled within it were about six black gal’tara and a pale Galra woman tangled under layers of fabric.

“So,” she began conversationally, glancing out of her hanging bed at her guests. “Do you know what you need or do I have something to make for you?”

“We’re,” Shiro began, watching the almost-white Galra lean out of her cocoon, nearly disturbing her cats as she went. Her long bangs fell in sheets around her face, the tips died a mess of icy blue and purple. She peered at Shiro curiously, ripping another strip of fabric and letting it flutter down to the floor. “We’re looking for Asaara?”

“That would be me,” the young woman sighed, sweeping her cats off of her lap and leaping elegantly from the cocoon. She was tall but slight of frame, all but swimming in the massively oversized black sweater that she wore. Shiro blinked in shock before recalling the Galra lifespan – a Galra who was just over two hundred years old was hardly finished with a quarter of their lifetime: she was easily much younger than someone like Maray or Sendak.

Asaara crept closer to him, folding her arms over her chest elegantly before lilting her head to the side to observe Matt for a moment, and then Nanan. “Well?” she prompted. “What can I do for you?”

“Can you make the Mother’s Tears?” Nanan blurted out. Matt and Shiro turned towards her defensively, the later taking a step closer to bar the Mother from the unfamiliar Druid. Anxiety rose high in Shiro’s throat – she may have abandoned the Druids under Haggar’s rule, but he was completely uncertain as to where Asaara’s loyalties lay. He’d been hoping to test the waters before revealing to the witch what they were after.

However, Asaara merely quirked an eyebrow and trailed away to a ladder leaned up against the many bookcases that surrounded the room, grabbing a little bag and climbing up halfway.
“So you’re the new Mother, hm?” she inquired, opening one of the jars and beginning to fill her bag. “I thought I felt that old bitch die a few myokokak ago. Good. It was high time she went and fucked off.”

Matt winced in Nanan’s direction as the little girl began to grow flustered at the other Druid’s harsh language, “I didn’t say I was—.”

“You’re certainly young enough,” Assara cut her off, closing the jar and climbing up another few rungs of the latter to deposit something else in her baggie. She paused, squinting down at Nanan over one shoulder, “How old are you?”

“I have sixteen seasons…” Nanan answered hesitantly. Asaara sighed, rolling her neck and continuing to fill her bag.

“Geez,” she huffed out a sigh, climbing down off of the ladder and marching up to the stove. She grabbed a large pan, mildly inspecting it for cleanliness before sticking it under a tap that jutted out of the wall.

“And what about you two, hm?” the witch pressed, gesturing behind her at Shiro and Matt with a flick of her fingers. “You don’t look like you come from Central Command.”

“We don’t,” Shiro confirmed. “Well; not technically. I’m Shiro—.”

Asaara interrupted with a hum, pressing a fingertip to her mouth before rounding on Matt. “And you?” she quipped, quirking her head with a slow blink.

“My name is Matt – the leader of the Vesh sent us here to find the Mother’s Kiss,” the brunet explained, wincing apologetically. “But we didn’t know until very recently that it was required to be made into a potion – which is why the Purra Valley family sent us to you.”

“I would be your best bet,” Assara shrugged, gesturing them over to a set of mismatched chairs by the empty mouth of a fireplace, which she had converted into a little altar of some sort. Hopping on one foot, the woman peeled off one of her socks, and then the other. She sat down on an ancient wooden chair below a pyramid of copper pipes that dangled above it and placed her bare feet on a slab of murky white crystal. She struck the copper pyramid above her with a single finger, sighing as its melodic hum diffused over the space around them. Shiro looked to Matt in absolute confusion, watching as his friend stared on helplessly at the witch. Nanan continued on as if Asaara’s actions were completely commonplace, removing her cloak and sitting down on a busted couch across from the elder Druid.

“The temple you’re looking for is up North in the foothills,” Asaara explained after an extended pause, the tune of the pipes still ringing low and odd in the circular room. “About half a day’s journey or so if we take a sled—,” she paused, propping her chin up on her fist. “I assume you have a sled?”

“Yeah, we brought one up from Purra Valley,” Matt explained; Asaara sighed, nodding to herself with a stiff look.

“Pattit, what is your name?” the woman inquired, gazing over at Nanan.

“Oh! Um, I’m Nanan,” she explained, gently touching a hand to her chest. “Thank you for having us Sister Asaara.”

“You’re welcome,” Asaara nodded. “But I’m no sister of yours; ever since I ditched the
Druids been an eclectic – a d'selvmaj.”

Nanan’s eyes widened, her ears pressed to her head, “You shouldn’t call yourself that…”

Asaara shrugged, leaning to the side of her weird chair and flicking the pipes again, “It’s fine; it’s been a long time since someone’s called me that as a curse. Now. Nanan; tell me what’s happened since Haggar died?”

Nanan fidgeted awkwardly with her hands, ears still pressed down to her hair in worry. As always, she looked over to Matt for comfort, only to have him nod her on encouragingly. The girl gripped at her skirts, bunching the fabric up between her hands.

“After Haggar died, most of the Druids didn’t know what to do,” Nanan explained. “There was a big fight about it; Haggar’s second-in-command Merla wanted the Druids to be in charge again, but—.”

“Merla?” Asaara interrupted, as Shiro was finding she was wont to do. The eclectic sat up straighter, interest piqued. “So that backstabbing bitch managed to weasel her way up that high, huh?”

“A lot of the older girls said that Merla and Haggar fought a lot before Haggar died,” Nanan explaind. “They said that Haggar didn’t want her as second-in-command anymore. But when Haggar died, Merla took over and – like I said – there was a big fight. A lot of Druids sided with her right away, and a lot who worked in the Med Bay at City Station wanted to stay and help the people who were hurt.

“But a lot of us just went where Merla told us to,” Nanan confessed, looking upset. “Especially the younger girls; we were evacuated a few okak after the fighting started and taken to live at The Convent and then—.”

“And then I imagine that they separated the girls who were born between the correct moons and locked them up for observation, right?” Asaara filled in, although her interruption seemed much more for Nanan’s sake this time than anything else. The eclectic closed her eyes, nodding as she repeated herself in a whisper. “Right. And I’m betting Merla was ready to make herself the new Mother the second one of you showed signs?”

“Some people like Lady Tira said that wasn’t the case, but we all knew she was lying,” the little girl explained sadly. “Lady Zuna wouldn’t tell us anything other than to be careful. I think… I think that’s when I knew I was probably going to… I knew there was something different about me… I thought Lady Merla was going to…”

Asaara clicked her tongue in disgust, nose wrinkling disdainfully as she stood and crossed the room back to the boiling pot of water. As soon as she rose from the seat a plush black gal’stara took her place, beginning to purr loudly.

Nanan’s shoulders began to shake, her eyes misting over in tears as Matt wrapped a comforting arm around her, leaning the kit into his chest and stroking her ears.

“It’s okay, Nanan,” he told her with a gentle smile. “We’re never going to let something like that happen to you.”

“Merla’s nothing but a greedy brownnoser,” Asaara hissed, removing the pot from the stove and dumping the contents of the package that she had gathered into the water. “Sinking low enough to kill a kit… I shouldn’t have put it past her. Murder, manipulation, defamation…” her mouth rolled
into a nasty smile at the last word. “There’s nothing she wouldn’t do to get at what she thinks is hers.”

“You…” Nanan began, blinking up at Asaara curiously. “You seem to know a lot about Merla.”

Asaara closed her eyes and took a deep breath before staring over at Nanan with an almost melancholy expression. She extended her hands, a tiny silver silhouette forming in each one of her palms; the magick danced off of her eyes, making them gleam a shade of ethereal platinum. She approached the couch, kneeling down to the floor and placing down her palms off of which stepped the two silhouettes, the light puppets bending to greet each other with a little curtsy.

“Merla’s story doesn’t start with her,” Asaara explained, looking down at one of the silhouettes purposefully. A third figure formed in between Asaara’s hand – bigger than the other two – and Shiro shivered to recognize the unmistakable silhouette of Haggar. “It begins with the previous Mother of Constellations – Haggar.

“For a Druid, it wasn’t hard to recognize that Haggar was what we call a false Mother,” Asaara began, looking on at the puppet show sadly as Haggar reached out towards the kits, taking one of their hands in each of hers. “This is how we refer to a Druid who murdered the previous Mother of Constellations chosen by fate, and unnaturally inherited her powers. Anyone who knew her personally would know that she was incapable of the love and strength that a true Mother should provide... and I knew Haggar quite well.”

The kits began to grow as they trailed after Haggar diligently, eventually maturing into adults. Shiro glanced up at Asaara, immediately recognizing her form in the silhouette of the smallest Druid.

“You were…” he began.

“Haggar’s apprentice,” Asaara admitted, and then gestured to the third unidentified figure. “Alongside Merla.

“The Druids were suffering beneath Haggar’s teachings,” Asaara explained, brow furrowing in pain as she closed her eyes. “In the time before Haggar – when the Mother of Constellations Mugenleb guided us – Druids were a good and kind people. We were primarily healers, aids. We used our magick for the benefit of the Galra and society at large. But when Haggar installed herself as the Mother things began to change.”

Asaara summoned more light puppets, strange creatures twisting themselves into being, writhing angrily – more Druids were summoned, their silhouettes jagged and warped as they swarmed, crackling with malicious magick. Asaara bowed her head, contorting her wrist to move the puppets, “And so…”

The hoary forms of Asaara and Merla’s light puppets pulled away from Haggar, seeming to speak amongst themselves. “It became our plan to pull the rug out from under Haggar’s feet as it were – we planned to arrange her murder and wait for the next Mother to form naturally, in order to return the Druids to the proper order.”

Asaara’s face grew cloudy, “But Merla was greedy.”

The figure representing Merla whipped around, gesturing wildly towards the Asaara puppet, causing Haggar to come running, the smallest Druid crumpling to the ground.

“She didn’t want to give up Haggar just yet; Merla had more she wanted to learn from her
and she wanted to keep it all to herself,” she explained as Haggar gestured violently, Asaara fading into a silver mist. “And so Merla exposed the assassination plot – but with me as the sole perpetrator.”

“And that’s how you became a dissenter?” Matt inquired – Asaara nodded sadly, watching as Merla and Haggar stood side by side, now almost indistinguishable.

“As far as I’m aware she was still planning on assassinating Haggar when you showed up and did the job for her,” Asaara smirked, banishing the magick projections. She bowed her head, looking almost guilty. She stood, leaving the sitting room to gather up the steeped tea and arrange it into mugs. “I’ll never stop regretting being unable to stop her sooner… so much suffering could have been avoided the galaxy over.”

She approached her guests, passing out the mugs of tea to Shiro and Matt both, pausing when she came to Nanan.

“What about you?” Assara asked, settling the mug firmly in the kit’s hands.

Nanan became perfectly still, mouth poised around the rim of her mug as Asaara’s words processed. She raised her eyes, blinking in confusion as she tilted her head to the side.

“Me?” she repeated quietly.

“You’re the new Mother, aren’t you?” Asaara inquired, shooing a fluffy gal’stara from her seat and making herself comfortable, leaning against the side of her chair. “What do you think of all of this?”

“I…” Nanan hesitated, staring over at Matt for the answers. Matt squeezed her shoulder, shaking his head gently.

“I can’t tell you want you think, Nanan,” he supplicated. Nanan took a quick sip of her tea, wincing at the bitter flavor before peering back over at the curious form of Asaara.

“I… don’t really want to be the Mother,” Nanan mumbled, scraping the toes of her boots against the floor as she swung her legs a little feebly. “But… I saw and heard about the bad things that Haggar made—like the plant lady in the arena and the… things… made out of… people…”

She trailed off with a shudder that was echoed by Asaara almost instantly, the two staring at one another apologetically. Shiro almost recoiled, wondering what shared memory the two had to empathize about.

“I don’t,” Nanan continued. “I don’t think that’s what’s right. That’s not what someone should do with their power. My dad tells—,” Nanan froze, her eyes darting towards Shiro before she stared deeply into her cup, looking shaken. “… told me that just because you have power, that doesn’t mean you should go and use it to make everyone hurt or to make everyone afraid of you. People who are strong like he was – or, or like Haggar or Merla— they were put there to protect those who are strong in different, smaller ways.

“But Dad said that sometimes people with power do bad things with it because they’re greedy or scared,” the little Mother admitted. “Which is what happened with Zarkon.

“But I’m just a kid,” she said miserably. “I really don’t know much, but I don’t think it’s right to hurt people. I think the Druids should help people, and keep them safe.”

Asaara’s thin lips formed a genuine smile and she blinked her eyes lazily, tilting her head
towards Nanan, “In that case, you’re already much better suited for the job than Haggar ever was, My Mother.”

Nanan nearly fumbled her mug in embarrassment, eyes going saucer-wide as she blushed and attempted to ward off the compliment with a flapping hand, “Oh my stars – oh no, no please don’t call me that!”

The eclectic threw back her head and laughed, the noise oddly warm and jovial in the ancient space around them, “You’re sweet, kit.”

“So,” Shiro hedged, beginning to get a sense of the direction where the conversation was going. He took a sip of his tea, surprised to find that it carried a bright berry flavor that warmed him up from the inside. “Would you be willing to help us make the potion?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Asaara said, standing only for the fluffy cat to immediately steal her seat once again. She padded over the cold cobblestone floor to where her pile of fabric scraps was, beginning to haul it up into her arms and dumping it into a nearby chest that seemed to open of its own accord. “I doubt you know the exact location of the temple, so let me take you there.”

Shiro smiled tightly. While the offer seemed helpful, he was hesitant to accept – they had only just met Asaara, and as far as he was aware, the eclectic would turn on them at the drop of a hat. Her whole story could easily have been a lie.

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you,” Shiro told her, watching as Asaara began to climb a spiral iron staircase to the next level and hesitantly resorting to calling up to her. “But you don’t have to! If you could just show us the coordinates—.”

“Mother or not, that kit’s just an Apprentice Mage,” the pale Galra shouted back down the stairs. “I don’t want you wandering into a heavily-warded temple just to get your asses blasted back out here.”

Shiro winced, staring at the embarrassed kit sitting near him. Matt sighed, covering Nanan’s ears with his gloved hands and giving Shiro an exhausted shrug.

“Really you don’t have to—,” the paladin continued to argue, only for Asaara to appear a moment later, holding a thick ring of keys. She gestured him near, glancing over Shiro’s shoulder as he approached, and dropped her words to a whisper.

“If you think I’m going to sit out of screwing Merla over, you have another thing coming,” Asaara informed him with a smile. “So either accept my help or go freeze your dirk off while looking for that temple – I’ll be getting that flower either way.”

She patted him on the shoulder with a cheerful look and then turned towards her other guests to inform them: “You’re welcome to stay in the castle for the night – I’ll have to arrange a few things before we set off. And besides, you’re probably tired from traveling anyway.”

“I’m really, really tired…” Nanan admitted.

“I bet you are,” Asaara nodded sympathetically. She jerked her head back towards the stove. “Come on; let’s get lunch going, huh?”

Nanan nodded a little, looking excited to be included. Asaara turned to face Matt and Shiro, “You two go grab what you need out of your sled; we’ll be here.”

The pair exchanged glances before staring at Asaara skeptically. Matt began to rub at his
shoulder awkwardly, apparently not trying to sound rude.

“Maybe I should stay inside and help—,” he began, only to be cut off by a short laugh from the eclectic.

“Please, if I was going to sell you out, I would’ve done it by now,” she rolled her eyes, flapping her hands as she made to shoo them out of her tower. “Consider this my trial of trust.”

Shiro placed a gentle hand on Matt’s shoulder, giving him a reassuring smile, “Let’s give her a chance, yeah?”

Matt sighed, gaze drifting from Shiro to Asaara before nodding in agreement: “Yeah. I’m sorry to doubt you, Asaara.”

“It’s no trouble,” the Druid shrugged, stepping closer to Nanan and gently steering her towards the stove. “She’s lucky to have guardians that take such good care of her.”

Matt thanked her quietly as Shiro experienced yet another pang of guilt in his chest. As if sensing this, the kit watched them as they left the tower, expression simultaneously wary and exhausted. Shiro looked away and stepped further into the snowy courtyard.

The pair remained silent as they headed into the stable, Matt climbing into the sled to rifle through the generous amount of supplies that Myzalta had gifted them. Shiro stalled, hanging back to absentmindedly pet one of the cows, just taking in the quiet space.

His conversation with Keith the night before had – at the very least – helped him put his feelings out on the table. Shiro hadn’t realized how much he’d bottled up his feelings about Nanan and Vektor until he’d vented them to Keith, waking up in the morning feeling a great deal lighter. Of course, it hadn’t stopped the torrent of guilt that had come crashing down on him the moment that he’d seen Nanan’s hollow eyes when he’d arrived at the breakfast table.

‘It’s hypocritical,’ Shiro admonished himself, stroking the animal’s ear between his thumb and index finger. ‘I don’t regret killing Vektor and yet I’m still feeling all this guilt for the fallout.’

He pulled away from the cow, looking over at Matt and knowing that he’d felt the same way in the arena – not just in the case of Matt’s shadow, but in almost every battle that he’d partaken in to earn the title Vrepmyza.

He recalled the moments after taking the fatal shot in the execution chamber, what he had been able to realize in the wake of Vektor’s death: there was only choice. And Shiro had chosen to live his life in shades of grey.

But people weren’t static; Shiro had said it himself enough times. He remembered thinking that as he stood in the cold, tiled room. He was allowed to feel his feelings, to have them change under circumstance, to allow himself to be a fluid and flawed being. But he had to own that, and that meant telling the truth.

“Matt,” he began, turning from the cow and back to the hollow of the sled where his friend sat, still immersed in their supplies.

“Hmn?”

“Can we… can we talk for a moment?”

Matt looked up abruptly, concern shining in his eyes. “Yeah man,” he agreed at once,
scooting aside on the sleigh’s bench and patting the space beside him. Shiro hesitated, uncertain if Matt would continue wanting to be so close to him after he’d said his piece. But his pause only seemed to inspire more worry in Matt and – not wanting to distress him further – Shiro assented, sitting with his hands folded anxiously in his lap.

“Hey, what’s on your mind?” Matt urged, gently placing a hand to Shiro’s knee. “Is it about Nanan? You’ve both been pretty out of it lately.”

“Yeah, we have,” Shiro admitted, releasing a tremulous breath. “But she, at least, has reason to be that way.”

“Don’t you?” Matt frowned.

“I…” Shiro trailed off, shaking his head. Keith had told him that he was entitled to his emotions but it was still easier said than done. Slowly he began to recount to Matt the same feelings he had shared with his fiancé, the truth tasting sour on his tongue. They sat in silence after, Matt processing what he’d been told.

“Do you distrust me?” Shiro asked softly. “I don’t mean that in a manipulative way, I just want to know where we stand. I know this isn’t…” he bit a lip, trying to gather his words. “Saying things like this may not reflect well on me but it’s how I feel and I owe it to you to be honest about it. I just want to know if you want some space.”

“I mean,” Matt began awkwardly, purposefully trying not to look anywhere in particular. “It is kinda a lot. And I don’t mean that in a bad way,” he clarified. “But… I don’t know, it’s just a different way of seeing things, I guess. I don’t think Nanan’s as afraid of you as you think – she’s a strong kid and culturally speaking this isn’t something out of the norm. She knew her dad was Vesh and while she may not have understood the dangers inherent with rebellion she was around during Zarkon’s rule and she did live her life governed by the principles of vrepit sa. I think in some ways that’s what makes her dad’s passing so hard for her, too: she can’t really reconcile a reality in which he can be dead but also a hero, someone who was able to go out with honor and accomplishment.”

At Shiro’s wince Matt gave his knee a small squeeze. “As for me,” he continued, “I dunno, I’ve become really protective of her so I’ve grown a little biased. Though, I guess that’s become pretty apparent, huh?” he laughed.

“You’re really good with kids,” Shiro commented.

“Thanks,” the other brightened. “Hope to have some, some day.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Matt adopted a wistful smile. “Would have had already if it weren’t for the state of things.”

“Already?” Shiro blinked. “I didn’t realize you and Sylvux were so serious.”

Matt cocked his head curiously, lips splitting into a grin a moment later. “That’s right,” he mused, “I guess you wouldn’t have known. I mean it’s already common knowledge around The Haven so I didn’t even think to say, but Sylv and I are married.”

“Married!?” Shiro repeated, the heaviness of their conversation lifting. “That’s… wow… married,” he marveled. “Congratulations, Matt; I had no idea!”

“Thanks,” the brunet smiled fondly. “It happened a couple months ago, if you’re counting in
our time. It was a totally Galra affair – no ceremony, no frills. We’d been kind of beating around the
bush about it, really. Sylv finally worked up the nerve and asked me and I said yes and that was
pretty much that.”

“I’m so happy for you; you and Sylvux seem really sweet,” Shiro returned warmly.

He was familiar with the Galra customs of marriage, something he had learned about during
his time on City Station. For the most part couples agreed to wed and were, socially speaking,
made from that point onwards. An application would be sent to the imperial registry that would
make the union legally binding but, all things considered, it was a very private and intimate affair.
Unless, of course, the couple in question were high to-do.

‘Oh man,’ Shiro realized belatedly. ‘What kind of wedding are Keith and I going to have?’
There was no doubt that like it or not their ceremony would be a very grand and public affair. ‘I
wonder if Matt would be my Best Man, providing that’s even a thing in Galra weddings. Granted, I
haven’t even told him yet that Keith and I are engaged so I guess that makes us both equally bad at
sharing big life events.’

“So yeah,” Matt went on and Shiro decided his news could wait a little while longer.
“Married life. Like I said, we hoped we’d have kits of our own by now. But, you know, things got
kinda crazy with the Vesh and Keith and the whole Zarkon-getting-assassinated-thing.”

“Ohops?”

“No, it’s for the better. I’m certainly not mad,” Matt countered. “I wouldn’t want to raise kits
in that kind of environment, anyway, not if I could help it. They deserve a better world than that; it
may have disrupted our immediate plans but in honesty this comes at the perfect time. If anything
were to happen to Sylv or I?” Matt continued, crestfallen. “I just couldn’t go through with this
anarchy business if it meant I’d risk orphaning my kits. I just couldn’t put them through that.”

Shiro nodded seriously, looking to his lap once more. He could tell where the conversation
was headed. “That’s good of you,” he offered. “Your head’s in the right place.”

“It’s gotta be,” Matt answered seriously. “Life is never gonna be the same once they come
along, whoever they might be. They’ve got to be the number one priority, right up there with Sylv
and I maintaining a healthy and communicative relationship, you know? ‘Cause if that’s not present
then there’s no real stability for the kit, is there?”

“You’re thinking of Nanan, aren’t you?” Shiro prodded knowingly.

“Yeah,” Matt admitted sheepishly. “Is that wrong of me? She just has nowhere to go and I
care about her so much already. She deserves to have a family again,” he insisted, glance sliding over
to Shiro uncertainly. “I’m not… I’m not gonna condemn you for what you did,” he promised. “But
like I said I’ve grown to be really protective of Nanan and because of that I’ve become a lot more
attune to her emotional state. It’s hard not to sympathize with her loss and feel like the whole thing is
unfair and wrong but at the same time I understand that you had little other choice. No other choice,
really,” he amended sadly. “But that doesn’t make it easier and to be honest I can’t say I really get
where you’re coming from about finding clarity in what you did. I guess I’ve just never been there.
So I don’t judge you, Shiro: that’s not really my place, anyway. I may not fully understand but
you’re still my friend; I don’t need space or anything.”

Shiro nodded quietly, unable to completely feel relief. “Don’t speak too soon,” he replied,
now completely unable to look at his friend.
“What do you mean?”

“There’s more,” Shiro hedged. “Not about Nanan. That was hard enough to bring up, to be honest but I’m afraid this is worse. I… I don’t think you’re going to want to be around me anymore but you deserve to hear it from me before anyone else.”

“Okay…” Matt encouraged uncertainly, never moving his hand from Shiro’s knee.

“I…” Shiro shook his head, willing the words to work their way out. “You know I was put back into the arena, right? Back when Keith, Thace, and I infiltrated City Station?”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” Matt acknowledged, an odd look crossing his features.

“Well during that time I had to fight –.”

“I saw,” Matt interjected.

“What?” Shiro froze, mortification seeping through him.

“I saw,” Matt repeated with a weak smile. “I know what you’re going to say. It’s about when you fought that version of me, right? Well… killed that version of me.”

Shiro flinched.

“I’m not mad or anything,” Matt pressed. “I mean it was pretty unnerving to see. Sylv got really flustered and didn’t want me to keep watching but I was determined to keep it on – I had to know if you were going to be okay.”

Shiro started, daring to look at Matt and finding only kindness there.

“You really think I’d stop being friends with you over that?” Matt teased softly. “First off it wasn’t even really me –.”

“But he looked like you,” Shiro insisted. “He spoke like you. Maybe a bit more harshly but,” he paused, swallowing thickly, “Wasn’t he entitled to say the things that he did? Was he really wrong about any of it?”

Matt quieted, growing thoughtful. “I think he said things in a way that was far meaner than I ever would have,” he admitted. “But I won’t lie, either: I was really hurt when you joined the military. It did kind of feel like you were abandoning Dad and I but in fairness I also never knew your reasons. And I heard what you said to that other me, that you were trying to find a way back home and that you never meant either of us any harm. And I believe you, Shiro, I really do. I know that you’re my best friend and I know that I matter to you: you’re still family, okay?”

Shiro made a strangled sound, only just becoming aware of the tears bubbling up on his lash line. The words went straight through his chest, good and bad alike. Matt offered him a sympathetic smile, wrapping an arm around the paladin’s shoulders and pulling him to the side so Shiro’s head rested against his shoulder.

“I can’t say that I like all of the choices you made,” the brunet clarified. “But that doesn’t mean that I don’t like you. You’re one of the most sincere people I’ve ever met and I’m lucky to have you as my friend.”

“Even if you had to watch me kill you?”
“To be totally honest?” Matt chuckled, pulling away just enough so he and Shiro could exchange glances. “If I were in that situation I would have killed your shadow self, too. If I thought Sylv or Katie were in danger and the only way I could get to them was through killing someone – even someone I cared about? Well… I get it.”

“That’s the weirdest reassurance I’ve ever been given,” Shiro laughed, wiping the tears from his face. “But thanks, Matt.”

“Feel any better?”

“Much,” Shiro assented as he was given a friendly squeeze. “So… are we good?”

“Yeah,” Matt smiled, tilting his head comfortably against Shiro’s own. “We’re good.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so, so sorry that this chapter went up late again! Ches and I are still getting used to our work schedules so updates may be a little wonky from now on, but we'll still try to post on Saturday nights <3

I'm so excited for everyone to meet Asaara! She was one of the few elements able to make it through the many, MANY incarnations of this story lmao. I'm curious what you guys think of her! Also we finally got to see Matt and Shiro talk, courtesy of Ches! It's been awhile since we've traditionally split a chapter~

Thanks so much for your love in the form of kudos and reviews! See you next week! <3
Well, at least that’s over,’ Sendak sighed to himself as he stepped away from the podium, the questions of the media recapitulating in his head. There had been as much curiosity as there had been scrutiny, but he had expected as much: never in Zarkon’s rule had there been any consideration for the rights and needs of mixed or non-Galra citizens and his decision to finally address those issues had whipped up quite the frenzy.

‘Can’t wait to see the broadcast tonight,’ he considered flatly as he mounted the few stairs to his home. ‘Moreover how my words will be condensed and taken out of context.’

It was a harsh reality of being in the public light and one that Sendak didn’t relish. He had certainly been misconstrued in the past – his orders on occasion outright twisted to suit some inferior officer’s needs – but never had his words had as much of an impact as they presently did.

‘Can’t counter it with aggression, either,’ he sniffs, almost melancholy for the days when maiming someone was considered a perfectly reasonable reaction to defamation or noncompliance. ‘No,’ he reconsidered a moment later, ‘It really is better this way.’

“Sir,” Zylo nodded a brief bow, holding open the door for him and allowing he and his guest passage. It hadn’t really been his choice to invite the Chief of Civil Affairs over following the press conference but Lylok had done a commendable job bringing him up to speed on the finer details and proper decorum demanded the formality, besides.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Lylok intoned, offering an almost shy smile. “It is always such an honor to be invited to your manor.”

‘That isn’t flattery,’ Sendak realized with surprise. ‘And Lylok isn’t the only one to have had this reaction, either. While I’ve always preferred working from my home office such a thing is really unprecedented, isn’t it? As it was, the only time Zarkon ever allowed guests into his mansion was to show off his wealth and power, the arrogant fuck.’

“Of course,” he returned as pleasantly as he could manage. Then, with a slight gesture of his hand: “If you would follow me to the sitting room?”

At Lylok’s gentle nod Sendak progressed, taking up the settee positioned across from the couch. At once discomfort settled in his belly at having returned to the scene of his fight, the heated words exchanged between he and Maray only hours prior stealing into his thoughts.

‘Why did I let myself get so angry?’ Sendak berated himself for what had to be the hundredth time. ‘Is my pride really so easily wounded? Is that the kind of person I am?’

He released an audible sigh, camouflaging his guilt for frustration. “The reporters today were ruthless,” he asserted, drawing his guest’s attention. “The number of times I was forced to repeat myself was astounding.”

“I can’t blame them for being thorough,” Lylok tentatively posed, “But no matter how many times they altered their wording a lot of their inquiries did feel redundant.”
‘What a way to say nothing;’ the lord regent resigned, ‘More or less repeating my sentiment as if to placate me. It makes them an excellent politician but only serves to highlight how little they trust me – and they’re obviously not comfortable in my presence.’

“You conducted their questions well,” Sendak offered lightly. “Your efforts allowed the briefing to largely remain topical.”

Lylok stared at him a moment round eyed before quickly dropping their gaze respectfully to their folded hands. “Thank you, my lord,” they responded simply, offering no further comment.

‘Well that got me nowhere,’ Sendak surmised as they lapsed into strained silence. ‘I wonder how the emperor would handle this? He, at least, doesn’t have the same kind of reputation as I do that might prove all the more intimidating. After all, I didn’t manage to be Zarkon’s second-in-command for nothing.’

Lylok continued to sit wordlessly to themself, fiddling anxiously with their claws as they tried to maintain the perfect picture of subservience in Sendak’s presence.

‘By the stars,’ the lord regent swore exasperatedly, ‘Can’t anyone simply talk to me like –?’

“Maray?” he finished aloud, surprised to find the planner beside him with tablet in tow.

“My lord,” Maray returned, and although he knew it was for the sake of company Sendak couldn’t help but feel the words stiff and dismissive. Their gazes met for just a moment, Sendak searching wordlessly for answers before frowning as he caught sight of the thinnest of scratches near to their temple, the beginnings of a bruise nearly disguised by the tone of their skin – or perhaps some well-applied makeup. Quickly the planner tugged their gaze away, something about their posture unusually rigid: Sendak could sense with near certainty that their quarrel was not the sole cause of it.

‘Something is going on here,’ Sendak noted uneasily. ‘But right now may not be the best time to bring it up.’

“Is something the matter?” he instead ambiguously asked, anxious by Maray’s sudden appearance and by their apparent tenseness.

“It’s unclear,” Maray hedged. “I’ve just received report of something suspicious appearing on the flight deck’s scans. No one knows what it is but it seems to be travelling –.”

A whip-like crack erupted only seconds before a thunderous boom, a chain reaction of explosions that shook to the very foundation following immediately thereafter.

Sendak sat frozen in shock, Lylok and Maray pale and staring before him. Another blast and Sendak jolted into action, springing from the cushions as the Royal Guard spilled into the room, eyes already blown wide with adrenaline.

“Sir, there’s been a breach,” Zylo reported rapidly, words nearly drowned out as the emergency siren began to sound outside. Confused and anxious voices joined the cacophonous wail as Galra began to spill from their homes, instinct driving them to determine their safety.

Zylo pressed to Sendak’s side, voice raised as she held fast to his shoulder. “Sir, you must come with me – we’ll take the tunnels to the bunker.”

“Inel?” Sendak barked in turn, gesturing for the Guard to gather the stunned Lylok from the couch.
Zylo shook her head curtly, lips drawn, “None yet, but there’s no time.”

“What’s going on!?” a voice called in alarm, the Guard parting briefly as they were pushed aside. Lance emerged from their ranks looking far more prepared than he sounded, hands already balled into defensive fists.

Sendak sized him up quickly, plan forming.

“Zylo, choose some of your men to take Maray, Lance, and Chief Lylok to safety – the rest come with me.”

“Sir!?” the captain stressed, unable to protest further as Sendak’s hailer began to ring, barely audible above the din. Deftly he redirected the call to the thin wired headset still attached to his person, never removed after the conference concluded.

“Report,” he directed, vainly pressing the speaker closer to his ear.

“Lord Regent,” came the familiar clipped tone and Sendak felt his heart accelerate in mixed worry and relief.

“Tora,” he responded without decorum. “What do you have?”

“There was an attack on the Second Ring in the seventh sector,” she informed rapidly. “The detonation affected both the sixth and eighth sectors; the military has been mobilized and evacuation efforts are already in place.”

“The seventh sector?” Sendak repeated with a growl.

“It’s a complete loss,” Tora went on, her own anger simmering. “The blast was that big: quarantine was initiated upon impact.”

‘No survivors,’ Sendak translated at once.

“Has anyone claimed responsibility for this?” he pressed, aware of the stares surrounding him that were made all the more uneasy by the snippets of his conversation.

“Not yet,” Tora answered.

“I’m heading out,” Sendak determined, instantly set upon by Zylo.

“Sir,” she contended, palms flattened against his shoulders. “I really must protest. You are far too important to be jeopardizing your life –.”

“Let me pass, Zylo,” the lord regent opposed, drawing up to his full height.

“Sir,” she supplicated one last time but Sendak was already distracted, turning against his headset as the admiral’s voice cut across the line sharply.

“Fuck!”

“Tora!?”

“What the hell are those?” his daughter growled, the confused voices of her men rising around her. “Masks on!” she ordered. “Could be a biological agent.”

“What do you see?” Sendak insisted.
“I’m not sure,” Tora grit. “Small floating white things – hundreds of them, if not more. They seem drawn to one another but I – damn it!” she yowled, and across the line Sendak could make out the sudden sound of rain coming down in torrential sheets.

“How is that the Atmos system?” he frowned.

“Shitty thing must be broken or som–,” Tora cut off. “They’re changing.”

“What?”

“Whatever these things are, the water is making them stronger – they’re turning into… people? They look like – I don’t know – small veiled mushrooms, almost?”

“Veiled mushroom people?” Sendak reiterated, immediately catching Lance’s attention.

“Get them out of there!” he shouted, reaching for the hailer still clasped in the lord regent’s hand. “Tora!”

“Blue?” she returned with an audible frown.

“You have to tell her –!”

“Wait!” Tora barked suddenly, “Fall back in line!”

There wasn’t time to say much else before a tortured scream punctuated the line, Sendak recoiling with a wince. The alarmed cries of the soldiers rose in response, a thick peppering of laser fire obscuring the words of their shouts.

“Tora!” Sendak pressed.

“They can’t –!” Lance began, but Tora was already shouting similar sentiments.

“Hold your fire! Hold your fucking fire!”

“Let me help,” Lance cut in determinedly. “I won’t try anything, I swear. I can fight – just let me help these people.”

Sendak stared back at him, meeting the unusually steely set of his eyes. “You know what this is?” he leveled.

“Yeah,” Lance nodded. “They should be called –.”

“Shooting just makes more of them,” Tora snarled, turning back to the conversation brusquely. “We have to contain them – they’re too small and too fast.”

“Clear the sixth and eighth sectors and put them under quarantine,” Sendak ordered, “Lance and I will be on our way to you.”

“Understood; see you shortly.”

‘Be safe,’ Sendak wished fervently as they disconnected the call in tandem. He gathered himself, turning back into the room with mind made up.

“Zylo,” he commanded, voice booming over the wail of the sirens, “We proceed as before: divide your men into two squadrons – take one to the tunnels and leave the other to me.”
The captain bowed her assent, realizing that any attempts to sway him further would be fruitless. The Royal Guard regrouped at her instruction, Maray and Lylok gathered protectively in their midst.

“This is ridiculous,” the planner protested fiercely, gaze cutting to Sendak at once. “I can fight, you know. I am not about to sit back and –!”

“I am not risking you,” Sendak countered.

“What?” Maray blinked.

“Take Lance to the armory to retrieve his panoply and bayard,” Sendak pressed, “And then get to the tunnels. This isn’t my doubting you: I’m about to receive a lot of communications from all across City Station but I need to get to the frontlines first – disseminate what information you can to those that call and direct only the most pressing messages to me. Please.”

The word sent a ripple of shock through the group but Sendak ignored it, meeting Maray’s searching gaze intently. After a moment the planner gave a curt nod, a trace of a smile on their lips as they reached for Lance and started leading the way.

“We’ll make it quick,” they promised before turning to Zylo. “Go ahead and take Chief Lylok to the tunnels – I’ll catch up with you: we shouldn’t waste much more time.”

Sendak waited anxiously as the Guard and their charge dispersed, drumming restless fingers against his thigh. There would be no time to change and his prosthetic would have to serve protection enough. But he had long forgone standard military issue weapons and the dark armor he had selected for the broadcast was more than just for show.

‘Lighter than I would prefer,’ he considered in frustration. But his battle class armor was upstairs apart from the armory and he didn’t want to cause any further delay. To his relief Lance gathered to his side minutes later, fitting his cuirass more snugly over his chest and tugging it firmly into place.

“Ready?” Sendak urged.

“Yeah; sorry for the wait,” Lance nodded as he unclipped his bayard.

“Alright,” the lord regent exhaled, throwing wide the door, “Stick by me.”

The trek to the ruined sector went far faster than either anticipated, the roads already cleared of civilians thanks to the responsiveness of the infantry. Overhead the artificial sky had gone out, replaced instead with the intermittent strobing of the city-wide alarms, casting an unsettling red glow over everything.

‘Like this it’s much easier to tell that we’re not on Gal,’ Sendak considered as he and Lance stepped out onto the streets of the Second Ring, the remainder of the Guard fanning out behind them. He could see the destruction ahead, the gigantic blast doors that separated the obsolete seventh sector from the remainder of the station already deployed and obvious as he scanned the scene. Blockades dotted the streets before them, a few uniformed soldiers pacing stiffly along the stretches between. One straightened at their approach, meeting them halfway.

“Officer Morna reporting,” she greeted, directing a hurried salute Sendak’s way. “Do you require an updated briefing, sir?”

“Go ahead,” Sendak said, urging her to walk alongside he and Lance.
“As you’ve likely been told the seventh sector was the one hit by this attack. I’ll keep this brief – intelligence at this point believes the strike was deliberate and required precise knowledge of the layout of City Station. What’s more is that the blast itself was likely just a means to an end: we’re facing hundreds of so far unidentified creatures that we can’t seem to harm or get near. Clearly the intention of the attack was to deposit them onto the ship.”

‘Somehow Merla is a part of this,’ Sendak interpreted darkly. ‘Even Stell wouldn’t go to this extreme; it’s just not their style.’

“You said they were like mushroom people, right?” Lance spoke up, glancing to the lord regent, who nodded.

“That’s how the admiral described them, yes.”

“Then I’m betting they’re Scobies,” Lance continued grimly. “They’re these beings made of yeast that come from Tirmania.”

“Tirmania!?” Morna exclaimed, surprise melting into a growl.

‘That confirms it, then,’ Sendak thought with some satisfaction. ‘Only the Druids could have had access to this kind of creature. No one knew what they were doing there but I guess this is the answer. Still, this isn’t going to be the damning evidence we need against Merla – with her here she’s like to wiggle out of being incriminated. Typical.’

“This likely has to do with the Druids,” Sendak offered vaguely. “We already know that The Convent was stationed by Tirmania’s moon and no one else has had access to the planet so it’s safe to say that they are behind this. Given the malcontent among their ranks I expected as much. Continue.”

“Well,” Lance explained, “From what Hunk and I read the Scobies have sentience but they operate more outta instinct than like, actual thought? And they are all centered around a ‘Mother Scoby’ and she’s the one that directs them on what to do. Not sure how that works, though.”

“I imagine that makes them ideal soldiers,” Sendak chuffed a laugh. “Wonderful. Any special way to take out the mother?”

“Pretty sure it’s the same as for the rest of them,” Lance returned. “They need to stay damp to survive so if you dry them out they’ll just kind of wither.”

“Which would be why the Atmos system was triggered,” Sendak assessed. “Even if we were to fight with actual fire it would be hard to eliminate them with the Atmos broken in the fighting zones. Do you know of any other alternatives?”

“Only thing I can think of would require precision,” Lance frowned. “And if you fuck it up then it just makes things worse.”

“We’re willing to try anything,” Morna spoke up. “Right now our men are at a standstill and are just trying to keep them contained – easier said than done when they can break down into very small, very fast forms.”

“Fair enough,” Lance shrugged. “In that case you need to take out those veils they surround themselves with. It’s a part of their body and from what I understand it keeps them alive and supplies them with nutrients and stuff. It should be weakest at the crown of their heads. So you shoot or slice that part off the veil should fall off or dry out and they either die right there or become too weak to change forms.”
“Would it keep them from regenerating themselves?” Morna pressed. “Shooting them as they are does nothing – they just reform or break into more Scobies.”

“As far as I know, yeah, it should put an end to that,” Lance affirmed. “But these things are vicious and run on the need to feed off of corpses.”

“They’re certainly intent on making plenty of them,” the officer clicked her teeth. “Those that managed to get away from them were left with some of the worst burns I’ve ever seen – the Scoby’s skin must be acidic because it melts away flesh on contact. We all have to be extremely careful,” she finished, drawing beside a final checkpoint and pausing by the gate.

“Sir?” one of the Guard spoke up, drawing Sendak’s attentions. “What will you have us do?”

“Lance and I will go ahead and try to see what we can discern. If you can provide a perimeter for us that would be appreciated. If you come into contact with any soldiers let them know what we’ve learned here.”

“Understood,” the other nodded, drawing back to instruct the remainder of the Guard. Sendak turned back to Morna, who clapped a hand to Lance’s shoulder seriously.

“I will pass on what you’ve told us, Blue Paladin,” she promised. “Please protect the lord regent. Vol sa.”


“What,” the elder teased as they entered the sixth sector, simulated rain pinging off of their armor, “Not accustomed to the respect of the Galra?”

“Not really,” Lance admitted, his bayard shifting form in his hands. “So what is this place? It looks…”

“Poor?”

“I was gonna say ‘different’,,” protested Lance.

“This is one of the poorest areas of City Station,” Sendak brushed off. “Lots of lower income housing and, recently, shelters and community program centers. The seventh sector contained the majority of those resources, along with departmental offices that someone like Lylok would have established.”

“So when they say this attack was deliberate…” Lance pieced together.

“These people were targeted in specific, yes,” Sendak growled. “If for no other reason than to demoralize the people and make them fearful. I highly suspect Merla is behind this even if she is currently here aboard City Station and if she and her lot had targeted the First Ring instead then few would care – the wealthy can afford to take care of themselves, after all. But this…” Sendak trailed off, rage and disgust curdling in his breast.

“That’s really –,” Lance cut off, turning sharply with blaster raised. Down a demolished alleyway a soft white orb hovered in the air, bouncing along on some invisible current. A second joined it, and then a third, a trail of the creatures drifting nearer like tiny fairies.

Sendak tensed, arm heating in warning as he mimicked Lance’s stance, waiting on the defensive for the Scobies to attack.
“There’s nothing we can do when they’re like this, is there?” he conferred, daring to move just enough to wipe the rain from his brow.

“Pretty sure not,” Lance grimaced. “Probably be a good time to roast ‘em but this rain makes that kinda useless. Unless we lure them –?”

“Not a chance,” Sendak countered. “We’re not endangering any further part of City Station even if it would make it easier to eliminate these pests.”

“Waiting feels wrong,” Lance shook his head.

“Be patient,” Sendak instructed lowly. “We’ll get our opening so don’t rush it.”

As if noticing them for the first time the Scobies stopped, hovering questioningly in midair. Suddenly they melded together, as if magnetized by some sudden force, their shape bubbling and congealing into one conglomerated mass. It sunk to the pavement with the weight of its new form, lithe body rising to stand as milky eyes stared up at them through a translucent veil.

“Is it gonna –?” Lance whispered, cut off as the Scoby lunged forward and barreled towards his chest. On instinct Lance fired, laser fire passing through the creature’s chest impotently but throwing it off just enough that the paladin could sidestep the attack. With a grunt he fell against the wall of a neighboring building, wincing as he examined his cuirass. Four long scratches ran across the plating, each scorched around the edges.

“Well fuck,” Lance laughed nervously, shooting a look to Sendak. “Be careful?”

“Try not to get hit like that again,” Sendak advised, steeling himself against the Scoby as it gracefully recomposed itself.

“Uh yeah, I’ll do my best,” the paladin retorted. “Hey, though – can you keep it distracted?”

“Why?” Sendak questioned flatly, eyes trained keenly on his target as his arm pulsed warningly before him.

“I think I can get a clean shot of its head, providing I’ve got the room to line it up,” Lance explained quickly.

“You can stabilize a shot like that?” Sendak dubiously returned, tensing as the Scoby cocked its head, sizing him up in turn.

Before Lance had a chance to respond the Scoby was launching itself forward once more, thin needlelike fingers outstretched towards Sendak’s throat. The lord regent growled, swiping out with his arm and cutting clean through the Scoby’s midsection before it could reach him. The Scoby shrieked in pained anger, already shifting as the two halves of its body began to stand independently of one another.

Sendak flattened his ears against the shrill cries, hissing with annoyance at his own hasty actions. Now two separate creatures, the Scobies began to circle him, one inching towards his back as the other occupied his line of vision.

“Yo, we’ve got company,” Lance warned, and Sendak risked a chance to scan the horizon just long enough to see an encroaching trail of floating white specs.

“Fuck,” Sendak exhaled.
‘I can try to be as precise as possible but there’s no way that I can afford to be that meticulous if there’s so many of them,’ he rationed. ‘That said, I can’t keep an eye on them all and if I’m too careless they’ll keep dividing and I’ll be overwhelmed. Guess this is some exercise in trust.’

“Watch my back,” Sendak barked, not waiting for a response as he lunged for the first Scoby, hand surging forward to meet its head and phasing entirely through it.

The creature shook with spasms, fingers scratching desperately at his prosthetic to no avail, leaving a litany of searing cuts in its wake. Not knowing what more to do Sendak hacked his hand back and forth swiftly, the Scoby screaming out one last time as its veil fluttered down to its feet and the being began to wither.

Sendak made to step away from his victim, freezing suddenly as a sharp whir of laser fire sang out behind him, the sound of a body crumpling lifelessly following just after. Sendak turned, finding the corpse of the second Scoby not two feet behind him, dead on the cobbled streets. He looked up to where he’d left Lance, the paladin still braced with ready weapon, muzzle only just beginning to lower.

“You said to watch your back,” Lance answered simply.

Sendak crooked a smile, somewhat disbelieving that the paladin would bother to save him. “Thanks,” he rejoined, shaking free the tension in his shoulders as he readied himself for the next wave of attack.

The dying screams of the Scobies had clearly summoned the others, whether out of some kind of language or mental link Sendak couldn’t tell. The white orbs reached him with incredible speed, changing shape in midair as they coalesced into humanoid form, swarming him from all sides. He turned quickly to face each one, gritting his teeth as their long fingers inevitably found patches of his skin, the fabric of his clothes searing away in seconds as the flesh beneath began to blister and break.

The sound of their wails rang in cacophony in his skull, his ears flattened down as far as he could manage, trying desperately to block out the disorienting sound. But the screeches kept coming, whether in pain or in death, Lance’s steady aim dispatching one Scoby after another.

Sendak threw himself wholeheartedly into the fight, remotely aware of the laser fire in the distance that signaled the military had carried on the battle elsewhere.

‘I’ve got to keep them away from Lance,’ he resolved, snarling as a Scoby nearly raked across his cheek. A shot rang out in response, the heat of the emission prickling against Sendak’s skin as the enemy fell away.

‘The kid’s better than I gave him credit for,’ Sendak considered, smiling despite the situation. ‘I’ll be sure to thank him later.’

“Sendak!”

Maray’s sudden voice made Sendak start, rearing back just in time to avoid the touch of one of the Scobies. Outstretched from its attack it didn’t have time to readjust before Sendak took advantage of his scant opening, the flattened palm of his prosthetic slicing through the crown of the creature’s head and sending it shrieking to the ground.

“Maray,” he returned, catching his breath and signaling to Lance. “Is everything alright?”

“You said to redirect pressing calls,” the planner explained, voice strained. “Well you’re
going to want this one— it’s Merla.”

‘Now this should be interesting,’ Sendak thought darkly as he scanned the rubble of the sixth sector for cover. ‘Merla hailing me at a time like this? She has to know that these sessions can be recorded.’

“Thank you, Maray,” he instructed. “Patch her through, please.”

“Right,” Maray hesitated. “Stay safe?”

Sendak quirked a smile, shaking his head. “I’ll be fine,” he assured, already retreating from the fight and taking the paladin with him. Ducking around debris they tumbled into the shell of a building, half blown apart but defensible enough for shelter.

“Cover the entrance,” Sendak instructed, taking a knee to position his hailer on the ground, projection fanning out above it. The video adjusted and Merla came into view, situated primly behind a stark white desk that clearly belonged to the Med Bay. In the background Sendak could make out the muffled commotion of the other Druids, likely hurrying to assemble medical assistance in the wake of the attack.

“Sendak,” Merla greeted leisurely, her composure in the wake of the chaos disturbingly placid. “How nice of you to receive me.”

“What is this about?” Sendak asked directly, not missing the slight smile his words elicited from her.

“It seems that you are out of your office,” the Druid noted serenely. “I assume you’ve gone directly to the scene of the accident?”

“There was nothing accidental about this,” Sendak gruffly returned. “This was an act of terrorism.”

“I take it that no one has claimed responsibility yet?” Merla posed and Sendak had to fight from obviously bristling at her words.

‘Of course not,’ he inwardly spat. ‘Unless you intend to do so now.’

“I have my suspicions,” he answered vaguely. “But no, no one has come forward about this.”

“I see,” Merla nodded to herself, expression clouding. “I must admit that I have my own, as well, but I’d rather not talk about it this way—in case I’m wrong I’d rather not have my accusation recorded. I’d invite you to my office now but as I think you can hear things are a bit hectic here at the moment. Still, I think we’d both agree that getting to the bottom of this as soon as possible is of top priority.”

Sendak’s gaze slid beyond the hailer’s projection towards where Lance was poised by the blown-apart entrance, bayard readied as he scanned the streets. ‘Even if there’s little she can do to me here on City Station I’d rather not walk into Merla’s territory alone. If I bring her onto my turf then I should gain some manner of upper hand, especially if I have the leisure of a witness. And I can think of just the opportunity.’

“Alright,” he conceded and Merla’s brows rose at the ease of his answer. “I’d love to hear any answers you can provide and I agree that we should meet in person. Given it isn’t cancelled there should be a gala tonight for the opening of the Memorial Park and Gardens—do you plan on attending?”
The Druid’s eyes narrowed by a margin at his response, smile still plastered to her lips. “I do,” she returned, voice a little strained. “Won’t there be quite a lot of people, however? I would hate to be overheard, especially if I am incorrect about our possible culprit. I certainly wouldn’t want to risk defaming them.”

‘Unlikely,’ Sendak sniffed.

“The gardens are rather expansive,” he insisted. “They take up the old grounds of where Zarkon’s palace used to stand, after all. I’m sure there will be ample opportunity for privacy. Besides, with that many people no one is bound to pay us any notice: I wouldn’t anticipate any problems.”

Merla hesitated, toying with her fingers agitatedly. “I suppose you’re right,” she forced a smile. “And you know this situation presents us with a rare chance,” she posed. “We could work together, Sendak – beyond this situation, I mean. We could both stand to benefit: I want to keep the Druids from destroying themselves and you, after all, just want cohesion and peace. I think between the two of us that we could make that into a reality.”

‘In other words you want to play as my Haggar,’ Sendak understood. ‘Well I saw how that went for Zarkon and I refuse to be another puppet ruler. Besides, there’s no promise that you wouldn’t try and kill me the moment you could get away with it – you’re far too treacherous to trust, Merla.’

“I think we should take things one step at a time,” Sendak turned her down lightly. “I’m eager to hear what you have to say, however; I appreciate your coming to me on this matter.”

"Of course,” Merla obliged with a small bob of her head. Still, something about her look remained steely and on edge. “In that case I look forward to our meeting,” she continued. “I’ll be in red, if that helps. Until then?”

“Until then,” Sendak agreed and the call disconnected, the projection folding closed as the hauler’s screen shutting off in lieu of active use. Rising with a sigh, Sendak collected the little device, slipping it into a discreet pocket behind his armor.

“Coworker of yours?” Lance spoke up, stepping aside as Sendak approached.

“Something like that.”

The paladin cocked his head in curiosity; “So who was it?”

“Merla,” Sendak answered shortly.

“Merla?” Lance exclaimed, eyes wide. “As in the Merla we’ve been talking about lately? The one who –,” he cut off, lowering his voice, “The one who we’re fighting against?”

“The very same,” Sendak confirmed.

“I was gonna say, it sounded like you two knew each other,” Lance pressed lightly, shouldering his gun in the absence of further attack. “Outside of this whole civil war business, I mean.”

“I knew her,” Sendak answered with a sigh. “From before, long before I even met Shiro.”

The casual mention of the paladin’s name in lieu of his title made Lance start, eyes widening but choosing not to comment.
“Merla was an apprentice of Haggar’s,” Sendak explained. “One of two. Everyone kind of assumed that one of them would be the next Mother once Haggar finally passed – apparently Merla believes that it was meant to be her.”

“Which would explain why she’s so jaded now,” Lance surmised.

“She doesn’t deserve the position,” Sendak grumbled. “And neither did Haggar. I never liked either of them and they made no secret of disliking me. And to think that she tried to solicit an alliance with me – as if Merla and I could ever work side by side.”

“Did you consider it?” Lance asked quietly.

“No.”

“Do you mean that, though?” the paladin shifted. “I know I’m probably the last person you’d tell in that case but… who am I gonna tell? How would I? I just wanna know if you’re really like how you put yourself out to be. Cause if you’re gonna go ahead and work with Keith? Well… as weird as the whole thing is you better respect him. Cause if anything ever happens to him it’ll be more than Shiro hunting your ass down. Keith’s my friend, too, and I’d never forgive you if you betrayed him.”

Sendak considered him a moment, shaking his head and striding towards the entrance. Lance took a half step back then stilled, shoulders set as the lord regent approached him.

“You’re an interesting one, you know that?” Sendak mused. “I’ve come to learn that you’re more than just talk and you’re far cleverer than you show. I have no doubt that you would come after me and you should know that I take your threat seriously. This said I have no reason to fear it, either. I have no intention on hurting the emperor. I meant every word I said to Merla, even if that’s hard to juxtapose to the enemy you once knew me to be. I can’t blame you for being wary. Rather, I’m glad to see that you are. You stand by your friends, Lance. You’re loyal. That’s something to be proud of,” he concluded, clapping a brief hand to the other’s pauldron. “You make for a good paladin.”

Lance stared after him in shock as Sendak strode past him, standing in the middle of the ripped up street as if he’d said nothing unusual. The lord regent turned back to him, hand shielding his eyes from the fading drizzle of the Atmos system, nodding back into the remainder of the sixth sector.

“You coming?” he asked, cricking the fingers of his prosthetic so it lit up in preparation of a fight. “There should still be Scobies out here.”

“Yeah,” Lance returned after a beat, unable to shake a smile as he braced his gun across his chest and jogged over to where Sendak stood waiting. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY managed to update on time. Woof.

Would you believe that I designed the scobies based solely on the fact that I don't like kombucha? Seriously though, it tastes like carbonated vinegar. And if you don't know what the heck I'm talking about, look up "how to make kombucha". Fascinating stuff.
I'm so happy to have Lance in this chapter, I enjoy his presence in this story so much, I really do! ;A; As for Sendak, I'm curious to see what you guys think of his actions in this chapter! ;3

And now it is time for our weekly thanks! Thank you all so much for you comments and kudos. It genuinely fills us with joy to know how much you are all enjoying the story! <3

~Moosey
"I don’t think it’s going to go through."

For the third time that hour, Keith deflated into his chair, scrubbing a hand over his face. He and Pidge sat in one of the many unused conference rooms that occupied the castle, the green paladin was seated at her laptop in front of the circular hologram projector that acted as the centerpiece of the table.

She shot the red paladin an apologetic glance, “Sorry, man.”

“No, it’s fine,” Keith returned with a shake of his head. “I don’t need Shiro to hold my hand through everything I do,” he toggled the document on his screen, wincing as he skimmed over the contents. “I think I’d just feel a little better if he looked this over for me.”

“Was he your editor or something?” Pidge joked, leaning forward onto the table. Keith lowered his eyes in embarrassment.

“How do you think I passed remedial English?” he mumbled; Pidge laughed.

“I mean, I can always give it a shot?” she offered with a shrug, immediately regretting it when the color drained form Keith’s face and he pulled his computer closer. “Or… well. Maybe not? Oh, come on Keith it can’t be that bad!”

“This document contains the words ‘insert Maray’s formal title here because I don’t know it’.”

“Yikes.”

“So – as you can see – I’m not really keen on anyone looking at it, let alone Sendak,” Keith admitted with a wince.

“Well I mean he’s gonna be the main person looking at it, so…” Pidge trailed off purposefully, wincing as well. “You’ll have to ask someone to look at it for you, buddy. Why not Allura or Coran?”

Keith shook his head, “Allura already wrote the opening for me; I don’t want to have them re-write this entire thing because I’m so incompetent.”

Pidge released a drawn-out sigh, “Keith, you are going to need people give you at least a little help. You can’t exactly go from a college dropout squatting in a shack to an emperor without letting a few people give you a hand here and there.”

“I mean you more than have a point, but,” Keith shut his laptop, crossing his arms over it and burying his face there. “Maybe I should take a few poly-sci classes before I give this thing a go.”

Pidge stood, rounding the table to sit next to her best friend and place a comforting hand on his shoulder.
“You’re already doing much better than you think you are,” she encouraged him. “The way you handled Vaneer and Sendak yesterday was pretty indicative of that.”

Keith grunted and Pidge swatted him upside the head in response.

“Oh,” Keith said with purpose, raising his face slightly to glare at Pidge. She quirked an eyebrow at him, tugging at the sleeve of his shirt encouragingly.

“Come on, there’s got to be someone you’d be comfortable with that can help you on this,” she sighed. Keith purposefully let his body go lax so that Pidge was forced to pry his arms apart, dragging him and his rolling chair down the length of the table. The green paladin laughed, “You shit.”

Keith finally raised his head all the way to smirk at Pidge and respond to her question: “I guess if I had to choose I’d say Thace. But I’m not sure if we’ll still be able to reach The Haven from out here.”

Pidge squinted at Keith, nearly suspicious, before she promptly rounded the back of his chair and hooked her arms beneath his.

“Pidge?! What are you doing?” Keith inquired in a laugh, half-exasperated as he allowed his friend to heave him to his feet and steer him back into the hallway.

“Holding you to your word,” she explained, doubling back to gather up their laptops and marching him out towards the debriefing room.

“Are we suiting up?” Keith asked, confusion spreading over his features. Pidge shrugged.

“I mean I’d grab my helmet if I were you,” she instructed, stepping into her designated changing cubby.

“I won’t risk it,” Keith sighed, stripping himself of his clothes and making to climb into his flightsuit. “What are we even doing?”

“Before we left The Haven, Matt taught me how to unscramble the signals in order to get clear correspondence with The Vesh,” Pidge explained from the other side of the partition. “Only thing is, we need a stronger receiver than what the castle’s got.”

“Stronger than the castle’s receiver?” Keith frowned, stepping out of his cubby as he hopped into his sabotons, “Where are we going to find something like that?”

Pidge stepped out beside him, helmet tucked under one of her arms as she gestured towards the elevator, smirking impishly, “Come on, I’ll show ya.”

Keith shrugged, following Pidge into the elevator that led down onto the concourse.

They stepped out into the loading bay moments later, both unsurprised to hear a loud clanging from within the Yellow Lion.

“Hey Hunk!” Pidge called out, the banging noise immediately ceasing. Hunk dropped down from the Lion’s exposed underbelly moments later, completely covered in grease.

“Hey,” he offered with a wave. “What’re you guys getting up to?”

“Goin’ to space to do some hooligan shit,” Pidge informed him pleasantly. “You in?”
Hunk plucked an oil-stained kerchief from his pocket, rubbing at his hands uselessly with a
little shake of his head, “Nah, you guys go ahead. I’m in the middle of making some repairs from that
fight on Hoth.”

“How?” Keith echoed with a perplexed tilt of his head. Pidge snickered, tugging Keith
towards her Lion.

“Gotcha, Chewbacca! Have fun fixing up the Faulcon!” she waved goodbye to their friend
as they went, Green leaning forward to offer them her open mouth.

Keith stared over his shoulder as Hunk disappeared back into his Lion, Green’s closing
mouth completely obfuscating his view of the concourse seconds later. He followed Pidge to the
captain’s seat, keeping pace with it as the mechanic propelled it towards the controls.

“How’s Hunk been doing?” Keith inquired as the green paladin began to tap on her
dashboard in preparation for takeoff.

Pidge produced a little sigh in response, “A lot better now that we’re on our way to go pick
up Lance,” she replied. “But I can tell he’s still really anxious that it’s a trap.”

“If that’s another Star Wars reference, I’m going to whack you,” Keith scowled.

Pidge laughed as the Lion turned, preparing for launch, “Nah, not that time. Good catch,
though, Rey.”

“I’m already lost.”

Pidge rolled her eyes, pressing forward on the thrusters to send Green out into the dark
expanse of space.

“But for real,” Keith frowned, leaning against Pidge’s seat. “You’re a lot closer to Hunk than
I am; has he really been okay? He’s just seemed so…”

“Off?” Pidge finished for Keith, briefly shooting him a wry look. She took a deep breath,
nodding in agreement. “I’ve really never seen him this upset before – maybe save for the thing with
the Balmerans. But I really can’t blame him, though. He and Lance are, like, best friends. They’ve
known each other since they were junior cadets – for like five years.”

Keith blinked in surprise, “I didn’t know they’d been together for so long.”

Pidge nodded, “It may not seem like it, but Hunk’s really protective of Lance. I know he
helped Lance through some stuff when he was younger.”

“What kind of stuff?” Keith frowned down at Pidge, concerned. She shrugged again.

“Dunno. Probably has something to do with the fact that, like, ninety percent of what he
consumes are SSRI’s and Ritalin,” Pidge said, and left it at that.

Keith frowned, thinking back to his conversations with the blue paladin: the mentions of
panic attacks, of therapy, and of the talk he’d had with Lance some months ago about his biological
father.

“Don’t do this to yourself, man, it isn’t worth it,” he’d said. “The comparing thing.
Wondering how you can be any different from what you’re related to. It’s not worth your time and
it’s not worth the stress. There are going to be things that are the same, and there are definitely
Differences. And the choices you make are going to define those differences.”

‘He didn’t even know how badly I’d need that reassurance in a few weeks. I need to thank him,’ Keith realized with a strange pang in his heart. The image of Lance standing beside him with a bullet in his cuirass clouded his mind’s eye. ‘For everything he’s done.’

A hazy spiral stretched out around them, dotted with glittering suns speckled over the distance. The Green Lion ascended through the astral sphere, leaving the castle forgotten below.

Keith felt a smile tugging at his lips – it was a rare occasion to use the Lions outside of practice or battle, and the sensation of getting to fly for the sake of flying was a little more than addicting. The simulators back at the Garrison may have been impressive, but nothing that they had ever been capable of producing even scratched the surface of what Keith had experienced in the past six months of his life.Unnamed planets and constellations fanned out around him, Keith chasing them with his fingertips along the windows of the cockpit.

“You’re fawning,” Pidge accused playfully.

Keith snorted, glancing to Pidge with a grin, “Can you really fawn at space?”

“Well if it wasn’t considered possible before, you certainly proved otherwise,” she teased in return, unclipping herself from her seat and approaching the screens projected above the dashboard.

“So what did you want to show me?” Keith inquired, watching as Pidge brought up a new, smaller projection that appeared to be a command panel.

“You know how you told me about the last set of Paladins that you read about in your mom’s diary?” she inquired, hitting a few more keys. “Well, I decided to do some digging and I found some pretty interesting information encrypted in Green here.”

“Like what—,” Keith began, only to be silenced as ten portraits, each in a line of five, appeared on the main dashboard’s screen. He squinted down at the second line of pictures, immediately recognizing Serro and Orkah among them. From the flowers and vines on the other two he was able to identify Fiola and Cebas, and the last was a Galra with white-violet fur and an expression eerily similar to Keith’s own. He immediately tore his eyes away to look at the portrait above Zarkon of a pure-white Galra woman donning the black paladin’s panoply. Beside her the other paladins were pictured above their successors: an O’shetal man above Cebas, a mouse-like woman above Serro, a Stellite nearly identical to Orkah above him, and finally King Alfor pictured above Fiola.

“These are…” Keith began slowly, reaching out to touch his mother’s portrait. Immediately her picture expanded, giving way to a lengthy article. Blueprints of the Blue Lion and her bayard neatly fanned out around her.

“The first ten paladins of Voltron,” Pidge completed for Keith. “Cebas actually left some incredibly detailed information here for the next green paladin – I guess it was his special interest. It’s all about all of our predecessors and the abilities they gave their Lions and Voltron as a result.”

“This is so detailed,” Keith marveled, scrolling through his mother’s page and coming across a diagram of Voltron dual-wielding swords. “That’s incredible!”

“Voltron was designed to allow each new generation of paladins to inherit the previous paladin’s gifts,” Pidge explained. “For example, the bayard of the first blue paladin – Flur – was a sniper rifle. So that’s how Lance is able to use the sniper rifle function on Blue, even though his
bayard takes the form of a blaster.”

“I mean, all of this is amazing,” the red paladin began, turning to Pidge in confusion. “But what does this have to do with contacting The Haven?”

Pidge grinned, collapsing Serro’s page and bringing up that of the first green paladin, “I wasn’t the only paladin to make a few adjustments to Green.”

She reached beside her to toggle the command panel, Green suddenly giving a tremendous groan. One of the side screens changed to a projection of the Green Lion and Keith watched as it moved in tandem with its real-life counterpart. The shield slid off to the side of the craft, the back opening up like a hatch as metal coiled its way up and up into a massive spire that jutted straight out of the Lion.

“Voltron was made to be a shining beacon to the people of the galaxy,” Pidge began, “A signal of hope for everyone to look to. Cebas wrote here that our predecessor Valstaf wanted to extend the Vol Alliance’s message to the far corners of the universe – so just before he retired he built this.”

Pidge stepped up to the hologram, indicating towards the structure that grew from the Lion’s back, “It’s a communications spire meant to act as an extender— either for Voltron in case they ever got out of range of the castle, or for the Castle of Lions itself. It’s meant to strengthen the signal as it is and extend it by twelve billion light years.”

Keith stared at her in awe, “Isn’t that a little overkill?”

“Just about one-point-seven light years short of the estimated span of the universe,” the green paladin proudly professed, her smile illuminating to manic qualities. “I’ve been thinking about seeing how much farther I can make it reach – there’s about ten thousand years’ worth of technology to help make that a possibility.”

Keith scowled, “You’re fucking with me. There’s no way that can be possible.”

Pidge sniffed, punching something in to the control panel, “Read it and weep.”

The Lion groaned as the spire readjusted itself in response to Pidge’s commands. The green paladin hopped back into her seat, sitting backyards as a bright voice crackled to life over the Lion’s systems.

“Pidge, is this—,” Keith began in disbelief as the familiar lines of the disc jockey rang out through the cockpit. “Is this ninety three point three?!?"

“KKOB?” Pidge’s grin brightened. “Albuquerque’s number one hit radio station playing the five-o-clock throwback hits straight to space?”

“Oh my God,” Keith laughed in disbelief as the chimes of a familiar song started up. “Is this Queen?!”

“Guess so!” Pidge giggled, Freddie Mercury’s vocals surreally twisting up around them, the glam rock oddly appropriate in front of the sparkling galaxies beyond. She hopped out of the captain’s seat, extending a hand towards him. “It’s gonna take a while for the program Matt installed to get through to The Haven, so… care to have this dance, best friend?”

Keith laughed as Pidge timed up her words to the lyrics of the song, accepting his friend’s outstretched hand and pulling her up close, settling his other hand on her waist, “Gotta warn you, I
failed the foxtrot unit in PE.”

“Here,” Pidge snorted, readjusting their hands before they began to bounce along to the beat. “I’ll lead.”

Keith laughed, ducking to allow Pidge to twirl him under the bridge of their arms, “Did you plan this or something?”

“Maybe a little,” Pidge winked in response. “Although I couldn’t have asked for a better song. Show off those pipes for me?”

“What?!” Keith snorted out a laugh in disbelief, Pidge rolling him up into sweetheart position. “Pidge—.”

“I reached across the galaxy to find your favorite radio station,” the brunette immediately pouted up at him, spinning Keith back into their start positions. “And you don’t even sing two lines for me?” She sighed dramatically as Keith dipped her back. “I guess you don’t love me, Keith.”

“You shit!” the red paladin snorted, rolling his eyes. “Ughhh… fine. Just a little though, okay? And don’t laugh.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Pidge chirped, grinning ear-to-ear. Keith rolled his eyes and took a breath and began:

“And I love the things,” Keith sang. “I really love the things that you do – you’re my best friend. Ooh, you make me live—I’m happy you’re my best friend. Ooh, you make me live – ooh you’re my best friend.”

“Your Majesty?”

The closing instrumental arrived alongside a familiar voice, Keith’s Altean markings glowing bright blue as he and Pidge whipped around to see Annis staring intently at them on the Green Lion’s screen.

“Shit!” Keith swore. Pidge scrambled to turn off the music as a new song started up, her impish giggles filling the Lion’s cockpit. “Commander Throk, I—.”

“Why your grace,” the Galra smiled twin rows of shark teeth, propping his chin up on the surface of his palm. “You wouldn’t have happened to have just been having fun now, were you?”

“Har har,” Keith grumbled, folding his arms over his chest. “I wanted to get in contact with Thace – with all of you, actually.”

“Is everything okay?” Annis asked, glancing worriedly at them as he turned his chair towards another screen, beginning to input commands.

“Everything’s fine,” Keith reported. “I assume you heard of Stell’s attack on the castle?”

“That’s correct,” the other Galra confirmed with a brief nod. “By the time I was made aware of it, I was informed that you’d already managed to come out victorious.”

“We came to an understanding,” Keith flubbed; Annis quirked an eyebrow.

“You’re a real interesting kit, aren’t you?” he said quietly, more to himself than to Keith.

“Have you been able to establish contact with Matt and Shiro?” Pidge piped in. “Keith says
he was able to talk to Shiro last night, did Matt happen to check in?”

“Malachite hailed us, yeah,” Annis confirmed with another nod of his head. “Said that he and Black were able to make it to our contact. Unfortunately—,” he heaved a sigh, giving Pidge a sidelong glance. “With the equipment we have at our disposal we’re not able to break through the thick storm cloud cover above Axana and Ennor.”

“Is that what’s preventing our signals from getting through?” Keith asked.

“A combination of electrical storms and the rough magnetic pull of Gal’s north pole make traditional forms of communication almost useless on the northmost points of the Zahtyrala continent during the cold months— that’s why only Druids lived up there for so long,” Annis explained. “That’s also why there’s nothing really north of Loletta as far as the military goes— and here’s Thace.”

Keith brightened as his father appeared beside Annis. “Dad!”

“Keith!” Thace beamed in response. “It’s good to see you, kit. How have you been?”

“I’ve… had better days,” Keith said truthfully, peering anxiously at Annis. “It’s good to see you, Dad. How have things been for you?”

“Uneventful,” Thace chuckled softly. “Building our arsenal, compiling evidence against Merla… according to Sylvux, our next steps rely on the outcome of Shiro and Matt’s mission as well as your talks with Sendak.”

Keith winced, “About that…”

His father’s face immediately grew concerned, “Is everything alright?”

“Sendak and I have been in communication,” Keith confirmed. “He even helped out a great deal with the fight against Stell.”

“So my sources have informed me,” said Annis, reaching over to grab an energy drink off of the far side of his desk. “They say you’re in the middle of drafting some sort of contract?”

“A contract?” Thace inquired, looking imploringly at Keith, who simply continued to wince.

“Yeah, uh,” he said slowly, reaching over to the dashboard to bring up the castle’s file-sharing system and dragging the text document into the transmission window, “That’s the main reason I wanted to get into contact with you. I’ve been having some… trouble… drafting the contract. I really have no idea what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Thace said reassuringly, his eyes moving to and fro as he began to read. He produced a fond smile. “It seems impeccable.”

“That’s because Allura wrote the opening paragraph,” Pidge chimed in. Keith turned to glare daggers at her, the green paladin immediately throwing her hands up in self-defense. Annis concealed a snicker behind his palm. “Hey, I’m just relaying what you said.”

“Ah…” Thace said softly, clearing his throat. “Your wording is certainly… unique, Keith…”

Keith immediately deflated.

“But!” Thace held up a hand. “It’s easy to tell what you’re getting at. It’s clear that you’ve thought this through very thoroughly and it looks like you have plenty of wonderful ideas.” He gave
his son an encouraging smile. “With some re-wording and organization this should prove to be a wonderful contract. Good work, son.”

Although he could tell that his father was trying to help him feel better, Keith produced a shy smile all the same, “Thanks Dad. Do you think you could help with the editing process?”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve dealt with any legal documentation of this caliber,” Thace admitted. “But I’ll certainly be sure to do so. Would you mind if I…?”

“Re-write all you want, Dad,” Keith laughed, smiling a little to himself. “I’d trust you to write the thing from scratch.”

“Thank you,” Thace smiled warmly. “I’ll be sure to get it back to you as soon as I can. Say a myokven or so?”

“I’ll be here to receive the transmission,” Pidge confirmed.

“Dad,” Keith began, drawing the man’s attention. “You said that you’ve been digging up dirt on Merla. I hate to be that guy, but insofar we’ve had almost no concrete proof of anything she’s been up to. Even Sendak’s come up dry.

“I don’t want to doubt the Vesh, but I want to make absolutely certain that we’ve got the right person,” he continued. “I know that someone wanted to harm the Mother of Constellations, but how do we know it’s Merla? I’d hate to convict someone completely innocent.”

Thace’s face fell and Annis quickly cleared his throat.

“I’ll take it from here,” the techie said, a document appearing on the screen from his end of the transmission. “This is only some of the information we have against her. Most of it is crap we’ve all done – you know: embezzlement, breaking and entering, murdering through the ranks…”

Even Thace was staring in shock at that point, the three others in the conversation completely silent. Annis coughed, scratching at the back of his neck.

“Anywho… some of our strongest evidence against her is in this file here,” he explained. “Most of it is… pretty grim. Stuff taken from R and D’s security cameras. Merla was heavily involved in a lot of Haggard’s biomechanical experimentation; turns out that she’s continued on that path even following Sendak’s ban on the practice.”

“Biomechanical?” Keith echoed.

“Yeah,” Annis returned casually. “You know, hybridized weapons made from dead Galra and stuff. Well, most of the time they’re dead, anyway,” he shrugged; Keith paled.

“But even this evidence is only so helpful,” Annis continued with a sigh. “Most of it is from before Sendak came to power so we still can’t use it as evidence against her, even if it does paint a much clearer picture of who she is as a person.”

“Isn’t that still helpful, though?” Keith frowned, exchanging a brief look with Pidge. “I mean, at worst it should make for a good smear campaign, right? Even if it’s shifting the way the public view her that might be a helpful start.”

Thace winced, speaking up: “As much as I hate to say it, kit, the same could be done to any of us. This sort of thing only carries so much weight with it given the time the videos were recorded. Besides, that’s not the sort of politics you’ll want to be getting yourself into – playing like that is only
bound to bite you later.”

Keith nodded quietly, ears drooping. “You’re right,” he assented. “So this means we’re back at square one? We don’t actually have any evidence against her?”

“Not necessarily,” Annis added in, eyes gleaming sharply. “Just today I dug a little deeper and found a collection of videos that were under more security than the rest. They appear to be dated more recently so I can only imagine how incriminating they must be. I just finished the decryption on the set – care to stand witness?”

At Keith’s confirmation a dialogue box appeared aboard the Green Lion, the emperor hesitating before accepting the screen share. He immediately recoiled as the contents appeared on one of the adjacent screens in living color.

An embalmed body lay in what appeared to be a topless metal coffin, wires and tubes curling out of the structure and the corpse’s neck and wrists. A massive beaker of Quintessence puling aureate stood beside the coffin, attached to one of the silk tubes trailing out of it. A tall, reedy Druid stood at the head of the display, reaching down to brush her fingers over the single gunshot wound darkening his temple.

“Lady Merla,” someone said from off screen. “Shall we begin the transference of Quintessence to the beast?”

“We’ve taken what we can from the corpse,” the Druid onscreen – obviously Merla – responded coolly. “I’ve been made aware that he had a kit – a daughter in our ranks?”

“…that is correct, Lady Merla,” another Druid responded after some pause, hesitantly stepping close to the High Priestess. “An apprentice Druid by the name of Nanan.”

“Nanan?” Keith gasped, eyes widening. Annis immediately perked up.

“That’s the name of the Mother…” he said.

“Which means that body is—,” Keith realized in horror. “Vektor.”

“An apprentice?” Merla snapped, eyes narrowing as she turned to face her assistant, who had just appeared on the screen beside her.

“One of the girls set aside for the culling, yes,” the other Druid confirmed mournfully. “Lady Merla, I beg of you – please spare the girl! The amount of Quintessence she’d be able to provide for this project is negligible. Lady Merla, please spare them all—!”

Merla lurched forward towards her assistant, a recorded gurgling noise filling the cockpit as the High Priestess’ hand connected with the other’s solar plexus. The Druid fell to the floor, a dark pool of blood seeping out around her middle. Merla knelt at her side, hand sparkling to life with a red glow as she plunged it once more into the Druid, who began to violently convulse, arcs of red lightning looping off of her body until there was nothing left behind but a singed corpse. Several other Druids ran to their fallen comrade’s side and Merla sniffed, turning her back on them.

“She’s dead,” she said in a clipped tone. “And unless any of you want to share in Ovate Meri’s fate, I suggest you continue preparing for the ritual.”

“Yes Lady Merla.”

“Right away.”
The Druids agreed, rushing back to their posts as Merla turned to survey the body once more. “Someone come and clean this up,” she said coolly, gesturing towards the fresh corpse with her spare hand. “But be certain to preserve it. I don’t care what the crone said; every corpse is a potential biomechanical beast as long as enough of the Quintessence is still harvestable.”

“Yes my lady.”

“Of course.”

“And the girl, Lady Merla?” another Druid off screen inquired. Merla’s mouth slid into an easy, pleasant smile.

“Well, for her sake I hope this ritual is a success,” she professed sweetly. “If not we’ll harvest her of her Quintessence in order to complete the biomechanical beast. Begin the ritual.”

Merla stepped back and away from the coffin, watching as it was moved into an upright position. Behind it, purple lights burst to life, illuminating a massive replica of the coffin behind it that easily filled the loading bay where it was stationed. Merla lowered herself to her knees before the casket, palms illuminated in red orbs as she began to sing. Her song began as a low, haunting tenor – it creaked up into altos and scratched the soprano notes, sweet and slow and deadly like poisoned nectar. Bolts of electricity lanced from the orbs that encapsulated her hands, leaping up into Vektor’s body. There they crackled upon the dead flesh, darkening it to singes as the gathered quintessence in the reliquary beside it began to pulse every brighter, shooting into the silk tube that led to the dead commander’s neck.

With an awful crackling noise, Vektor’s body lurched, the electricity within him taking on a sinister purple glow and attaching them to the massive coffin docked behind him. Merla’s song persisted, the register growing into screaming whistles as her limbs began to writhe. Suddenly, more voices began to join her – the pace flowing from largo into a frantic adagio, volume gathering until the audio from the recording reached a single, high-pitched noise and whited out.

“ERROR” the screen spelled out in red, Galran characters “RECALIBRATING”.

Within seconds the audio and video were running again; the launch bay completely full of steam. Vektor’s body was gone, reduced to ash. Merla stood before the empty coffin, supported by another priestess.

“Send the biomechanical beast to Glacimor,” she said breathlessly. “My sources tell me that’s where The D’zatvesh have made their base – needless to say, Emperor Lotor will be attempting to track them down soon enough.”

‘They sent the beast to intercept us at Glacimor,’ Keith recognized hollowly, his thoughts sluggish. “So that thing we fought there… that was Vektor.’

The recording continued, Druids dispersing hurriedly as they made to carry out Merla’s orders. The priestess beside Merla began to speak, her words suddenly slurred as the video skipped, bars of static breaking across the image. Annis perked up immediately, mouth set into a scowl. Thace, too, had jolted upright in alarm, leaning in closer to the camera as he made to inspect the video on their end.

“What’s going on?” Keith frowned, attention split between the distorting feed of the security camera and the disgruntled pair of Vesh.

“No, no, fuck,” Annis hissed in turn, tapping rapidly across his console. The video fizzled
one last time, replaced instead by a black field upon which the Druid’s standard stood centerpiece.

“Oh no,” Thace breathed, withdrawing and looking slowly to his companion.

“What just –?”

“Son of a –!” Annis fumed, launching himself back against his chair, arms crossed firmly over his chest. “Curse the stars. **Fuck.**

“That sort of interference,” Pidge translated quickly, her own expression set into a grimace. “That video released a virus, didn’t it? That’s why it stopped like that.”

“This is not what I fucking needed right now,” Annis nodded tersely. “This is not what *any* of us needed right now.” The commander unfolded himself stiffly, leaning back towards the monitor and tapping out a few commands. “It’s as I thought,” he exhaled lowly. “I can’t retrieve the video – everything in the file was corrupted and who knows what kind of malignant code has been released into the mainframe. I’m sorry, Your Highness – I wasn’t anticipating an issue of this caliber; it’s been a long time since anyone or anything has gotten past my security.”

“At least we gained some peace of mind that we’re right in our path,” Thace countered, placing a consoling hand to Annis’ shoulder. The commander relaxed with a tired smile, nodding in acceptance.

“Thankfully this was done through screen share so you shouldn’t have any problems with your Lion,” Annis continued, directing his words at Pidge. “But it still wouldn’t hurt to run a scan just in case. I’m going to have my hands full with resolving this. I have faith in my firewalls but there’s no way of knowing how much damage this file has brought until I start sifting through the code. I apologize, but I’m going to have to ask that you don’t try and contact us again until I give you the all clear – I don’t want to risk whatever this is spreading to other systems. Thace will contact you through an unrelated feed later, probably via one of the mech; until this is issue is put to bed we’ll have to get by this way.”

Biting a lip, Keith nodded, unable to shake the images he had just seen from his mind’s eye. He could tell that his companions were likewise affected, Pidge tremulous with a mixture of disgust and adrenaline beside him. “Thank you for finding us this evidence, Annis,” Keith nodded solemnly, setting a comforting hand on Pidge’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure if it was meant more to steady her or himself. “It – it was pretty gruesome to watch, but Dad is right: at least now we have the confidence in knowing that Merla isn’t who she puts herself out to be. Even if we no longer have the video as proof,” he pressed, Annis turning aside bitterly, “We know now that Merla really was intending to kill the kits in her care. Maybe…” he trailed off, the alternative too horrible to voice.

“Dad…” Keith began again, glancing at Thace’s image. He looked horrified; the expression on his face was an amount of grief and loathing only a parent could comprehend. His shoulders were shaking. It immediately reminded Keith of the time that Thace had learned that Zarkon had been beating him and his heart went out to him immediately.

“Will you be okay?” Keith asked quietly. Thace nodded tersely.

“As disturbing as that was, I’ll have to be,” he said. “Will you?”

Keith smiled, although he knew it was watery, “I’ll be fine, Dad.”

“So…” Pidge began a little awkwardly, pressing her palms down into her knees in what Keith assumed was an effort to keep herself from shaking. “Back here in a myokven for that edit,
“That’s correct,” he confirmed, schooling his features into a professional mask. “I’ll also be sure to make some notes as to what I found particularly pertinent as well as some key points you may want to add, if you’d like.”

“Please do,” said Keith, pushing away his anxieties and allowing his smile to grow genuine. “Thank you for all of your help, Dad. I’m sorry to bother you with it.”

Thace’s ears perked up in surprise and his expression settled into one of fondness, “Keith, you are never a bother. I’m already so proud of what you’ve accomplished already and I want to be here every step of the way to aid you in what is to come.”

Keith couldn’t help but beam, the inside of his helmet lit up by the happy glow of his Altean markings, “Thank you, Dad.”

“Geez,” Annis mumbled to himself, scratching behind his ear. “You’re making me miss my parents at this rate.”

“Sorry to have to make you experience an emotion,” Pidge joked, the ex-commander shooting her a cheeky grin.

“Yeah, yeah whatever short stuff,” the Galra grumbled, cheeks dusted in purple. “Good to go?”

“Yeah, I think we’re done here for now,” Keith confirmed. “Thank you Dad, Annis. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate all that you and the Vesh as a whole have done for me.”

“Anytime,” Annis ruefully grinned, using his claws to flap away the notion like a pesky bug.

“Of course,” Thace nodded. “I love you, Keith.”

“I love you, too Dad.”

“And I’m going to barf,” Annis said brightly, Pidge snickering in reply. “Until then Your Majesty, Green Paladin.”

“Bye Commander Annis,” Keith nodded in farewell.

“Bye!” Pidge chirped, and the transmission cut off there.

Both paladins immediately deflated, Pidge reaching up and back to pat Keith lightly on the cheek. He leaned into her touch, nuzzling against her palm in a feline fashion.

“Your dad was right, you know,” Pidge confirmed, dropping his cheek and reaching out to maneuver Green’s controls. “You’re doing a great job.”

Keith released a laugh that was much more hysterical than the intended sardonic, “God, I hope so. It’s been one hell of a week.”

“Yeah well I know so,” Pidge informed him confidently. “Sorry project ‘cheer up Keith’ got a little… muddled there at the end. I didn’t exactly expect to see… that.”

“It’s…” Keith sighed, shaking his head. “It’s not fine, what happened in that recording; but I still really appreciate you going to those lengths just for me. The radio and everything? It was really nice; I needed the break.”
“Welllll,” Pidge sing-songed as they pulled back into the hangar. “You are kind of my best friend, you know.”

“Yeah well, you’re kind of mine, too,” Keith smiled as Pidge unbuckled herself, turning around to offer her open arms. Keith leaned into the hug willingly, pressing the green paladin close before pulling away to exchange tired smiles.

“Hey Pidge?”

“Yeah?”

“You think you can get the radio to work in the castle?”

Chapter End Notes

You guys, your comments never fail to make my week <3 They've cheered me up on more than one occasion as of late!

How did everyone like this chapter? I feel like Keith deserved a little bit of time with his bestie -- there hasn't been enough Keith and Pidge chillin' as of late, has there? By the way, the song they dance to is "Best Friend" by Queen :3
The synthetic sky of the First Ring twinkled overhead with the light of false stars, the maps of constellations just barely visible in the projected distance. Beneath the grand canopy spread a massive garden, the twisting paths of fanciful pruned hedges running maze-like before terminating in a pristine park at whose center was erected an elegant statue. Small lights had been strung throughout, bathing the partygoers as they mirrored the stars with their soft glow.

Sendak surveyed it all with a mounting sense of accomplishment. Of course, it had taken a large team of people to pull off the project but it was finished and it was beautiful – something lasting – and it was something that he could be proud of.

‘I hope,’ he considered as he stood in the center square of the park, drink flute in hand, ‘That this is something that Lotor can take pride in, as well.’

Above him the statue stood sentinel, gazing out towards the horizon with determination. He had never known the woman it depicted and could only hope that its likeness bore true to her flesh-and-blood counterpart.

‘I wonder what you would have thought about all of this?’ Sendak wondered as he took in her foreign features. ‘At the very least I think we would both agree that this is a far better use of Zarkon’s old property.’

It was still strange to think the bastardly tyrant was truly gone: all of Sendak’s life he’d served as a constant and oppressive figure in the mind’s eye of the Galra citizenry, always looming and ready to strike out at any deviation from his cruel ideologies. It had shaped him, the way Sendak had grown from kit to commander. He had been sensitive once – a fact that felt shameful upon reflection – until the personality was stripped from him and he was molded into just another piece of fodder for Zarkon’s wars. But now things were different – the park stood testament to that.

The sentiment was strange, a slow dawning thing that filled the lord regent with discomfort and catharsis all at once: ‘Now we can all be who we wish.’

It struck him then as he looked around the expansive gardens that the people within had become inherently different. There was something unprecedented about the way they held themselves, the way they conducted their behavior with one another. They were relaxed, at ease, their shoulders lax in the absence of a militaristic state. They were smiling.

‘Maray was right,’ Sendak recognized, a sheepish smile creeping onto his lips as he sipped from his flute. ‘As usual, as it would seem. We’re no longer living under Zarkon’s shadow and we don’t have to continue on as we’ve been. Somehow they were able to see things so much clearly than I’ve been, seen how deeply Zarkon’s passing has changed things – not just for the government or the rules or anything like that. But… for the people. For individual lives. Even with as involved as I’ve been in the entire state of the empire I never really realized what this regime change means. What it means to be free.

‘But Lotor? I think he sees that clearly, maybe more so than most. He’s had the privilege of
the outsider’s perspective, of growing up apart from all of this. He could run the kind of empire that the Galra people need, the kind that they deserve. Even with as new as he is to all of this he has a sort of passion that’s rarely found among our people anymore, something that we lost along the way, I guess… because we had to. It was only ever a waste to hold on to those kinds of feelings and it was weak to be as fiercely kind as he is. I still can’t believe the way he handled Stell. I don’t think he understands just how remarkable that choice really was. I don’t think he knows how ready he really is for this job.’

Another thought crossed his mind and he frowned, a kind of uncertainty he’d rarely felt creeping through his chest. Again his gaze returned to the mingling party goers, lingering until he could pick out their expressions, the strands of their conversations. Many were Galra by heritage, others by nationality, the features of Stellites and O’shetal and even farther flung cultures cropping up among their midst. He cared for them. All of them. They were his people and he alone was responsible for them – for their happiness and their wellbeing.

‘But this business with Lotor,’ he considered, expression folding. ‘An alliance like ours can’t last, can it? I know that we have the freedom to make the government as we like it but can we really run it side-by-side? Is it even feasible to share executive power like that and moreover, are we compatible enough to pull it off? We’re both stubborn and strong willed – that much I can tell already – and that’s bound to come at odds sooner or later. I don’t want to risk tearing apart everything we’ve built; this has to be done right. It’s so much more important than any one of our desires. But if Lotor is to return as the emperor… where does that leave me?’

It was a question he’d been trying to suppress for a while, one he hadn’t wanted to deal with. But the political climate was getting harder to handle, more treacherous. ‘Even now I’m being pressed from all sides,’ he admitted. ‘And I know now that I can’t do this alone, not with how things stand. I need his help but that could also mean having no choice but to step aside. No, I think it’s very likely it will come to that. I’ve fought so hard to get to where I am, though – can I really give it up so easily? Can I just step back and surrender?’

The word rankled him, left him with anxious agitation. Surrender had never been a valid option, had never been anything but dishonorable.

‘But maybe even that is changing now,’ Sendak frowned. ‘Even still, I don’t know if it’s something that I can concede to. There has to be some way to work this out, something I can do so that we both are satisfied. So that, moreover, our people are satisfied. I can’t forget that Lotor will need me, too, and that that’s not just a self-made bluff. We’ll work through our differences – and similarities – somehow. We have to. But… even I can’t see where this path will lead us and I can only force so much. We’re in a new era now and I can’t be exactly as I was. But if things were to change? If I were to… step down… where would that leave me? What would I want? Who would I be?’

The thoughts tumbled around inside him, echoing in ceaseless repeat. He couldn’t answer them so easily and knowing such made something primal stir in his breast, an acidic kind of feeling that crawled up his throat as if to choke him. He swirled the remainder of his drink before downing it quickly, willing the sensation to leave him. The alcohol bubbled pleasantly against his palate, the comfortable warmth it brought him settling throughout his limbs. It allowed him to relax somewhat but still Sendak could put a name to what he was feeling: it was fear.

‘Maray knew from the start, even before I did,’ he submitted.

“You think I don’t see you?” the planner’s voice rang in his head, the memory of their fight still painfully strong. “Who you are beneath all that toxic bullshit?”
‘How can they see it when I don’t even know it myself?’ Sendak wondered. ‘I don’t know who I am beneath all that and I suppose I really am afraid. I don’t know if I want to find out, if I’m ready to. All my life I’ve had to be a certain way, been conditioned to think and feel in ways that were most convenient to the empire. It’s hard to feel any other way because the second I do I feel so repulsed with myself, so ashamed.

‘But that’s not an excuse, not anymore. I don’t have to live my life like that, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t hard to accept. And it was never like that for Maray, I think. They’re stronger than me in that regard: they’ve only ever been themselves, even if that was controversial at best. And somehow, maybe because of that, they see something in me that I don’t. They said that if I stopped holding on to what I’ve been that I could be happy. Is that really true? And am I so unhappy now? I am stressed all the time and I have gained the sort of power that I’ve always craved but… is that alone enough? Is that really all that I want for myself?’

He scanned the crowd, searching out a single figure among all the rest. ‘I need to apologize to them,’ Sendak resolved, setting his glass aside as a server passed by. ‘Offering tea was one thing but actually speaking face to face is another: Maray deserves the respect of a spoken apology. Especially because they were right. About everything.’

“Having a good time?”

The sudden voice jarred Sendak from his thoughts and he looked up as Lance approached, his armor buffed and looking much shinier than Sendak had ever seen it. Behind Lance trailed a soft blue cape, the crown of small white flowers nestled against his hair demarcating him as the guest of honor. This the paladin tugged at gently as he fought to keep it in place, a shower of tiny petals landing on his shoulders.

“So you’ve found me,” Sendak called instead as the other approached, inwardly grateful to have such a thorough distraction from the existential crisis he had absolutely not planned to experience.

“You been hiding from someone?” Lance asked, glancing around. “You’re kinda on your own over here.”

“I’m not really good at talking to people,” Sendak returned frankly, “If you hadn’t noticed already. I don’t mind parties so much but I can’t really stand small talk. It’s all really uncomfortable if you ask me.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Lance bobbed his head. “But I don’t know, it’s kinda fun once you start. There’s a lot of interesting people here tonight and they actually want to talk to me? It’s really weird, honestly.”

“You did well today,” Sendak praised, eliciting a flustered smile from Lance. “Both fighting beside me and at the opening just now – sorry I couldn’t have prepared you further.”

“It’s fine,” Lance brushed off. “I think if I had known I was supposed to give a speech beforehand I would have been so nervous that I’d have choked. Hope what I said was okay, though? I mean, I don’t really know all the formal stuff.”

“Me neither,” Sendak gave a sly smirk. “I’m learning every day – same as you, I suspect. But I’ve never been one for all the pomp and polish: even if it’s less eloquent, being genuine seems to carry more weight. That was something the empire never was afforded before. Not under Zarkon, at least, but no one is left to remember those times anyway.”
“Save for Thace,” Lance corrected.

Sendak hummed thoughtfully, giving a little nod. “I suppose you’re right: save for Thace. I imagine his insight would be more valuable than most when it comes to running a government. He must have seen and experienced so much. And, if I’m not mistaken, he once served as an ambassador in addition to being a titled prince. The emperor is lucky to have such an ally in the prince father.”

“Yeah,” Lance grinned, “He’s a real nice guy besides. Wish he could have been here tonight; I think he would have really appreciated it.”

“And the emperor?”

“Keith? Yeah, him, too,” Lance agreed. “Can’t wait for him to see it. A little birdy told me that you were pretty personally involved with making this whole memorial happen. Like, that it was your idea.”

“Bird?” Sendak echoed, mystified.

“Yeah, man,” Lance chuckled. “Like… it’s a colloquial thing. An expression. There wasn’t an actual bird involved.”

“Naturally,” Sendak bluffed, brow furrowed. “And I’m assuming that ‘bird’ was Tora?”

“Actually it was Maray,” the paladin returned meaningfully. “And they seemed pretty pleased about it, too. I get the feeling they’re more than a bit proud of you.”

“Maray is?” Sendak stumbled, unable to keep from feeling surprised. After their fight he imagined that Maray would continue to be cross with him – as Maray was wont be in such situations.

‘But to think that Maray went on to suggest nice things about me even after that?‘ Sendak marveled. ‘Even after I had been so needlessly angry towards them? They really are something else.’

“Have you seen them?” he followed up hopefully.

“Maray?” Lance clarified. “No, not since the opening ceremony. I think they’ve been busy with stuff behind the scenes, maybe. I know they were talking to the lady who did the welcome and everything. Her department worked on this park?”

“That would be Ira,” Sendak explained. “Chief of Infrastructure. She and Maray are fairly similar people so it would only be natural that they’d be enjoying one another’s company. I imagine, too, that they’ll be held up with conversation for quite a while tonight: I’m sure there are plenty of people that will want to wish congratulations and ask questions.”

“Maybe we’ll run into them,” Lance shrugged. He hesitated, assessing the lord regent carefully. “Did you apologize to them?”

Sendak emitted a strangled noise, entirely caught. He regarded the paladin, eyes narrowed in chagrin. Lance just chuckled in response, daring to clap a brief hand to what he could reach of Sendak’s bicep.

“Hey, it’s okay, man,” Lance assured him. “You’ll get your chance. Besides, it’s not like you totally fucked up: you had a disagreement, it happens. And, like, Maray obviously still thinks really highly of you. I think they’d just like acknowledgement that you were being, uh…”
Sendak raised a brow, letting Lance squirm over his final word. “Yes?” he pressed in amusement.

“Mean?” the paladin supplied in question and Sendak had to laugh.

“Yeah, we’ll go with that,” he conceded.

“So, uh,” Lance segued, rocking onto his tiptoes as if to get a better vantage of the surrounding area. “We’re supposed to meet up with Merla tonight, yeah? Er, well, you are, anyway. But I’ll totally come too if you want me to.”

“I did intend on bringing you as a witness,” Sendak admitted casually. “I figure Merla will be backed into a proverbial corner that way: anything she says can be testified against as more than just hearsay – your account could prove as corroborating evidence. Still,” he went on, “I’m a little surprised that you’re offering on your own accord.”

“I mean,” Lance’s face scrunched up quizzically, “Why not, right? I am a Paladin of Voltron and this sort of thing technically is my business. Besides, I, uh,” he broke off with a forced cough of embarrassment, “I kinda thought you might like the company? If that’s not too weird to say? I mean we’re not exactly –”

“I would like that, yes,” Sendak assented and the paladin flushed in shock.

“Cool,” he gulped down, trying to act natural. “Sooo any idea where to find her?”

“She said she’d be wearing red – which in and of itself isn’t entirely helpful, all things considering,” Sendak frowned, gesturing to the other attendees. “That said, I imagine she’ll be waiting nearby to somewhere private.”

“Maybe the hedge maze?” Lance suggested. “That’s probably the best place to go talk in private. Also there’s like a lot of couples in there. A lot.”

“How decorous,” Sendak rolled his eyes. “In any case you’re probably right; shall we?”

Taking the lead Sendak began the walk through the park towards the gardens, the grounds growing darker even in the presence of the fairy lights. ‘Certainly seems secluded,’ he speculated. ‘Also seems like a good place to get stabbed by your political enemy. Good thing Lance was so willing to oblige.’

“Is that –?” the paladin questioned as they drew near to the mouth of the maze, the park glittering just behind them, walled off by an open gate. Sendak followed where Lance was pointing to find a figure with their back to them, ornate crimson robes falling from their frame. Their shock of white hair flowed over their shoulders, their face obscured from sight.

“Must be her,” Sendak asserted.

“Isn’t that a bit…,” Lance hedged. “I dunno, ostentatious? I mean this is supposed to be a secret meeting, right?”

“It may be a bit flashy but this is a gala,” Sendak reminded him. “And it’s a good disguise – she looks nothing like a Druid when she’s dressed like this.”

‘More like nobility, if anything,’ he considered sourly. ‘Which is exactly the sort of image she’s hoping to pass off, I’d bet.’
“Ready?” he asked lowly and at a determined nod from Lance he proceeded, closing the rest of the way between themselves and the woman.

“Good evening,” he greeted evenly, the woman turning to him and revealing that it was, indeed, Merla.

“Sendak,” she returned, offering a polite bow of her head. “And…” she trailed off, setting her sights on Lance, an annoyed look flashing across her features for the briefest of moments. “You’ve brought a friend,” she finished thinly.

“As a Paladin of Voltron and a close confidant of the emperor I only thought it pertinent to bring him along,” Sendak smoothly lied. “Providing what you have to tell us we’ll want to get Lotor involved in what follows – an attack on City Station of this size is something that he’ll need to be a part of. This is only to ensure that he is properly informed.”

“I was hoping this discussion would be held in confidence,” Merla admitted smoothly, brow furrowed in concern as she regarded Lance. “As I said I wouldn’t wish to slander anyone should my suspicions be proven false.”

“You have my assurance that this conversation will be kept confidential with the exception of the emperor,” Sendak asserted. “Lance is of no threat to us; his role as paladin should say something as to his integrity - he is the blue one, after all,” he concluded purposefully.

Merla considered Lance briefly, the paladin extending his hand in an introduction, “I know we just met, but I promise to keep this between us.”

The Priestess gently took his upper arm, squeezing it gently in greeting as Lance did likewise.

“It’s a pleasure to be acquainted with the guest of honor, and what’s more, part of the emperor’s personal entourage,” Merla dipped her head politely towards him before turning back to Sendak. “I suppose I should cut straight to the chase, as it were; Sendak, do you know of High Priestess Tira?”

“If I’m not mistaken, the last time we spoke you referred to her as the Druid you were at an impasse with, the one who wanted more funding for Research in Development,” Sendak recounted. “And, I believe, the one that was left in control of The Convent in your absence. I’m taking it that she’s the one you suspect?”

“Unfortunately that is correct,” Merla admitted, eyes pinching guiltily. “As I’m certain your intelligence has discovered, the creatures that attacked us were beings known as Scobies: a semi-sentient form of yeast native to Tirmania… the planet where The Convent and Tira both are currently stationed.

“Like I’ve said in the past, Tira and I have never seen eye-to-eye in our ethics and methodologies. But still, as a fellow High Priestess I entrusted the care of The Convent to her in my absence to request financial aid.” She turned from them, wringing her hands in upset, “But… with her devotion to Haggar’s biomechanical studies, I would not put it past Tira to take a special interest in creatures such as the Scobies and discern a way to manipulate them to her advantage. I fear that she sent me from The Convent in order to secure the chance to make this sort of attack in my absence.”

“Do you mean to suggest that those same studies and the use of the Scobies are interrelated?” Sendak caught on quickly.

“We never did find the mother Scoby,” Lance spoke up in concern. “And it’s got to be somewhere
fairly close, at that. I don’t think it’d work if it were further away than the span of a planet, in fact. You said biomechanical… do you mean -?”

“Like a robeast?” Sendak finished for him, looking to Merla critically. “The production of those should have been halted.”

Merla looked away shamefaced and shakily professed: “As it was. But as head of Research and Development, Tira wasn’t so ready to let those studies go. I’m afraid she has been using loopholes in the legal text in order to continue the experimentation on a smaller level, perhaps in private.”

“And you suspect that she’s been doing so onboard The Convent?” Sendak asked in clarification.

‘So is this Tira person really acting of their own accord or is their hand being forced by Merla?’ he puzzled. ‘They could be cohorts in this scheme but it also isn’t impossible that Tira is proving to both align with Haggar’s old views and to be getting in Merla’s way. After all, Merla has been known to report on other Druids. No loyalty amongst thieves or something like that. Regardless, Merla seems more than happy to pin blame on her and I’m suspicious as to why. The most logical thing would be that Merla is the one at fault here - after all, Tira seems more like a scapegoat than anything.’

“That’s correct,” Merla told him, meeting eyes with Sendak once more, and they were full of tears. “I’m… I’m so sorry that this happened, Sendak. As the acting Mother of Constellations I should have kept a better eye on those I am responsible for. As a result of my negligence we lost so many innocents today; I doubt that I will ever be able to convey the depths of my sorrow.”

‘Oh,’ Sendak thought with unease. ‘She’s good. I almost feel bad for her but I can’t let this little display sway me. Still…” he considered uncertainly. ‘Even Maray was hesitant about naming Merla as our enemy. Could I be wrong in this? Could the Vesh be wrong? I never really got to talk to Lotor about what evidence they had on her but I don’t know what other avenue to explore. My gut is telling me that she’s the one behind this, even if everything I’ve found can be whittled down to coincidence. There’s just no one else that fits the bill, it all just lines up too perfectly. Even at that I’m going to really have to play my cards carefully.’

“Your sincerity speaks volumes,” Sendak returned clapping a brief hand to her shoulder and allowing his words to carry dubious meaning. “Unfortunately what has transpired here today cannot be undone; I think the most we can do from this point is to ensure that the Scobies are fully eradicated and that they pose no future threat to our citizens. I urge you to share with me any information you might have on them, and on the whereabouts and construction of the mother Scoby. If it is a robeast as we suspect then it will have the capacity for a lot more destruction. We all have right to be mournful right now but we are also being presented with the chance to lessen the fallout of this attack. Will you work with me on this?”

“I’ve got to keep her in my sights for now,” Sendak decided, watching as Merla blotted the tears from her eyes with a delicate hand. ‘Until I can figure out what’s really going on here I need to keep my prime suspect close. Problem is, I have no means of doing that unless she willingly stays put or is otherwise forced by obligation - I still have no grounds to arrest her or to forbid her from going anywhere.’

“Of course,” Merla nodded, a watery smile forming as she touched his wrist lightly. “You have my full cooperation, Sendak. I’m sorry to have antagonized you over the funding. If I’d have known…” she cut herself off, shaking her head sadly. “Please let me know what I can do. To be perfectly sincere, I was planning on returning to The Convent tomorrow in order to confront Tira personally… perhaps in this time I would be able to gain some insight as how to neutralize any
further threat she or her creations present.”

“Isn’t that unsafe?” Lance cut in with a concerned frown. “If this Tira lady is really that
dangerous, you should plan to bring some backup with you.”

‘Nice save, Lance,’ Sendak thought gratefully. ‘He catches on quicker than I’ve given him
credit for.’

“Lance brings up a good point,” Sendak agreed, false concern lacing his brow. “While I
certainly wouldn’t want to appear militant towards those in your care I do think that providing you
some added protection would be a good idea. Besides that, while Tira may generally fall under your
jurisdiction, her attack on City Station brings the government of Gal into matters. If she’s found
guilty she will be tried by the state, as well - it may be necessary to have backup that can make that
arrest.”

“No,” Merla cut in, eyes narrowed in determination. “This is something that the Druids must
settle amongst ourselves. I know I was desperate for your aide, but spiritual code demands I must
take personal responsibility for this.”

“I wouldn’t wish to contravene the tenets of your practice,” Sendak backed down warily.
“But I would at the least like to be informed of proceedings, if that is agreeable. Tira will still be
amenable for the damages done today if she is indeed the one responsible; even if she is dealt with
in-house so to speak she will still have to answer to a court here on City Station.”

‘Nothing more I can press for there,’ Sendak thought despairingly. ‘Merla does have the
power of religious freedom as a Druid, one of the only that the empire is not allowed to infringe
upon. Her protestation is enough to keep my hands tied, unfortunately.’

“I will be absolutely certain to return her to you given that she is indeed the perpetrator,”
Merla agreed with a nod of her head. She smoothed her hand over his, smile gentle. “Thank you,
Sendak. Your trust means worlds to me.”

“Of course, Merla,” Sendak graciously returned. “I’m glad that we could work past our initial
differences.”

‘Well, at the very least I can hold her accountable if Tira ends up mysteriously dead or
missing,’ he figured. ‘Merla should know as much, too, so perhaps that alone will be enough to
protect Tira given that she’s been falsely framed.’

“Thank you both for your confidence,” Merla said, cupping her fingers around Sendak’s
palm as she smiled brilliantly at Lance. “I’m… I’m incredibly relieved to have that information off of
my chest.”

“I imagine it’s been hard to bear,” Sendak acknowledged. “I wish for you to know that you
needn’t deal with these burdens alone.”

Merla’s smile brightened further and she gathered Sendak’s hand in both of her own.
“Please?” she began to propose sweetly. “Dance with me?”

‘Uh,’ Sendak balked, forcing the surprise from showing on his face. ‘Now that's something I
didn’t expect. Something tells me this is a clever bid to get away from Lance, however. But this
conversation went relatively well… I can’t very well refuse her, now can I?’

“Certainly,” he found himself saying, purposefully ignoring the way Lance’s eyes seemed to
bulge in shock. With the mien of a gentleman he offered Merla his arm, the smooth white of the
prosthetic gleaming from what light entered the garden. Merla accepted it gladly, fitting close to his side as he walked to back into the park to where several couples were dancing, Lance trailing tentatively in their wake.

“Oh,” Merla exhaled softly, reaching out to grab the attention of someone standing nearby. “It would be unfair to not arrange for the guest of honor to have a dance. Excuse me?”

“Hey, just who I was looking for,” they responded, stepping closer and setting a hand on Sendak’s arm. “Looking good, Da- Lord Sendak.”

Sendak turned to face his daughter, the wear of the day scrubbed clean from her and replaced with a flowy black dress.

“As do you,” he responded, lips curling into a smirk at her near slip-up. “It must be a relief to be out of armor for a change.”

“You’d know better than most,” Tora grinned at him, turning to Lance and appraising him with a raised eyebrow. “So you look snazzy,” she continued to smirk, crossing her arms over her chest; Lance laughed sheepishly in return. Tora then regarded Merla for a moment. “Hey,” she greeted shortly.

“Good evening, Admiral,” Merla returned with a kind smile. “I was curious if you would mind accompanying the blue paladin in a dance?”

“I mean, sure but I’m going to step on his feet,” Tora shrugged.

“Intentionally or not?” Lance inquired dubiously; Tora’s grin sharpened.

“We’ll see, Blue,” she said, stepping up to take the lead.

Sendak watched with amusement as his daughter whirled Lance away, the two laughing at their crude attempts to formally dance. ‘Well at least they’re having fun,’ he considered fondly. ‘With everything that’s gone on lately it’s a relief to see.’

Merla set a gentle hand on his shoulder, drawing his attention away from the kits. She presented her opposite hand to him, tilting her head invitingly.

Sendak’s eyes widened at the display, unable to mask his surprise as Merla exposed a sliver of her neck to him. “Feeling rather flirtatious tonight?” he recovered quickly, taking her hand and leading her into the dance. “Or perhaps just a bit too much champagne?”

“Perhaps,” the Druid responded mysteriously, drawing closer to him as they swept over the dancefloor. “I think I’ll let you be the judge of that, Sendak.”

Sendak allowed the action, feeling his skin prickle at her proximity all the while. ‘Regardless of her motivations getting close to me is just another strategy,’ he assessed, spinning Merla away from him before returning her to his arms. ‘This feels dangerous.’

“I think,” he answered slowly, “That your mind is still on our conversation from earlier today.”

“Is yours?” Merla purred, sliding her hand from its perch on his shoulder back onto his ruff. “I hope you’ve taken the time to reconsider my offer?”

Sendak bristled slightly and Merla laughed, smoothing down the fur there without concern.
“To be honest I’ve been far too busy today to consider much of anything,” he stated neutrally, forcefully ignoring the urge to step away from her touch. “I don’t think my mind’s had room to rest all day.”

“All the better to take action quickly, in that case. Its hackneyed, for certain, but two heads are better than one, Sendak,” She dropped her voice to low tones, eyes growing hooded as she pulled him closer. “Think of all that we could accomplish together.”

The music trailed off and the dancers around them began to separate in preparation for the next song; Sendak cleared his throat and took the opportunity to step back as well, not missing the frustration apparent in Merla’s gaze.

‘Shit, what do I say?’ he thought anxiously.

‘We’re in better standing now so I can’t flatout refuse her - but there’s also no way I’m accepting her offer, either. How should I -?’

“Oh there you are,” a voice cut in, much to Sendak’s relief. He and Merla turned at the words, finding Maray standing to the side of them with a slightly manic smile.

‘What the hell is happening here?’ Sendak inwardly frowned, now completely at a loss.

Maray cocked their head slightly and Sendak at once recognized their trademark look of displeasure. “All things considered I am off duty for the night,” Maray spelled out. “Unless the lord regent requires assistance?”

“I…” Sendak hesitated, looking between Merla and Maray uncertainly. Maray’s brows rose a fraction as if in silent urging. “Now that you mention it,” Sendak recovered, licking at his lips thoughtfully, “There are a few matters to discuss. Merla, it was lovely getting to dance with you; I hope you won’t mind if I excuse myself?”

Merla’s eyes narrowed slightly at Maray before she turned to Sendak with a brilliant smile full of gleaming fangs, “Of course. I’d like to continue our conversation later, however. Farewell, Sendak; I hope you enjoy the remainder of your evening.”

She dropped his hands, pushing past Maray and off of the dance floor, not even bothering to wish them well.

“You’re welcome,” Maray enunciated, turning to Sendak with a knowing look.

“Thank you,” the lord regent responded out of turn, shaking his head as he watched Merla disappear into the crowd. His eyes flickered back to Maray, who looked about ready to snap. Meeting Sendak gaze, however, the expression melted, replaced instead with protective concern.

“What did she want, anyway?” Maray intoned lowly. “That woman is a right viper.”
“I’ll tell you later,” Sendak promised, brushing a hand to Maray’s shoulder. “Not here; not on the dancefloor, anyway.”

“Shall we…” Maray hedged, regaining confidence a moment later. “Shall we go to the gardens, then? I get the feeling there’s a lot for us to catch up on and we can’t very well excuse ourselves for a time yet.”

Sendak blinked down at them, Lance’s appraisal of the maze surfacing his mind. Something odd stirred in his chest at the insinuation but he ignored it. “Yeah,” he assented after a beat, hand never moving from Maray’s arm. “Lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of things:

- I absolutely love, love, LOVE this chapter. I'm totally gay for formal party scenes and Ches -- who wrote the majority of the chapter -- did SUCH a good job with it <3

- Ches and I actually co-wrote a chunk of this chapter, particularly Merla and Sendak's conversation, as we've done in the past. How did you guys like it? Particularly I love writing dialogue this way because it forces us to think on our toes and, personally, I feel like my dialogue comes out a lot smoother

- Sendak is so thick-headed. I love it. I wonder where you all think this is going...~?

- We may be taking a short break after this chapter. We might be able to get the next chapter up, but I'm not sure if we'll have time to edit. Ches and I are now both employed, so we don't have as much time to work on our writing as we previously did and we're running out of pre-written chapters.

- As such, I now think it's an appropriate time to announce that this story will be a little longer than originally anticipated, as it will be the final installment in the Leo Rising series. After lots of editing, re-writing, and re-working Ches and I finally landed on an ending that felt concise and ideal as we both wanted. Because of work, I don't know how long it will take for us to finish up writing the rest of this story, but we have about twelve more chapters left to know. We'll keep you informed in the author's notes and on our blog voltronrising.tumblr.com

- Thank you everyone for your comments and kudos <3 They've really been helping me get through my weeks. I hope you all have a lovely weekend!

~Moosey
The wind picked up once again, hardly buffeted by the protection of the coat Shiro wore over his armor. Ennor’s mountain range had given way to the foothills of the frosty country’s tundra, the world beyond the soft undulations of land a disturbingly flat sheet of white. Beside him, Asaara gestured to a nearby slope and Shiro tugged the reins of the sleigh, guiding the team of cows up the directed path and into a system of caves. In the seat behind them sat Nanan and Matt, the elder of the two clearly attempting to distract the kit from the task at hand with conversation, but Nanan sat silently beside him, choosing to reply only in nods and hums.

“This should be a good enough place,” Asaara announced as the tunnel they were in gave way to icy ripples in the wall – weak sunlight streamed in through the rocks that made up the ice cave’s roof, reflecting weirdly off a pool of water pregnant with stalactites. They drew in the sleigh as far as it would fit, Matt and Shiro helping to steer the cows around so that the conveyance provided some amount of barrier between them and the storm.

Asaara stepped out beside the pool, running her fingertips over the rounded heads of one of the crystalline formations that lined it. The eclectic closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath through her nose and touching the pendant gem that hung around her neck. Nanan stepped up beside the other Galra, her own hand seeking the bone charm that dangled from her throat. Matt and Shiro approached the two in confusion, watching as they linked hands and drew in another breath in unison.

Their voices filled the crystal cave like a glass harp, the sound low and pure – Asaara’s voice lingered in a note, Nanan’s lilting above her in sweet cadences before they fell into rounds. Asaara’s strong alto trembled into reverberations throughout the space, Nanan’s tiny but pure soprano following along diligently. The protective spell reached a soft crescendo and concluded, cresting high in the roof of the cave, where it rang out to completion.

Asaara opened her eyes and wordlessly approached Matt, extending her hand for his tablet.

“We made better time than I expected,” she observed, drawing up the projection of the map and marking down their location. “But that’s good, all things considered. That gives me some extra time to explain. Now.”

Asaara lowered herself neatly to her knees, reaching into the folds of her upcycled sweater coat and retrieving a velvet bag. Blue goldstones painted with aureate symbols poured out, spilling prettily over the floor; Asaara leaned over them, quietly arranging the runes to her liking. It took a moment, but Shiro quickly realized that she wasn’t doing a reading: she was setting up a map.

“Ensa Temple is arranged like this,” she explained, gesturing towards a box of runes. “The building itself only makes up the perimeter of the property – the area in here,” she tapped her finger...
“So it’s set up like an atrium?” Matt inquired, crouching beside the Druid.

“That’s because it is an atrium,” she confirmed. “The temple itself is mainly there to house the entrances to the crypts below and the supplies to tend to the garden.”

“All this inside is a garden?” Nanan quipped, to which the eclectic nodded.

“For thousands of seasons, the Druids at this temple spent their entire lives cultivating plants and crops that can withstand Ennor’s climate and shared them with the people who lived here in Ennor,” Asaara explained. “They say that the springs that flow here despite the cold made the land holy.”

“Do they?” Nanan asked, peering at Asaara with wide, golden eyes. The eclectic smirked knowingly, rearranging some of the runes before her.

“The Druids here have a close connection with the weather, and use their magicks to make the conditions inside of the atrium perfect for developing the new plants in the micro-climates that they create. Really, they could have had this place anywhere – the springs just happened to be convenient.”

“But what about the Mother’s Kiss?” Matt quipped. “If there are Druids at this temple, could they be loyal to Merla?”

“I mean,” she drawled with a shrug. “Probably.”

Nanan made a distressed noise and Matt immediately swatted the eclectic on the shoulder, gesturing at her angrily with his eyebrows while he made to comfort the girl.

“I’m not going to lie to her,” Asarra scowled, folding her arms over her chest and glaring pointedly at Matt. “If Merla’s got a head on her shoulders, she would have had them destroy the crop the second she realized that there was going to be a new Mother —.”

“But we still have to try,” Matt cut her off immediately, squeezing Nanan’s shoulders and giving the girl an encouraging smile. “Who knows? Maybe the Druids there are nice?”

Asaara rolled her eyes, sarcastically mouthing ‘nice’ as if it was the most ridiculous word she’d ever heard.

“But regardless,” Shiro interrupted, turning towards Asaara. “What’s going to be the easiest way to get in? I really doubt we could just walk up the steps and go knock on the door.”

“Well, I think it might prove to be a little more interesting that way,” the Druid deadpanned, rubbing her pendant across her lower lip thoughtfully. “But no. Remember the catacombs I talked about? There’s more than one way to get into the temple.”

“And that is?” Shiro pressed, beginning to become irritated with Asaara’s cryptic hedging – he found that he vastly preferred her interrupting. To his surprise, the eclectic merely gestured towards the back of the cave.

“The snow storms on the tundra can get pretty nasty in the depth of winter,” she explained. “So the people who lived out here way back before central heat and cooling devised a plan to get to the safety and shelter of the mountain whenever the elements got too rough. There’s a system of subterranean caves that run from here in the foothills out to the crypts accessed through the temple.”
“After we get there, what’s our course of action?” Shiro inquired.

“Get in, grab the flower, and get out without being noticed?” the eclectic responded with another one of her noncommittal shrugs. “I don’t know, I’m a goddamn healer – you’re supposed to be the legendary paladin.”

‘Wonderful,’ Shiro thought, feeling the tension in the cave begin to rise. Matt stepped out towards the Asaara to interject, holding a hand out towards her peaceably.

“You said something about the time, earlier,” he recalled. “That we had more than you expected?”

“Yes,” Asaara nodded stiffly. “The Mother’s Kiss is unique in the fact that it only blooms at night. The Mother’s Tears potion only calls for its pollen, so if we manage to take it off some of the pistils when it’s blooming, we should be okay.”

‘This information would have been great to know before we got here,’ Shiro thought irritably, but didn’t make a move to voice this to Asaara. She was already getting testy enough as it was, and Shiro was attributing it to her nerves.

“Why not just grab a bunch of the flowers and bolt?” Matt suggested.

“Because the second that flower is separated from its roots, it will wither and die,” Asaara informed him. “The pollen needs to have come from a living pistil – a living flower.”

“That sounds oddly specific,” Matt returned dubiously.

“You want to read the potion directions?” Asaara huffed. “Magick is finicky like that – if we cut corners either it won’t work or something will go horribly wrong.”

After stating this she stared at Shiro, daring him to contradict her. He shuffled in place, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked over to Nanan who had begun to distract herself with petting the cows during the terse course of their conversation.

“We should split up,” Shiro suggested. “Asaara and I will go to the temple. Matt, you stay back here and guard Nanan—.”

“Oh no, this is a group activity,” Asaara interrupted Shiro immediately, rounding on him with a raised claw. “Number one: safety in numbers. Number two—.”

“She’s eight!” Shiro countered at once. “We are not risking her life just because —.”

“Can you guys just stop arguing?!”

The little shout silenced the two adults at once, carrying with it a surprising amount of anger. Nanan stood beside the sleigh, facing away from them – her hands were balled into fists at her sides, shaking with some amount of controlled rage. Matt made a sympathetic noise, approaching Nanan to offer comfort, only to have her throw out an arm in refusal and turn back towards them all, tears streaming down her face.

“Do this! Do that! All you guys do is talk about stuff I don’t know anything about and make me go around and do all sorts of confusing things,” Nanan sniffed angrily, aggressively cuffing tears out of her eyes. “My Dad is DEAD and I’m ALONE FOREVER now and I don’t even really know any of you at all! And now on top of all that, you’re yelling at each other! Ever since Haggar died, all anyone has done is fight and all I’ve done is be scared and angry and confused! I don’t want any of
this to happen to me, but it’s happening, okay?!”

The girl panted for a moment, Matt opening his mouth to talk before Nanan snapped: “Just shut up!”

She froze in place, staring down angrily at her boots, fists still trembling as she shook her head: “Up until now I’ve done everything you asked me to! I came all the way out here to get the stupid flower and make the stupid potion and I’m tired of everyone getting to tell me what to do! I’m tired and I’m scared and my heart hurts!” She slammed a palm to her chest, looking around at the other three for some measure of understanding, tears slipping unbidden down her cheeks. “If you really are doing all this for me, then doesn’t it matter what I want to do?! All you’ve done is treat me like a little kid, but if I really am the Mother and I’m that important, then that’s not fair! I want to make my own decisions for once!”

Nanan finally fell silent, hiking her hood up over her head and climbing up into the sleigh, folding her arms and pointedly staring away from them.

Shiro and Asaara exchanged guilty glances, the Galra woman’s ears drooping in shame. Matt released a gentle sigh, gesturing for them to step back and approached Nanan with trepidation.

“You’re right,” the brunet began in a placating tone. “You’re completely right, Nanan. You’ve been through… God, you’ve been through so much these past few days, and we haven’t taken time to talk you through everything or even listen to what you have to say.”

He trailed off, finally setting a hand on her shoulder, “I’m so sorry Nanan. I’m so sorry about your Dad, about having to take you – hell, I’m sorry you have to be in this situation at all. You’re right – it’s completely unfair, and we’ve all been letting the situation at hand guide us without regard to your feelings.”

Nanan glanced over her shoulder at Matt, gently setting her fingertips on top of his. The pilot smiled brightly, pulling the girl into a hug from behind, “Whatever you need, please just tell us – I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that you feel safe and happy. But… things have to stay this way for a little while longer, okay?”

The Mother remained silent but gave a stiff little nod of her head, reaching up to paw more tears out of her eyes. Slowly, Asaara approached her, standing beside Matt and ducking down to address Nanan at her height.

“It would be dangerous for you to come with us,” she explained. “But I don’t know how long the pollen will be good for once we get it off of the flower – if the Druids there are on our side, I want to be able to make the Mother’s Tears at the temple and give it to you as quickly as I can.”

“Then I want to go,” Nanan turned suddenly, staring up at Asaara with bleary eyes. Her elder sighed, reaching up to pet the top of her cloak.

“You understand this isn’t like a video game or the movies, right?” Matt asked seriously.

“I understand,” the girl confirmed with a resolute nod. “I know I could die… but I think that I’ve known that ever since I realized that I’m the Mother;” Nanan squeezed her eyes shut. “But you have to make me a promise, okay?”

“Okay, Nanan,” Matt said, reaching out to take her hand, smoothing his thumb over her fingers. “What is it you need?”

“If I die, you need to protect the next Mother,” Nanan told him seriously, beginning to shake.
Shiro felt his heart clench as Matt made a pained noise and pulled the kit closer, burying his face into her neck and shaking his head resolutely.

“No, Nanan – you’re not going to die. There’s absolutely no way I’m ever going to let that happen. I promise you,” the brunet pulled away, cheeks broken out in patches of red as wet streaks worked their way down his face. “I’m *not* going to let anything happen to you, okay? You’re not all alone, Nanan. I’m not going anywhere; I promise.”

“Okay,” Nanan produced a muffled reply into Matt’s shoulder, holding onto him as if her life depended on it.

Before long, night approached and the icy cave was bathed in darkness. Asaara produced a silvery orb in the palm of her hand, cupping it beneath her chin and looking out at the assembled group warily. The light danced in the pools of her eyes, giving her an ethereal sort of glow before she looked away, holding the small sphere aloft. As the eclectic turned and started towards the back of the cave more of the orbs formed alongside her, following like specters bobbing on the sea.

Asaara led the way in silence, her path clear and each step sure-footed as they made their procession. It continued like this for longer than Shiro anticipated, the smooth paths arching up off of the ground like bridges, taking them above dark purple shallows with crystals forming at their banks and depths like the cup of a broken geode.

Eventually Asaara stopped, coming to face a narrow slit in the wall, which she turned to pass through easily, Matt and Nanan following after her. Shiro took a deep breath, momentarily debating whether or not to abandon his cuirass before surmising that the crack would be just big enough to admit his broad form.

“Are you okay?” Matt asked Nanan as they edged forward, the smooth walls freezing cold and pressing them tightly from both sides.

“Uh huh,” the kit confirmed with a frightened jog of her head, a loud breath of relief escaping her as she slid out of the narrow space. Shiro pulled out alongside her, taking a moment to survey the cavern that they had emptied out into.

A stone door occupied the wall that they faced, ten feet tall and inlaid with crystals and ancient runic carvings that Shiro could never have begun to comprehend. Asaara raised a hand, placing it over a milky pink stone set deep into the door, whispering melodically under her breath. There was a deep *plunk*, like a rock being dropped into water, and the doors slid apart with a gust of cold, musty air.

“Oh Nanan,” Matt winced, immediately going to cover the kit’s eyes. “You don’t want to see this, don’t look…”

Much like the catacombs on City Station, rows of tiny cubbies were cut into the stone, skeletons neatly stacked up in each of the little areas. Mummified bodies of Druids past acted as sentinel pillars along the path, dust and rotting robes dripping from their forms.

Confidently, Nanan took Matt’s hand from her eyes and peered around, ears lowering to her head before she ducked closer to him.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, allowing Matt to secure an arm around her shoulder. “It’s just… it’s more sad than it is scary.”

Gracefully, the catacombs swept up, the natural cut of the stone replaced by the uniform
carvings of proper burial vaults, wrought iron doors appearing in the walls where cubbies had once been. Their path came to a dead end, concluding in a set of stone steps that led up to a trap door in the ceiling. Asaara banished all but one of the grey orbs, holding the last in her palm close to her chest as she scaled the steps, moving as quietly as she could to work open the wooden door.

Shiro and Matt braced themselves, the elder of the two calling the purple-white glow to his Galra arm, the younger readying his pistol in preparation. Asaara’s legs disappeared for a moment during which the three other travelers held their breaths, sighing in relief when she ducked back in to the catacombs and beckoned them up.

Ensa Temple was a stark contrast from the black marble and gothic buttresses that made up the Druid temple on City Station. It was built delicately –like a conservatory – all light, thin pillars and arches cumulating in frosted glass. The ceiling above them was a beveled sky light, the maps of constellations pouring down into the space, just like the temple on City Station.

Asaara swept her arm around in an arch, grasping the pendant at her chest and closing her eyes in concentration. A moment later, the eclectic shook her head, dropping the pendant and speaking softly: “I can hardly sense anything.”

“That means we’re in the clear, right?” Matt asked but the Druid shook her head once more.

“No,” she said, frowning in concern. “It’s just… it’s a little disconcerting, isn’t it? I’d think with all the Druids here that I’d be able to feel a greater trace of magick here but instead it’s just…”

“Nothing,” Nanan finished for her, ducking into her cloak. “It doesn’t feel right…”

“But what does that imply for us?” Shiro asked, only to be met with silence. Asaara’s hands tightened around her orb as she glanced around in concern, gesturing for the others to follow her. They moved through an open door and down a covered path that led out into a massive, snowy atrium.

The night hovered around them, eerily silent and still. Flood lights illuminated the yard, blindingly white against the frosty vegetation that towered above them. Asaara took the lead, sliding between bushes and pushing herself deeper into the garden. The others pursued, the cracks and snaps the plants created in the wake of their movements sounding disturbingly loud in the freezing air.

Just when it seemed like the vegetation would go on forever, they finally emerged into the wide center of the courtyard. Here, gas lamps reached high into the air, their stained glass coloring the undulating snow in shades of red and blue, culminating in rippling amethyst in the massive pool below them. Little ice floes surged over the surface of the springs, creeping over lily pads and hoary vines.

“Where are the flowers?” Nanan inquired, going to step over one of the many snowy humps littering the ground. She let out a little cry as she tripped, barreling down into the powdery ground. Matt surged forward to aid her almost immediately, freezing as his hands connected with her shoulders, eyes lingering on what she had tripped over.

“What?” he whispered as Shiro and Asaara stepped closer to observe. A little patch of dark blue had revealed itself beneath Nanan’s steps. Matt crouched lower to brush off more of the snow and tugged on the scrap of color.

A piece of fabric, stiff and frozen began to emerge from beneath the white, bearing with it an intricate pattern of gold. Asaara’s eyes widened and the Druid immediately fell to her knees, palms flying over snow to unearth more and more of the royal blue. Pushing a particularly large chunk out
of the way, Asaara suddenly recoiled and Shiro immediately understood why.

It hadn’t just been a scrap of fabric, it was an entire cloak; and it was still affixed to the frozen corpse of the Druid who wore it.

“So that means…” Shiro began, horror slowly creeping up the nape of his neck like an icy-hot brush of fingertips as he stared around the courtyard. There were at least fifty other undulations in the snow, each representing a Druid buried beneath.

“I suppose I got a little ahead of myself,” a voice from behind them announced softly.

Shiro immediately spun to face the source of the noise, his arm glowing to life as he took on a defensive stance. A plain-faced Galra woman dressed in dark purple robes sat placidly on a stone bench behind them, her smile welcoming. Immediately, silvery energy sparked around them, Asaara’s magick taking form in a long ribbon of energy which curled around the quartet, snakelike.

“Merla,” Asaara snarled at once, a ripple of displeasure surging through the ribbon surrounding them. Nanan immediately sucked in a terrified breath, clinging to Matt’s leg.

The woman regarded Asaara coolly, standing from her perch and steepling her fingertips before her as she walked to the waterside.

“It’s certainly been awhile, hasn’t it Asaara?” Merla sighed, glancing out over the eerily-rippling pond. “I’m glad to see you’ve found a way to occupy your time – although charity work may be a bit unbefitting of you.”

“God can you just shut the fuck up?” Asaara snarled, clicking her tongue when Merla turned to her with a shocked and offended stare. “I know what you’re here for; I know what you’ve done. You can drop the act you lying bitch, it’s never been very convincing any—.”

Asaara never got to finish, drawing in a breath sharply as a bolt of crimson energy lanced out from Merla’s hand, shrieking loudly like a Tesla coil as it met midair with Asaara’s ribbon of light, sparks showering down from the collision.

“Shiro, Matt,” Asaara said lowly, her voice trembling in a mixture of fear and rage. “Take Nanan and go.”

Merla sighed, a dim red glow beginning to fill the pool behind her, overtaking the amethyst water with a bloody hue. The water swept up in a massive wave, swirling around them like a snow globe, crystalizing thickly as it traveled, alight with the glow of her magick.

Asaara swore, her snake of light coiling through the air and slamming into the barrier in another eruption of magickal discharge. Merla made a thoughtful noise, closing the distance between them with a mournful shake of her head.

“Asaara,” she sighed, carrying with her the mien of an exasperated older sister. “It’s behavior like this that made you into a d’selvmaj.”

“Asaara…” Shiro said lowly, but the eclectic merely threw out an arm to usher him back, the hem of her coat beginning to whip around her body in an unseen wind. The ribbon of light above her spiraled down around her wrist, coalescing in her hand like a fencing foil, thin and sparkling with her intent.

Merla hummed, drawing to her palms an orb of red light each before she surged forward. Asaara shot towards her in a sprint, leaning into her foil and absorbing with it the first blow Merla threw.
The second collided with her side, the scent of burnt flesh immediately filling the contained space as the eclectic shrieked, sparks firing from her sword and hissing upon making contact with Merla’s face. The Priestess yowled, rearing back and preparing to strike again, hair beginning to slip free of the braid wrapped around her head.

At seeing her distracted, Shiro turned to Nanan, dropping to one knee and addressing her seriously.

“Do you know any spells that can melt through this ice wall?” he inquired. The kit bit her lip, extending the cup of her hand and allowing a tiny flame to form within it. Immediately she turned towards the wall and pressed the flame close, crying out when angry red sparks shot out at her. Shiro immediately pulled her out of the way, light returning to his prosthetic once more as he made to hack at the thick barrier.

Another shower of crimson sparks rained out before him, a fork of electricity leaping out from the barrier and hitting the nearby ground, melting the snow to steamy water. He tried again, reaching behind him to unclip his bayard from his cuirass and slicing at the glowing ice. Another, larger bolt of electricity leapt out at him, singeing the halberd, which began to glow red hot.

“Fuck,” Shiro swore, turning back to face Asaara and Merla, but catching Matt moving out of the corner of his eye.

“Matt—!” Shiro began, but his friend had already dashed forward into the fray, one hand armed with a pistol and the other with his electric rod. Shiro immediately crouched beside Nanan, holding his arms around her protectively.

Asaara deflected another one of Merla’s blows, sidestepping the oncoming bolt of red magick and thrusting forward with her glowing foil, the weapon phasing through Merla’s stomach. The priestess screamed as the magick penetrated her body without harming it, golden eyes alight with a platinum glow as Asaara surged forward, pumping a blast through her sword and sending Merla staggering backwards.

Matt took this as his opportunity to strike, swinging the electric baton down at Merla and activating it as soon as she caught it in her hand. Red bolts of electrical magick surged into the rod, which acted as a conduit while Matt pressed the muzzle of his gun to Merla’s temple and pulled the trigger.

The backfire was spectacular, electricity crackling up out of Merla and throwing both Matt and Asaara back several feet. The Priestess righted herself quickly, angry red marks glowing to life on her skin, the singe from the laser blast darkening her left eye, blood and dark vitreous fluid gushing down her face. She shook in place, reaching up to touch her cheek before looking down at her palm.

Without hesitation, Merla jammed her fingers against the socket, screaming as magick filled it, leaving behind a red orb of light in its wake. Asaara charged again, Merla snarling as she met her old rival with a rake of claws to her face, barely parried by the backhand swing of the glowing foil. Matt charged Merla once more, the Priestess scoffing and firing a ball of red magick from her opposite palm.

“MATT!” Shiro started from where he was guarding Nanan. The magick collided with Matt’s solar plexus almost immediately, sending him flying back into the barrier of ice with a wicked crack.

“NO!” Nanan cried out in distress, pulling herself free of Shiro’s grip and making to sprint towards Matt. Shiro leapt for her, but Nanan was faster, beginning to take on a flaxen rose hue as she sprinted towards her injured friend – and Merla.
Merla didn’t miss this, smirking manically as she attempted to twist her way out of one of Asaara’s advances. The eclectic held fast however, her foil coruscating with another surge of sparkling discharge, unwinding itself from its tight form and back into the snakelike coil of before. It immediately secured itself around Merla’s neck, the Druid falling to the ground with a rough tug from Asaara, choking loudly.

Shiro arrived at Matt and Nanan’s side, the tiny Druid looking over the crumpled form of their friend in concern. She placed her palms upon his chest, tilting back her head as she began to heal Matt. Shiro stood between them and the warring Druids, bearing his naginata protectively across his body, watching in horror as Merla wrapped her fingers around the band of magick secured around her throat and brought to it a violent red glow.

It was Asaara’s turn to shriek in agony as Merla’s magick invaded her, causing her to immediately withdraw. Merla turned on her, seizing Asaara with a red-tinged hand and slamming her into the ground, pinning her there with the weight of her magick, an orb of the stuff smothering Asaara’s mouth, effectively silencing her.

Merla took to her feet and sighed sadly, as if she’d had a disagreement with a friend rather than just cauterizing her own missing eye and attempting to beat several people to death. Calmly she turned to face Shiro, a smile of familiarity curling onto her lips.

“Vrepmyza,” she greeted him in a benevolent tone. “It’s good to see you doing well.”

Shiro didn’t hesitate, sprinting forward to swing his naginata at her, Merla rocketing to the side with a crackle of bright red electricity. Shiro turned on her immediately, swiping with the benign end of the staff in an attempt to disturb her footing. Merla jumped over the pole, pressing herself close to Shiro who immediately abandoned the bayard, crossing his prosthetic over his body to absorb Merla’s attack.

The electricity flowed into his prosthetic harmlessly, negated by some source within it. Suddenly, the arm pulsed with energy and Merla leapt backwards, studying Shiro curiously. The paladin didn’t take a moment to breathe, instead immediately beginning to track Merla.

“You were truly Haggar’s pride and joy, did you know?” Merla inquired, making to circle Shiro. “The way that arm became an extension of your consciousness; the rage and bloodlust and lethality that you channeled into it was exquisite.”

Shiro barred Merla from completing her rotation, slicing at her with the arm, only for Merla to grasp onto it, expression mirthful as the glow of her magick protected herself from its burn.

“What was it that was said before he destroyed the original?” she queried almost innocently. “That he could have loved you?”

Shiro ignored the jab, wrenching his arm free of Merla’s hold, only to receive a blow to his side in response.

“You’re not worth playing with,” Merla muttered, and Shiro’s vision was overcome with bright red.

His vision dimmed, replaced instead by fragmented scenes:

The halogen lights of the morgue filled Shiro’s eyes, shaking as he stared down at the mangled and burnt corpses of his mothers laid out before him for identification. The smoldering tray of ashen full of bones ready for picking. The moment before the ship Persephone launched into space bound
for Kerberos. The slam of a cell’s door. The lights of the arena beating down onto him. The sticky-slick of his first kill’s entrails fresh on his hands. “I could have loved you”. Keith lying in a pool of his own blood, the light fading from his eyes. Otherworldly noises filled his ears, screaming, screaming, and then evanescing into song strangely dissonant from the world of pain around him.

Shiro lay on his back in the cold, blearily registering the swathes of pearlescent light surging up against the thick spiral of ice that kept them trapped in with Merla. Suddenly he gasped as he was shocked into full consciousness, heart hammering in his chest. Specters were rising around them in brilliant arcs, twisting protectively around Shiro, Matt, and Asaara, whose song seemed to guide them. Asaara was crumpled in the snow, clutching something to her chest, the power behind the tremolo in her song almost frightening.

Merla stood with her back to them, head hung. She rose a hand to the side of the globe of ice, scarlet bursting forth from her palm as it dissipated into mist, rising in the air alongside the ghosts of the dead Druids surrounding them. They surged forward against Merla, who snarled into their clawing swipes and gnashing teeth, pooling into black and red shadows.

“Asaara!” Shiro cried hoarsely, standing to sprint towards his friend. Behind her, Matt was stirring as well, a ghost benevolently pressing her palms to his chest.

“Nanan…” the brunet gurgled, rolling over and pushing himself to his feet before staggering towards Asaara.

Asaara sobbed, her spell breaking off suddenly as she collapsed, letting whatever was bundled in her arms gently land in the snow. Shiro stood, approaching as the night stilled back to silence, nothing permeating the stagnant air accept for the soft gasps of air that the eclectic drew in.

“Nanan…” Matt said softly, falling back to his knees beside Asaara, reaching forward with shaking hands.

Shiro tripped over to them, not wanting to face what was splayed out before the eclectic, plain as day.

“Nanan…?” Matt choked out, voice already thickening with tears as he lifted the little girl from the snow, her head hanging limply, curls trailing in the slush. The fur across her face was burnt into lightning-strike patterns running along her capillaries, the gold in her eyes beginning to pool with red, light pupils becoming dark and visible.

Shiro was shoving Matt out of the way before he could realize what he was doing, rolling Nanan onto her back and shaking her shoulders.

“Nanan?” he urged.

“She’s—,” Asaara choked out.

“Shh,” Shiro hissed, lowering his ear to her mouth, gently setting his palm over her chest. Beside him he could feel Matt shaking violently, his little exhalations of disbelief peppering the air. And then, the slightest little breath. Shiro released a sign of relief, fingers desperately searching along Nanan’s neck for a pulse.

“Her heart’s still beating, but just barely. I’m starting chest compressions,” Shiro announced, kneeling beside Nanan and bracing his palm over the center of her chest.

“Wait!” Asaara cried, taking Shiro by the wrist and shaking her head violently. “We’re going to have to shock her,” she announced shakily. “Merla – she used electricity to – I’m going to try a
shock."

The eclectic removed Nanan’s cloak and bodice, brushed away the remnants of her destroyed bone charm, and pressed her fingers to the kit’s bare chest. The lighting-like patterns of scorches reached even there.

“Stand back,” she told them. “Oh three. One, two—.”

A crackle of electricity caused Nanan’s body to jolt up off the ground. The second she pulled off, Shiro took over. Another check proved that her breath and heart rate was just as sluggish as before. Placing his palm over her chest and gripping with his opposite hand, Shiro began to push down, trying to keep the compressions steady as he pressed against her sternum, counting out loud to thirty.

He finished, tipping back Nanan’s head and opening her mouth. Pinching her nose closed he pressed two breaths into her mouth, forcing her chest to rise fully. Again, he continued compressions, mind completely steely of the reality panning out around him. Panic was superseded by procedure and order, Shiro going through the motions as he’s practiced a thousand times back at the Garrison.

‘I’m not pressing hard enough,’ he realized as he began to transfer air to Nanan once more. ‘I’ll have to…’

Steeling himself, Shiro began compressions again, wincing when he felt Nanan’s sternum crack beneath the heel of his palm. Once he completed the compressions Matt touched his shoulder, silently offering to take over.

Shiro moved out of the way at once, allowing Matt to continue the CPR. He breathed into Nanan’s mouth, both he and Shiro counting the compressions as he resumed, another rib cracking under his hands. The three sat in silence as they worked, Matt continuing the next round of CPR and moving aside for Asaara to perform another shock.

A shrill gasp penetrated the air.

Nanan’s eyes fluttered as she coughed and gasped, turning on her side and vomiting into the snow where she continued to heave and choke. Asaara steadied her as Matt began to shake violently next to them, coughing out his own sobs.

“Fuck,” Shiro sniffed, cuffing away his own tears as the heat of relief flooded him like a drug.

Nanan moaned, Asaara moving the girl into her lap and laying her hands over her chest.

“H-here,” the eclectic said, voice tremulous. “Here you go, I’ll fix that pain in your chest. You did so good kit, you’re so good…”

Several of the Druid ghosts floated near to the scene, their presence all but forgotten in the wake of the CPR. They reached out gently, phasing through the three adults to place the visage of their hands over Nanan’s chest, the light of their own magicks glowing alongside Asaara’s as they worked to heal the broken bones.

“Thank you,” Shiro told them with a shaky nod.

“Thank you so much,” Matt sobbed, cupping his hands over his mouth. “Thank you.”

The ghosts nodded and closed their glowing eyes, fading into the misty curl of their breaths.
Asaara removed her hands from Nanan’s chest, covering the girl up with her cloak to the best of her ability. Nanan stared up at them unblinking with wide, bloodshot eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” Matt coughed through his tears, reaching out and taking the kit’s hand. He brought it to his mouth, kissing it softly before pressing Nanan’s palm to his cheek. “I’m so sorry Nanan, I failed you.”

Slowly, Nanan shook her head, just barely brushing her finger over Matt’s cheek before letting herself go limp. Matt and Shiro started, Asaara shaking her head gently.

“She’s okay, I think she just passed out from shock,” she explained, sitting Nanan up. “Shiro, carry her into the temple, but be sure to keep her upright in case she throws up again, I don’t want her aspirating. They should have some medical equipment inside that will help us out.”

Shiro nodded, carefully gathering Nanan into his arms. Matt stood beside them shakily as they followed Asaara through one of the proper pathways cutting through the atrium. It didn’t take long to locate a medical ward, the black paladin delicately laying the kit down in the patient bed bobbing above the floor. It dipped under her meagre weight, Asaara immediately setting to check and apply the proper equipment, securing a breathing apparatus over Nanan’s mouth and nose and hooking her up to several machines.

By the time dawn broke over Ensa temple, Asaara had finally finished her work, coming to sit on the floor beside Matt and Shiro, placing her face in her hands. No one could speak what they were thinking.

Nanan had just barely survived.

They had nearly failed.

Chapter End Notes

So -- before the major edits -- this was originally supposed to be the last chapter of Constellation. How much would you guys have hated us then? No worries, we’re hard at work on the rest of Constellation! We’ve reorganized a few things and finally have something that we’re both super happy with! From now on we’re going to try to write a chapter a week and post it on Saturday evenings (as we’ve been). However, with work I’m not sure if we’re going to be able to keep up a weekly update schedule, but we’ll try our hardest! If that changes, we’ll be sure to let you know in the author’s notes.

This chapter was written by me and it went through a LOT of edits and changes and re-writes, but I’m super happy with the result! Hopefully you guys enjoyed it, too! I’ll never stop thanking you -- our wonderful readers -- for all of your kudos and comments! I hope you all have a lovely week, Ches and I can’t wait to start wrapping this series up <3

~Moosey
Midday hung over Sosettar Castle like a gloomy specter, the weighted grey of the clouds just visible through the gaps in the heavy drapes that had been eaten through by moths – or, by whatever the equivalent creature on Gal was, Shiro supposed. Either way, the weak rays of daylight had saturated the musty sitting room, playing through the panels of stained glass kaleidoscope-like and casting weird angular shadows over the furniture. These Shiro traced with his eyes, wishing desperately for sleep to come and numb out the memories that beat ceaselessly against his skull.

“We almost lost Nanan this morning,” Shiro tested out the words, tone tentative and low. “We almost lost Nanan,” he repeated, “And there was nothing we could do to stop it.”

Helplessness and guilt burned in his chest and with a whimper Shiro turned against the brocade of the cushion he was using as a pillow, blocking out the world around him as if it would better stave off his thoughts. The events of the past several hours were more than he could digest, the reality of it all only just cresting through the fog of shock and fatigue that had followed him until that point.

He, Matt, and Asaara had stayed up without rest all morning until long after the sun had risen, all waiting anxiously for Nanan to revive. None of them had said more than a handful of words to one another, countenances downcast and contemplative. At some point during the morning Matt had gotten up from beside Shiro and begun to pace, hands fidgeting together fretfully all the while. None of them wanted to voice what they all knew: they had very nearly failed.

‘What am I going to tell Keith?’ Shiro had wondered, drawing his knees towards his chest. ‘What am I going to tell the Vesh? Where do we even go from here? Even if she failed to gain the Motherhood, the fact that Merla dropped her act is off putting – what will she be willing to do now that she doesn’t have a cover? Now that she knows for certain that Nanan is who stands in her way to gaining power? How long do we have until she makes another attack? A political move? Now that she’s revealed herself what does she really have left to lose?’

Shiro quickly found that he didn’t have any answers.

‘There has to be a plan of recourse in place,’ he made to console himself. ‘No matter how much faith in us the Vesh had there’s no way they didn’t also plan for the worst. Thace, at the very least, has seen way too much to overlook the possibility. But still,’ he considered, unease gnawing at his belly, ‘Was what we attempted to do here worth it? Was this plan really the best idea? Nanan almost…’

Shiro trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

He had looked up to the floating bed in which the girl laid, finding the respirator still secured across her face. She was pale, brow creased even in sleep as though she were fighting off a bad dream. Shiro lowered his gaze in guilt, unable to help but feel squarely responsible for all of the pain she had been forced to endure.

‘I’m so sorry, Nanan,’ he apologized inwardly. ‘I should have listened to you more – we all should have listened to you more. I’ll never regret saving your life back at The Convent but I don’t
know if I can justify endangering it any longer, especially not knowing how things have played out.’

Nanan began to stir and Matt rushed to her bedside, gently taking one of her hands in his own. The little girl coughed, pawing at the breathing apparatus with her free hand before realizing what it was, body going lax with confused surprise.

“You’re alright,” Asaara assured her in a voice kinder and softer than Shiro had heard from her yet. “Let’s see how you’re doing.” After a few moments of careful assessment Asaara unhooked the younger Druid from her equipment, helping to prop her up more fully in the oversized bed. Matt stayed beside her the whole while, coaching her gently as he tried to tide back his own tears; the kit wiped at them gently, nuzzling closer to the brunet for comfort.

“Did I die?” she asked at length, her companions going silent at once. Nanan’s ears drooped.

“Oh,” she followed softly, voice strained and raspy.

“It was a close call,” Asaara clarified, fingers interlocking fitfully as a sad smile forced its way across her lips. “It seems wrong to say that you were lucky but –.”

“Nanan I am so – we are so –,” Matt interjected but Nanan just smiled at him weakly as if to console him.

“Can I have some water?” she asked quickly, looking between the brunet and Asaara. “My chest hurts.”

“Hurts?” Matt reiterated worriedly.

“Hurts or is sore?” Asaara calmly asked, waiting as Nanan contemplated herself.

“It’s sore,” Nanan decided at length. “But like… really sore.”

“Do you think you can move?”

Nanan bit her lip, shifting gingerly in place. “I think so,” she determined, choking back a pained gasp as she fell too swiftly against the pod. Matt keened in response, settling a hand to her shoulder. “I’m okay,” Nanan assured quickly, irises glazing over.

“It’s okay if you’re not,” Asaara countered gently. “Though now that you’re awake we should try and return to the castle.”

“I can carry her,” Matt offered at once. “Shiro, will you go get the sled?”

At the sound of his name Nanan produced a little sound torn halfway between a growl and a squeak. Her gaze fell upon him for a moment, tearing away the second he returned it and shifting imperceptibly closer towards Matt.

“Yeah,” Shiro forced out, ignoring the hurt that lanced through him as he slipped from the room and went to gather the team.

The subsequent trip back to Sosettar Castle had been quiet and bleak. Nanan had curled up beside Matt as he fed her chips of ice, murmuring to her soothingly as Shiro and Asaara steered the cows through the snow. The sun had only just reached its zenith by the time they arrived at the property’s periphery, the giant silver gates swinging wide for them as they approached. Exhausted, they spilled from the vestige, Nanan yawning into Matt’s chest as he lifted her from the sleigh.

“I’m going to put this one to bed,” Matt announced. “I know it’s like noon but I think we could
all use the rest. And maybe a shower, when we have the energy.”

“You’ll probably want to wash those suits of yours,” Asaara hummed perceptively. “Or at least change into something a bit cleaner; let me see what I can find for you.”

Following her lead, the group trailed into the castle, stretching with relief as the fireplace sprung to life in the Druid’s wake, the warmth seeping into their stiffened joints. Asaara rooted around for a moment, brushing aside sleepy gal’stara as she extracted a small mountain of fabric from her cocoon of a bed. With a wave of her hand the patched-together garments rearranged themselves in a wash of soft grey light, folding themselves into a proper stack.

“I usually take these down to Purra as donations,” Asaara explained, divvying up the clothes between Matt and Shiro. “So there’s no guarantee how well they’ll fit. Should be better than what you’ve got, at least.”

“Thank you,” Shiro returned earnestly, and Asaara waved off the sentiment.

“The sleeping quarters are down this corridor and up the left staircase once you hit the grand foyer,” she explained with a brief nod. “There’s like a million of them so you can’t miss ‘em – choose whichever ones you want. A couple have bathrooms attached but if not then there’s a bigger one that you can use, too.”

Nanan yawned again, tugging gently at Matt’s front. “Will you stay?” she asked in a small voice. “I don’t want to be alone. At least until I fall asleep?”

“I’ll stay,” Matt promised readily. “We can find a nice big place to cuddle up and I’ll groom you until you fall asleep. And even after that I’ll stay. How’s that sound?”

Nanan had merely offered a little smile in turn, relaxing back into his arms.

‘Even if everything else has fallen to shit around us,’ Shiro reflected, ‘at least Nanan and Matt have each other. I guess that’s one thing to be grateful for.’

Tiredly Shiro readjusted where he lay, pulling the sheet tightly around himself. It had been used to cover the very couch he occupied and felt unclean against his skin no matter how much he’d tried to beat the dust and gal’stara fur out of it first. Across from him sat a low coffee table and two high backed chairs still hidden by sheets of their own, a dead and gaping fireplace positioned to their side. Distantly Shiro wished he had asked Asaara to light it for him, the chill of the snow beyond seemingly unhampered by the thick stone of the castle walls.

“Are you sure you want to stay in here?” the Druid had asked dubiously from the doorway. “One of the bedrooms would probably be a lot more comfortable, you know.”

“It’s fine,” Shiro had assured her tiredly. “…he hedged, licking at his lips in thought a moment. “After everything that’s happened today I’d just like some room to myself,” he admitted. Asaara lowered her gaze and then nodded, pausing as if there were more she wanted to say. It wasn’t hard to guess what was on her mind.

With a small cough Shiro broached the subject; “How is she doing?”

Asaara looked back to him, not needing further clarification. “Well enough,” she sighed with some relief. “Better than expected, actually. She should be sleeping now; Matt ended up laying down in the bed with her and pet her hair until she was purring.”

“She really trusts him,” Shiro added, forcing a smile.
“I can’t say as I’m surprised, what with as attached as Matt has gotten to her.”

“It’s weird to seeing him being so parental,” Shiro frowned, considering the time they had spent at the Garrison together all the way up to their final days aboard the Persephone taking data from Kerberos. “It’s like the last time I saw him he was still just some goofy kid. Well, young adult. But… now he’s so different. He’s grown up so much.”

“As have you,” Asaara pointed out meaningfully. “Thanks to the Coliseum, galaxies over have seen testament to that.”

Shiro winced, nodding. “I suppose you’ve got a point there. Still, are Matt and I really capable of caring for her? She’s only eight – sixteen seasons – and beyond that she’s been through so much trauma and loss,” he explained. “And now… I mean… she almost died Asaara. How do we go on from here? What tools do we have to help her deal with all of this?”

“I can’t say as I know,” the Druid admitted. “You have to understand that these kinds of problems – the emotional sort, the kind that have to do with traumas – have no kind of treatment in our culture. At least not any longer. Us Druids used to be trained in that kind of medicine, but that was so long ago that it’s more or less forgotten. This kind of thing, well…” she trailed off with a grimace. “Honestly the only recourse the Galra have anymore is reconditioning.”

“Absolutely not,” Shiro returned sharply and Asaara raised her hands in peace.

“I wasn’t suggesting as such,” she responded calmly. “Besides, from what I hear that kind of thing has been outlawed now. I… I don’t really know what will be best for Nanan; normally I would say to let her be among other Druids but obviously that’s no longer a valid choice. With the Motherhood still up for grabs there’s no way that Merla’s going to handle this defeat gracefully. She’ll come back, and with the vengeance, and we’ve got to be prepared.”

“I was afraid of such,” Shiro exhaled, running a hand over his scalp. “We’ve got to come up with some other plan, some place to go – I highly doubt Merla is going to stop hunting Nanan until she gets what she wants.”

“Neither do I,” Asaara concurred. “But with Nanan as she is now? There’s just no way that she can be taken to anywhere dangerous. I think the Vesh’s base would be best.”

“What do you mean?” Shiro stilled. “‘With Nanan as she is now’?”

“I have reason to believe that Merla tried to take a bit more than just the Motherhood from her,” Asaara hedged. “And I don’t know how long the effects will last, but… Nanan doesn’t have the same sort of aura to her as she did before. In fact, it’s barely present. I have suspicions that Merla ended up draining Nanan of some of her powers – stole it, essentially. I’m not confident that Nanan has enough energy at her disposal to protect herself now; even erecting a barrier may exhaust her. Given that she’s still healing from her injuries I fear that using her magick now may actually physically cause her harm.”

“So what do we do?” Shiro bit his lip. “I agree that having her stay among the Vesh is probably what would be safest. Even still, a lot could happen between now and then. I’d hate for her to be completely defenseless – worse, to feel that she is defenseless. You said that you didn’t know how long lasting this deficit would be – does that mean that there’s something we could do to help her?”

“Maybe not you or Matt,” Asaara admitted gently, “but with coaching from another Druid she may be able to start regaining what she’s lost.”
Shiro looked to her searchingly and she sighed, nodding with a good natured smile. “Yes, I can be that Druid,” she affirmed. “If you’ll trust me with going to the Vesh’s base, that is.”

“I think you’ve more than proved yourself trustworthy,” Shiro pointed out.

“I’m honored to hear it,” Asaara bowed her head. “That said, I highly doubt that Matt will be willing to be separated from her – I suspect that he’s going to want to come with Nanan and I. Still, that would mean losing your traveling companion,” she warned. “So how is it that you wish to proceed?”

“You’re right about Matt,” Shiro sighed knowingly. He looked up with a determined smile; “But even at that he’s going to want his mech and he left that at Myzalta’s place. It’s not far from here so I imagine the best course of action would be for the lot of us to travel there together and then split up after we’re all rested. I need to check in with the rest of my team.”

“Will you be alright on your own?” Asaara frowned, fiddling with her pendant. “How do you intend on getting to your team? Will you need to be dropped off?”

“Malachite can only sit three,” Shiro recalled. “Taking multiple trips might be risky; I’d rather get Nanan as directly to The Haven as possible – that’s the name of the Vesh’s HQ.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Asaara conceded. “Especially since we still don’t know how Merla was able to find us. I suppose it could be safely guessed that Nanan would head to the temple before long but Merla didn’t seem like she’d been there for long, either. She wasn’t waiting on us – she was expecting us. Someway, somehow she knew exactly when we’d be there.”

“Which is exactly why you lot need to get to safety as soon as possible,” Shiro asserted.

“So then what do you intend to do? How do you plan on getting back to – well, wherever it is you’re going? Unless your host has an entire craft you’re not telling me about?”

“Probably not,” Shiro chuckled. “I’ll be heading back to the Castle of Lions. I… should be able to figure something out, but we’ll probably have to stop over at Myzalta’s,” he concluded uncertainly.

Asaara squinted at him critically before giving a small shrug. “Well if you’re sure,” she dismissed. “I hope this Myzalta person doesn’t mind the extra company.”

“They’re very accommodating,” Shiro promised, stifling a yawn beneath his palm. “And their kits seem to think highly of you; I think they’re occasional patients of yours?”

“Hmn,” the Druid contemplated, cocking her head. “Now that you mention it, I think so. The name sounded familiar, at least. Well you might as well rest up: sorry for keeping you, I just thought you should be made aware of Nanan’s condition. We really need to make sure not to push her until she’s fully healed,” Asaara reiterated. “But with things as they are I’m concerned over her getting hurt.”

“It’s unlikely things will deescalate soon,” Shiro returned grimly. “And thanks for filling me in. Until then, sleep well?”

“I’ll try,” Asaara dubiously hummed. “I know we’ve all been through a lot but let’s try to aim for leaving here around sundown. Make sure you’re ready by then?”

At Shiro’s confirmation the Druid departed, closing the door to the sitting room behind her with a soft click. Like a string had been cut, Shiro collapsed against the couch, the traces of resolve he had
mustered for the others gone in an instant.

“Keep it together, Shirogane,” he chided, voice cracking as the threat of tears beat against the backs of his eyes. It was precisely the reason he had wanted space to himself; Matt had borne witness to a number of his episodes already and no matter how good he was at handling them Shiro didn’t want to give his friend anything more to worry over.

“It’s fine,” he forced out. “We’ll figure something out. We have to. We always do.”

But Shiro could feel his resolve crumbling, the leaderly façade wearing thin. He’d pushed himself just a little too far, been strong for the others just a bit too much.

“Fuck it,” he whispered in a humorless laugh, wiping at the tears that had already begun to blur his vision. “No one’s here, anyway, right? Just get this out of my system; things will be different by nightfall.”

Permission to cry self-granted, Shiro collapsed against the sofa, the weight of the day bearing down on him until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

---

When Shiro awoke the light perforating the windows had weaned, the sun eclipsed behind the crags of the mountain range that embraced the castle. Eyes still puffy from crying and not feeling entirely rested, Shiro propped himself up on an arm, stretching his neck in the hopes that it would pop and release the tension that had built up while he’d slept. The effort was to no avail and Shiro slumped against the couch, contemplating whether he should get up or try to sneak in a few more minutes of sleep.

A faint rustling jarred him from his thoughts and Shiro went on the defensive, arm warming with orchid light. The effect was eerie, distorted purples casting strange shadows and doing little to illuminate the space. The rustling returned, far too loud for any kind of errant rodent and Shiro sat up more fully, straining his eyes against the dark and trying to pick out any shape that wasn’t abandoned furniture.

Another shuffle and then two pricks of bright yellow pierced back at him and his heart accelerated against his chest. “Who’s there?” he called out, voice calmer than he felt. The glowing yellow flickered in a slow blink but the other person remained silent. Unnerved, Shiro rose from the couch, pushing the sheet aside and raising his arm in an attempt to better see. It did little to aid him and, driven to raw instinct, Shiro began to calculate the surest means of defense.

The other person shifted and – now alerted to their presence – Shiro could make out the gentle padding of their feet across the carpet, their steps surprisingly soft. Between the two armchairs the figure came to a stop, just barely bathed in the light of Shiro’s prosthetic.

“Nanan?” he frowned, taking a step towards the girl before stilling.  

‘Why didn’t she respond to me?’ he thought cautiously. ‘Something’s odd here.’

“Nanan?” he supplicated again, voice kinder than before. “Hey, what’s wrong? Is Matt with you?”

The Galra said nothing, merely staring at him with an intent that Shiro couldn’t quite sense.

“Is something bothering you?” Shiro pressed, only to be met with silence. Shiro took a tentative step forward, measuring the girl’s reaction. Nanan’s eyes flickered a moment but she let him advance, not budging until Shiro was kneeling before her.
“Why are you here?” she finally asked. At first Shiro couldn’t discern if she was talking to herself or to him, the slant of her eyes lowered to the floor as if in contemplation.

“What do you mean, Nanan?”

“Why are you here?” the Druid reiterated, eyes cutting back to Shiro ferociously enough to make him recoil. “Why are any of you here?”

“I don’t –.”

“No,” Nanan hissed and Shiro could feel his skin prickle, something disturbing the air around them. “You told me that you went to The Convent to save me – to save everybody. To keep Merla from being the Mother and to keep us all safe. But we’re not safe and Merla’s still out there and even if I am the Mother I don’t have my powers and I can’t do anything. There’s no reason for you to be here anymore so why are you?”

“Nanan, I’m sorry for what happened,” Shiro bowed his head. “For everything that happened – we all are. We didn’t –.”

“All you ever do is apologize!” Nanan cut across, the outline of her body growing clearer in the darkness as a pinkish glow began to overtake her. Shiro froze, innately aware of the mounting danger.

‘How do I defuse this?’ his thoughts raced. ‘She deserves to be heard out but this isn’t good. If she uses her powers she might –.’

“‘I’m sorry’, ‘we’re sorry’, everybody is just sorry!” Nanan went on tersely, hands now awash in the aura of her magicks. “But nothing ever changes! No one ever does anything! Merla still wants to kill me and my dad is still dead and I still have nowhere to go and no one is doing a thing about it!”

“You have every reason to be angry,” Shiro assented, slowly reaching out for her shoulder. A small snarl escaped her and she evaded his hand, rejecting his attempts to console her. Shiro retreated, heart thrumming in his chest as he tried to think of what to say. “Maybe we are apologizing too much,” he conceded. “That’s not to say that we don’t mean it. The situation is even more complex than it was before and –.”

“Stop. Making. Excuses!” Nanan spat in staccato. “You guys just keep saying things that I don’t understand and it hasn’t made anything better. Why did you even bother taking me from The Convent in the first place? Nothing changed! It just got worse.”

“Merla would have killed you, Nanan,” Shiro insisted, licking his lips. “We had to keep you safe so we –.”

“She’s gonna try and kill me anyway!”

“We can still stop her,” Shiro pressed. “We won’t let her get away with hurting people.”

“You hurt people.”

“…”

“None of this would have happened if it weren’t for you,” Nanan continued venomously. “‘Vrepmyza’ – I know what that means, you know. I’m not stupid. You’ve killed a ton of people so why should any of the rest of us matter? You’re probably just waiting to kill me, too, just like Merla.
The only reason anyone keeps me around is ‘cause I’m the Mother. But if my dad were still alive he would have protected me and none of this would have ever happened. But he can’t because he’s dead and it’s your fault and now you’re trying to pretend like you care about me. But you don’t and now everything is… is… is shit!”

“Nanan I –.”

“SHUT UP!” Nanan shouted and suddenly Shiro was propelled backwards, the table behind him knocking painfully against his spine as something constricted at his neck. Scrabbling, Shiro struggled to fight the pressure off, fingers raking impotently at his own skin. He could feel his arm flare to life beside him, the desperate need to survive winning out over any rational concerns.

“Nanan,” he choked, fighting to sit up as the pressure at his neck forced him to the ground, the back of his head ramming against the corner of the table and making him dizzy. He connected with the floor with a thud, blurry eyed as Nanan came to stand over him, the pink of her aura extending from her body like an elongated hand.

“This is your fault,” Nanan repeated, and Shiro could hear that she had begun to cry even as her image grew distorted and he fought for breath.

“Nanan please,” he begged, but the pressure just increased.

“Don’t!” Nanan bit out in distress. “You couldn’t beat Merla when we had the chance. You didn’t win so now you have to die. Vrepit sa – it’s your fault so it’s fair.”

“Please!” Shiro choked out as his vision began to spot. “You’ll hurt yourself,” he forced next, words strained against the vice at his throat.

“I don’t care!” Nanan returned, voice hysterical. “I already hurt: my body hurts, my head hurts, my heart hurts. It doesn’t matter.”

“You have to –.”

“Shut up!”

“-protect yourself.”

“I am protecting myself!” Nanan insisted, but the extension of her aura wavered as if uncertain, slackening slightly. Shiro gasped in a ragged breath, the oxygen painfully rushing to his head.

“I’m –” Shiro began, quickly swallowing his apology. Nanan looked at him curiously, brows creased in upset and cheeks flushed a dark purple from her tears. She cuffed at her eyes with a wrist, maintaining the phantom limb about Shiro’s neck.

“None of this should have happened,” he tried again. “But Matt and I will never regret saving you. We’re all worried for you; if you keep using your magick you’ll hurt yourself. Asaara is really worried. She says she wants to help you recover. We all do, even if we don’t know how. I promise we’re going to keep you safe –.”

“Safe?” Nanan’s frown deepened, the anger returning to her eyes. “You said that before and you were wrong – you’re just trying to trick me,” she accused. “You begged before – you just want
to live. You’re lying, aren’t you?”

With sudden force the fingers of her aura constricted and Shiro gasped out a wheeze, the air knocked from his lungs before he could grab a breath. The effects were much more immediate, his vision fuzzy and vignetted in an instant.

‘I can’t die here,’ he struggled, images of Keith and his friends filling his mind. ‘I have to... no other choice,’ he concluded in fragmented thoughts. The energy pooled in his arm and Shiro struck, the heat of the prosthetic passing dangerously before his face as he sliced at the space above his neck. Nanan let out a yelp of fright and she stumbled backwards, the pinkish arm dissipating like smoke.

Shiro tried to get to his feet, almost nauseous as he tried to reorient himself, succeeding in little else than rolling with a groan onto his side. The rug hissed as he propped himself up, his Galra arm searing through it. Nanan looked to the prosthetic fearfully, keeping her distance as tears continued to fall down her cheeks.

“I’m not trying to trick you,” Shiro began, the effort of talking making him wince.

‘Must have bruised my trachea,’ he distantly assessed. ‘I have to be careful she doesn’t hurt me further; even if she’s acting out of anger and fear she’s far more powerful than I’ve ever given her credit for.’

“I’m not trying to hurt you, either,” Shiro pressed, wishing desperately that his arm would fizzle out as he rose to his feet. “Asaara agrees that you should be taken to The Haven – that’s where the Vesh are. You’ll be safe with them.”

“The Vesh?” Nanan echoed uncertainly.

“Yeah,” Shiro nodded. “We didn’t… we didn’t do a good enough job protecting you,” he admitted. “So we’re going to do better. You deserve better.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” came the small reply.

“Wha… no,” Shiro blinked, blindsided by the question. “Nanan we’re trying to do best by you. Asaara is going to go with you and I bet Matt is, too. The Vesh are really nice and the people at The Haven aren’t just all adults – there’re kids there, too. I think the best plan is to leave tonight and–”

“But what about what I want?” Nanan insisted. “Stop bossing me around! You’re not my dad!”

Shiro braced himself, realizing he had screwed up. “I know I’m not your dad,” he attempted to placate. “And I know no one’s going to replace him. I get –”

“No you don’t get it!” Nanan sobbed. “I don’t have a family anymore! And if my dad can’t live neither can you!”

Shiro’s scream perforated the air as a violent crack of energy collided with his chest, sending him staggering. Electric tremors coursed through him and, panting for breath, he collapsed to a knee. The Druid was advancing once more.

“Nanan,” Shiro cautioned, grimacing as his body convulsed from the pain.

“No,” the girl spat back. The pink of her aura had swollen around her, magick sparking as her voice rose. “I’m not listening to you anymore! You’re not listening to me! You just don’t get it!”

“Wait! You’ll burn yourself out!” Shiro cried. “Nanan, please! Let’s talk about this; your
powers could –.

“I don’t want them!” Nanan returned furiously. “I don’t want to be the Mother! I don’t want any of this!”

At the final word Nanan’s aura burst apart, tendrils of energy striking out like lightning. Shiro’s vision flashed white, the sound of shattering glass just noticeable over the noise of the blast. Ducking on instinct, Shiro hurdled himself at the floor, the short pile of the rug smashing against his forehead as debris peppered his prone form.

“I hear you!” Shiro shouted over the ethereal wind left in the wake of the explosion. “I hear you and you’re right – you’re right about a lot of this!”

The gust at his back weakened and Shiro slowly rose, fine powder and glass shards falling from his clothes. Nanan was watching him intently, brows screwed up in uncertainty. But she was listening.

“You’re right, Nanan,” Shiro continued, heart slamming against his ribs. “We have been making excuses. We haven’t made much progress and we haven’t protected you well enough. We haven’t been listening to you, either. Not nearly as much as we should have been. And that’s not fair to you and I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to hear any more apologies but I mean it: you deserve more than what you’ve been through.”

As Nanan stilled, so did the winds around her, her hair a disheveled halo about her shoulders. Shiro went on, fighting to keep his voice steady.

“You’re right about the rest, too. About me. I… I am Vrepmyza. That’s a part of me and it always will be. I did do really bad things; I did kill a lot of people. I’m not going to deny that. And I am the reason you lost your father. I’m not going to try and dodge responsibility for that, either. I did what I thought I had to do and you suffered because of it. And none of that is fair to you. I am Vrepmyza and I did do these things and you have every right to hate me or distrust me. And I want you to know that you’re not ever obligated to forgive me for these things. But this is who I am and these are the choices I’ve made – I can’t undo that. But I can try to be better, to do better – for myself and for others.

“And I am trying, Nanan. I’m trying to change things, make things better for everyone. Not just on Gal or on City Station but for the entire Empire. I’m trying to do the right things, to make the right choices. And that’s not because I’m trying to make up for what I did – I know I can’t erase that. I want things to be better for everyone and maybe I’m still making mistakes trying to get there. I’m sorry that you got caught up in all of this; I know you didn’t ask for any of it. I understand that this has been hard for you and scary and confusing. And I want you to know that I hear what you’re saying and that I’m going to be better at listening. I’m going to try and make it less scary and I’m going to try and figure out how to solve all of this. Me, and Matt, and Asaara, and even Emperor Lotor. We’re going to set things right.

“And I get if you feel like things will never be right. Because you’ve been through so much, lost so much. I’m never going to say that I understand how you feel because I can’t – I’m not you and I can’t experience things the same way as you do. But I can say that I’ve been in your shoes; I know what it feels like to lose your family. And I am so, so genuinely sorry to have put you in that position. I would never, ever wish this feeling on anyone. You didn’t deserve this and your father didn’t deserve this.

“I couldn’t prevent what happened to your dad; he died because Zarkon ordered it – even if I hadn’t done it, someone else would have. But I get that either way I’m complicit in his death and it’s
fine if you feel that I’m the only one at fault, that’s your right. I don’t think I will ever forgive the person that took my moms from me. I don’t think I’ll ever not miss them or feel quite the same as before. And for the longest time I wanted revenge on the person that killed them. Jail just didn’t feel like enough. Nothing felt like enough. And I didn’t feel like anyone could understand the pain and the anger I went through, or how alone and scared I felt. And even at this I’m not going to say I understand the feelings that you’re going through now because they’re your own. I understand if you want to kill me; I probably would have taken the opportunity if I’d had the chance, too. At least back then.”

“Why?” Nanan spoke up at last, voice small and sad. “Why not now?”

“Well,” Shiro considered, “Because it wouldn’t have changed anything. I don’t think it would make me feel any better. It wouldn’t make my moms less dead or my feelings less painful. It wouldn’t have undone anything at all. It would just be one more person dead, no matter how much it felt like they deserved it for what they’d done. And even those people must have others that would miss them. I don’t think there’s any easy answer to this kind of thing. I don’t think that there’s any solution that would feel satisfying.

“But I can’t speak for you, I can’t say what would or would not make things feel better for you. And I know we come from different places, and that how these things are dealt with on Gal are different, too. Our experiences are never going to be exactly the same but I do want to say that I know what I did was wrong and that I’ve hurt you. I know that your father was a brave man who believed in something bigger than himself. And I know that you deserve to live your best life, no matter what that looks like – and that’s for you to decide, no one else.

“You’ve been right about a lot of things but most of all you’ve been right to speak for yourself and for what you want. And it’s our responsibility as adults to listen to you fairly, and we haven’t been doing that. So that’s going to change from now on, okay? Even if there’s only so much we can do – it’s a promise, alright? And maybe that doesn’t mean much coming from me, that’s fair. But you deserve to be heard and I’m going to see to it that that happens. And not because you’re the Mother or because I’ve wronged you – because it’s what you deserve as a person, okay? As Nanan. So –.”

“NANAN!”

The Druid turned sharply at the sound of her name, eyes blown wide as Matt and Asaara rushed breathlessly into the room.

“What –?” Matt panted, freezing as he took in the ruins of the windows and Shiro’s prone form on the carpet.

“Is everything alright?” Asaara voiced uncertainly. “This is…” she trailed off, gesturing to the debris with a knowing wave of her hand. “How are you feeling, Nanan?” she asked instead, gathering to the girl’s side without touching her. “Do your injuries hurt at all?”

“I…” Nanan stammered, cuffing at the silent tears that rolled down her cheeks. “I don’t know,” she admitted after a breath.

“That’s okay,” Matt soothed, kneeling beside her. “We’ll figure that out later. Do you want to talk about what happened?” he asked, shooting a questioning look to Shiro. Nanan hesitated, gathering her breath before stepping into the circle of Matt’s arms, taking comfort in the gentle circles he rubbed against her back.

“Nanan and I were talking things out,” Shiro phrased awkwardly. “Things got kind of… intense.”
“I’m sorry,” Nanan whimpered from the cradle of Matt’s collarbone. “I’m really sorry.”

“Hey, it’s alright,” Shiro placated, kneeling carefully beside Matt and the Druid. “You don’t have to apologize, Nanan. I’m not mad; things are going to be okay.”

Nanan nodded in understanding, stepping back enough to wipe at her face some more. With another little nod she turned around, looking hesitantly between Matt and Shiro. “Things are going to be okay,” she repeated, but there was question in her tone.

“You don’t have to say so just because Shiro did,” Matt clarified. “It’s fine if things aren’t okay, too. But we’ll take care of whatever it is together.”

“I trust you,” Nanan assured him, throwing an arm around his neck and giving him a sideways hug. “And,” she pressed, turning back to Shiro, lip tugged between her teeth. “I don’t hate you. And I’m sorry if I hurt you with my magick. That was mean of me. Are you okay?”

“I’ll be alright,” Shiro assured her, sitting back on his heels. “What about you? Do you feel better now that we’ve talked?”

“I think so,” Nanan answered contemplatively, reaching to fidget with something at her chest that wasn’t there. Frowning, she looked down, pawing at her clothes.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Matt questioned, angling around her to take a look.

“My necklace,” Nanan murmured, ears cocking as she looked between the adults. “Does anyone know where my necklace went?”

“The one made out of bone?” Matt returned.

“It was damaged earlier,” Asaara spoke up. “When, well… I took it off of you when I was healing you. I thought I’d try and fix it when I had a moment. It seemed like it had some magickal properties to it… who gave it to you?”

“Oh,” Nanan hummed. “Merla did. She gave them to all us Apprentice Druids.”

The group stilled, silence only punctuated by Nanan’s gasp of surprised realization.

“That must be how she found us,” Matt resolved. “That’s how she was tracking all of you girls. Ugh, how creepy!”

“But then!” Nanan interjected insistently. “That means –!”

“Ironically, the charm itself was destroyed by Merla when she attacked you,” Asaara returned calmly. “But I’ll make sure that it’s properly disposed of. She’s not getting her hands on you, not ever again. Here,” she continued, lifting her hair to fiddle with the back of her neck. A moment later she removed the crystal pendant she wore, placing the cord gently around Nanan’s own neck. “Take care of this for me, okay?”

Nanan took the pendant in her fingers, looking up to the older Druid with wide eyes. Asaara smiled, ruffling a hand between Nanan’s ears.

“I know you tended to fidget with the other one,” she explained with a one shouldered shrug. “Thought you might like this in its place.”
“Thank you,” Nanan earnestly replied. “I’ll be good with it, I promise. I really love it.”

“Well we love you, Nanan,” Matt reminded her, gaze softening at her surprised reaction.

“Really?” Nanan prodded, voice a nervous whisper. “I mean… I know I’m supposed to be the Mother but –.”

“We love you regardless of that,” Matt cut in gently. “It doesn’t matter if you’re the Mother or not – we love you because you’re you and we’re gonna protect you and do what we can to make sure you’re safe and happy.”

“Like family?” the girl returned tentatively. Matt swallowed hard, smiling despite being on the cusp of tears himself.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Like family. I know you don’t have much these days,” he continued, taking one of her hands in his seriously. “But if you want, you can come live at The Haven with the Vesh – that’s where me and my ilbe live. You’ll always have a place with us, that’s a promise. We can look out for each other.”

Nanan sucked in a breath, collapsing against Matt’s chest, arms strung close around his neck. Matt laughed, hugging her in turn and petting her hair and ears. Asaara joined him, resting a hand upon the girl’s shoulder. The little Druid paused, half twisting about in Matt’s arms to look behind her to where Shiro still uncertainly knelt. Then, without hesitation, she held out her hand to him, offering a teary-eyed smile when he slipped his palm against hers. With a certain tug he was pulled forward, and then Shiro was admitted into the circle of her embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapters a little late! We’re still working out a few tiny kinks with what order we wanted to post stuff in and a few extra things with chapter content and POV. Also we were busy eating spaghetti.

I think Chess did such a wonderful job with this chapter <3 She wanted to make Shiro very sincere and validating to Nanan and not at all manipulative (as adults are wont to do when talking down children). I feel like it turned out absolutely fantastic and very sincere. It was also important to us to not have Nanan forgive Shiro, but she is warming up to him a little.

As I said before, we’ll try to continue updates weekly on Saturday nights, but they may end up being posted a little later depending on how busy our weeks are. I know we’re going to try to write a few chapters tomorrow and Monday, though, so hopefully we’ll end up with another backlog of content.

And -- as always -- thank you to everyone who has left kudos and comments, they really make our week <3
Humbled

Chapter by chocolatemoosey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whump.

Sendak bristled to attention at the muted thud, pausing at the foot of the stairs of his home, one hand already upon the banister. He squinted, straining to make out further noise and, finding nothing further amiss, began to slowly ascend. While anyone else may have dismissed the sound, decades of military training had the Galra immediately on edge, having learned the hard way that his gut instinct was usually correct.

Carefully Sendak crept up the stairs, surprisingly silent despite his bulky frame. Pausing at the crest he listened once more, ears swiveling slightly as he attempted to triangulate the source of the noise.

‘There,’ he tensed, the faintest scratching coming from somewhere to his right. Sendak followed the sound, padding along the curvature of the hallway towards the back of the house.

‘It’s just a branch from one of the trees in the garden,’ he mused, not at all convinced by his own thoughts. ‘I’m being paranoid. Or,’ he hesitated, drawing short beside a slightly cracked window, ‘Perhaps not.’

Sendak scrutinized the casement, careful to stay out of view of the pane. Small claw marks perforated the paint, almost as though the sill had been used to gain leverage to enter the house from the outside. A growl worked its way up Sendak’s throat but he stilled it, maintaining his cover.

Scritch. Scritch.

Sendak lunged, pushing open the window with one hand while plunging the other below, fingers seizing around a mass of fabric and fur. The other let out a startled yowl and Sendak wrenched back his arm, yanking the intruder through the window and into the hall. Immediately he was met by a heavy handed swipe, claws raking across his neck as the assailant twisted about to sink their teeth into his wrist. Sendak dropped them immediately, throwing them with enough force that they sprawled bodily across the carpet.

An opening.

Sendak descended rapidly, knee diving into the other’s solar plexus as he wrenched their arm immobile, other hand seeking out their neck.

“Don’t move,” a familiar voice ordered, and it was only then that Sendak noticed the knife that threatened to pierce through the vulnerable gap of his underarm. Stiffening, Sendak stilled, attention turning from his danger to the face of his attacker.

Maray stared back at him, an amused smirk splayed out across their lips.

“Come now, Sendak,” they quipped. “A slip up like that can be fatal.”

“Maray?” the lord regent addressed, stunned.
Maray shrugged beneath him, a hint of guilt evident in their smile. “Well you have quite literally caught me,” they sighed. “I figured this would happen eventually.”

“What?” Sendak shook his head in confusion, backing off of the party planner and onto his haunches.

Maray was dressed in an unusual fashion: donning all black, they wore a handsomely tailored double breasted coat that could almost be mistaken for aristocratic wear were it not for the hard lining Sendak could feel beneath his knee – what was obviously bulletproofing. Maray’s boots, too, could have been thought to be from the formal closet of a commander but to Sendak’s trained eye the trappings of stealth wear could be clearly defined. The long tail of hair the planner usually kept over one shoulder had been neatly braided back, wrapping tightly around the back of their skull in an obvious effort to keep it out of the way.

“If you’re afraid that I’ve betrayed you –,” Maray began, only to be gruffly cut off.

“You have better fucking not.”

“– then you are quite mistaken,” Maray finished calmly. “It’s quite the opposite, in fact.”

“What do you mean?” Sendak frowned, distantly aware of the strange tightness of his chest.

“My purpose has only ever been to protect.”

“Protect what?”

“The regime, I suppose,” Maray hummed, picking themselves up off the floor and settling into an easy cross-legged recline. “Though I did everything in my power to sabotage Zarkon’s,” they added after a beat. “You were right to assume my connection to the Vesh.”

“That much was self-evident,” Sendak returned cautiously.

“Perhaps I was a bit too transparent on that front,” Maray acknowledged with a note of frustration. “I must admit I’ve developed a soft spot for our young emperor.”

“And if you’re Vesh then you wish to see him on the throne,” Sendak filled in. “Which means to suggest –.”

“Don’t think I haven’t become rather fond of you,” Maray cut across with a soft laugh. “Perhaps it’s a bit of a conflict of interest but it can’t be helped.”

Sendak stilled, the words knocking him breathless. The reaction didn’t go unnoticed, Maray’s smile widening in genuineness.

“In any case, as the Imperial Sentinel it is my sworn duty to look after you,” they continued. “I mean, someone has to.”

“What?” Sendak repeated.

“I know – I really don’t come across the type, do I?” Maray mused. “No one would expect a mere party planner to be the single most lethal guard in the empire, especially not someone as outwardly frivolous as myself. But I suppose that posing as a member of the royal court has come in
handy as I’ve never been suspected or found out. Perhaps he had me pegged for a separatist and wanted to keep a close eye on me, but Zarkon was the one to hand pick me for the position. I never had any love for the man even if my job was to protect his life at all costs – I suppose that’s what made it so easy to depose of him, in the end.”

“How do you mean?” Sendak cocked his head curiously. “You mean to say you had a hand in the uprising?”

Maray barked a laugh. “A hand?” they echoed proudly. “Dear Sendak, you can’t possibly think that Thace was the Vesh’s only mole? I was the one to organize the coup in the first place. The Vesh couldn’t have done that without a direct connection to the goings-on of City Station. Besides, Imperial Sentinel or not, who better to arrange a regicide than the person tasked with telling the emperor himself where and when to be somewhere? It was risky, but the waiting and the sacrifices were worth it in the end.”

“I…” Sendak trailed off, the information not entirely processing. “I guess I still don’t understand,” he admitted after a pause. “The Vesh succeeded: Zarkon was deposed of and now Lotor is readying to take the throne. Why continue to hide your position?” A glimmer of doubt sparked in his chest. “Do you not trust me?” he asked in quieter tones.

“It’s not a matter of trust,” Maray answered, hand seeking Sendak’s arm in comfort. “Rather, it’s a matter of keeping you safe. You and Lotor. And Tora,” they added thoughtfully. “I know Zarkon used her against you, forced you to fight in the arena at the cost of her life. I’m not about to allow anyone else to leverage your child against you.”

“Thank you,” Sendak exhaled gratefully, hand seeking purchase atop Maray’s own. “It must be no secret to you that losing her is among my greatest fears.”

“She’s your daughter,” Maray replied simply. “That’s how it should be.”


“Zarkon did leave behind loyalists,” Maray reminded him. “As well as plenty of others that have been eyeing the emperorship for who knows how long.”

“Like Merla,” Sendak nodded.

“Yes, like Merla,” Maray grimaced. “And fighting her off has been a full-time job, I’m afraid. Through her connections she’s already made several attempts on your life, you know?”

“You’ve been taking out assassins?” Sendak translated, mind suddenly filled with the number of cuts and bruises Maray had mysteriously seemed to collect over the past few weeks. “That’s why you’ve been injured lately.”

“And why I’ve been attempting to conceal it,” Maray confirmed. “Although apparently my efforts were in vain; I’m sorry for having concerned you so.”

“Don’t apologize for that,” Sendak frowned, surveying the bodyguard concernedly. Already he could make out a shallow gash along Maray’s temple, dried blood smeared down the side of their cheek. Several tears were evident along their coat, glimpses of skin visible through the caked fabric. Most worryingly of all was the dark stain that blossomed across Maray’s left shoulder and Sendak immediately noted the way the other sagged into the injury, careful not to put weight on it.

“You’re hurt,” he murmured, gathering to his feet as he offered a hand to Maray.
“It’s alright,” Maray assured, accepting the assistance with a gentle smile. “It will heal.”

“Not if it’s not treated right,” Sendak insisted, guiding Maray to follow him. “Let me fix you up; it’s the least I can do. You were fighting off an assassin tonight, I presume?”

“Three, actually,” Maray conceded. “Merla seems to have ramped up her efforts.”

“How recently?” Sendak returned with alarm.

“Within the past day, actually. There has been a strange unrest within the ranks, too. The guards around City Station have been tense – some of them must know something but I haven’t had the chance to interrogate anyone yet.”

“Interrogate?” Sendak repeated, brow rising appraisingly.

“Don’t think I don’t get my hands dirty,” Maray replied with obvious pleasure.

Sendak hummed in approval; “You’re certainly full of surprises tonight.”

“You don’t seem to mind.”

“I didn’t say they were bad surprises,” Sendak pointed out.

“Could it be that you like the thought of my looking out for you?”

“I won’t deny that,” Sendak admitted softly. “I think the knowledge of just how lethal you are is also… appealing. I’ve never been one to underestimate you or think you incapable of protecting yourself,” he quickly pressed. “But to know that we’re equals in military capability – rather, that your talents must supersede my own, well…” Sendak emitted a hum that nearly curled into a purr. “It’s nice to know, is all.”

“I don’t take that compliment lightly,” Maray said proudly. “Especially not coming from you – you’ve never been one to dole out praise freely.”

“I suppose that much is true,” Sendak agreed, gesturing Maray to take a seat on the futon as they entered his room. “One moment,” he instructed, pausing their conversation just long enough to gather what medical supplies he kept squirreled away in his bathroom. He laid them out carefully opposite Maray, trying to assess what would be needed.

“Would you, ah,” he hedged, gesturing awkwardly.

“Should I remove my clothes?” Maray asked innocently.

“Well, uh, your jacket, yeah,” Sendak coughed, only to be met by Maray’s laughter. Nimbly they unbuttoned their coat, shrugging out of one sleeve with a wince.

“Here,” Sendak murmured, reaching forward gently. “Let me help you with that.”

Gingerly they made work of the coat, revealing a sleek, high-necked bodysuit paneled with flexible armor beneath. Maray reached for their neck, finding a discrete zipper there and pulling it down and around their underarm, pushing away the sleeve to expose their injured shoulder. The wound was deeper than Sendak had anticipated, nearly blackened from the depth and the clotted blood. He set about it delicately, trying to inflict as little discomfort as possible as he cleaned the injury. Maray hissed as Sendak applied the small amount of topical Quintessence in his possession, pain evanescing into a sigh of relief as the wound began to visibly shrink and close.
“It’s the best I can do,” Sendak said by way of apology as he secured a wad of gauze over the remainder of the laceration.

“It’s far more than I expected,” Maray assured, beginning to pull away. Sendak shook his head, gently taking the other by the wrist.

“Don’t think I’m done with you,” the lord regent rumbled, already pawing about the medical kit for more supplies.

“Oh?” Maray returned teasingly.

“Yes,” Sendak muttered back, working his way across the litany of smaller cuts that blemished Maray’s skin.

“You spoil me, you know,” Maray commented, allowing Sendak to turn their arm carefully about in his hands, dabbing antiseptic into the wounds.

“Is that so?”

“It is,” Maray murmured. “If you’re not careful I’ll get used to such attentions.”

“Can’t have that, can we?” Sendak returned, making no effort to alter his actions. He snuck an upward glance only to find Maray smiling softly to themselves. Sendak looked away just as quickly, unable to prevent the warmth that radiated through him at the sight.

Suddenly Maray stiffened, body a tense line.

“Sorry,” Sendak ushered at once, withdrawing. “Did I hurt –?”

“Shh,” Maray cut him off insistently, staring towards the bedroom door intensely. Sendak wordlessly obeyed. He could just make out the sound of voices from outside, their words indistinct but harried. Then there was a resounding boom from downstairs, the voices rising in a crescendo as they were met by the alarm of the Royal Guard.

Sendak and Maray looked to one another in alarm, the same name on their lips: “Merla.”

Maray was the first to their feet, jacket snatched up in one hand, the other reaching for the knife Sendak now knew was kept concealed at their thigh. “I don’t know what’s going on but you need to get out of here,” Maray tersely assessed.

“Another coup?” Sendak growled.

“Must be,” Maray agreed, grabbing for the other’s wrist and leading him into the hallway, their own body postured before Sendak’s own. The Royal Guard could now be heard, Zylo’s voice rising above the rest, statements purposefully loud as if to warn whoever might be near.

“You have no authorization here!” she snarled breathlessly, clearly caught mid-fight. “You’re not arresting the lord regent on my watch.”

“Arrest?” Sendak repeated indignantly.

“If Merla gets a hold of the government here she’ll make you an enemy of the state,” Maray recognized quickly. “For now City Station isn’t safe for you.”

“I’m not going to abandon my people,” Sendak countered, pulling short. “I’m not running.”
“And I’m not having you imprisoned or worse,” Maray shot back, tugging at him insistently. “You can’t help anybody if you’re dead.”

“I can’t help anybody if I give Merla the chance to grab the throne.”

“Oh you stubborn man! Damn your pride!” Maray exclaimed. “If she’s ordering your arrest then she’s got domestic support on her side – we don’t know how far this goes but at least part of City Station is in revolt against you. You and I both know she’s been organizing with planets like Stell – anyone could be in the wings at this moment and now is not the time to argue.”

Sendak hesitated, a singular word ringing back to him. Pride.

‘They’re right,’ he resolved. ‘Maray has always been right. If there was any time to set aside my pride it’s now. They’re counting on me. The people are counting on me; I can’t take risks now just for the sake of saving face. My reputation, my whole concept of never backing down no matter the cost – what’s it for? The remnants of an ideology and regime that I despised but were drilled into me nonetheless? No, I don’t need it. Not anymore.’

“Alright,” he agreed, Maray straightening in shock opposite him. “What’s the plan of action?” Sendak pressed. “If we’re to get out of here we’ll need to reach the hangar, but that’s practically in the Third Ring. That’s a far way to go undetected.”

“Right,” Maray recovered, unable to mask their surprised delight. “We’ll have to take the tunnel system; there’s an entrance to them through the basement level for emergencies like this.”

“Lance,” Sendak suddenly realized.

“Shit,” Maray swore in agreement. “Of course you wouldn’t be Merla’s only target.”

“He better not have left his room,” Sendak grumbled dubiously as they cut their path downstairs, avoiding the foyer and pressing against the walls as they went. The Royal Guard offered them cover, throwing themselves aggressively against the line of Merla’s supporters. The dissenters yelled as they ran past, trying to alert one another to the pair’s escape.

“Down,” Maray urged, yanking at Sendak’s shoulder and forcing his head down as laser fire peppered the walls behind them. The passage to the basement came upon them rapidly and Maray gave a powerful kick, knocking the door open explosively. Barreling down the stairs, they came to a bodily stop, nearly colliding with Lance and Tora.

“What the fuck is going on!?” the paladin yelped, eyes wide as he held his bayard aloft.

“Coup,” Sendak answered brusquely as Maray offered Merla’s name in tandem.

“Dad you’ve got to get out of here,” Tora asserted, already pushing her father in the direction of the tunnels. “You too, Blue. If they get a hold of you it’ll compromise everything we’ve worked for.”

“Tora?” Sendak turned about in her grasp.

“No, you understand correctly,” she returned grimly, already able to tell what Sendak meant by his question.

“You’re coming with me,” her father countered.

“No this time,” Tora refused. “Someone has to organize what remains of the military and
they’ve been your most loyal supporters. As the Admiral it is my duty to guide them. I’ll rally whoever I can and hold a defensive against Merla. At worst I’ll pretend to work alongside her. I’m going to buy you time, just trust me.”

“Tora,” Sendak stressed, taking her by the shoulders anxiously. “I’m not leaving you behind. I’m not about to let you get hurt, especially not on my behalf. There’s no way in hell –.”

“What good is another exile?” Tora shook her head with a forced smile. “To you, to Lo, to the empire? Let me do this, Dad. Let me protect you this time. Please. Just trust me. I’ll be okay, I promise. I can handle this.”

“I…”

“Sendak, I’m sorry, we have to go,” Maray interjected, ushering Lance through a previously concealed door. Above they could hear the cry of the Guard as laser fire increased, the sound of pounding feet growing louder. “There’s no time.”

Sendak turned back to Tora, throat tight.

‘How can I possibly let you do this?’ he thought achingly. ‘What kind of father…? I can’t just…’

He stared into her eyes, finding only love and determination there, the firm set of her brow familiar to him: her mind was made up and no bargaining on his side would sway her now.

‘It’s impossible to ask this of me,’ he lamented. ‘But I trust her above all others. She’ll always be a kit to me but I owe her the respect an adult deserves. This is her choice; I would do as much for her but right now I can’t. I guess it’s time, isn’t it?’

“I trust you,” he returned thickly and Tora relaxed in his hands.

“Thank you, Dad,” she whispered, throwing herself against his chest and gripping him tight. He embraced her fiercely, face tucked into her hair and pressing a kiss to her head. The approach of the separatists grew louder still and he pulled away, holding her in his arms as much as his mind.

‘This won’t be the last time,’ he told himself firmly. ‘I won’t allow it.’

“I love you, kit,” he choked out. “I’m so proud of you.”

Tora sniffed, misty eyed despite her resolve. “I love you, too, Dad. Now get out of here,” she ordered, turning away from him and towards the door, blaster trained before her. Sendak hesitated, taking in one last sight of his daughter.

“Go!” Tora barked, the door at the top of the stairs flying open.

Sendak jolted into action, darting into the tunnels after Lance and Maray and plunging himself into eerie darkness. Maray pushed him forward, whirling around to plunge their knife into a keypad by the entrance, the console sparking violently as the door slid shut with a definite bang. Sendak stared at it, chest tight and knowing that it would never open again.

‘Please,’ he inwardly begged as they fled down the barely-lit passageway, ‘Be safe.’

The trip was chiefly silent, the trio hurrying along the underground network, pausing only to discern the maps that marked each fork in their path. Before long they had reached the juncture of the First and Second Ring and, having no other alternative, slunk their way through the arena that
connected it.

“We’re lucky it’s so late,” Maray whispered. “Everything is closed up so there should be few people around; we won’t be noticed so long as we stick to the shadows and are quick about it.”

“What about any guards?” Lance questioned, glancing about furtively.

“It’s not the guards I’d worry about,” Sendak countered, “It’s the security cameras. We get caught on those then a squad could be sent to intercept us up ahead.”

“No use worrying about it now,” Maray resolved.

To their relief, Sendak’s concern had been for naught, the group making their way rapidly along the perimeter of the Second Ring until at length they had reached the hangars.

“Our plan of action?” Lance queried, looking uncertainly between his companions. It was clear he was unsure who was in charge anymore and if Sendak was being frank, neither did he. Maray looked to him questioningly and he merely nodded, ceding control of their operations once more.

“Right,” Maray began, speaking swiftly. “Sendak, as lord regent you have authorization to override any lock or door within City Station. Get to the main terminal and use that to secure us a loading hangar. Lance, you find the nearest cruiser you can that’s big enough for the three of us. I’m trusting you to be our pilot. I’ll hold off whatever resistance we face in the meanwhile,” they finished grimly. “Try not to engage anyone and head straight to your respective tasks: the longer this takes the less chance we have of succeeding.”

“Understood,” Sendak intoned, Lance nodding his confirmation beside him.

“Ready?” Maray breathed, and in unison they made for the hangar proper.

The seconds seemed to crawl by as Sendak made for the control room, equal parts anxiety and adrenaline coursing through him. He could hear Maray at his heels, met not long after by the muffled sounds of fighting.

‘Don’t focus on it,’ he directed himself, swiping his hand across a scanner and permitting himself into the main terminal. A lone guard jumped at his sudden presence, reaching for his blaster out of instinct.

“Don’t,” Sendak growled and the guard stilled, frozen in confusion and fear as Maray dropped his unconscious compatriot to the floor.

Sendak made quick work of the controls, keying in his override code before selecting the nearest possible loading gate. Through the plate glass window before him he could see Lance poised with transformed bayard in hand, the gun discharging into the chest of an oncoming guard. Beyond, the gate Sendak had selected stirred into action, its preliminary door opening like an aperture to allow them passage. Startled by the sound, Lance shot a glance to the control tower, his thumbs up just barely visible across the concourse. Then he darted into the belly of the cruiser, the ship lighting up in response a moment later.

“Nothing about that was subtle,” Maray grumbled as they beat a steady retreat to Lance’s position. “That door will have alerted all nearby personnel.”

“I didn’t think we had time for subtle,” Sendak shot back.
Maray produced a wry smile; “At the very least it was never your style.”

The two bounded across the final distance of the facility, launching themselves aboard the craft and slamming into their seats.

“Buckle up my dudes,” Lance called out as the cruiser’s doors hissed shut. “This might get bumpy!”

At his touch the ship approached the open gate, a countdown commencing in bold Galran characters just beyond the viewport.

“Come on, come on,” Lance urged, drumming at the arm of his chair nervously. The hangar had sprung to life behind them, the yelling of guards and soldiers alike muffled beyond the confines of the craft. Then the countdown ended, the gate behind them snapping shut as the runway spread out before them and they were off, rocketing past the streaming lights of City Station and into the abyss of space beyond.

Lance leaned heavily into the controls, piloting with far more expertise than Sendak had given him credit for. At length the paladin relaxed, fiddling with the command console and keying something that looked like coordinates into the system. Lance reviewed the numerical series once, nodded to himself, then submitted the code, spinning the captain’s chair around to consult with Sendak and Maray.

“We have our heading?” Sendak presumed aloud.

“Yeah, though I don’t think it’ll make anyone too happy,” Lance sighed through a shrug. “Couldn’t think of anywhere else to go, though.”

“And where would that be?” Sendak pressed suspiciously.

“Dude, I think you know where,” Lance returned tiredly.

“I can’t imagine that the Castle of Lions would willingly receive a Galra ship,” Maray pointed out.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lance said with a wave of his hand. “I may be garbage with numbers usually but I did take care to memorize the access codes to the Castle. Can’t say we’ll be met with a warm welcome, though.”

Sendak remained quiet, gaze trained out the passenger window. Too much had happened in little over an hour and now he was faced with situations beyond his control. The reality filled him with unease and he felt himself balling his fists in frustration, the tips of his claws extending and pricking slightly at his palms. Lost in thought, he nearly jumped at Maray’s consoling hand, the planner – no, Imperial Sentinel – offering him a sympathetic glance.

Sendak released a breath and returned the look with a thin smile, forcing himself to relax bit by bit as he sat through the remainder of the flight. Even with the advanced engineering of the Galra fleet, the passage took longer than he’d have liked and by the time the Castle of Lions loomed on the horizon Sendak found he still had come up with nothing satisfactory enough to say.

‘Oh, good evening Emperor Lotor,’ he thought to himself with annoyance. ‘Thought I’d drop by now that everything’s gone to shit. Yeah, this is going to go over well.’

Before them the hexagonal barrier of the castle was clearly raised, rippling with a sort of energy long lost to time.
“Well, here we go,” Lance announced, punching at the console once more. The force field shifted and a section of the barrier fell away, a part of the massive craft opening up to allow them access. Lance steered them through, darting into the opening before the castle’s defenses could catch them in any crossfire.

“The tailor’s still got it!” Lance crowed to himself as he initiated deceleration. Sendak and Maray exchanged a bewildered look. With a jerk they came to a complete halt, the cruiser depressurizing as the door unlocked and swung open.

“I’ll lead the way,” Lance announced thoughtfully, untransformed bayard held loosely in one hand. “I’d expect an audience.”

Sendak nodded, following behind Lance and Maray and blinking hard against the lights of the castle’s hangar. The Lions stood prominent as he fought to refocus, the closest he’d been to them since he had been tasked with keeping the Red Lion safe under Zarkon’s command.

‘Weird to see them all like this,’ he considered. ‘I never realized how small the Red Lion is in comparison to the others.’

“Freeze.”

The order pulled at Sendak’s attentions and he halted, Maray’s arm already protectively spread out across the expanse of his chest. Before them stood a half circle of the remaining paladins and their princess, the emperor himself positioned at their center, his bayard held aloft in the shape of a sword. A surprised frown crossed his features but before he could say anything further the paladin to his left let out a restrained shout.

“Lance!” he called, clearly on the precipice of disregarding his weapon to run to the blue paladin’s side.

“Hunk!” the other brightened, doing exactly that and launching himself at his friend, arms thrown tight around his neck. Hunk laughed and hugged him back, separating them long enough to begin a determined search for bodily harm.

“I’m fine, I promise,” Lance laughed, and the group as a whole seemed to relax somewhat.

“Sendak,” the emperor spoke up, tone even but wary.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Sendak returned smoothly. The other flinched.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I didn’t expect to be here,” Sendak countered. He still hadn’t thought of the right things to say.

‘Winging it as always, I suppose,’ he surmised. The emperor was still looking at him expectantly.

“The game has changed,” Sendak continued. “Merla’s made a power play even I didn’t expect – she’s launched a coup of her own on City Station and there’s a warrant out for my arrest,” he explained with a mirthless laugh.

The emperor paled, jaw slackening somewhat.

“What changed?” Lotor persisted. “What made her feel safe enough to do that?”
“I’m not sure myself,” Sendak admitted. “The way I figure she’s either gained some new power or ally or she’s become truly desperate.”

The paladins all tensed, looking around at one another uneasily as though sharing a common thought.

“Lotor?” Sendak hedged, trying to piece together the gaps in his knowledge. The emperor turned his attentions back to Sendak, brows furrowed.

“It’s Keith,” he instructed, gnawing at a lip in obvious distress. “Just Keith.”

“Alright… Keith,” Sendak tested out awkwardly. “I sense that there’s something more here that I am unaware of. If you have any pertinent information about Merla’s actions –.”

“I don’t recall us finalizing our accord,” Keith interjected firmly, shoulders a taut and regal line.

‘Funny,’ Sendak blinked, regarding the other. ‘I could never say it but for a moment there he looked just like Zarkon. The way he holds himself, the directness of his words. It’s uncanny. Still, there’s something else there, some sort of empathy that Zarkon never had the capacity for – with the right guidance he’ll make a fine ruler yet.’

“To my knowledge neither of us finalized our documents,” Sendak answered with ease. “Given that failure to do so was mutual and given the current state of things I’d say that our priorities lie elsewhere at this point.”

“Maybe,” Keith conceded. “But they also served as a treaty and a means of protecting our respective interests.”

“I don’t fault you for not trusting me,” Sendak hummed.

Keith disregarded the comment, the arm holding his bayard falling slightly.

“I’m willing to share with you what we know,” he prefaced, “But not without assurance that it’s safe to do so. Why are you here, Sendak? You must have a million outposts or bases that you could seek out and yet you came here. That aside, you don’t strike me as the type to leave – if I remember correctly you chided me for doing just that.”

“That was Vaneer,” Sendak corrected. “Though I may have thrown in a derisive comment or two, I’ll admit. As for my circumstance? I was forced to leave City Station against my better judgement – I never would have done so without the input of others. I am still trying to convince myself that this was the right course of action,” he went on plainly. “And you are right to say that leaving a confrontation is not my habit.”

“Even still, you decided to come here?”

“Yes,” Sendak confirmed, words feeling leaden and bitter in his mouth. “I suppose for now I have nowhere else to go.”

“What are you saying, exactly?” Keith frowned, and this time he lowered his bayard completely, letting it dangle loosely against the shell of his palm.

Sendak snuck a glance at Maray, willing himself to continue. ‘No time for pride,’ he reminded himself, and the disdain and humiliation welling up within him began to lessen.
“What I’m saying is,” Sendak mustered, “I need your help. Rather, I am requesting your help. I have been sincere all along in seeking to be your ally and it’s only natural that your faith in that loyalty is thin, but I am telling you here and now that I’ve lost the upper hand. I recognize that I am putting myself at your mercy, that you have the freedom now to betray me. This said I am asking you – trusting you – not to. I ask that in return for my compliance and aid you shelter me – Maray and I both.”

Keith stared at him a long time, whether in contemplation or curiosity Sendak couldn’t tell. The bayard shrunk to its untransformed size and the emperor clipped it to the back of his cuirass, an exhausted sigh shaking his frame. “Come on,” he encouraged at length, stepping aside to admit them passage to the castle proper. “It seems we have a lot to catch up on.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Saturday everyone! Chess really outdid herself with this chapter -- I mean I'm biased because I love ALL her Sendak POV chapters, but this one was just so emotive, especially with the goodbye scene with Tora. Don't tell anyone I told you so, but she teared up while writing it <3

I'm surprised that no one picked up on Maray earlier! I was really sad because we lost a pretty awesome scene in editing where they interrogate an assassin.

With what we have left to write, we're hoping to keep posting every Saturday, and we're expecting our final chapter to be out on December 30th and the epilogue to be out on December 31st! It feels so surreal that this series is finally winding down!

Thank you to everyone for your love, support, kudos, and reviews! See you next week!

Omake

“Lance!” he called, clearly on the precipice of disregarding his weapon to run to the blue paladin’s side.

“Hunk!” the other brightened, doing exactly that and launching himself at his friend, arms thrown tight around his neck.

“Sendak,” the emperor spoke up, tone even but wary.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Sendak returned smoothly.

"ROCKY!" Yelled Lance.
Merla appeared gracefully upon the same stage where Keith had stood not seven weeks earlier when he had been sworn in as prince. She was dressed resplendently in deep burgundy robes, the same rose gold fastenings Haggar had worn to the coronation dripping from the complicated loops of her hair. A red bandage wound around half of her head, obscuring one of her eyes. Behind her stood a conglomeration of officials dressed in equally formal wear, the broadcast’s headers naming them as the rulers of the planets that had joined Merla’s coalition: Stell, Apis, the Harfeld Moons, Stratus, and Qurm.

The expression she wore was a disturbing contrast to the pitiless face that Keith had seen in the security footage: her single eye was half-filled with tears, mouth drawn into a somber line as she addressed the people and the press.

“To long has the oppression of the Galra military withheld the freedom of the conquered peoples of the former empire,” she was saying, glancing out over the sea of people congregated before her. “Gal may have gained its independence, but what are we but extensions of the Tyrant’s will if we continue to prosper at the expense of the oppressed?”

The crowd cheered in support, Merla holding up a humble hand to silence them.

“To long we’ve spent tangled in the web of the Lord Regent’s bureaucracy, listening to false promises of hope while we endured the hardship of the attack on the Second Ring – only to have him parade his wealth before the common man in a frivolous gala not a myokven later,” she stated coldly. Behind Keith, Sendak released a sound halfway between a growl and a scoff.

“To long,” Merla lowered her head as if ashamed, embarrassed, “Have we waited for the return of the emperor’s progeny, who fueled us with hope only so briefly as to have his own escape.”

Keith bristled at that, hurt shooting through him. ‘I am the emperor,’ he thought, although that didn’t prevent the guilt from diffusing through his veins as his people rallied before Merla. ‘Is this what they think of me now? That Zarkon’s death was only a means to an end? A means to my end?’

“But our time of waiting is over,” Merla announced, raising both of her hands towards the crowds before her, inviting them into her embrace, into her circle of confidants. “I ask for you – the people of Gal, those oppressed by the former empire, and all people the galaxy over to take my hand as I lead you into a new era of democracy! Beneath my guiding hand I will help to free the empire and usher in freedom and prosperity the likes of which haven’t been seen in over twenty thousand seasons!”

Maray froze the broadcast, turning to the paladins and their allies assembled in the debriefing room. Lance hissed in disgust from where he stood next to Hunk, jerking his head away from the screen.

“She’s playing them like a piano!” he bristled, shaking his head violently as he glanced over to Keith and Sendak, both standing rigidly opposite one another, eyes downcast. “You guys can’t
“Clearly this speech is not only intended to take a dig at you, but a shot at both your morale and that of your supporters,” Allura chimed in. She shook her head as well, folding her arms over her chest in disgust. “This is a smear campaign at its most base form.”

“You think I’m not aware of that?” Sendak told her a little sharply, ears pressed flat to his head in chagrin. Maray shot him a stern look and the former lord regent glanced away, clicking his tongue in frustration.

“Pidge,” Keith spoke up, the green paladin sitting to attention. “Can you use the Green Lion to get us into contact with the Vesh?” he bowed his head, leaning into the cup of his hand to warm his temple with his fingertips. “I think we’re in need of regrouping.”

“No need,” Maray spoke up, leaning back into the terminal to call up the proper controls. “I should be able to reach them from here via an outpost in the Asclepius System.”

Keith blinked in disbelief, still reeling under the earlier information that Sendak and Maray had presented to him: Maray had been the Vesh’s top mole in City Station all the while.

“Who,” Maray had said a little smugly as Keith helped them into a healing pod not hours before. “Do you think gave the Vesh the signal at your coronation?”

Looking back at it, Keith felt almost foolish for the oversight. Maray had been the one to let him talk to Thace, to cover for him when he’d been with Shiro, even to replace Tora as his retainer and bodyguard. Speaking of—

Keith had turned to Sendak as Maray’s healing pod shut, the planner’s eyes fluttering closed. There was some unreadable amount of tension on the Galra’s face, his jaw working restlessly as he observed Maray behind the sheet of bowed glass. He was a far cry from the sneering and smirking man Keith had faced in the Castle of Lions months earlier. His expression was withdrawn, concerned – more than anything, he looked tired. Gone were his robotic false eye and massive prosthetic, leaving him to appear much smaller than Keith remembered.

“Where’s Tora?” Keith had asked after taking pause, seeming to startle Sendak out of deep thought. Immediately his ears pressed flat to his head, a surprisingly telling sign of distress that the monarch typically would have put past his old enemy.

“She elected to stay behind and lead the military,” Sendak announced smoothly, attempting to shift his expression into one of indifference. But his mask was crumbling at the edges, concern lacing his features. In that moment he looked like Thace.

“He’s good, my dad,” Tora had told Keith once. “Kind of a gruff, stony bastard but he’s gone out of his way to protect me time and time again, given me anything I’ve ever wanted. And even though I’m not his by blood, I’m still his daughter. He still loves me with every bit of his heart, even though he’s awkward to show it.”

“I’m sorry,” Keith spoke up, Sendak turning to him in surprise. “That must be really hard for you as a parent.”

Sendak sniffed, looking away, “Tora is a capable adult. There’s no one I would trust more with the job.”

There was a pause as Sendak approached the healing pod, brow knitting as if he were deep in thought.
“Thank you,” he said, so softly that Keith nearly thought he’d been mistaken. Sendak glanced over at the emperor, smirking at Keith’s slack-jawed expression.

“I really am that prideful, aren’t I?” he chuckled softly.

“I don’t think I need to answer that,” Keith returned with the same measure of dry humor. Sendak’s fanged grin grew and he crossed the small distance between himself and Keith.

“It shouldn’t take us too long to assess the current political climate,” he explained. “I’m sure Maray will be more than willing to help on that front once they’re finished healing. But as far as I’m concerned, I think we’re a bit beyond formal treaties at the moment.”

Keith had tried his hardest to disguise his relief at Sendak’s words, not having yet received Thace’s revised version of the contract. In fact, he’d spent the last twenty four hours alternating between stressing about the contract and the wellbeing of the Vesh following the viral infection that the security footage had released into their system.

Keith had expected Sendak to say more on the matter, or to switch gears and launch into more planning, more tactics. Even if they had mutually decided to forego the treaties, Keith had anticipated that the dance of diplomacy would still be there and that he’d have to fight to keep Sendak on his toes if he wanted a shot at respect. But Sendak pressed no further, seeming content to know that they were on the same page. With a tired nod of his head he slipped past Keith, folding himself quietly beside the healing pod and inclining towards it as if making to sleep.

“We’ll resume talks once Maray is healed,” he asserted neutrally, eyes closing. “I don’t see any reason not to include them and you know they’ll want to know every detail.”

“Yeah,” Keith murmured back, suddenly feeling as though he were intruding on something private. “I’ll, uh, I’ll wait with the others back on the bridge. We’ll finish debriefing when you two are ready.”

The wait had taken less time than Keith had anticipated and by the time Sendak and Maray had returned to the group the lord regent seemed back to his usual self, sharp eyed and unaffected.

“I don’t know if it’ll work,” Keith told Maray as they worked away at the ship’s controls, fiddling with the foreign communications system set up before them. “Like I said, the Vesh’s security may have been compromised and Annis said he wasn’t sure how long it would take him to fix.”

“Knowing Annis and the level of precautions he takes, there shouldn’t be any problems by now,” Maray informed him confidently, hesitating when the screen before them flashed with a message.

“It’s an incoming transmission,” Coran explained, stepping up to the platform beside Maray and toggling the proper controls to display the transmission’s information. “Hmm. They have the proper security code and—bless my bones! It’s coming from Malachite!”

“It’s Matt and Shiro!” Pidge perked up in excitement.

‘Oh boy,’ Keith thought, staring over at Sendak. The ex-commander’s expression was hard to read, but if Keith had to guess based on his body language, Sendak would have very much preferred to be anywhere else in the universe at that moment in time. It didn’t help that everyone save for Coran and Maray were now staring at him very pointedly. ‘It’s awkward enough with them knowing that Sendak killed Shiro, they don’t even know that they—.’

“Let in the transmission voice-only,” Keith directed. “I… I kind of want to ease him into
No one questioned why, Coran immediately allowing the transmission through.

“Matt, Shiro,” Keith greeted happily, attempting to squash down the trepidation in his throat. “You guys are on speaker right now.”

“Keith!” Shiro returned, sounding exhausted but overjoyed to hear his fiancé’s voice. Keith couldn’t help but melt a little. “It’s just me right now, actually. Matt’s using other means to get Nanan and our allies to The Haven. What happened to the video feed?”

“I,” Keith hesitated, staring over at Sendak who not-so-subtly was attempting to retreat into the bowels of the castle ship.

“Is everything okay?” Shiro asked. Keith sighed in exasperation, stomping over to Sendak and grabbing him roughly by the upper arm, giving the Galra a very pointed glare.

“Yeah – everything’s fine just—a lot’s just happened on our end,” Keith sighed. “It’ll be easier to explain in person, I’ll meet you on the concourse?”

The black paladin hesitated for a moment, but responded nonetheless: “Of course. I’ll see you then.”

The transmission cut off and Keith and Sendak met one another evenly, their expressions set in stone.

“Let go of me,” Sendak said evenly after some pause. Keith’s eyebrows shot straight up.

“Oh no, you’re going to deal with this whether you like it or not,” Keith scowled, dragging Sendak towards the elevator. To his surprise, Sendak immediately looked over to Maray, as if seeking support. Maray thinned their lips, planting their hands on their hips and staring over at Sendak impassively. Sighing in derision, Sendak extracted his arm from Keith’s grip and walked into the elevator with some amount of dignity, Maray following closely behind.

They arrived at the hangar not moments later, just in time to see Shiro climbing down from the emerald green mecha. The black paladin removed his helmet, turning to face the movement out of the corner of his eye. The weary smile on his face immediately went slack.

“Shiro!” Keith called out to his fiancé, jogging out onto the concourse to meet him halfway. Shiro caught Keith in his arms, pressing a quick kiss into the emperor’s dark hair before pulling away, glaring at Sendak in confusion.

“Keith, what’s going on?” Shiro asked, settling his arm protectively around Keith’s shoulders as the couple turned to face Maray and Sendak. Then, in undertones, “Are you alright?”

“Last night, Merla organized a coup against Sendak,” Keith explained, reaching up to place his hand over the one Shiro rested on his shoulder. “He, Maray, and Lance escaped on a small ship and Lance piloted them here. We’ve… decided to offer them sanctuary for now.” He then glanced up at Shiro, smiling softly. “I’m fine. I’m happy to see you.”

Shiro’s expression grew gentle and he pulled Keith towards him in a one-armed hug before staring over at Sendak coolly, mouth pulled into an uncertain line as he silently waited for answers.

Sendak didn’t flinch, meeting his gaze evenly and looking perhaps even more disgruntled than Shiro was: he clearly no more wanted to be there than the paladin wanted him to be.
“I wasn’t expecting you to be joining us,” he said by way of greeting. Maray let out a disproving little hum, nudging Sendak in the arm. The lord regent soured, trying again. “I hope you had a safe flight?” he offered halfheartedly.

Shiro’s eyes narrowed, obviously interpreting Sendak’s words as a jab. “What are you doing here?” he asked a little sharply. Keith stared at him mystified by the question, having just provided the answer.

Sendak arched a brow, on the verge of response, but Shiro cut him off first. “No bullshit, Sendak,” he leveled. “If you’re to receive amnesty from us then you’d better be direct and transparent.”

Sendak released a low laugh, smirking with annoyance. “You could at least pretend to be cordial.”

“I said no bullshit.”

“Fine,” Sendak returned tersely. “Clearly you see me as a threat to your and the emperor’s wellbeing, even providing the fact that we’ve been attempting to work together these past few days.”

“To say nothing of your actual intentions,” Shiro pointed out.

“You asked me to be transparent and I am.”

“You’ve become the lord regent,” Shiro pressed. “One step from the throne and Keith is the only person in your way to claiming absolute power. I know the kind of power hungry bastard you are - you think I’m not going to think twice about your being here?”

“And you have every right to be cautious,” Sendak shrugged off. “I have no illusions about that.”

“If that’s the case then try to persuade me otherwise,” Shiro returned. “You’ve still given me no reason to trust your being here.”

“Resorting to ultimatums now?” Sendak mused with a spark of amusement. Shiro bristled in response.

“Sendak –”

“At ease, soldier,” the other barked back. Shiro jerked, caught off guard by the command that had been engrained into him. He rocked back on his heels, eyes downcast with quiet seething.

Sendak exhaled deeply, something of his former self settling over his shoulders. “It’s as Lo–Keith has said:” he outlined, “I am only here because I have been given no other choice. Merla has launched a coup of her own making and forced me out. I don’t know what suddenly emboldened her but from what we’ve been able to see of the broadcast, four planets have publicly aligned with her along with the Harfeld Moon Systems, for what it counts. Given that the emperor and I were in the midst of arranging a treaty, this castle ship was one of the only places left available to me.”

“Unsurprising you wouldn’t have any friends to turn to,” Shiro grit. “So don’t be too quick to count us among them.”

“Don’t try and make this personal,” Sendak smiled thinly. “I recognize that you may have had a difficult past few days but so have I; still, I only see one of us instigating here. Don’t you think we’re both a little too grown for this?”
“And that’s not instigating?” Shiro snorted in derision. “Don’t you try to undermine me – I have every right to ask the questions I’m asking. I know how you operate better than anyone else here: if you don’t want to provide an answer you’ll just talk in circles and derail the conversation the second you have a chance. That may have helped you as a politician but I’m not giving you an out. Not now, not here. I am not above turning you away.”

“Not to preclude your feelings in the matter,” Sendak hummed, “but you should realize that your dissent is in direct contradiction to that of your friends – while I can’t say they are thrilled to have my company they have already offered me asylum. Unless you feel your opinion supersedes theirs?”

“I’m not saying that at all!” Shiro tensed, hands balling at his sides. “I would never aim to disregard my friend’s decisions: that’s not how a team works. But the fact remains that I am a part of that team and all of our opinions hold weight here. I know if I have reservations then the other paladins will hear me out. This isn’t the military, Sendak: none of us outrank the other.”

“That’s well and good for you and for Team Voltron as a whole,” the lord regent indicated, “but you’re forgetting that one of your paladins is now emperor of the Galra Empire. No matter what equality you’re trying to establish here, your playing field will never be truly balanced. Don’t let your immediacy to him cloud your ability to see the weight of his decisions.”

“Do not lecture me on my relationships,” Shiro hissed, voice unnervingly even. “I don’t need to take that shit from anyone, least of all you. Of course I know that Keith’s the emperor now – how could I forget that? I get how serious that position is, how much this changes everything for us, for him. But I also get that he’s a person, not a position. I get that he has his own stances and positions and that they may be different than mine sometimes – I embrace that, encourage that. Keith’s his own person and he doesn’t need my permission for anything.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to advise him or speak up when I have doubts. Nothing is going to bar me from being open with him, from communicating with him at every turn. Because no matter what titles we end up with or what our roles in the bigger picture may be, at the end of the day Keith and I are equals. That’s what it means to be in a relationship with someone. I am perfectly confident in what Keith and I have and no interference or manipulation on your part is going to cause me doubt in that now. I’m sorry if you haven’t found that for yourself but it’s also not my problem anymore.”

Sendak stilled, jaw working silently. “Do you feel better now?” he stiffly asked. “Do you feel some sort of catharsis now that you’ve told me off? You accuse me of derailing and yet look where we are: you can’t tell me this argument has anything to do with my being here or with the threat Merla currently poses, so why don’t you just say outright what’s on your mind?”

“I’m not having this conversation here.”

“You’ve already started it,” Sendak tiffed.

“Look,” Shiro growled. “All I’m saying here is that I’ll support Keith and the others in whatever they decide and in whatever the consensus is. But don’t expect me to maintain some sort of superficial relationship with you outside of the public eye.”

“I’m not asking that you do.”

“Then drop whatever bullshit act you’re putting together now,” Shiro laid out.

“Maybe you should just get to the root of what you mean,” Sendak shot back, voice rising
slightly. “Because believe it or not I’m not the same person you remember – you’re certainly no longer the man I used to know. Maybe it’s beyond your pride or your capacity to realize but I’m not being ‘superficial’ as you call it. In fact I am trying to be as transparent and as level-headed as possible even if you’re hellbent on being antagonistic. I understand your reservations against me and I have never once insinuated that you weren’t entitled to feel that way towards me.

“There are frankly far more important things to be discussing right now but for fuck’s sake, Shiro, if you won’t let this go. So fine, let’s have it then: let’s talk about you and me because clearly we’re getting nowhere until you’ve had your say. But you know what? You’re having mine first.

“I am not going to claim that I was the perfect ilbe. I fucked up. A lot. I recognize that. I was not as good to you as I should have been. There were things I didn’t tell you and there were plenty more times when I wasn’t straightforward. I didn’t talk about my feelings or make room to acknowledge yours. That just wasn’t what our relationship was, that wasn’t what either of us were comfortable with. You pushed me away just as much as I pushed you. I made an effort but I also know it wasn’t enough. I didn’t do right by you but don’t for a second pretend that that oversight wasn’t mutual. You do not get the right to try and pin this all on me or act superior now that you’ve found what you needed. You don’t get to take your unresolved feelings out on me or rub your new relationship in my face.”

“I’m not looking to be petty,” Shiro countered indignantly. “You say I’m entitled to my feelings yet you gloss over them like they’re insignificant. You say you fucked up. You think? You say you hid things from me? How about the entire existence of your daughter!? Don’t you think that might have been the slightest bit pertinent to mention? If you couldn’t be honest in that then what the fuck am I supposed to believe? What the fuck else did you conveniently forget to mention?”

“Don’t bring Tora into this,” Sendak growled. “I didn’t keep her from you out of some kind of malice or ill intention. Zarkon had been on my ass far before you came along: he had been looking for a way to get better control over me, rein me back so I wouldn’t present such a threat to him. So Tora went into hiding, changed her identity, got stationed out of his reach. The only reason my being a parent was hidden from you was because the less people were aware of it the safer and more guarded she would be. I’m sorry if protecting my daughter’s safety was an inconvenience to your trust in me but I will prioritize her wellbeing every time.”

“Well that’s great and all, Sendak, it really is,” Shiro sneered. “And you know, a part of me can accept that but it doesn’t escape my notice that you chose to engage in a relationship with me in the first place. You say that Zarkon was looking for a way to get to you – looking for a person to use against you – and even knowing that you still thought it was a grand time to start a new relationship? Did you have that much faith in my ability to protect myself or are you really just that selfish? Because from what I can figure you either didn’t value me as much as I thought you did or when it came down to it you were only ever interested in a good fuck.”

“Don’t you dare assume my feelings in this!” Sendak yelled back, striding across the distance that separated them until he and Shiro were only a foot apart. “Don’t you try and tell me how I felt or why I made the choices I did. You really think I used you? That after everything you were just a good lay to me? You really think so little of me? Is that the kind of person I am to you? And what, you really think starting a relationship with you was some sort of snap decision? That I didn’t grapple with the potential consequences beforehand? You think I chose to develop feelings for you? It’s not that fucking simple!”

“You’re the one who just admitted that you put me in danger for your own sake!” Shiro irately laughed. “What kind of person does that?”
“That’s not a road you want to go down,” Sendak shook his head. “Don’t try and play a game you can’t win.”

“The hell do you mean by that!?”

“I mean exactly that.” Sendak thundered, “don’t try and claim some sort of moral superiority over me when all it does is make you out to be a hypocrite.”

“HOW THE FU–?!”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t done the same!” Sendak cut across viciously. “You were the one that chose to come to City Station with Keith. You were the one that put him in danger. You put each other in danger. Numerous times, even! And now, given your respective status and the political climate the way it is you can’t tell me that you don’t complicate one another’s safety. So tell me how it’s any different? This is you prioritizing your relationship over any potential danger. You did it in the face of Zarkon and you’re doing it again now that Merla’s around. So what makes this so much more palatable to you? Because you’re the one doing it? Because this relationship is that much more meaningful to you? Or did it just never occur to you before that your argument holds no water?”

“That’s–!” Shiro cut off with an aggravated growl.

“Well?” Sendak cocked a brow. “Go on, tell me. What makes your situation so much different to ours?”

“I may have made some rash choices,” Shiro conceded hotly. “But ultimately Keith and I are equals and we went into these risks knowingly together. We both accepted the fact –.”

“You’re really going to tell me that you saw some power imbalance between us?” Sendak interjected. “That there was really some sort of discrepancy? The entire reason I decided to risk a relationship with you is because I viewed us as equals. You more than held your own in the arena and then in the military beyond that! You were someone that could keep pace with me – not just in physical ability but in personality. You made it more than clear that you would call me on my shit and you tolerated it when I called you on yours. You challenged me in a way that I could respect and appreciate. I always valued your opinion, even when it got under my skin from time to time. I valued you. It isn’t like my emotions had no play in the decisions I took but I never would have entered into a relationship with you if I didn’t think you were worth the risk.”

“And even given all that you left me?” Shiro looked bitterly to his feet.

“I didn’t leave you,” Sendak clarified. “I was given sudden deployment orders. By Zarkon. It wasn’t as though I could defy those. It’s clear enough to me now that he only issued them in the first place to separate us – he never did relish the fact that I got close to who he viewed as ‘his’ champion. You were the one who left, Shiro. The moment I left your side you decided to split. Did you not think you could have just told me if you were unhappy? Was it really necessary to run away without a single fucking word or explanation?”

“‘Run away’?” Shiro echoed, anger renewed. “You say that like City Station was my home. Don’t forget that before all else I was a prisoner of war, Sendak. It doesn’t matter that I joined up with the Galra military. It doesn’t matter that I decided to be with you, even knowing you were a part of the regime that got me where I was. No, I didn’t fear you – let me be clear about that one thing. I’m not saying that you abused any power against me; I’m not saying that you manipulated me into being with you because that wasn’t the situation at all. But you didn’t acknowledge the fact that I already had a home. That I had been taken away from people I loved. I already belonged somewhere.”
“People you failed to mention?” Sendak sniffed. “You told me you had no family left, that your mothers had died when you were younger. What was I to think?”

“For the same reason you didn’t say a word about Tora – I wasn’t about to endanger Keith. He was all I had left. And for all your attempts to be the bigger person you just made a hypocrite of yourself: you have no room to criticize me for not talking about my family when you didn’t say a single word about your own. You can’t say it was because you were protecting them, either: I’m sure Myzalta and their cows posed a real threat to Zarkon, right?”


“Yeah,” Shiro laughed. “I met them. Hard to imagine you’re related. Or you and Sylvux. But at least I got to learn that I wasn’t the only one you kept at arm’s length.”

“I’ve distanced myself because it’s what I’ve needed,” Sendak cut back icily. “Because I wasn’t able to handle the deaths of my immediate family in a way that Galra society sees fit. Because at first it was too fucking painful to be around them, to receive their pity. And then because I couldn’t feel anything about it at all because I was so affected by their loss that I was sent in for reconditioning. Because I wasn’t a good enough soldier. Because it wasn’t acceptable to have room to grieve because it was a detriment to the empire.

“So no, I didn’t talk about any of that. I wasn’t ready. I’m still not entirely ready. I can’t reconcile the fact that my mother didn’t see me as reason enough to live after we lost my siblings. I can’t work through the fact that I had no alternative but to serve the ideology that saw my family as no more than fodder. And I still can’t give myself the room to work through this without feeling immeasurably guilty or burdensome for caring in the first place.

“And that is something you will never understand, Shiro, because you aren’t Galra. Because you haven’t been brought up in a culture that got so fucked up under Zarkon’s thumb. You will never understand what it’s like to be made to feel selfish as a person and worthless as a soldier because your love for your family gets in the way of serving the empire. So forgive me for not wanting to talk about it,” Sendak went on thickly. “But this has nothing to do with you and me.”

“How could it not?” Shiro countered. “I’m not saying you had to tell me the specifics; I’m not saying I was entitled to know things you weren’t ready to share. But at the very least you could have warned me where you were coming from, that you had struggles you weren’t ready to deal with yet. I would have accepted and respected that but instead it became this whole unknown thing that changed the entire dynamic of our relationship. I would have been more than willing to support you if I had known you’d needed it. Instead you said nothing and let that silence push me away. How could you maintain that you saw us as equals if you didn’t feel you had the space to just talk to me? I never really knew what you were thinking or feeling. At the time I just thought it was who you were as a person and tried to accept that; I didn’t have the perspective then to realize that you’re supposed to work past those things when you’re in a relationship. I settled for that because I didn’t know any better.”

“Well I’m sorry if you felt you had to ‘settle’ for me,” Sendak retorted. “Because I sure as fuck never felt that way towards you.”

“A great time to make that clear,” fumed Shiro. “I don’t really know how you think I should have felt, then. Especially when you never once told me how you felt. About us, about anything. You sure seemed able to push aside whatever it was once Keith and I came back to City Station.”

“You think the way our relationship imploded didn’t hurt me?” Sendak recoiled. “That it wasn’t hard for me to know I’d been replaced so easily? You think facing you in the coliseum wasn’t
among one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do?”

“You want to talk about the coliseum?” Shiro wagered. “You want to talk about what you
 told me? What you said right before killing me? I can’t forget it, you know? ‘I could have loved
 you’.”

“I lied!” Sendak roared and for several minutes the hangar went quiet.

“What?” Shiro lowly questioned.

Sendak stared at the space between them, jaw set. At length he shifted, raising his gaze to
 meet Shiro’s own, something resigned about his expression.

“I lied,” he repeated. “Because I did love you. I loved you all along and I was too coward to
 admit to it. So there’s that: now everything’s out on the table, take it as you will. Believe me or not, it
doesn’t make a difference now. I’ve since moved on and it’s clear that you have, too: that’s fine by
 me. Maybe this conversation did something for you and maybe not. I guess either way you learned
 something new.

“But I didn’t come here with the intention to fight you and regardless of the fuck ups I’ve
 made I’m trying to work past them: this situation is far bigger than you and me and frankly it’s far
 more important. Feel as you wish towards me but I am going to continue to do my best to work
 alongside you. You wanted to know my aim was? It’s to see Keith on the throne, even if that seems
 contradictory to what you know of me.

“I’ve had my taste of ruling this empire and I know that its people are split in their opinion of
 me. I know that a strong majority of them want their rightful emperor back and I also know that I
gain nothing by defying that. I have no intention of stepping away from politics but I’ve also come to
 reevaluate my position within them – I can only be so effective and accomplish so much as emperor
 and as such the position has lost its appeal to me.

“I still stand by my opinion that Keith needs guidance, that he’s too green at this to rule on his
 own. That he needs to learn more of Gal, of our people, of politics in general. But this said, I think he
 has the makings of a good ruler – I’ve seen it for myself. I believe he has what it takes to steer the
 empire in the right direction, but at the caveat that he seek assistance and consultation where he needs
 it. I want to be a part of this change, whatever that looks like. For once I want to be on the right side
 of our history. So I guess if endorsing Keith’s right to rule makes me Vesh then so be it: I have no
 intention or reason to stand in your way now.”

Shiro stared at him searchingly, the fury that had possessed him subsiding with each passing
 word. At length his shoulders slumped, his defenses erased. He looked tired, his bottom lip tugged
 between his teeth in contemplation. He hesitated, looking to Keith, who nodded his unspoken
 support.

“Alright,” he conceded at last.

Sendak eased in relief, nodding a bit to himself before catching Shiro’s eye once more. “Your
 trust, no matter how tentative, does not go unappreciated,” he asserted, before turning to look at
 Keith. “That goes for the both of you, you know.”

“Thank you, Sendak,” Keith finally spoke up, curling a hand around the fold of Shiro’s arms.
 His fiancé relaxed, permitting him nearer.

“We’ve already set a course for The Haven,” Keith directed, suddenly aware of the way the
others attenuated to his command. “Maray, if you could continue to establish a connection it would be appreciated; I would like to give the Vesh a heads up of our arrival at the very least.”

“Absolutely,” Maray agreed, seemingly thankful to have been tasked with something to do.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to join them,” Sendak spoke up, the Imperial Sentinel joining him a moment later to place a consoling hand to his bicep. Keith looked perceptively between the two of them.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I think that might be best. I’ll fill Shiro in on everything that’s gone down since his absence,” he continued. “We’ll regroup later.”

Offering a quiet agreement, Sendak and Maray turned to leave, speaking to one another in undertones as they exited the hangar. Shiro exhaled deeply from beside Keith, pulling the other paladin close and burying his face in Keith’s hair. Keith smiled, hugging his fiancé and placing a kiss to his shoulder.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he offered.

Shiro shook his head no as he pulled from the embrace, scrubbing a hand through his hair with obvious exhaustion.

“Not right now,” he explained. “Later, maybe.”

“That’s fine,” Keith comforted him. “Take whatever time you need – you know I’ll be here whenever you feel like talking about it, if at all.”

“I will,” Shiro smiled lopsidedly. “But for now I’d just like to hang out with our friends. I need the break.”

“Sounds good,” Keith smiled back, linking his fingers with Shiro’s own and leading them towards the elevator. “I think that’s one thing we could all stand to have.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay I was absolutely SHOOK while Chess was reading the argument to me. I was actually literally eating popcorn while listening, if you can believe. How did all of you feel while reading this? Honestly the part where Sendak says "I lied" had me shook to the core. And I knew it was coming.

Thank you everyone who’s left kudos and comments, as this story comes to a close, its so wonderful to know that so many of you have stuck with us for this whole shindig <3

Happy Halloween everyone! We'll see you next Saturday!

~Moosey
Shiro awoke to the sensation of soft, warm fabric settling over him. With the smallest noise from the depth of his throat he opened his eyes in a squint. Keith’s blurry silhouette hovered nearby as he tucked his fiancé in, settling down beside Shiro on the couch where he’d passed out. Closing his eyes, Shiro wriggled closer to rearrange his head on Keith’s lap, releasing a content sigh when Keith gently began to scratch his scalp.

Over the next several minutes Shiro drifted in and out of sleep until he managed to blink himself completely awake and roll over to look up at Keith. His fiancé smiled, bending down to drop a kiss on Shiro’s forehead and then his lips.

“Time is it…?” Shiro slurred, rubbing idly at his tired eyes.

“It’s about seven thirty in the morning,” Keith replied. “Could you not sleep?”

Shiro shook his head “no”. He and Keith had retired to bed the previous evening following an extensive shower to rid Shiro of the wilderness that had built up over his skin. They’d curled up together in bed and proceeded to spend the next several hours catching each other up on what had happened when they were apart. By the time Shiro had finished telling Keith about everything that had transpired with Nanan, he was far too emotionally drained to get into it about Sendak – and besides, Keith had been drifting off to sleep while cuddled up in Shiro’s arms.

Shiro had snapped off the lights, Keith falling into soft snores while his fiancé spent the next several hours tossing in bed while his fight with Sendak played on an infinite loop in his head. Eventually Shiro had given up on sleep, kissing Keith between the ears and crawling out of their pushed-together mattresses. Keith had only stirred to steal Shiro’s pillow and hug it to his chest.

Shiro had sought out a laptop and the silence of the lounge, determined to preoccupy himself with something productive. But – if his current state was anything to judge from – he had managed to pass out on the couch three-fourths of his way through his report on the mission to Gal.

“No,” Shiro finally responded to Keith, squeezing his eyes shut to help ward away the sleep. “Sorry for leaving.”

Keith stroked back Shiro’s bangs, addressing him in soft tones: “It’s fine. How’re you feeling?”

Shiro sighed, rolling to face Keith’s stomach and gently kissing him there, “Like crap. I’m…” he clicked his tongue quietly, embarrassment heating his cheeks. “I’m sorry you had to see Sendak and I fight. You know I don’t get angry easily, but when I do—,” he peered up at Keith. “It’s a really ugly side of me that I don’t like people to have to see. Again, I’m sorry you had to. And on top of that, I feel horrible for talking about you like you weren’t there. I’m sorry for that, too Keith.”

Keith shrugged, face neutral. “You don’t have to apologize. It’s clear that you both had a lot on your minds and if you’d held back you’d probably just have blown up at each other at a really inopportune time. And it’s not like I haven’t seen you upset before, Shiro,” he added with a smile. “Like I always say, I love all parts of you – even the ones that aren’t so pretty,” he bent forward to
curl around Shiro’s head in a loving embrace, nuzzling him like a gal’s tara. “And don’t ever worry about talking about me like I’m there or not. I completely trust you to represent me and my feelings. Hell, you probably can parse them out better than me most days.”

Shiro relaxed, a relieved smile smoothing over his tense features as he nuzzled Keith back, “Same goes for me, you know.”

“Thank you,” Keith smiled, kissing Shiro’s temple once again. His fiancé finally sat up, stretching away the strain of sleeping on a couch.

“Let’s go check the bridge,” he suggested. “I wanna get the ETA to The Haven.”

“We should stop by the kitchen first,” Keith mused. “Hunk’s already up and cooking breakfast – he’s been in a great mood since Lance came back.”

Shiro nodded in agreement, standing and following Keith to the kitchen. Inside, Hunk was cheerily tending the stovetop, the bright, sweet scent of French toast perfuming the air. Shiro drew short of the entrance when he saw who else was in the kitchen fixing a latte with what appeared to be about ten shots of espresso.

Maray and Shiro met eyes, sharing uncomfortably smiles for a brief moment before Maray hastily splashed the smallest amount of sugar into a massive mug of dark coffee and strode out of the room, addressing the couple with a quick salutation of “good morning”.

Shiro and Keith took their food to go, the former silently begging that they didn’t stumble into Sendak on the way to the bridge.

They met Allura and Coran there, the pair pouring over what appeared to be a map of Gal that they were working on bringing up to date. Pidge was nearby, folded up in her captain’s chair and hammering away on her keyboard.

“Shiro!” Allura said brightly, turning to embrace the returned paladin. Shiro turned to accept a handshake and a pat on the shoulder from Coran. Pidge offered a distracted wave from her seat.

“It’s good to have you back,” the princess continued, her face growing concerned. “Are you… quite alright?”

Shiro blinked in confusion; Pidge filled his stumped silence with a snort.

“We could all hear you and Sendak going at it like a couple of exes on daytime television,” she explained. Shiro paled, staring around at his friends in alarm. Coran slowly turned back to the overhead screen, mouth drawn into a line while Allura coughed and blushed.

“Unfortunately we did… overhear a good section of your tiff,” she explained. “You’d all been in the hangar for quite some time so we decided to check up on you via the security channels to make sure you didn’t need our assistance.”

“Don’t worry, we turned it off when you started talking about fucking,” Pidge filled him in conversationally. Shiro made a noise high in his throat, looking about ready to crawl back into bed and die. Keith glared at his friend, who ducked back into her laptop.

“Everything’s fine,” Shiro supplied, making his best attempt to regain his composure. He stepped closer to the projected screen. “What’s our ETA for The Haven?”

“Actually, we’re stationed on Glacimor’s moon right now,” Coran supplied. “Due to the
conditions of the storm, we’ll have to send you all down in your Lions.”

“I’m guessing Sendak and Maray will want to come, too,” Keith spoke up, glancing apologetically at Shiro. “We should go grab them from their room.”

“I’ll ask Lance if he can give them a ride,” Keith thought to Shiro telepathically. “He’ll have the easiest time navigating besides.”

“Our best bet would be to make Cerberus Mu,” Shiro responded. “The added bulk from the Yellow Lion will give us some much needed stability and Blue can help with navigation.”

“If you’re comfortable with that,” Keith replied with a soft smile. Shiro returned his expression with one of his own, setting a reassuring hand on Keith’s shoulder before requesting that Pidge send for Maray and Sendak.

The trip down to Glacimor was terse and cramped with all five paladins crammed in Cerberus Mu plus the added bulk of Sendak and Maray. Thankfully the later couple kept to Lance’s side of the Lion, appearing to have managed to establish an odd sort of friendship in their time together. Shiro tried his best to breathe through the uncomfortable atmosphere, channeling his energy into piloting the massive Lion into The Haven’s hangar.

They were met on the concourse with a considerably larger crowd than their previous trip, their arrival having been expected this time around. Upon disembarking, Shiro was immediately inundated with the affections of Myzalta’s kits, the Galra apparently having to travel there alongside Matt, Nanan, and Asaara.

“Vrempyza’s here!” Tyrila squealed, fastening herself around Shiro’s waist while Rin did their best impression of a bear and attempted to scale Shiro like a tree.

“It’s so nice to see you again!” Zambrina gushed, trotting up to Shiro’s side with Nanan’s hand secured in her own.

“Hi you guys,” Shiro greeted the kits, lowering himself to his knees so that Rin didn’t manage to topple him over. He smiled gently at Nanan, who provided him with a shy wave. “How’re you feeling, Nanan?”

She shrugged, pulling closer to Zambrina almost shyly, “I’m feeling better.”

“She’s been healing fabulously,” Asaara supplied as she and Matt approached.

“Glad to hear that—,” Shiro began, only to be cut off by a dramatic gasp from Rin.

“Oh my God,” they whispered loudly. “Is that—?!”

“Emperor Lotor!” Nanan squeaked, watching as Keith stepped out of Cerberus Mu’s open mouth, caught up in an animated discussion with Pidge.

“Huh,” mused Zambrina. “I thought he’d be taller.”

Shiro’s snort of laughter was lost as Myzalta sprinted past him, coming to a sudden halt before the Lion. Their body was ridged, mouth obscured by the cup of their hand. Several meters away, Sendak had also frozen mid-step, his eyes locked with his cousin’s.

“Sendak!” Myzalta cried, colliding with Sendak’s chest moments later. Baby Lula mewed indignantly from where they were squished between the adults, Myzalta laughing through their tears.
and absently handing the baby over to Maray, who stood beside Sendak with a perplexed expression.

For a moment Sendak simply stood there, stock-still and silent while his cousin wept into his chest. And then it was as if his resolve crumbled, arms coming up to wind around Myzalta and hold them close.

At this, Myzalta’s kits seemed to lose interest in Shiro, stepping towards the stranger that their parent had embraced.

“Udi?” Zambrina quipped, releasing Nanan’s hand as she peeked around the bulk of their embrace to get a better look at Sendak’s face. “Who’s this?”

Myzalta finally pulled away from Sendak to smile down at their children, “Kits, this is your cousin Sendak.”

“I know you! There’s a picture of you on the wall!” Rin exclaimed, pointing at their estranged cousin dramatically.

“Hello!” Tyrla chirped, promptly affixing herself to Sendak’s leg. The Galra frowned, lowering himself to her height as his hands hovered over her shoulders awkwardly, completely uncertain on how to proceed.

“Oh,” he said to the toddler, hesitatingly extending his hand towards her. “It’s… a pleasure.”

Tyrla stared at his offered hand for several seconds, completely mystified, before she took it up in both of her hands and pressed a little kiss to his knuckles.

Maray let out a delighted little exclamation, Myzalta laughing at the expression of pure confusion on their cousin’s face. Tyrla laughed mischievously, releasing Sendak’s hand in favor of hanging off of his neck, her older siblings joining her almost immediately with a bombardment of nuzzles and questions for their cousin.

Shiro glanced away, recalling Sendak’s words from the day before:

“I’ve distanced myself because it’s what I’ve needed,” he’d informed Shiro, the look of hurt crossing his features almost raw. “I wasn’t ready. I’m still not entirely ready.”

‘I crossed a line there,’ Shiro realized, guilt suddenly surging through him. ‘I should never have brought up his family, especially knowing about his mother.’

“It seems you haven’t changed much.”

Shiro redirected his attention to the speaker, Sylvux approaching with Keith at his side. The Vesh’s leader was grinning in a familiar manner at Sendak, offering a large hand to help him to his feet, the kits whining in disappointment as their new friend stood.

“Sylvux,” Sendak greeted amiably, wincing as Rin managed to scale his back and cling to him like a monkey. “It’s been awhile.”

“For all of us,” Myzalta smiled, standing beside their cousins. They froze as Rin propped their head up on Sendak’s shoulder, grinning at their parent and cousin. “Well I’ll be damned.”

“What?” Sendak frowned, awkwardly patting at the kit gripping onto him.
“Uncanny,” Sylvux chuckled. “Rin looks so much like you did when you were a kit.”

“Really?” Sendak blinked, surprised.

“The relation is very clear, even now,” Maray remarked, coming to stand next to Sendak’s cousin, still bouncing Lula on their hip.

“If I recall correctly,” Sylvux grinned over at Myzalta. “Sendak used to be quite a climber when he was that age, too.”

Immediately, Sendak’s ears pinned flat to his head and he stared over at Maray, who was beginning to grin in amused interest.


“Wasn’t there a time at school when you got stuck up a tree?” Myzalta teased, watching as their cousin paled considerably. “You climbed higher than all the other kits, but you were too afraid to get down, so one of the teachers had to climb all the way up to get you and you cried the whole —.”

“Alright,” Sendak cut them off, completely chagrined. “That’s quite enough Myzalta.”

“I’m quite curious to know what other shenanigans you got into when you were a kit,” Maray smiled, obscuring a giggle behind their palm.

“None you’d want to hear of.”

“Oh contrary!”

Sylvux laughed, thumping Sendak on the back before he and Keith approached Shiro.

“I wanted to commend you on your efforts to help retrieve Nanan,” Sylvux spoke, reaching out to shake Shiro’s hand. The black paladin accepted the gesture, but presented Sylvux with a watery smile.

“With all due respect, I feel as if I thoroughly failed, sir,” Shiro confessed, eyes seeking out Nanan. She was standing next to Matt and Asaara, the trio talking quietly with one another, Matt idly petting the little girl’s hair as they spoke. “Not only did I fail to collect the Mother’s Kiss, but I allowed Nanan to become grievously injured.”

Sylvux sighed and set a hand on Shiro’s shoulder, Keith offering his opposite bicep a gentle touch of comfort.

“Nanan is alive and safe here with us and that is what’s important,” the Galra told Shiro, meeting his gaze with steady eyes. “We could not have foreseen the scope of Merla’s sight, nor predicted her actions.”

“You should be thanking Matt and Asaara,” Shiro said, nodding towards the two. “Matt supported Nanan the whole way through and Asaara saved her life.”

“I have already thanked them for their contributions, Vrepmyza,” Sylvux assured him, giving his shoulder one last squeeze before parting. “You sell yourself short, you know?”

Shiro didn’t know how to respond, feeling as if a salute would be the only way to reply. However, Keith caught his hand before Shiro could fall back into old military habits and the pair
crossed the concourse to go and greet Thace.

It wasn’t long before Annis appeared to interrupt the salutations and carted the group off towards a meeting room to get settled. The kits mewed and begged to be included, still clinging to Maray and Sendak before their parent carted them off to the kitchens for lunch, leaving only Nanan behind. The little girl politely took a seat next to Asaara, looking completely out of place among the assembled, although her expression was just as serious as the next person’s.

Shiro and Keith settled down next to Nylan, who was dressed in dark shades of navy blue, her hair shaved to a close crop – the Galra signifiers of mourning. Shiro gave a sudden jolt of recollection as he sought out one of the smaller compartments in his armor, popping it open to reveal a miniature thumb drive.

“Nylan,” he addressed the woman softly. She stared up at him with exhausted eyes, attempting to produce a warm smile. Shiro returned the expression, setting a sympathetic hand on her shoulder and offering the flash drive in the cup of his other palm. “I met Zuna on The Convent,” he explained. “She wanted me to give you this.”

Eyes full of soft wonder, Nylan accepted the thumb drive, cupping it close to her breast.

“Thank you,” she said softly, expression pained, yet somehow peaceful. She looked at Shiro hopefully. “Did she say anything else?”

“Just that she meant everything she wrote,” Shiro relayed the late Druid’s words. Nylan nodded to herself, withdrawing her hailer and plugging in the tiny drive to observe the contents therein.

“So,” Annis began conversationally, rising from his chair and stepping up onto the table. Sendak made a displeased noise from where he was seated. Annis made a gesture at him that Shiro recalled was the Galra equivalent of flipping someone off. “Seems like we all have a lot to catch up on. I take it you don’t need introductions, Sendak.”

“I’m quite familiar with a good amount of the people here,” Sendak replied tersely, glancing around the table, which was occupied mainly by ex-soldiers of varying ranks.

“Good, because we’re launching right into it,” Annis turned his attentions onto Maray. “So, what’ve you managed to gather in your time playing mole, Imperial Sentinel?”

Shiro raised his eyebrows in shock as Maray reached into their pocket to extract their hailer, calling up a projection that displayed the faces of over a dozen aliens in various states of wellbeing. Most of them looked thoroughly battered to a pulp, drooling blood and squinting at the camera with swollen eyes.

“During my reconnaissance I managed to take down fifteen assassins making attempts on the lord regent’s life,” Maray explained, their tone disturbingly matter-of-fact. “Questioning proved fruitless, however. They were all paid in the same matter: via nondescript drop off locations with cash and a target name. Even upon further perusal of their payment locations, I continuously came to dead ends. Most of them were on rather backwater planets with low amounts of security, so there was no way to tell who came and went.

“However, the assassination attempts began to come in more rapidly than ever within the past five okak – particularly after every time Merla met with Sendak to make negotiations,” Maray continued, shooting a dark look at their friend. Sendak shuffled uneasily. “Unfortunately I was unable to pick up on the coup before it was already in motion, so my knowledge on that front is
limited. However, I was able to spend last night researching about said coalition and sending my findings to Annis.”

“Besides Merla, the ringleaders present on City Station are Duchess Teema of Qurm, Duke Ryder and Prime Minister Rhanvar from Stell, President Dannika of the Harfeld Moons, Chief Tarentola from Stratus, Queen Morelle of Tirmania, and Queen Florea of Apis,” Annis laid out, drawing up his own projections to display the portraits of the mentioned leaders. “In addition to those planets, fifty others in the Nacarpolit Galaxy have pledged to Merla’s coalition. It’s expected that their representatives will continue to arrive on City Station in the coming days.”

“She’s making it so that attacking directly would be political suicide,” Thace explained. “She has them gathered there under the pretense of peace, so attacking City Station directly—.”

“…it would make us look no better than Zarkon,” Keith concluded bitterly. “So what are our options?”

Sylvux sighed from where he sat, casting Nanan a wary glance. It was more than clear that he didn’t want the little girl to have to overhear the grim reality of the political situation unfolding around her. Still, he gathered himself and said: “As it would stand, we have three options. The first would be to attack City Station head on before any more of her confidants can arrive, nipping her rule in the proverbial bud. The second would be to wait it out until her insidious intentions become clear to the people, but there’s no telling what she could accomplish in that time span. The third would be to attempt to rally our own coalition of supporters of the Vesh and Emperor Lotor and organize a political counter-attack.”

“But how effective is that going to be—?”

The meeting was interrupted by a perfunctory gasp from Nylan, who stood from her seat, staring intently at the projection of her hailer’s screen.

“Captain?” Sylvux frowned, crossing around the table to stand beside her.

“Asaara, could you come have a look at this?” Nylan asked, gesturing for the eclectic to approach her. Asaara stood, lazily approaching the soldier and accepting her hailer. She squinted as she read over the contents, eyes widening in shock.

“What is it?” Maray inquired.

“I received this drive from Shirogane – it was given to him by Zuna before she was killed,” Nylan explained. “Most of the contents were,” she glanced away from the gathered, looking equal amounts embarrassed and heartbroken. “…personal sentiments, but there was a handful of images attached at the end of her message.”

“This is insane,” Asaara shook her head, flipping through the images. She pressed her hand to her mouth, barking out a humorless laugh. “That magnificent old bitch.”

“What did you find?” Keith asked.

“These are copies of Haggar’s hand-written grimoire,” Asaara explained, the expression going straight over Shiro’s head. At confused looks from the majority of the gathered, Nanan spoke up.

“A grimoire is where a Druid stores all of her spells and stuff she finds out about,” Nanan explained. “Mostly you keep them on the computer – only really old Druids write it down by hand.”
“According to Zuna, Haggar had these among her possessions on The Convent,” Nylan explained. “After Haggar died, she was able to dig them up and take pictures of these pages before Merla had a chance to find out about them. She wrote that she destroyed them afterwards.”

“What do they say, though?” Matt asked.

“Do you remember what I told you about Merla and myself when we first met?” Asaara inquired. “How Merla and I were Haggar’s apprentices?”

“Of course,” Matt nodded, coming to stand up beside her. He stared down at the pages, his mouth contorting in confusion. “These are…?”

“Names,” Asaara explained. “Of all of Haggar’s previous apprentices. They weren’t chosen at random.”

“Then how?” Shiro frowned.

“Haggar was using her magick to divine who the next natural Mother would be. According to her research, the process of ascension works quite differently from what we were led to believe,” Asaara explained. “If another Druid murders the True Mother, she will take on the role of Mother of Constellations – until the next True Mother was born. Ironically enough, both Merla and I were the candidates for True Mother in our generation. She even has your name written down, Nanan.”

“But,” Nanan began, looking perplexed. “You’re not the Mother? Why didn’t Haggar just kill you to keep the powers?”

“Because it was easier to leech it off of us,” Asaara smiled without humor. “A longer method, but less messy, and garnered her further power in the process. Haggar reverse-engineered this method from a ritual discovered by Mugenleb’s predecessor…” she slowed, meeting Nanan’s gaze. “It’s a method of consensual transferal of the Motherhood from one Druid to another.”

There was a long pause.

“Merla’s billing herself as The Mother of Constellations,” Keith mused. “If we can have a fully realized Mother, then it would be more than easy to expose her—.”

“But it depends on what Nanan wants,” Shiro cut in, deferring attention to the little girl. Nanan shrunk down into her seat as all eyes fell on her. Matt was at her side in an instant, coming down to her height as he rested his hand on her shoulder.

“If it’s too much, we can talk about this later,” he told her. “I don’t want to stress you out, pattit.”

Nanan glanced hesitantly at Keith and Asaara before returning her attention to Matt, shaking her head, “It’s okay. I… I think I’ve known what to do for a long time.”

She hopped out of her seat, going to join Keith and Asaara’s sides, dropping herself into a low curtsey, “Your majesty.”

Keith immediately blushed, ears pricking straight up, “It’s fine, you don’t have to—.”

“No,” Nanan shook her head as she straightened up. “I want to say this to you.

“I… I don’t know if Vrepmyza’s talked to you, but I don’t think it’s any secret that I don’t want to be the Mother,” she confessed, ears drooping. “But even though I don’t really understand
what’s going on, I always wanted to do what I had to in order to keep people safe,” she looked at Shiro, smiling sadly. “Even though I fought a lot with myself about that. I knew what it meant to be Galra,” she continued. “Victory or death. And I didn’t want to let people down, because I knew that they would die. But now…”

She reached out, taking up Asaara’s hand in both of hers, “I think that… I think that maybe that’s not for me. I just—I really just want to be a kid. Because if I was the Mother, I’d have no idea what I was doing, and maybe more people would get hurt for that. I still need to learn, I think.” Her smile brightened, “But Asaara, even though you’re kind of weird, you’re super nice and super smart. All you’ve done is help us, and you made sure I didn’t die when I was really hurt. You were supposed to be the Mother before I was, and I think that you’d be a really good one now, too.”

Asaara stared at Nanan, her eyes circles of shock. She looked around at the gathered, finally deferring to Keith. A smile quirked up the side of her mouth.

“You know,” she began conversationally. “I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced, Majesty. I’m Asaara.”

“Shiro’s told me a lot about you,” Keith smiled, reaching out to take her hand in greeting. “Thank you for all of your help. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“You, too,” Asaara nodded before turning to address the rest of the Vesh gathered at the table. “I know that I’ve just met all of you, and that I haven’t yet been able to prove my self-worth on anything other than hearsay. Not to mention, I’ve kind of made it my prerogative to stay out of all this political bullshit. Under any other circumstances I would refuse the Motherhood right out.

“I don’t need power,” Asaara shook her head. “I just need to keep people healthy and safe. But Nanan, if this is what you need from me, and if this is what the empire needs me to do,” she paused, sucking in her lower lip and closing her eyes. She nodded to herself once, opening them back up and facing Keith. “Then Your Majesty, with your approval and the Vesh’s I’d like to formally request that the Motherhood be transferred to me.”

Keith nodded, sneaking a perfunctory glance at Shiro, Matt, and then Nanan, “You three would be able to vouch for Asaara’s character and ability best. I’ve already heard Shiro and Nanan’s accounts – what about you, Matt?”

“Absolutely no qualms here, Your Majesty,” Matt smiled, folding his arms over his chest. “Sylv, what do you think?”

“Unless anyone in this room has objections, I would like to approve this measure as well,” Sylvux stated. “Majesty, what would be your plan of action after the True Mother comes to fruition?”

Keith furrowed his brow, and Shiro could tell that he was silently parsing over his options, “As much as I hate to say it, heading a smear campaign or waiting for Merla to show her true colors would take too long.” He shook his head, “By that time she’d have the empire completely entangled in her control – we need to cut her off at the root before she has time to gather momentum.

“What we need to do is concentrate our efforts into retaking City Station,” the emperor surmised. “I want the people to see who the True Mother is and what she stands for, and I want to be able to talk to the coalition leaders myself and in person. I can’t idly stand by while my capitol is reclaimed by another tyrant.

“I shouldn’t have run in the first place,” Keith concluded softly, dropping his eyes to the table.
before him. “My people needed me there, and my absence allowed Merla to take hold.”

“It was a wise political move on your part,” Sendak cut in, surprising the gathered. “City Station was in an uproar and the best thing you could do was protect yourself from aggression from more seasoned and corrupt politicians. You may be capable, but you are green; and Merla managed to undermine even me.”

“I—,” Keith blinked, looking genuinely taken aback by the compliment. “Thank you.”

‘That’s…’ Shiro thought, watching as Maray smiled and laid a supportive hand over Sendak’s bicep. ‘That’s really something, coming from Sendak of all people. He doesn’t pass out compliments freely.’

“I did my best to lead the empire in your absence,” the ex-commander confessed. “But I feel now that my efforts were in vain. I should have sought your council at the earliest opportunity.”

“Your efforts were far from in vain, Sendak,” Sylvux addressed his cousin kindly. “You established the skeleton of the democracy that the Vesh is attempting to create, and for that I cannot thank you enough.”

“Honestly, I probably would have just told you to go for it,” Keith shrugged. “Like you said: I’m still green. You know how to play the game, and like Sylvux said, you effectively laid down the foundation for what we’re seeking to create and without that in place we’d be in an even bigger mess than we currently are.”

“Okay well,” Annis huffed from where he was sitting cross-legged on the table next to Thace, looking completely exasperated to have been cut off for so long. “We can sit around and lick each other’s dens as much as we want but – ow.”

The techie winced as Thace thumped him hard on the arm, gesturing purposefully over at Nanan, whose face had gone bright purple.

“Oh,” Annis frowned. “Sorry, kit. Anyway, sorry to be that guy but we should probably get this magick stuff going ASAP so we can focus on planning our countermeasures. You need some fancy rocks or something to do your thing, Druid?”

“Yeah, yeah, shut your mouth, Throk,” Asaara scowled at him, returning Nylan’s hailer to her. “I don’t need my magick to sense your sarcasm.”

With a roll of her eyes she dismissed him, expression clearing as she turned her attentions towards the captain, setting a gentle hand on her cheek. “I’m sorry for your loss,” she prefaced gingerly, “but it would be best to destroy the drive as soon as you can.”

“Thank you My Mother,” Nylan returned with a humble bob of her head. Asaara sighed, clearly embarrassed, and looked away from the other woman.

“You guys got a temple around here or something?” she inquired, scanning the room for answers. Prince Perét, who had henceforth been mainly preoccupied with his cuticles, looked up at her, blinking in an almost sleepy fashion.

“We have a non-denominational chapel right here in the capitol building,” he explained. “It’s a mite small, but I hope it should be sufficient?”

Asaara nodded once, sharply, “Yeah, that should work.”
The eclectic faced Nanan, reaching out towards her with a friendly hand, “You ready, kiddo?”

The girl nodded decisively, hesitating just for a moment before she accepted Asaara’s grip. A sheepish smile formed on her face, “Is it okay if Matt and Shiro come, too?”

Shiro was immediately taken aback by her request, sharing a surprised expression with Matt. Asaara, too seemed shocked, but not deterred – her expression melting into one of genuine warmth, “Yeah, that should be fine. I think that His Majesty Lotor and Sylvux should come to, just for posterity’s sake. But no more people though.” She glared out at the rest of the room, as if daring them to challenge her. “This is a ritual, not a damn sideshow.”

“Prince Perét,” Sylvux began, deferring to the monarch. “If you would?”

Perét and his assistant Mimeaux showed the small party to the chapel, a room cut out in the shape of a sphere that spiraled up into a rounded cone at its ceiling. A massive chandelier hung from the crest of the cone’s tip, dripping prismatic light into the space. Pews were set out in the round facing the dais at the center of the room, upon which Nanan and Asaara sat opposite one another.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Asaara asked, tentatively holding her hands out to Nanan. “Once we do this, you can’t take it back.”

The smaller Druid nodded decisively, offering her hands to Asaara in turn, “I’m sure. I don’t want the Motherhood. The only thing I want is for my family to be happy and safe.”

Asaara smiled, linking their hands between them and dropping her forehead down to touch Nanan’s, “I’m proud of you, kit.”

“Thank you,” Nanan returned gently. “I’m proud of you, too Asaara.”

Asaara chuckled in soft disbelief, nuzzling her apprentice before bringing her hands up close to her chest.

“Do you feel your power, Nanan?” Asaara inquired softly. “Right here?”

“Yes,” the girl nodded in response.

“I want you to imagine drawing your power out into your hands, like you’re about to cast a spell. But just keep it there, okay?”

Nanan nodded again, taking a deep breath and following Asaara’s instructions. Within a moment her hands began to glow a dull pink that burned brighter and brighter as time passed – Asaara’s shimmering silver flooded her own hands a second later, the two wrapping together in a metallic pink glow.

Asaara opened her eyes, which were completely void of the typical Galra gold, now completely entrenched in the hoary lights of her magick. As she did, Nanan opened her own eyes – soft pink at first before settling into the flaxen pink of The Mother’s magicks, along with the light that twisted around her hands.

Shiro felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention, a deep chill working up his spine as the air in the room dropped in temperature, the scent of petrichor flooding the room. He glanced beside him to see that both Sylvux and Keith had ruffled considerably, their ears pressed down to their heads as they winced against some sound too high-pitched for Shiro or Matt to process.
The magick between Asaara and Nanan’s hands began to spark and crackle, the Druids’ mouths beginning to work in unison, mouthing out soft whispers that the translators couldn’t even begin to interpret. Their voices grew louder, the soft song they produced resonating and warbling in the air, a thing alive, pulsing and swirling in time with their magicks.

And then, as quickly as it began, it was over.

Without warning, the pair fell silent. The air warmed, Shiro shaking out the last of the chills that ran up his spine. Nanan and Asaara’s magicks faded, the two slumping silently as they closed their eyes. Nanan’s eyes fluttered open slowly, the girl raising up her hands and staring intently at her palms. With a little gasp, they became aglow in Asaara’s grey magicks – now Nanan’s.

“Asaara?” She asked tentatively, leaning forwards towards the eclectic. Asaara didn’t respond, simply opening her eyes as they became awash in a rose gold glow, along with the rest of her body. Her hair rose along with the skirts of her coat, which fanned out and began to bob and circle around her, like waves on a sea. She leaned back into her magick, which buoyed her easily, drawing her up to her full height. Her boots seemed to skim the ground as she hovered, the flaxen pink light twisting around her in elegant spirals of flowers and filigree, her mouth parting into a small ‘o’.

And then her feet touched the ground, gently, slowly – the glow of magick softening, returning to within its new host. Asaara blinked, the light disappearing from her eyes as she glanced out around those who surrounded her.

“So,” she said conversationally. “I think that worked.”
'Well this isn’t the first time I’ve found myself repentant before a closed door,’ Sendak considered frankly as he took a moment to compose himself. One of The Haven’s luxury suites stood opposite him, its crystalline-inlaid doors thick enough to prevent any sound from escaping the room beyond them. Maray had assured him that its occupants would be in but Sendak had waited an extra few hours before deciding to pay the royal couple a visit: the last thing he’d wanted to do was risk agitating Shiro further.

They’d had less than a full day to recover from their spat and between the meticulous planning and the repetitious debriefings Sendak wasn’t positive that his ex had even managed to squeeze in an opportunity to rest. Sendak himself had crashed as soon as he’d gotten the chance, all but crawling into the bed he’d been offered, pausing just long enough to shuck off the light armor still on his person.

Maray had laughed at that, not unkindly teasing him for his sulky behavior all the while offering themselves as a sounding board should Sendak need it. Sendak had taken a minute to consider the offer, peering at his friend over the rise of the pillow he’d burrowed into.

“You might as well come here,” he sighed at length, readjusting on the mattress to make room. “This might take a while and you’re likely tired, too.”

Maray had raised an elegant eyebrow at the invitation, lips quirking with unspoken comment. They perched themselves upon the bed with uncertainty at first, relaxing as Sendak slumped back down into the thick comforter and began to talk. He hadn’t known where to begin at first, long since out of the practice of sharing his emotions with anyone, save perhaps for Tora. So he’d started at a ramble, just trying to parse out his thoughts as the events of his argument with Shiro played out in his mind.

He wasn’t sure when the conversation had shifted, exactly: when he had begun recalling memories from when he was a kit, laughing with Maray over his misguided youth as a new recruit in equal measure with sharing moments of his later life, of the hardships they’d both endured under a reign they’d had no liberty to openly criticize or question. At length the gnarled feelings of anger and guilt had untwisted in Sendak’s belly and he’d found himself entirely exhausted, eclipsing into sleep as Maray brushed their fingers across his forehead.

When Sendak had roused again it was only out of necessity, one of the paladins knocking outside his door to alert him that the Castle of Lions had safely arrived at The Haven. Maray had given him a gentle smile from the mountain of sheets beside him, passing a steaming mug off to him as they nursed one of their own. Sendak had gratefully accepted it, unable to suppress a little purr of satisfaction to find that Maray had remembered precisely the way he took his coffee. They lingered like that for a moment longer, simply enjoying the warmth of the bed and the quiet of one another’s company before reluctantly pulling themselves together into presentable condition to meet up with the others.

Despite the previous nights’ talk, however, Sendak had still found himself distracted during the meeting, not missing the way that Shiro purposefully avoided him, his body language closed off
‘I need to talk this out with him,’ he’d resolved as Annis addressed the group around him. ‘We’ve had some time to cool off; we can’t just leave things as they stand – not if we intend to work together. Hopefully he’ll be amenable to hearing me out, but I guess we’ll see. We both said some loaded things and if I’m being honest I think we were both in the right to say them, that we needed to say them. No matter how shitty I’m feeling now I have to admit that a part of me feels relief for having finally gotten all those things off my chest.’

Finding the right words hadn’t been hard – he’d been harboring them in all their myriad forms for nearly a year. He’d arranged his arguments neatly, run through imaginary scenarios in his head late at night when sleep had eluded him and bitterness had set in. He’d tried to guess what Shiro might say in turn and what, then, he could say in his defense.

The fact was that Sendak had been prepared for things to come to proverbial blows with Shiro and he had been ready for quite some time. What he hadn’t been prepared for was how that fight would make him feel.

Sendak had never relished arguing with Shiro, at least not in earnest. Somehow he thought that things would change since the dissolution of their relationship but if anything Sendak only managed to feel worse.

‘I guess that’s just how this works out,’ he accepted. ‘My being over him doesn’t mean that I care for him any less, just… differently. Maybe I can still salvage this. Maybe we can leave this entire mess as friends.’

Resolute, Sendak exhaled the last of his nerves and rapped upon the door.

Silence.

Sendak paused, brow creasing as he waited, uncertain if he was being ignored or if perhaps he had ended up waiting too long, the royal couple having turned in for the evening. With a wince he readied to knock again, knuckles just about to graze the crystalline paneling when a scrabbling could be heard on the other side, the door swinging open a fraction as Keith appeared in the margin. He seemed out of breath, damp hair framing his face, the crests of his cheeks bluish from the glow of his Altean markings.

“Ah,” Sendak stuttered.

“Hey,” Keith panted out, trying to appear casual despite the fact that all he seemed to be wearing was a rather decadent towel.

“Honey?” Shiro’s voice could be made out from the depths of the suite, confusion lacing his tone. “Is someone at the door?”

“WELL,” Sendak forced out, making to turn. “Sorry to intrude.”

“Huh?”

“Who is it?” Shiro called, drawing nearer.

“I’ll come back later.”

“Wait,” Keith flushed. “I wasn’t– we weren’t–!”
“Keith?” Shiro spoke in question and Sendak froze, knowing he’d already been seen. Shoulders sagging, he slowly turned back to the couple as they lingered in their doorway. Shiro, at least, was more clothed than Keith, the fingers of one hand pressed to his lips as he tried to suppress mutual embarrassment and amusement at the predicament.

“NOTHING IS HAPPENING HERE,” Keith stressed out, looking between Sendak and Shiro rapidly.

“You’re ah,” Sendak pointed out unnecessarily, “You’re in a towel, Your Majesty.”

“I took a shower,” Keith insisted.

Sendak just nodded neutrally, not missing the still-wet curtain of bangs that hung in Shiro’s face.

‘I’m a little too old to be that naïve, kit,’ he mused, choosing to say nothing further that might fluster Keith.

“I can come back later,” he repeated, this time directing his words to Shiro. The paladin stilled, appraising him in question before his gaze drew suddenly to Keith’s own. They shared a wordless look, their expressions shifting slightly as if in response to something Sendak couldn’t quite hear. Then, in unison, they seemed to come to a conclusion, Shiro propping open the door to their suite and nodding his head for everyone to follow him back inside.

Sendak hesitated, uncertain of what he had just witnessed. “Did you just…?” he hedged.

“It’s a paladin thing,” Shiro shrugged off. “Come on; unless you want to have it out in the hallway?”

“I’m not here to fight you,” Sendak murmured as he crossed the threshold into a circular sitting room. Through a door to the right he could make out the interior of a large bedroom, Keith disappearing beyond it with a quiet click, leaving he and Shiro to their privacy.

“Look,” Shiro began, locking the front door and coming to stand opposite Sendak.

“I wanted to –,” Sendak started at the same time, the two falling to silence in awkward tandem.

“So…” Shiro filled the space.

‘Just say it,’ Sendak bolstered himself.

“I’m sorry,” came the twin sentiment. Sendak and Shiro stilled, eyes wide and meeting one another’s unabashedly.

“What?” Shiro asked stiltedly. “You… you never…”

“I know,” Sendak nodded quickly.

“You never apologize.”

“Yeah.”

“At least not like this,” Shiro finished off.

“I can’t say it was ever a habit of yours, either,” Sendak acknowledged with a slow grin.
“Not between us, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Shiro echoed. “So… so what’s this, then?” he asked, licking his lips uncertainly.

“I mean it when I say I’m not the same,” Sendak huffed a small laugh.

“That’s not easy for you,” Shiro plainly stated, and the understanding seemed to break the tension between them. Shiro released a thoughtful hum, moving to sit sideways on one of the low couches before angling his chin at the space opposite him in clear invitation to join him. Sendak settled upon the cushions, acutely aware of how close the arrangement forced he and Shiro to be.

“Is this alright?” he asked in undertones.

“Yeah,” Shiro permitted, looking to his lap a minute. Sendak quieted, giving him whatever space it was he needed.

“There’s some things I want to say,” Shiro admitted after a pause. “But I’d like to hear you out first. Is that okay?”

“More than,” Sendak assured him. “Though I’m not very good at beginning.”

“Start wherever then,” Shiro urged, giving a laugh that Sendak immediately recognized as being nervous.

‘We’re equally awkward about this, then,’ he assessed with some relief. ‘At least I’m not alone in that regard.’

“Okay,” Sendak initiated. “I think… first things first, I should thank you for being straightforward with me. I know I wasn’t the most… receptive, perhaps? I think we both had a lot of things to say.”

“If you’re going to say that we both said things we don’t mean –,” Shiro warned.

“No,” Sendak grinned. “I think it’s pretty clear we both meant everything we said. And… maybe we went about that more harshly than was strictly necessary. But I also believe that we both needed to say those things and to be heard about them. Even if it was…”

“Painful?” Shiro surmised quietly.

“Yeah,” Sendak dropped his gaze. “For me, too. I… I realize that the way I phrased things might have been a bit cruel.”

“I’m just as guilty, if we’re being honest,” Shiro sighed. “I mean, you were right when you said I was the only one antagonizing. At least in the beginning. I guess… I finally had this opportunity to say all these things I’d been bottling up and I just didn’t want to let it go. So I brought up shit I shouldn’t have – like your family. That never should have been on the table.”

“Well you certainly know how to hold my attention,” Sendak chuckled lowly. “And… thanks for conceding on that point. Although, that said, I get what you mean. About not being able to just let it go? I… I was just as guilty of that. It kind of felt like…” he exhaled thoughtfully, “I don’t know, as if I only had that moment to say things, to be honest about what I’d been feeling. Like it just would never come up again or that, I don’t know… that if the situation ever presented itself again that I wouldn’t have the place to be as angry about it as I felt?”

Shiro laughed at that, nodding in understanding. “Because I was pissed off you felt you had
the ability to be angry, too?” he clarified. “We both try so hard to be more restrained people – maybe that’s just the conditioning the military instilled in us.”

“Yeah,” Sendak agreed with relief. “It just seemed like if we had it out at any other time it would just be the one of us doing all the shouting while the other was just… closed off, I guess? Emotionless?”

“It’s true,” Shiro admitted. “Maybe this way was a bit messy and uh, well, ill-timed? But at least it felt fair. I wish we’d just gotten it over with sooner.”

“Do you…” Sendak hedged, searching Shiro uncertainly. “Do you feel any better? I mean, a lot was said and most of it was fairly… brutal. But…”?

“No, I get you,” Shiro cut in. “It was… cathartic, in its own right. Like even though it hurt like hell to hear those things it also felt like this huge weight had been lifted?”

“Closure?” Sendak offered, and Shiro smiled.

“Yeah, closure.”

“I’m sorry I never just talked to you before,” Sendak murmured after a pause. “It seems like something so simple but at the time it was really a big deal for me. It just wasn’t something I was able to do at the time, and that wasn’t fair to you. Realizing that, I probably wasn’t ready for a relationship then – I just wasn’t in the right headspace to do things the right way, the way that you or anyone else deserved. I’ve… I’ve changed a lot since then. At least… I’d like to think so?”

“I believe it,” Shiro returned softly, fingers lighting upon Sendak’s crooked knee. “The Sendak I knew would never take the time to talk like this, to be this… open? To apologize and do it fully? And I want you to know that I value you doing this because it is just so out of character from the version of you that I used to know. This can’t be easy for you – I recognize that it’s a big change. Though… I have to wonder where it came from?”

“I don’t know,” Sendak frowned curiously. “Though it must have been a recent development.”

“In that case I have a few guesses,” Shiro smiled lopsidedly. Sendak looked to him searchingly but the paladin shook his head, smile deepening.

“I’m in the same boat,” Shiro said instead. “No matter how much I wanted to be in a relationship with you back then I probably wasn’t ready to be in one, either. We were both out of our depths in different ways, both had too much extraneous stuff going on. We needed to figure ourselves out first before we brought other people into the picture. Not to say that I didn’t value my time with you…” Shiro trailed off earnestly.

“As did I,” Sendak returned in equal measure.

“You really meant it?” Shiro asked, lip tugged between his teeth. “That… that you loved me?”

“Yes,” Sendak ushered, voice gravelly. “I really did love you, Shiro.”

Shiro’s gaze flickered and he bit harder on his lip, startled as Sendak’s hand came to gently rest atop his own. He looked up suddenly, their eyes meeting.

“Shiro…” the black paladin repeated softly. “To actually hear you call me by my name,
"I should have said it more," Sendak insisted. "Always, even."

"I know you only didn’t because it made it easier to keep from getting too close," Shiro said. "You were trying to protect yourself. Maybe me, too. But… it really does sound good to hear you call me by name, even now. I know it’s too little, too late," he continued with a sad laugh. "But for what it counts, I loved you, too, you know? I think in some ways…” he trailed off, shaking his head resolutely. "Sorry, nevermind, I –."

"It’s not something I can forget, either," Sendak insisted, and Shiro stilled, watching him intently. Sendak gave their conjoined hands a little squeeze, not knowing what more he could offer. "We’ve both moved on, haven’t we?" he asked instead. "Things aren’t the way they were anymore, not in any capacity, really. But… the feelings remain, don’t they? Even if they look a little different? I don’t think I can stop caring for you," he admitted plainly. "But maybe because of that I’m content for things to be like this. You’re happy where you are, you’re cared for in the way that you need to be – that you deserve to be. And it’s not like you need my blessing or my permission to live your life but the fact still remains that it makes me weirdly happy to see you have these things. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah," Shiro relaxed. "I get that exactly. I… I’m not looking to have a relationship with you again –."

"Right, same."

"– but I do still care for you and this is… it’s enough, you know?" Shiro finished.

"I’m glad it’s that way for you, too," Sendak returned. "And I really am glad that you have Keith," he continued. "To be honest, he’s a hard person not to like. He seems like a good fit for you."

"I’d hope so," Shiro shot back with a gentle blush. "I mean, I’m marrying him, after all."

"You… what?" Sendak blinked, pulling back in surprise. Shiro cocked his head, nose wrinkled in curiosity.

"You mean Keith never told you?" he asked.

"It… never came up…" Sendak stilted out. "I… well…"

"Are you alright?" Shiro pressed. "Didn’t think this would catch you so off-guard."

"I mean," Sendak shook his head slowly. "In the spirit of honesty, I might as well share with you: my original plan was to marry Keith, myself."

"What?" Shiro drew back flatly.

"Yeah, it was a bad plan, ultimately, and that’s why I scrapped it," Sendak smiled apologetically. "Which is kind of how things worked out as they did."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Shiro asked insistently, not nearly as annoyed as Sendak had anticipated.

"Before I became lord regent," Sendak explained, "I had this idea to marry Keith. It legally
would have given me claim to the throne – not that I ever had any ill intention by Keith, mind you. I just figured that it would make a good political match and that with that achieved that overthrowing Zarkon would have been easy. In fairness there would have been a lot less upheaval in the long run. Keith… like I said, I support his claim to the throne now. In ways I did since the beginning. But I still contend that he needs guidance.”

“You intended to be that for him?” Shiro translated.

“Yes,” Sendak admitted. “Obviously I plan to go about that in a different way now.”

“So if you were planning on marrying Keith…” Shiro continued with an air of disbelief, “Then that’s what was going on back at the hangar, right after the coup. You stopped us because you intended to have Keith stay?”

“Yes.”

“And then Lance…?” Shiro frowned.

“Wasn’t entirely my call,” Sendak clarified. “But when it came down to it, I did end up using him as some means of leverage – I knew your group wouldn’t just abandon him and so it meant that Keith and I were guaranteed to talk in the future.”

“So wait, those contracts you guys were writing?” Shiro interjected in sudden realization. “They were going to be negotiating your getting married to one another?”

“At the very outset, yes,” Sendak relented with a sigh. “But I changed my mind early on about that.”

“Why?” Shiro frowned. “It’s not like you to invest so much in a plan just to back down.”

“I realize,” Sendak smiled wryly. “But when it came down to it, I began to appreciate just who Keith was. I didn’t really know him before and it was easy to view him as just another piece in this political game. But… he really is something else, isn’t he? What he lacks in tactical know-how he makes up for in charisma. He’s quick on his feet, fiery. He’d hate me for saying it, but in those ways he’s a lot like Zarkon was.”

“He is,” Shiro agreed knowingly.

“But if that were all, I wouldn’t have changed my mind,” Sendak went on. “If he truly was just another Zarkon then I would’ve tried all the harder to make myself the real emperor while leaving him just a figurehead. But he’s not that way, he has a kind of mercy that I’ve never known another Galra to have. There’s a kindness to him that at first seems so weak and misguided and yet… it really is his strength, isn’t it? His sincerity?

“Keith… The reason I couldn’t go through with it is because I realized that he’s a good person, that he has a chance of doing this right. He has this moral compass, this sense of justice that is just so firmly a part of his person that he comes off as completely untainted by the realities of our empire, of the whole terrible landscape of how politics work. There’s something refreshing in his newness to this and what’s more is that it isn’t just some persona he adopts because he has to – it’s literally a part of who he is.

“When I came to think that way I couldn’t bring myself to just use him. I… I wanted to guide him, to step back and do it in a way that respected him, even if it wasn’t what immediately served me best. I’ve never felt so inspired to act that way before and when I came to understand that feeling I also came to believe that Keith truly was the one meant to inherit this empire. He’s someone worth
following, and you know that I don’t say that lightly.”

“You should tell him as much,” Shiro hummed with pride.

“I intend to,” Sendak inclined. “All of it, that is. If I wish to work alongside him then transparency is a must even if…” he gave another guilty smile.

“Well, while he might be surprised by what you’ve told me I can’t say that I entirely am,” Shiro countered ruefully. “I know you well enough – I should have anticipated something like this from the get-go.”

“Are you angry?” Sendak cocked a brow.

“Mn,” Shiro frowned. “I don’t really think it’s my place to get angry – Keith’s a person, not a possession. He might be a bit miffed but as far as I’m concerned I’m just glad you told me the truth, even if it is a bit fucked up.”

“I willingly admit as such.”

“Well your self-awareness in that is what has me at ease, I guess,” Shiro pointed out. “I mean, I’m certainly not happy to hear it but so long as you’ve given up on that idea then we’re both good.”

“That’s a promise,” Sendak insisted, palm held aloft. “I really have given up on that.”

“Have your sights set on someone else?” Shiro suggested.

“I… what?”

“Nothing.”

“No, I –.”

“Thank you, though,” Shiro cut in. “For taking the time to talk with me. It would have been so easy to just let things sit as they were. I’m really glad you came by. I feel… at peace.”

“Closure?” Sendak suggested again, letting the previous line of conversation go.

“Yeah,” Shiro agreed. “Closure.”

Sendak eased, offering his ex a hand. “Does this mean we’re good?” he asked. Shiro just smiled, taking it in his and pulling Sendak into a one-armed hug.

“Yeah,” he affirmed. “We’re good.”

After a moment they parted, rising from the couch as they made for the front door. Shiro idled at the threshold, something clearly on his mind.

“Hey, Sendak?” he called after the other. “You know what you said about me and Keith? About how it makes you happy to see me in this relationship? I get what you mean. I’m happy for you, too. You deserve to find that for yourself. So… don’t let it pass you by, okay?”

“Yeah,” Sendak replied, mystified despite the flush that worked its way through his chest. Shiro’s smile broadened.

“Well, night then,” he said in parting.
“Night,” Sendak repeated, wandering back the stretch of corridors towards his room. It was a short trip, the passages empty of any foot traffic, the entirety of The Haven seemingly bedded down in preparation for the attack come the following morning.

‘I really should rest up,’ Sendak assessed as he passed into his apartments, not feeling nearly tired enough despite the hour. ‘Perhaps I should go find –’ he cut off, thought finishing aloud.

“Maray?”

The Imperial Sentinel looked up at once, folding closed the book they held in their lap in order to give Sendak their full attention. They sat in a chair to one side of the bed, a tray of silver teaware arranged on a table beside them.

“How did it go?” Maray asked, insistent but not unkind.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Sendak returned instead.

“Yes, well,” Maray hesitated, suddenly uncertain. “I kind of let myself in; I knew how troubled you were about this whole thing so I thought I could make you some tea, but…”

“You didn’t have to go to such trouble,” Sendak assured them. “Though the gesture is definitely appreciated.”

“You don’t mind, then?” Maray queried. “I mean, the tea is a bit cold by now.”

“That’s fine,” Sendak said. “Even cold, I’m sure it tastes better than my attempts.”

Maray pursed their lips in a smirk, too polite to say anything, but Sendak merely chuckled.

“I’m sorry, Sendak, I really shouldn’t tease you,” Maray gave in.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Oh?” Maray angled a brow.

“Mnhmn,” Sendak hummed out, approaching the side of the bed he tended to sleep on – the side nearest to Maray – before turning down the sheets. There was a soft creak of furniture behind him as Maray shifted, the gentle pad of feet announcing their presence as they approached. Sendak turned to meet them, already smiling as Maray’s fingers found purchase on his bicep.

“Going to bed so soon?” Maray asked in a near purr.

“I thought we could lay down, yes,” Sendak returned simply, delighting in the surprised quirk of Maray’s brow.

“‘We’?” they repeated.

“Mnhmn.”

“I was given my own room, you know,” Maray reminded him.

“I know.”

Maray quieted, lips curled in satisfaction. “Is this what I get for teasing you?” they asked, shedding themselves of their robe before crawling beneath the covers.
“I said I wouldn’t have it any other way, yeah?” Sendak rumbled a laugh in turn, peeling out of his shirt before joining Maray under the growing warmth of the sheets. He could feel the others’ eyes on him but made no comment, basking instead in their closeness. After a moment’s hesitation he turned onto his side from his back, not missing Maray’s low hitch of breath as the action brought them face-to-face.

‘Wow,’ Sendak thought privately, pulse faltering.

It was no secret that Maray was beautiful – at least, it was not a secret to Sendak – and being so close only seemed to inspire a shy sort of nervousness that Sendak rarely felt. He fought the urge to reach out and draw the other nearer, the heated glow of Maray’s eyes holding him captive.

‘Breathtaking,’ Sendak surmised.

Usually kept so meticulously, the silver pile of Maray’s hair spilled out of its braid and across the pillows, a sort of bedroom look that made it hard for Sendak’s mind not to wander. The alluring slope of their neck, the blush cresting their cheeks, and their lips – almost always worn in a playfully knowing smirk – looked so soft…

But there was more to them than that.

Slight yet athletic, Maray had always given off an aura of competence – although to what extent Sendak had only recently learned. The Imperial Sentinel. Sendak wasn’t sure why the knowledge filled him with such pride and excitement – it wasn’t his accomplishment, after all. But still. Maybe it was just knowing how the title changed the dynamic between them, just knowing that Maray had been looking after him, protecting him – especially when he was the one used to doing the protecting. Something about it just felt… nice.

‘But I didn’t need to know you’re the Imperial Sentinel to also know that we’re equals.’

Lightly, Maray lifted a hand to Sendak’s chest, but this time their look was more earnest than melted.

“How did things go?” they asked. “Am I wrong to say you seem in better spirits?”

“You’re not;” Sendak affirmed, “things went a lot better than I’d feared. As usual I’d built things up in my head unnecessarily. Shiro was… wary, but eager enough to listen. We both apologized, anyway.”

“I’m relieved to hear it,” Maray gave an encouraging look. “After that fight you had, I thought maybe…” they trailed off, swallowing down the rest of their words.

‘Do they think Shiro and I are trying to get back together?’ Sendak wondered.

“Shiro and I have made peace with each other,” he filled in quickly. “We both said we felt like we’d finally gotten closure.”

“Closure?” Maray repeated, and Sendak couldn’t miss the lilt of hope in the other’s voice.

‘Or maybe I’m just perceiving that because I wish to,’ he second guessed.

“Yeah, we…” Sendak answered, fighting to gather the right words. “I think before there were a lot of unresolved issues between us. I mean, obviously he has Keith now and I – well, we both just needed to vent the frustrations we’d been keeping all that time, I think, and now that we’ve done it we can fully move on, you know?”
“To date, you mean?” Maray clarified.

“I, uh…” Sendak stumbled, “Yeah.”

“Hmn,” Maray mused, expression unreadable. “So what about you, then? As you’ve said, Shiro has Keith now and they seem quite happy. Where do you stand? Is this breakup too fresh for you, or…”?

“No, I wouldn’t say it’s fresh by any means,” Sendak answered with forced calm. Maray was smiling and he wasn’t entirely certain as to why. “I mean,” he continued, “the way things ended there really was no patching things up. I’ve since dealt with the loss of that relationship – it was just nice to feel like we got to resolve things. Not everyone gets the chance to do that. I… we didn’t really talk about the specifics but I’m still hoping we can be friends.”

“If things went as you say then I have little doubt,” Maray consoled him. They paused in consideration, brow creasing. “There was something you said back at the hangar: that you didn’t think you were ready to see your family yet, to… talk through that loss? Now that both Sylvux and Myzalta are here – and their kits, no less – are you really doing alright? Is it too much?”

“I…” Sendak hedged with a low sigh. “To be honest, I’m still unsure. We haven’t had the time yet to really talk about things. But…”

‘I'm glad they got to meet you,’ he finished privately.

“I think… it’s probably time that I started talking with them again,” Sendak voiced. “I really am ready at this point to move forward with my life. I want to have… I want to…” he paused, tripped up by the phrasing.

“Yes?” Maray prodded, knowing smile returned to their lips.

“It’s going to sound ridiculous.”

“Please,” Maray waved off, giving Sendak a light swat on the chest. “If it’s your feelings then it can hardly be ridiculous. You might as well spit it out.”

Sendak gave a defeated sigh, watching Maray’s reaction carefully. “I want to start settling down,” he admitted at a mumble.

“Oh?” Maray trilled.

“Yeah, I… see? It’s ridiculous!”

“Nonsense; keep going.”

“I... I mean, I already have Tora but she’s grown up,” Sendak hedged. “I had that experience alone and I probably could have done it better. It’s not to say that I regret her or anything like that—”

“Of course.”

“–but I just think it’d be nice to try going about things properly is all.”

“Are you saying you want another kit?” Maray asked, and Sendak could have sworn that they grew a little closer.

“I… yeah,” Sendak gave in. “I’m just at that point in my life where I want to find an ilbe, settle down so to speak. Have a… a family. Those things have always mattered to me but now? I
don’t know, it just feels like there’s a real chance of that being an actual possibility for a change. There’s still a lot going on,” he acknowledged, “and it’ll take some time yet before everything settles down and evens out. Once we get Keith on the throne and established, who knows? It will never be perfect and I’m not saying I want out of politics altogether. I don’t think I have the temperament to do just office work –”

“I know you don’t have the temperament to do just office work,” Maray teased.

“Okay, yeah,” Sendak smiled ruefully. “But what I’m saying is, for the first time in a very, very long time – maybe ever – I feel like I can see a future for myself, like I can finally have the life that I want.”

“You want to be a provider,” Maray translated.

“I mean that sounds so archaic –”

“But it’s true?” Maray hummed.

“Well…” Sendak nodded vaguely.

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” Maray assured him. “It’s charming, even. Besides, it suits you: you’re a loving and protective person.”

“Loving?” Sendak blinked. “Surely that can’t –”

“Oh please,” Maray scoffed. “You’re very loving and that doesn’t contradict your ambition or ruthlessness, either, so don’t you start with that.”

“Hmn,” Sendak relented, unable to keep from smiling.

“What?”

“You’re cute when you get like that,” Sendak said before he could stop himself.

“C-Cute?” Maray stammered, flushing instantly.

‘Whoops,’ Sendak inwardly winced, heart racing anxiously. ‘But… they don’t seem put off by that, either. Maybe…’

“I mean it,” he pressed, and Maray blushed harder.

“No, no,” they insisted, waving a hand. “I’m not cute. I’m… I’m bossy and opinionated and high maintenance. I’m not –”

“Maybe,” Sendak shrugged, and Maray froze. “But I like that about you.”

“I… h-how?” Maray disbelievingly asked. “That’s not really… those aren’t great traits to have. Nobody really wants someone like me.”

“That’s not true,” Sendak countered and they both grew still.

‘I know what I want for myself,’ he realized. ‘I know I want this.’

“You deserve to find that for yourself,” Shiro’s words came back to him. “So… don’t let it pass you by, okay?”
‘Maybe now really is the time,’ he resolved. ‘All this while I’ve been trying to ignore or doubt what I’ve been feeling. I think I’ve done a pretty poor job of it, though. This is… this is something worth the risk. Maray is worth getting hurt over. I’m not about to let my mistakes repeat themselves; I was never straightforward with Shiro and it hurt us both in the end. Maray deserves better than that. Maybe I do, too.’

“What do you mean?” Maray asked at length, voice quavering. “I really… I mean, I know I’m the Imperial Sentinel and all that. I know what my capabilities are. I’m a good soldier and everything. But… I’m not… I am a little unhinged, you know? And I’ve had enough feedback from others to know that I’m a lot to handle. That I’m not… what people want. My personality is –.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your personality,” Sendak interjected. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re meticulous and particular and yes you’re bossy and maybe a bit high strung but none of those things are at a detriment to who you are. I like those things about you. You keep pace with me, keep my ass in line,” he admitted with a laugh. “And maybe I like that you’re a bit out there, that you’re dangerous. That just means that I don’t have to hold back who I am. I don’t have to pretend around you.”

This time it was Maray’s time to smile. “Well I don’t have to pretend around you,” they returned. “And I know that you don’t underestimate me, either, even before you knew who I was as far as the empire is concerned.”

“Why should I?” Sendak shrugged. “You’ve never given me any reason to doubt that you could handle yourself. I’ve always thought you to be capable.”

“Even if you thought I was just a party planner?”

“Please,” Sendak chuckled. “Even if I didn’t know the extent of your physical capability I always knew you were clever. You don’t have to be good at fighting to be a force to contend with.”

“Still,” Maray pressed, shyness returning. “Saying all of this? What do you mean by it?”

Sendak took a subtle breath, fitting a finger beneath Maray’s chin and tilting it up towards his own. “I mean to say that I care for you,” he stated. “And that I’ve cared for you for a while now. Your friendship means more to me than I can possibly express and maybe it’s been out of fear of losing it that I’ve not said anything. I want to remain your friend,” he continued, and he could feel his pulse sing against his throat. “But I want more than that, too. I want to be your confidant, the person that you feel at home with. I know that a lot could change in the next several hours. I know that we could die tomorrow. But you deserve to know how I feel: I… I’m falling for you, Maray. I have fallen for you and I want to be with you. I could think of no greater honor.”

Maray released a soft whimper, eyes desperately searching Sendak’s own. “You mean it?” they asked at last, voice nearly a whisper. “Me? Me?”

“You,” Sendak smiled, and Maray surged forward, pressing into Sendak’s embrace, their lips meeting at last.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY! Sendak and Maray getting together has been planned for such a long time,
and its so wonderful that its finally happening! Kudos to those of you who caught on to the romantic tension. Also, I'm sorry for not tagging the story Sendak/OC but A) we were afraid of putting people off B) we wanted it to be a surprise.

Ahh the arranged marriage plot. It was actually going to be a LOT more prevalent in this story, but unfortunately it got lost to the edits. If any of you were curious as to why Tora kidnapped Lance at the end of Satellite, its because she was supposed to kidnap Keith and hand him over to Sendak. However, when Keith managed to escape and Tora found herself with an incapacitated Lance, she decided to take him hostage as leverage.

I'm sorry this chapter was a day late! Between work, prepping for the upcoming holidays, and Ches working on getting a new job we've been pretty busy. Updates may continue to be occasionally be late, but we'll try our hardest to make sure that they won't be more than two weeks apart. If that changes, we'll let you guys know on our tumblrs!

Thanks so much for your kudos and comments! Every alert from Ao3 has my heart doing flips!
WOW I am so, SO sorry that this chapter took so dang long to come out. We were waiting to finish writing before we started posting again and I'm happy to report that we've completed the story, so please look forward to an update every Saturday! I hope you all enjoy the concluding chapters of Constellations!

Keith awoke when pale silver light gradually began to illuminate his and Shiro’s suite. He rolled over onto his back, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as the crystal chandelier above them steadily began to glow brighter in an imitation of a sunrise. Arching his back off of the bed, Keith pulled himself into a series of languid stretches before promptly nestling up against Shiro’s chest.

For once, his fiancé was still sleeping soundly – a rare occurrence for someone usually so punctual about early rising. However, considering that Shiro had only caught several hours of sleep on the couch the night before, it was hardly a surprise. The relief from his talk with Sendak the night before must have sapped away the tension, finally allowing Shiro a good night’s sleep.

Keith for one was overjoyed to hear that Shiro and Sendak had managed to make amends. Some small part of him had been curious if they would continue their relationship, but Shiro had frequently assured Keith that he had no interest in polyamory and he was more than happy just having Keith.

Still, Shiro had seemed to want Sendak to be lucky in love. He’d come to bed smiling softly and had informed Keith that he hoped he’d been able to encourage Sendak to speak with Maray.

“You mean they aren’t a couple already?” Keith blinked in mild surprise. “I’m pretty sure they shared a bed the night before and they look at each other like—.”

“Like we do?” Shiro finished for his fiancé with a knowing smirk. Keith had grinned, rolling over in bed to allow Shiro to climb in beside him. “No, Sendak’s always been aggressively in denial about his feelings – but if the talk we just had with him is any indication, he’s moving past that part of his life.”

“I’m happy for him,” Keith smiled, resting his head on Shiro’s chest as his mouth cracked open into a tongue-curling yawn. “’M happy for them both.”

He’d drifted off fairly quickly after that, awash with calm knowing that his fiancé was at peace with his ex.

And Shiro certainly seemed peaceful, even the morning after – his stirring was more gradual than it usually was: a complete departure from the agitated way he’d usually leap into consciousness. Shiro’s eyes fluttered open and landed on Keith, instantly filling with misty warmth.

“Morning,” he greeted, voice bogged down with sleep as he rolled to his side, tucking Keith closer to his chest. Keith responded by pressing a kiss to Shiro’s collarbone and nuzzling up against
his chin.

“Morning,” he yawned again, almost instantly triggering a yawn from Shiro in turn. “Sleep well?”

“Slept like the dead,” Shiro replied happily, pressing kisses into Keith’s tangle of bedhead. “You?”

“I always pass right the fuck out when we’re sharing a bed,” Keith admitted with a grin, gently placing a row of kisses down the column of Shiro’s throat. The black paladin groaned contentedly, surrendering his neck to Keith’s attentions. Keith grinned, nipping playfully at his fiancé’s flesh, careful not to leave a bite mark.

“Mmm, what time is it?” Shiro hummed pleasurably, rolling over to grasp for his hailer. Keith allowed himself to be rolled by Shiro’s momentum, promptly climbing up onto his lap and straddling his hips. His fiancé stopped for a moment to quirk an eyebrow at Keith’s lascivious position before peeking at his hailer.

“Well?” Keith asked, leaning forward and shifting his hips just enough to be purposeful.

Shiro stifled a groan in his throat, “It’s – uhm. It’s six.”

Keith blinked, genuinely surprised, “It felt like we slept a lot longer.”

“We did go to bed earlier than usual,” Shiro reminded him.

“What time do we have to be on the concourse?” Keith inquired.

“Seven,” Shiro replied, placing his large, warm hands over the jut of Keith’s hip bones.

Keith allowed his head to drop backwards and groaned in frustration, trying not to lean too heavily into Shiro’s touches as he did; “I do not want to get out of bed. I literally just got you back.”

“Oh yeah?” Shiro quirked an eyebrow, his smile sharp. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Keith smirked right back at him, leaning down to give Shiro a kiss, “You know exactly what that means, sexy.”

They pressed their lips together, Keith gasping happily when Shiro’s tongue brushed over his lower lip, hands trailing up and down his bare back. Keith greedily sucked Shiro’s tongue into his mouth, bobbing his head around it in a manner that was more than a little suggestive. Shiro pulled away, making their next several kisses brief.

“We need to –,” he made a surprised noise as Keith grabbed him by the cheeks, smashing their lips together messily several times. He pulled away, laughing. “What are you doing, you weirdo?”

“I have no idea,” Keith admitted with a shrug. “I just – ugh. I don’t want to go liberate City Station,” he rolled off of Shiro, plopping down next to him. “Not right this second at least. I just want to lay around in bed all day and make out with you.”

“You sound like a kid,” Shiro laughed.

“I am a kid.”

“It’s okay, I just wanna laze around kissing you, too.”
Keith laughed at the guilty smile on Shiro’s face, turning to press a quick kiss to his cheek. He quickly pulled into another series of stretches before beginning conversationally: “So. You think Maray and Sendak fucked last night?”

“Keith!” Shiro sputtered, turning to look at him with wide, embarrassed eyes.

“Too weird?” Keith grinned, standing and heading to the bathroom in search of a toothbrush.

“I’m not dignifying that with an answer.”

Keith laughed, picking up one of the awful little tooth-cleaning tablets sitting in a bowl next to the sink. He crunched on it hesitantly, wincing when the foam surged through his mouth instantly dissolving the germs and plaque but effectively making him look like a rabid animal.

Once the foam died down, he spat it out and rinsed his mouth, stepping aside to allow Shiro access to the sink. His fiancé ran a hand over his chin, pulling his skin taut.

“I seriously need to shave.”

Keith shrugged, heading back into the bedroom to retrieve his flight suit, “I dunnno, I think it makes you look pretty sexy. Very rugged.”

“Rugged?” Shiro stuck his head out of the bathroom with a disbelieving grin.

“And roguish.”

“Geez,” Shiro laughed, ducking back into the little room. Keith laughed, stepping into his flight suit and activating the mechanism that drew it taught around his skin.

“I’m going to look like a tool,” he announced remorsefully.

“Hm?” Shiro popped his head out again, cheeks inflated with tooth foam. Keith gestured towards the remainder of his panoply stored in the closet – dark black beside Shiro’s white. It had been gifted to him the night before by Prince Perét.

“Among my people, black is the symbol of highest honor of a ruler and fighter: of a warrior king,” Perét had informed him. “I had this suit of armor constructed for you out of the finest materials available in the Mnemosyne system.”

He’d turned to his assistant, taking a folded piece of cloth from her hands and unfurling it – it was in shades of white and light blue, displaying a diamond separated into quadrants, each displaying the symbol of their associated peoples: a fruit for the people of Gal, a flower for the Druids, a crown for the aristocracy, and a set of crossed swords for the military.

“This is the new standard for the liberated empire,” Perét had explained. “Please wear it as a cape to carry your people with you at all times.”

Keith knew he couldn’t very well refuse the gift, or even refuse to wear it on the liberation mission. He found himself yet again before a mirror, Shiro clipping the flag cape to one of Keith’s pauldrons in the old Altean fashion Allura had once shown them. Initially Keith had feared that the suit of armor would appear dark and demanding, or reminiscent of something Zarkon would wear – he vastly preferred the white of the paladins’ panoplies. But standing there beside Shiro dressed all in white, and with his people’s standards proudly attached to his person, Keith could not have felt less like a tool.
“I look like a king,” he said a little hoarsely.

“You look like an emperor,” Shiro corrected kindly, turning away from Keith and stepping back towards the closet. Keith watched him with curiosity as Shiro laid out a flat, square jewelry box on the bed and popped it open.

“Allura sent this with me the first time we came to The Haven,” he explained, extracting the circlet from within. It was a simple white gold chain weighed down in the middle with a light blue pearl. “Lance found it in his room, actually, right after we came to the Castle of Lions.”

Keith dipped his head, allowing Shiro to place the circlet upon his crown.

“She said it belonged to your mother,” Shiro said, setting a hand on Keith’s caped pauldron. “She wanted you to have it.”

Keith turned back towards the mirror, reaching up to touch the powder blue pearl on his temple.

“I feel like I should give you something, too,” Keith admitted, turning towards Shiro. “I…”

He reached up to remove the circlet from his head, gesturing for Shiro to lower his head before him.

“Keith—,” Shiro began, blushing deeply but following his fiancé’s directions.

“As the emperor’s bridegroom and future prince consort, you ought to be decorated, too,” Keith smiled, cupping Shiro’s jaw in his hand. “It’s not just me going into this.”

Shiro’s face softened and he leaned down, allowing Keith to draw him into a kiss.

“Nearly there,” Sendak directed, eyes trained ahead as the massive walls of the Coliseum rose ever higher on the horizon. The screens along them flickered, filling with static as an error message played out in brilliant orchid to the streets below – Annis’ work.

“Initiating separation protocol for Team Two,” the familiar drawl sounded in Sendak’s ear. “Your jump point is just ahead; good luck.”

“Understood,” Sendak returned, tugging his blaster tighter against his body as he increased his speed. Around him the emergency system screamed, hidden lights in the artificial sky strobing in warning, shattering the illusion of early daylight.

‘There,’ he assessed, searching out the paneling of the ceiling and finding the access point within, the refined optics of his eye hyper focusing on the minute details of the grating. A quick lift through the foyer of the Coliseum and he and his squad would be taken to the overhead tramways and then the air ducts within.

‘And on to the mother scoby,’ he assessed.

The soldiers of the Vesh swelled beside him, the pounding of their boots mismatched as they surged through the streets, blasts of magick soaring overhead and colliding violently against the buildings: the Druids were at their heels.

“Team Three, on my lead:” Sendak addressed, a grin curling across his lips as the exhilaration kicked in and he began the sequence.
“Three.”

Another volley of crackling magick chased by return fire from the rear guard. Sendak ignored it, decades of service surging forward and blocking out all distractions. There was only the mission now.

“Two.”

Only a few meters remaining. He readjusted his grip on his blaster, muzzle angling in preparation for a fight.

“One.”

The heavy footsteps behind him changed pattern as the Vesh fanned out, the outward flank comprised of his team separating from the rest.

“Deploy!” Sendak barked, a third of his forces darting out into the streets ahead, taking position around the building’s entrance as the remainder of the squad thundered across the threshold.

“Good luck, Sendak,” Keith’s voice briefly cut across the line, his form just visible from the epicenter of the departing group.

“And to you, my emperor,” Sendak acknowledged, and then the entirety of the first two teams had passed by, leaving he and his squad in the darkened atrium of the Coliseum. “Switching to private channels,” he indicated, letting out a breath as he flicked a finger over the scanner of his comm set.

“Neatly executed,” Maray praised from his side, voice not picked up by the comms as they tuned to the next setting.

“Thanks,” Sendak flashed them a fanged grin, already scanning their surroundings for signs of attack. “Pick up on anything?” he asked privately, seeking out heat signatures from the tiered balconies that encircled the lobby.

“Mn,” Maray mused, the faintest flash of teal light reflecting from their glasses as they engaged their tactical optics. “Nothing,” they announced after a moment’s pause, the squad finishing their preliminary clearing of the area. But all at once they jolted, attention diverted towards the front doors as a stray bolt of magick struck across them, blowing out the glass into millions of shattered fragments.

“Well not for long, apparently,” Maray amended sourly and Sendak just nodded, already motioning for the squad to follow him towards the core of the building. A column of thick plated glass caged the two elevators, their doors flinging open as Sendak struck the call buttons.

“Load in,” he instructed, prosthetic eye once more whirring to life as he conducted another sweep. Satisfied, he jumped into one of the carriages, Maray in the other as they anxiously ascended to the topmost floor. The squad piled out in an orderly rush, some already squatting outside the doors while the rest congregated in the center of the elegant bridge that stretched between the elevators and the gallery opposite them. Sendak crossed it quickly, his team gathering at his heels as the final fuses were set.

Another crack of energy resounded against the exterior walls of the Coliseum, the fixtures and façades of the lobby shivering in turn. Eyes snapping to the front doors, Sendak could make out the tiny but distinct heat signatures of approaching Druids, the auras of their magicks creating odd distortions in his field of view. The soldiers around him bristled, all reunited safely on the top floor.
“Light it up,” Sendak growled, turning and heading for the broad staircase that extended beyond the ceiling. As he mounted the first step the high frequency beeps began, rapidly sounding out in succession before eclipsing into a moment of total silence. Then the two carriages of the elevator fell, rocketing down the shaft free of their cables and smashing into the foyer below as the bridge they had just crossed exploded with a deafening boom.

The Vesh chattered with relief, small congratulations passing over the line.

“Save it for later,” Sendak cut across, allowing himself a brief grin that only Maray managed to catch sight of. “We’ve bought ourselves some time but this is not the only access point; keep your heads up and the lines clear.”

“Oh let them have their fun,” Maray teased, covering their comm set a moment. “They’re not kits.”

“Yeah, well they’re kits to me,” Sendak countered, stopping before a heavy overhead door, the keypad beside it indicating that it was currently out of function.

“Allow me,” Maray murmured, fiddling with the tools secured along their combat flightsuit before extracting a square device and jamming it over the keypad. There was a flat beep and then the override kicked in, the keypad rebooting as the doors whooshed open before them. The squad poured in, securing the perimeter as Sendak and Maray formed the rear.

“Won’t that door be a liability?” Sendak frowned at the gaping passageway.

“Nope,” came the bright reply as Maray deftly lifted their blaster and shot out the keypad entirely, the heavy doors slamming down behind them. The Vesh jumped, caught off guard and Sendak sighed, smirking in the dark.

“See?” he needled back so only Maray could hear. “Like kits.”

Then, turning into the darkened station: “Activate low light mode – that includes any and all visors and scopes. And put your masks on now unless you relish breathing in spores.”

“Sir?” one of the Vesh questioned as thin strips of colored light flickered to form vague outlines of the soldiers in their midst.

“As you know, our aim is the mother scoby,” Sendak informed them. “Take her out and it will destroy all of the other scobies linked to her. There’s no telling what this creature will look like – whatever it turns out to be, bear in mind that it was engineered specially by the Druids in order to obey orders from Merla. If we fail to take out the mother scoby then Merla could use it as a biological weapon – she could have all of City Station hostage on a whim. Team One can’t risk engaging her until we take this possibility from her, understood?”

A low chorus of affirmation met him and he continued, picking out their forms as his eyes acclimated to the darkness.

“These things need some form of moisture to survive,” he instructed, “and that’s why they’ve been holed up close to the Atmos system and the rest of water storage. Only way to counter that is to burn them or to sever the veils from the tops of their heads. Do not shoot unless you are certain you will land your shot – an error in judgement could jeopardize your fellow soldier in an instant. Scobies can replicate themselves and are extremely fast. Their skin is acidic and will burn through any organic or inorganic material they encounter – do not make the mistake of thinking your armor will protect you from them for long.
"You’ve all been equipped with flare grenades,” Sendak went on. “Our strategy will be to use these to clear the vents in front of us before we proceed. The blasts are quick but intense; the fire will go out after a few moments but you do not want to get caught in the burst. Our aim is to proceed as quickly through the system as possible, find the mother scoby, and terminate her. Avoid all unnecessary conflicts and stay together. The vents are easy to get lost in without a map and there will be no stopping for those that fall behind or get separated from the group. This will be your only warning."

The squad quieted, their anxiety palpable as Sendak strode through them to the edge of the station’s platform.

“Now,” he finished, allowing the energy to build up in his prosthetic, warm light pulsing along the length of his arm. “Shall we make our emperor proud?”

“Vol sa!” Maray returned instantly, the words picked up by the Vesh and exalted into the echoing chamber of the tunnels.

“Vol sa,” Sendak grinned, leading the way across the tracks and to the maintenance side of the station, cleaving through the access to the ducts with a swipe of his hand. Stooping, he stepped into the opening, proceeding ahead at an awkward crouch until the shaft broadened into a tall but narrow tunnel, no wider than two of him across. Maray straightened up beside him, twisting their hair up and securing it to the base of their skull.

“Ready?” they asked in undertones.

Sendak watched as the last of the squad emerged from the opening of the shaft, nodding once resolutely. “Yeah,” he murmured, fingers slipping deftly around Maray’s own and giving them a gentle squeeze. “Please be careful.”

“I will,” Maray promised. “So long as you are, as well; I always know you’re scared when you say ‘please’.”

“Never for myself, though.”

“I know,” Maray returned softly, the unspoken words stretching between them. Sendak gave another squeeze of their hands, breaking hold to head off into the vents.

“Move out!” he ordered, the squad falling in step behind him. With Maray’s assistance, they progressed through the labyrinthine twists of the ducts, leaving heated and charred metal in their wake as the flares of the grenades smoldered out at their feet. Mote-like specks drifted through the tight tunnels and Sendak wasn’t positive if they were the smallest form of the scobies or the spores he knew they could produce. Ahead the passage widened, the metallic walls growing slick and viscous, white spots blemishing them in uneven patches.

“Don’t touch them,” Sendak warned over the comms, voice somewhat muffled by his mask. Even with its protection the air around them had grown thick and cloying, the humidity producing an uncomfortable sweat beneath Sendak’s armor.

“Hold,” Maray cautioned, stepping out before him and toggling on the flashlight affixed to the scope of their blaster. Bathed in the halo of light lay the eviscerated form of a Galra, the skin of their face blistered and mangled, jaw frozen agape.

“We’re getting closer,” Sendak mused darkly, about to proceed but Maray blocked him off again, gesturing with the muzzle of their gun.
“The armor,” they pointed out and Sendak paused, squinting to get a better read of the markings along the inverted breast of the dead Galra’s uniform. A small enamel pin glinted back at them, a flower distinct against a blue field.

“They’re Vesh?” Sendak realized with alarm, shooting a furtive look down the adjoining tunnel. “We should be alone.”

“Either that pin was planted or we’ve got friendly company,” Maray assessed. “That said, would you like to progress the way I have charted or would you like to redirect course?”

‘I’d try to see ahead but that won’t work here,’ Sendak grimaced. ‘If I try to detect heat signatures then this whole place will light up my field of vision.’

“Chart a new course,” he directed, striding passed the corpse and into the next network of ducts. “If they’re friendly then all power to us. If not, then we can catch them from behind and get the upper hand before they’re able to react. At the very least it’ll keep them from intercepting us ahead when we’re not expecting it.”

“Understood,” Maray confirmed, toying at the screen of their glasses until they secured a suitable route. “The way ahead is a bit roundabout,” they warned, stepping into the ducts behind Sendak. “Ultimately we’ll still get to water storage but we’ll have to cut through a couple of service stations to get there. The time differential between routes is minimal but still, it’s there.”

“Keith and the others will have to make do,” Sendak grimly resolved. “If we get caught up in a battle we aren’t prepared for this close quarters then that time difference will be negligible.”

Maray nodded in understanding, lapsing into silence unless to give direction. The squad pressed ahead through the tunnels, rotating lead every so often to toss a flare grenade down the next set of ducts. Before long they had crossed the two service stations Maray had warned of, the final stretch of tunnels just before them. As before Sendak swiped at the entrance, arm phasing through the sheeted door and tearing it aside for them, but as the metal fell he began to cough, a litany of white spores flying out from the opening. The team stiffened, blasters hefted forward as Sendak shook his head, trying to clear himself of the choking sensation despite his mask. Maray placed a concerned hand to his bicep and he touched it lightly, nodding to indicate he was fine.

He peered into the ductwork ahead of them, toggling on his blaster’s light to get a better view. Here the tunnels were caked in white, their surfaces slick and uneven. More of the white specks lingered in the air, bobbing along ominously and occasionally sticking and congealing against the walls.

‘They’re not attacking so these must be spores,’ Sendak quickly assessed. ‘Though it’s virtually impossible to tell them apart at that size. Ought to be careful.’

Slipping a flare grenade from his kit he twisted off the top and lobed it into the open space. It hit the floor with a metallic thud, conflagrating an instant later. The spores – or maybe scobies – caught flame, burning like the pinpricks of distant stars before petering out, the way ahead cleared. Sendak began to advance, half crouched in the mouth of the tunnel. Flashlight still on, he could more clearly see that the duct terminated in a T with space to the left and the right. At the junction he could see another mangled body, the torso caved in from the weight of a fully formed dead scoby atop it.

“It should be to the left,” Maray filled in, angling over Sendak’s broad shoulder to get a look. “And it looks like we’re get–.”

A volley of distinct laser fire sounded from beyond, the sound echoed and magnified by the
inevitable ricochet. A pause, and then another burst of fire, the sound a little more distant.

“Whoever’s down there is moving fast,” Sendak spoke, knowing his voice would carry over the comms. “And I advise we do, too.”

At his lead the group progressed, the tunnels seeming to narrow the farther along they got, the gelatinous slick around them clinging on even in light of the flare grenades. Before long they had been forced into single file, Sendak turning sideways at points to ease his bulky frame through the corridors, the white slime transferring to his cuirass with each tight pass. He breathed steadily, determined to neither inhale the spores around them or to give way to claustrophobia. Still, his heart hammered with each passing step as the tunnels grew more treacherous and the sounds of fighting more intense.

To his immense relief the way ahead began to widen, a series of industrial doors made visible beneath the soft glow of a sign hanging from the ceiling that read “Water Storage”.

“It’s here!” Maray’s voice cut across the line, half drowned out by the rapid pulse of laser fire. Separating from the pack they advanced towards the nearest door, nudging it open a fraction with the muzzle of their blaster. Another round of fire sounded from the room beyond, brilliant flashes of light seeping across the threshold.

“I’ll take point,” Maray offered, sparing a look in Sendak’s direction just long enough to gain a nod of approval.

‘Stubborn as ever,’ Sendak resignedly mused. ‘They knew that I wouldn’t place them there if it were up to me. But I trust their ability.’

“Proceed,” he ordered, signaling to his men as Maray thrust their weight against the door. Spilling into the room in a wave, Sendak trained his blaster ahead, letting his squad pool around him as he tried to assess their surroundings.

Dead scobies lay everywhere, their bodies littering the floor and hanging limply from the humming data towers that filled the large circular space. Terminals flickered with intermittent light along the upper balcony of the room – some shot through entirely from the assault – while others still floated lifelessly on the floor below, what was once a command center now flooded with water. Other bits of detritus bobbed in the wake, a haphazard path of stepping stones to a huge conference table atop which a squad of soldiers braced themselves, picking off scobies as they congealed and coalesced where another had fallen, hundreds more floating mote-like in midair.

The soldier in their center shouted something to the rest of the team and they rearranged themselves, the door to the room banging shut audibly in the gap of their laser fire. The soldier whipped around, locking onto Sendak in an instant and firing before he could even react. The shot hurdled past him, heat singeing against his cheek as the bullet found its mark in the wall behind him.

“State your purpose or the next time I won’t miss,” the soldier growled out, her words filling Sendak with relief despite the sincerity of her warning.

“We’re on the same side, Tora,” he returned easily, the soldier perking to attention.

‘And thank the stars that you’re alright.’

“Vol sa, Lord Regent,” she shot back, shoulders relaxing as she turned back to her men a moment, barking out instructions before ambling across the walkway of debris towards him.

“I’m gathering intel,” Sendak spoke into his comm set. “Assist the admiral’s troops and clear
the area for them.” A short round of affirmatives and Sendak switched off his mic, fighting off the urge to draw his daughter into his arms as she approached.

“Are you –?” he began, only to be waved off instantly.

“That can wait,” Tora cut across.

“Why are you here?” Sendak tried again, cutting to the chase.

“Merla finally tried to kill me,” Tora answered with a grimace, patting lightly at her side: the uniform there was jagged and cut, edges darkened with blood. “No worries, though,” Tora continued on quickly. “Nothing a bit of topical Quintessence can’t fix. Knew I had to do something so I took my best men and made a break for it.”

“So you came here?” Sendak pressed.

“If I can’t take out Merla then I’m sure as hell gonna take out her pet.”

“The mother scoby?”

“It’s been a real bitch, too,” Tora nodded.

Sendak cocked his head, scanning the room quickly in confusion. “You mean it’s here?” he asked, finding nothing more than the gathering corpses of the scobies. “I don’t understand; we knew it would hole up near to water storage and that it used the Atmos system as a source of power but –,” he broke off at Tora’s sudden laugh. “What?”

“It doesn’t feed off the Atmos system,” she corrected, jerking her head up meaningfully. A huge hub covered in amber screens distended from the center, its weight uncertainly supported by a jungle of cables that crawled across the vaulted ceiling. They glinted strangely, something about the dim mass belying movement. Sendak stilled, unease rippling through him suddenly.

‘My eyes are playing tricks on me,’ he cautioned himself. ‘Unless –’

But he had no time to finish the thought before a cluster of cables dropped from the rest, whipping about like a grotesque arm and connecting with a soldier whose body went flying into the nearest wall with a sickening crunch.

“Oh fuck,” Sendak hissed, eyes rounding in realization. “It is the Atmos system.”

“It’s moving again!” Tora yelled out, the rest of her orders lost under a barrage of laser fire. With a snarl of frustration she hefted her blaster, emptying a round into the mass of cables at the creature’s epicenter, the bullets barely making an impact.

“The fucking thing just eats them!” she spat, brows furrowed as she looked for a point of weakness, muzzle tracing its movements.

“So it’s a robeast, then?” Sendak questioned, covering Tora as the white specks around them began to cluster and reform, scobies dropping to the ground in preparation to attack.

“The Druids do love their toys.”

“But how are we supposed to kill it?” Sendak insisted, throwing his weight to one side as a scoby charged him, its razor thin claws grazing the pauldron of his armor.

“The mother scoby?” Tora returned, whirling around to send a bullet through the crown of
the scoby’s head. It staggered, veil parting and fluttering to its feet in death. “Well these lesser ones aren’t making it any fucking easier are they?”

“Thanks,” Sendak spared a moment, righting himself before regaining the fray. A second later he was ducking, the cabled arm of the mother scoby lashing out just above his head as another tight coil of cords descended from above. “I’ve never seen a robeast like this,” he admitted, tracking its movements with his blaster. “How does it even see to attack?”

“It’s the screens,” Tora shouted back. “Not just here but all over City Station. The lesser scobies must give it some kind of feedback, too.”

“Annis will have blinded it, then,” Sendak grinned. “He errored out the entire station.”

“And the emperor?”

“On his way to Merla.”

“Let’s not fuck this up, then,” Tora asserted.

“Even still,” Sendak grit, swiping out with his arm as another scoby charged him. “Robeasts were built to withstand space war – we’ll bring down half of City Station before we make a scratch. We can’t destroy this thing at so great a cost.”

“That’s because you’re looking at the whole picture, Dad,” Tora countered. “Even though it has the Quintessence of the mother scoby it’s still just a hunk of tech. The Druids made this one so that it could receive remote commands from Merla and then in turn give commands to the lesser scobies. They even integrated it with the Atmos system so that it could care for its own at will. But that’s its flaw, too – take away the functionality of the machine and the organic side is left vulnerable. I don’t think Merla ever intended for this thing to be a fighter.”

“Well it’s sure fooling me,” Sendak grunted as the mother scoby struck again, its tentacled appendages flailing wildly across the room.

“It’s just defending itself,” Tora shook her head. “That’s why it flooded the place. It’s trying to make the lesser ones strong– FUCK!” she cut off suddenly as the tail end of the cables eclipsed the water’s surface, arcs of light shooting out in electrified currents. There was a scream as one of the soldiers seized, caught halfway between the safety of the conference table and the dry stairs beyond, their body dropping heavily with a splash.

“GET OUT OF THE WATER!” Tora ordered, a series of instructions following.

“Just defending itself, huh?” Sendak huffed a laugh.

“It changed plans,” Tora bitterly bit back.

“Yeah, well clearly we’ve got to change ours,” Sendak resolved. “What’s been your strategy until now?”

“A good one, but we’ve not had the manpower to follow through,” Tora explained. “One of these data towers contains the program files for the Atmos system. Take that out and its defenses are weakened.”

“Plus it falls out of Merla’s control.”

“Exactly,” the admiral nodded. “My men and I have taken out two, so that means six more
Sendak looked about quickly, finding the towers to the northwest of the room smoldering, the numbers seven and eight painted onto their crumpled sides. “Right, well there’s no time to guess,” he determined. “We take them all down at once.”

“Sounds great,” Tora grunted. “Any ideas how to do that? The towers were built to withstand a lot of abuse – just shooting them isn’t enough.”

‘I could try contacting Annis,’ Sendak considered. ‘Or even Pidge. They could probably find a way to hack in and power this all down remotely. That said, their team is working on holding down City Station and keeping the way clear for Keith and the others – I can’t risk distracting them now. Looks like we’re on our own.’

“I…” Sendak trailed off, too distracted by the threat of the scobies to really think. They surged forward with vicious shrieks, pointed claws raking at his armor. He pulled back from their onslaught, getting just enough breathing room to slash at them with his prosthetic. They dropped at his feet but one lingered, hovering midair in two pieces, its body bubbling cancerously at it divided, two new creatures left in its wake.

“Great,” Sendak swore, diving for the first. It crumpled beneath his palm but the second evaded, fingers curling around his bicep with searing pain. Sendak reared back, too close range to do more than shake it free, the seconds ticking past as the acidic flesh of the scoby ate through the gaps of his armor down to his skin.

“Dad!”

Her shout the only warning, Sendak stilled, sucking in a breath as a bullet sailed just passed his nose, sinking into the crown of his attacker wetly. The creature began to spasm, grip loosening in shock, and Sendak shook it free, dispatching a shot of his own and making the scoby go still.

“Thanks, I –” he began, eyes hardening as he looked beyond where his daughter stood, the scobies forming and clustering at an alarming rate. “Down,” he ordered sharply, grabbing her arm and tugging her to the floor alongside him as he ripped out the head of a grenade with his teeth. He lobbed it ahead, curling in over the shape of his daughter as the flare ignited, the scobies screeching with ungodly shrieks as they immolated.

The intense heat pricked at his skin, sending an unwarranted shiver down his spine, sweat slick on the nape of his neck.

‘It’s so fucking hot,’ he grimaced, straightening as the embers of the flare died down, small flames still alight where the scobies had fallen. His gaze slid passed them, fixing on the data towers beyond.

“Wait,” he realized aloud, toggling his mic back on in a hurry as he helped Tora to her feet. “Maray?”

“A little busy,” Maray’s clipped voice carried back, a succession of laser fire following.

“Maray,” Sendak urged, undeterred. “That device that you used on the keypad to blow the fuse – do you have any more of those?”

“Some, yes. I always keep them on hand for missions.”

“Well listen, I need you to deploy them as quickly as possible. There are six surviving data
towers in this room and we need to wipe them all.”

“Understood, Sendak, but I only have three left,” Maray warned, and from where he stood Sendak could see the Imperial Sentinel duck away from the fight to feel around in their utility belt, one of the fuses appearing in their hand a moment later. Maray shook their head tersely, sighing over the line: “What should I do about the other three towers?”

“Leave those to me,” Sendak assured. “I’ll stay on the line.”

Needing no further prompting, Maray set off, bounding over the body of a fallen soldier and towards the nearest terminal – number six.

“Your plan?” Tora questioned from beside him. Reluctantly Sendak tore his gaze away from Maray, turning into his comm set instead.

“Listen up!” he commanded. “I need the explosives team to take whatever resources we have left and prioritize them on data towers one through three. Focus on taking out the fan belts and get the systems to overheat. Take any remaining flare grenades to expedite the process. Just burn them out – we need this entire system to crash.”

“Alright,” Tora agreed, her voice most prominent among the rest. “And you and me? What do we do?”

“Tora and I will keep the mother scoby distracted,” Sendak answered instead into the comms. “We’ll buy you all the time we can so move quickly.”

“That’s suicide,” Tora swore appreciatively.

“Better not be,” Sendak grumbled in turn.

A pause and then Maray’s voice came over the line, words soft but determined: “Please be careful.”

“I know,” Sendak returned, voice tender.

“Come on,” Tora urged, nudging him briefly. She hefted her blaster, training it on the largest of the screens and squeezed off a quick burst. The laser fire pinged off the surface noisily, the monitor flickering slightly as if in recognition. Then a monstrous tangle of cables shot forward, surging into the ground with enough force to make Tora and Sendak stumble.

“Got its attention!” Tora crowed, stomping down atop the wires and holding them taught as she fired again in the mother scoby’s direction.

“Careful!” Sendak scolded, the tentacle writhing underfoot. Tora jumped back with a grimace, the cords recoiling rapidly back into the Atmos system’s hub.

“Think it can feel pain?” Tora called, eyes trained sharply on the glistening cables lining the ceiling. Another set rippled forward, twisting together before shooting out to the left away from them. Sendak swung out to track its movements, firing along the body of cables. The arm jerked, freezing in midair before redirecting swiftly, angling at his feet. With a low swear Sendak dove, shoulder jabbing painfully against the floor as he fell.

“Maybe,” he answered at length, scrabbling to his feet only to duck once more as the arm swished violently above his head. “Either way it’s trying to protect itself.”
The arm cut towards him again, withdrawing only a few feet from his face. It writhed, curling in on itself, a piercing shriek filling the room and echoing back to him from all sides. Sendak grimaced, ears flattening tight against his skull. With effort he rose, trying to get his bearings as light blossomed against his vision, the telling boom of an explosion dwarfed as the wailing increased. It died out just as suddenly, the silence leaving his ears ringing.

“That must mean –!” Tora began.

“Tower Six is down,” Maray’s voice cut in over the line.

“As is Tower One,” one of the Vesh added. “Moving on to Tower Two.”

“Excellent,” Sendak spared them the praise. “Keep at it.”

“That helped,” he assessed as the mother scoby made for them again, now pursuing with multiple cabled limbs. They thrashed about haphazardly, attentions torn between its numerous attackers. Sendak and Tora alternated fire towards the hub, forcing the mother scoby to refocus on them once more.

“It’s movements are hindered now,” Sendak called out, trying to keep his legs from buckling under him as one of the tentacles crashed down to his left, missing him entirely.

“Yeah but it’s getting more erratic, too,” Tora countered. “We only have so much stamina to keep evading it like this – we have to find its weak points.”

“Your thoughts?” Sendak supplicated, wincing almost immediately as the mother scoby released another bone shaking wail.

“That was Tower Five,” Maray spoke in his ear. “We’re more than halfway there.”

“Fantastic!” Tora spoke on her father’s behalf, turning back to their conversation. “The mother scoby is a robeast, right?” she asked rhetorically. “Well every robeast has an organic center, that’s the only way for them to have a consciousness.”

Sendak squinted up at the ceiling, eyes trailing along the network of cables that all fed into the hub of the Atmos system, the screens gathered around it like armor beginning to struggle and flicker.

“It’s behind all that,” he assessed.

“I think so, too,” Tora confirmed. “But there’s no way to get up there and I’m not seeing any gaps in the screens to shoot for.”

“There has to be a way to get passed them,” Sendak growled to himself. A gust of air against his ear, Sendak whirled around, crossing his blaster over his chest defensively as a tentacle swooped in from the side, striking the center of the weapon with groaning force. Sendak pressed back against it, teeth grit, the appendage changing tactic and curling around the muzzle of the gun, yanking back. Sendak let go and the tentacle went sailing away, his blaster still caught up within it. Shaking itself, the cords dropped the weapon to the waters below, curling inwards and retracting back towards the ceiling.

“Huh,” Sendak hummed, dropping into a fighting stance and letting energy course into his left arm. The prosthetic sparked to life, orchid light pooling in his palm.

“I have an idea,” he yelled out a preface. “We need to bring it to us.”
“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing!?” Tora returned indignantly as some of the lesser scobies dropped dead around her feet.

“This way,” Sendak said instead, jerking his head towards the terminals behind them. Tora followed hot on his heels, discontent plain on her face.

“This is way too close of quarters,” she began, leaping backwards as one of the cabled limbs pursued them, thrashing about and smacking into the data racks. The machinery sparked at the impact, crumpling in on itself and beginning to hiss. Tora raised a brow at that, jabbing at the limb with the butt of her blaster. It jerked towards her and she grinned, darting behind another rack. The limb snaked forward and Sendak took his chance, clamping his hand down around it and forcing the energy of his prosthetic out along it. With no time to register the attack the cables burned a bright orchid, still chasing Tora and slicing neatly through the terminal between them. Another furious scream resounded throughout the room, its tones only increasing as the cacophony of conflict escalated in turn.

“That was Tora and I on Tower Four,” Sendak reported swiftly.

“Tower Two is down,” called one of the Vesh. “We almost have the third one – we just need a little more time.”

“And you’ll have it,” Sendak promised, catching Tora by the arm briefly. She looked to him in confusion, eyes going wide as he slipped off his mask and passed it off to her, tone low: “Just in case.”

“Dad?” she questioned, hesitating.

“I love you, kit,” he returned simply, stepping back as a mass of cords ensnared him, catching him about the chest and yanking him off his feet. Tora cried out beneath him and Sendak sucked in a breath, twisting about in the grip of the cables, pressing himself low against their bulk. The hub of the Atmos system raced closer and closer, all but one of the screens errored out.

‘Almost,’ Sendak braced himself. ‘I only have one shot at this.’

The distance closed with dizzying rapidity, the coils beginning to loosen in their retreat.

‘Almost,’ Sendak gauged. ‘Almost. NOW.’

With a growl he flooded his prosthetic with light, searing through the cables around him, the heat blistering and unbearable. The bonds dropped away almost instantly. For a moment he felt weightless, suspended in the air. And then he began to fall. Sendak struck out, scrabbling for purchase against the screens, just barely catching himself and knocking the wind from his chest. He panted, clinging tight, fitting his other hand atop the frame of the adjoining monitor and pulled. The screen gave way with a metallic groan, loosening from the hub with a series of snaps.

“Come on!” Sendak snarled, shaking as he fought to hold himself aloft. His prosthetic surged with energy and the screen gave out entirely, listing to one side wildly before crashing away into the water. With the last of his strength Sendak hefted himself up, swinging into the opening and tumbling to his knees.

Another groan and the metallic case of the hub quaked, a telling boom sounding from below. The resulting scream of the mother scoby was all-consuming, amplified to new heights. Sendak doubled over, nauseous and disoriented, clutching at his head. He could make out the chatter of the Vesh in his comm set, their words an incomprehensible and muted-out roar. He didn’t need to hear
them to know that the final data tower had been blown. The robeast had been wrested from Merla’s control.

“Found you,” Sendak rumbled out, barely cognizant of his own voice. The mother scoby – or what was left of her – floated before him, massive and sickly pale. She rose along the column of her wide tank, a fetid smell like vinegar sloshing forward as she crested the water’s surface, gelatinous white spores clinging to her veil. It flared warningly, releasing more into the air in a toxic cloud.

Sendak choked, lungs burning. Then he charged, arm outstretched and glowing fiercely, surging forward and forward until it sunk squelchingly between the eyes of the mother scoby. The creature reeled, jerking him towards the water’s edge with her, shaking violently as she tried to jolt him free. Sendak slammed against the edge of the tank, crying out. Something wet encircled his throat, squeezing punishingly over his jugular as white hot pain overwhelmed his senses.

‘It’s as I thought,’ he realized, struggling against the mother scoby’s acidic flesh. ‘I’m not going to make it out of this. Not this time.’

His mind filled with everything that had transpired over the course of the last few months. Of all he had seen, all of the change he had been a part of.

Zarkon – dead. A tyrant dethroned.

City Station brought out of war, only to be plunged back into chaos but now, ephemerally, hanging on the precipice of a peace that might actually be lasting.

His people, Gal, the entire empire – all with the hope for something better.

The Vesh victorious after ten thousand years of struggle and sacrifice.

Keith, poised to lead, to do right by all of those who had suffered. A true emperor. A good man. A friend.


Tora, living out her dreams. Admiral of the Galra Empire. Fearful of no one. Safe, even as the spores of the mother scoby poured out of the space around him and down to where she stood. Safe. And loved.

Maray.

Sendak’s heart clenched, bittersweet acceptance filling him as his mouth flooded with his own blood. He coughed wetly, gathering the final dregs of his strength and surged forwards, slicing with his palm. The mother scoby shrieked in death, her veil sliding free from her head and spilling sideways into the murky tank. The creature’s limbs flailed wildly, the grip at his neck lessening. Sendak sucked in a breath, choking at once.

He felt faint, faraway, vision faltering.

He grinned.

“Mission complete,” he rasped into his comm set. “Vol sa.”

He took one staggering step, balance faltering. Something struck out against his chest – the final attack of the mother scoby – and he stumbled, the ground beneath his feet giving way to empty
Maray.

Sendak closed his eyes as he fell, holding the other in his mind.

Beautiful, wickedly clever, deadly. A perfect balance of compassion and unstoppable force. A best friend, a confidant, an equal.

He could hear Maray’s gentle words – his own, echoed back to him: “please be careful.”

“I know,” he had returned, understanding at once, his tone laden with all the sentiment that didn’t need to be said.

Sendak smiled against the backdrop of his thoughts, world blinking out as his body hit the ground.

‘I love you, too.’
The interior of *The Intrepid* was disturbingly hollow, completely void of the armored personnel that Keith remembered from his first time aboard the ship. The orchid lights pulsed along the walls in a way that was harrowingly organic, reflecting the desperate heartbeat choking Keith in the hollow of his throat.

Had it really only been seven short weeks since he was last there? His time as a captive member of the aristocracy had felt like it had lasted weeks. Then again, the reconditioning itself had severely skewed his sense of time, given the amount of false memories that had been implanted in Keith’s head.

Even in his right mind, there was a harsh contrast between the person who had initially been led aboard the ship as a paladin and the man who marched upon it as an emperor.

Keith was flanked on one side by Asaara and on the other by Shiro and Matt. The latter’s eyes were narrowed, expression dangerously serious; Keith had absolutely no doubt that Matt would topple galaxies in order to make Merla pay for what she had done to Nanan.

Asaara was a silent specter beside him, her face drawn into an unreadable expression. From what little Keith had observed of her, this was unusual behavior – Shiro had said that Asaara typically had a mouth on her. Keith watched as she briefly glanced down at her palm, fingertips coruscating with rose gold energy.

Finally, Keith looked to Shiro. His fiancé immediately met him with an encouraging smile. Keith could see the blue pearl beyond the visor of Shiro’s helmet and felt something inexplicable bubble up in his chest. No more separation. From there on out, they fought together.

“The twenty-seventh floor is clear,” Pidge reported into Keith’s earpiece. “Twenty-eighth…twenty-ninth…”

“The entire ship’s deserted accept for the throne room,” Annis’ voice continued in her stead. “Looks like she’s holed herself up in there.”

After a fruitless search of the First Ring, Keith and his compatriots had finally taken to *The Intrepid*, following their intelligence’s reports of a single biorhythm being found on the ship.

“There’s probably a reason she hasn’t ditched City Station yet. I don’t know how the stuff works, but she could be using magick to lure you in there,” Annis had drawled as they boarded the ship. “And like, you know, blow you up.”

“I sense her magicks here,” Asaara had reported in turn. “It’s the real deal.”

“She could always just make a suicide attack,” Annis suggested.

“Unlikely, given her personality, but comb the place for bombs all the same.”

“The only hit we’re getting on the security system is the biorhythm in the throne room,”
Thace said over the comms. “It would be in your best interest to enter through the service entrance.”

Keith watched as Shiro’s visor flickered to life with the directions.

“Thanks, Dad,” Keith said into his comms before redirecting his attention to his guard. “Okay, let’s try not to engage her until—.”

As if on cue, a soft chime sounded throughout The Intrepid, the orchid lights framing the walls and paneling the floor momentarily fading to green before resuming their eerie glow.

“That’s our signal,” Matt said, lips drawn into a thin line. He gripped his pistol tighter, leather gloves creaking against the blaster.

“Follow me,” Shiro directed, unclipping his bayard from his cuirass and activating the naginata. Keith did the same, readying his sword. It felt like an eternity since he’d used it for anything outside of training. He gave it an experimental twirl in his hand and – finding himself ready – gave a nod of affirmation to Shiro, who led them into the entrance of one of the service tunnels.

The lights within were even dimmer than those above, casting a strange violet pallor over the quartet as they traveled. Here, below the halls of The Intrepid, it was even quieter than the empty passages above. Carpet muffled their footsteps as they traveled, breaths uncomfortably loud in the small space.

After several moments of this, Matt softly cleared his throat and announced: “When this is through, Sylvux and I are going to adopt Nanan.”

Keith, Shiro, and Asaara turned to Matt, whose determined expression had softened minutely.

“We decided last night,” Matt told them, smile brightening. “Sylv and I have wanted kids for a while, but with the political climate and the immediate danger we’re in with our roles in the Vesh, it hasn’t been an option. But I feel like Nanan and I got really close during the time we spent together on Gal,” he explained. “And – if she’ll have us – Sylv and I would love to be her parents.”

Keith and Shiro beamed at one another and then at Matt. Even the stoic-faced Asaara was grinning.

“I can’t speak for Nanan, but honestly?” Shiro reached out to set a hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I think she’d love that.”

“Congrats, Matt,” Keith nodded happily.

“Don’t congratulate me just yet,” Matt’s grin sharpened and he tapped his pistol against his shoulder. “We still have to take Merla out.”

Asaara laughed, throwing back her head, “I like the sound of that!”

“What about you, Asaara?” Shiro inquired, causing the new Mother’s ears to swivel towards him. “What’re your plans for the Druids?”

She snorted, “Take them all to Gal’stara Land? I don’t know.” Asaara’s expression then grew serious. “But in all honesty? I want to make Nanan proud. I want to reinstate the old ways of the Druids – counseling instead of reconditioning, free healing magicks, using our powers for the betterment of the people instead of personal gain.”
“I’ll do everything in my power to support you in those goals,” Keith spoke up. “It’s important to me that my people are provided for – healthcare, shelter, all their basic needs.”

Asaara nodded, looking pleased.

Suddenly, Matt rounded on Keith and Shiro, his smile absolutely vicious.

“So, what about you two lovebirds?” he crooned. “You have any plans for the future?” he wiggled his eyebrows, “Any baby-shaped plans?”

Keith and Shiro immediately began to laugh, staring at each other with blushing smiles as they shook their heads.

“Not for several, several more years, no,” Shiro waved a hand to dispel the notion. “We need to work on getting married first.”

“And – you know – creating an entire new governing body of an empire,” Keith laughed.

Matt opened his mouth, looking like he was about to make another lascivious comment when Shiro rounded a corner, which concluded in a small door.

“Seems so innocuous,” Matt said instead, looking around at his friends.

“Is everyone ready?” Shiro inquired, glancing around at his comrades.

“As I’ll ever be,” Asaara shrugged. Keith snorted a laugh at her before giving an affirmation, followed by Matt.

Shiro nodded and activated the function to open the door.

It led out into the center of the throne room, looking cavernous and dreadful in the absence of Zarkon’s court. Black marble floors reflected the massive windows displaying the starscape outside, the little pinpricks of starlight held captive in their surface.

The dais had been stripped of Zarkon’s throne, replaced with one of resplendent obsidian carved into smooth-faced fractals, which glowed hot with the reflection of Merla’s scarlet robes. She gazed down upon them imperiously with her one remaining eye, looking completely unsurprised at their arrival.

“Lotor,” she greeted Keith in a calm, even tone. “How wonderful to finally make your acquaintance.”

“You’re surprisingly contrived for someone who’s caused so much trouble,” Keith responded coolly. Merla simply stared in turn. “We both know why I’m here so why—?”

He was cut short as Merla stood from her throne, steepling her fingers as she stepped down off of the dais. Her robes trailed behind her like a crimson wave, turning her reflection in the floor red hot.

“Lotor the savior,” she mused calmly, a little smirk curling the edges of her mouth. “Lotor the abandoner. Lotor the second-coming of the tyrant. I wonder how history shall remember you—AUGH!”

Merla jerked, her body becoming a flurry of robes and ribbons as a shot rang out through the throne room.
Matt snarled, blaster still smoking as he cocked it once more, pointing it straight at Merla, “Shut the fuck up.”

Merla righted herself with all the sick grace of a jerking marionette. He fingertips glowed a deep maroon as she dug them into her side unflinchingly and cauterized the wound, all while making full eye contact with Matt. His vision refused to waver. If anything, Keith could have sworn he saw the brunet smile.

“Fine,” Merla said shortly, in the manner of a disapproving parent. She raised her hands, allowing them to come alive with the sanguine luminescence of her magicks. “No more charades. Stand down now or –.”

Her voice died in her mouth, eye moonlike in disbelief as her magick sputtered and sparked out.

“The scoby…” she said in barely a whisper. Her expression hardened, lips contorting into a snarl. Her magick reignited, becoming spheres at her palms. Keith barely had time to raise his sword before one of the orbs collided with his chest. Numbness blossomed, followed by a thousand shards of cold pain as he flew backwards, red fractals overtaking his vision.

Shiro awoke slowly, the world gradually spinning into focus. Somewhere he could register someone saying his name, a warm hand gently shaking him into consciousness.

“What happened?” he slurred, tongue thick in his mouth.

“Merla knocked you unconscious,” a familiar voice rumbled. Shiro groaned as he was shifted into a sitting position.

“Keith?” Shiro tipped his head back, staring up at Sendak. “And Matt? Asaara?”

“All safe,” his ex smiled, gesturing behind him towards the throne. Keith rested up against one of the arms of the ornate chair looking battle-worn; his eyes were glazed over in exhaustion. Shiro allowed Sendak to help him to his feet and he hobbled towards Keith with the Lord Regent’s help.

“Keith,” Shiro sighed happily, reaching out towards his fiancé. Keith stared at him, eyes glazed over in glassy distance. “Keith…?”

Shiro cupped Keith’s cheek with one hand, gently gripping the opposite arm with his other hand in order to give him a soft shake. Keith’s body jostled limply, eyes still void of any type of recognition.

“Sendak, what—?” Shiro looked to the Lord Regent, heart sinking as Sendak calmly settled down onto the throne, grinning at Shiro with sharp teeth.

“Your help was appreciated, Shiro,” Sendak purred, reaching out to take Keith’s hand and pull the doll-like emperor into his lap.

“What…?” Shiro repeated. His voice was hoarse in his throat, mind reeling as he attempted to process what was playing out before him. He reached out to his fiancé, but Keith turned away from Shiro, settling his head onto Sendak’s chest, nuzzling into his ruff.

“Full reconditioning suits him well,” Sendak chuckled, petting Keith’s ears affectionately. Shiro stepped back in terror, heart sinking as he reached out for Keith again, a sharp sensation
“Keith,” Shiro begged, falling to his knees. “Please. I love you no matter what, Keith. Please, please come back to me.”

Keith did not even turn towards the sound of his voice.

Keith. Beautiful, vibrant Keith rendered to no more than a doll. Shiro could care less if Keith was in Sendak’s lap. What mattered was that Keith was himself – with his shy smiles and his trepid kindness and his fire. His free will. His choices. His life.

Sendak hummed as Shiro collapsed into himself at the foot of his throne, loose tears slipping down his cheeks. The Galra hummed, reaching out to take Shiro’s face in his hand.

“I’m not so cruel as to keep you apart from the emperor,” Sendak informed him with mock gentleness, using a clawed thumb to wipe away Shiro’s tears. “Surely you two can stay side by side if you are to become Vrepmyza once again.”

A fracture broke across Shiro’s vision and he blinked it away, “What?”

“I said: Surely you two can stay side by side if you are to become Vrep—.”

“I am Vrepmyza.”

Sendak stilled, “What?”

“I am Vrepmyza,” Shiro repeated, another fissure running across his vision. Someone outside of the throne room was calling his name, pounding on the door. Shiro met Sendak’s gaze evenly.

“And you’re not Sendak.”

Another crack.

Sendak was frozen in place, looking at Shiro with wide, golden eyes.

“Sendak has changed,” Shiro said with conviction, taking to his feet. “He wouldn’t lie to me and he wouldn’t take advantage of the situation in order to seize power – not anymore.”

Shiro looked down at the false Keith. More cracks fanned over his vision.

“Sendak told me he cares about what happens to Keith – that he believes in his ability. And Sendak might be cruel sometimes, but never like this,” Shiro smiled gently, hearing the person crying to him outside grow louder still. “Sendak would never tear a family apart.”

Suddenly, there was the sound of a loud crack followed by that of tinkling glass and the forms of Sendak and Keith shattered, dropping to the throne in a million shards. Shiro took a step back, head turning towards the sound of a door bursting open.

In tumbled Asaara, her hair sticking up in fear, eyes blown wide.

“Shiro!” she cried out.

“Asaara!” he ran to her side, catching the winded Mother in a brief hug. “What’s going on, where—?”

“We’re still in the throne room,” she explained. Shiro looked around the room and then back at her, perplexed. Asaara sighed and flailed her hands a little. “I mean in the waking world.”
“Waking world?” Shiro repeated in confusion.

“Right now we’re trapped in a dreamscape,” Asaara clarified. “Thrown up against our worst fears. You can communicate with me and eventually wake up now that you’ve realized this is fake – but we have to wake up Matt and the emperor first. Our bodies are extremely vulnerable right now. Follow me.”

Asaara took off toward the door that she had come through, Shiro tailing close behind her.

“Will we be able to help them?” Shiro asked, staring around at the unfamiliar room. It looked like one of the alcove-filled antechambers that he and Keith had taken refuge in during Vektor’s assassination attempt on Zarkon. An upturned cauldron lay in the middle of the room, its fragrant contents flooding the floor – there were further signs of the struggle scattered throughout the room. This had been the scene of Asaara’s nightmare.

She glanced at Shiro observing the aftermath of her dream before looking away, shame-faced.

“Even as the Mother, I haven’t studied psychic magicks,” she said sullenly. However, her expression quickly hardened. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to try my damndest to get us out of here.”

She stepped up to the door opposite that they had just entered through, the flaxen pink glow overtaking her hands and eyes. With a grunt, she surged up against the door, sweat quickly beading on her temple as she worked. Shiro joined her, arm glowing to life as he pressed with all of his strength.

Slowly, the door began to slide forward before the friction dissipated altogether. Paladin and Druid both tumbled through the open door into the frigid landscape of Ensa Temple’s atrium.

Crouched by the side of the pond was Matt, curled protectively around a bundle in his arms. Shiro and Asaara exchanged frightened glances before rushing to his side.

The ground was dark with blood, bile, and excrement, the dark stains covering Matt and Nanan both. Matt wailed, clutching the dark, frostbitten corpse to his chest as he rocked, eyes meeting with Shiro and Asaara’s as they approached. His face was shiny with snot and tears; little ice crystals had gathered on his lashes.

“I’m sorry,” he wheezed. “I couldn’t protect her, I can’t—.”

Matt stared down at his arms, crying out in hoarse grief as Nanan’s body shifted to that of Pidge. Shiro looked away as Matt brought his sister to his chest and continued to cry out, grief profound.

“I couldn’t do it!” he shouted as Shiro crouched beside him. “I’m not fit to be a protector – a parent – a brother –!”

Matt wailed at Pidge’s body as Shiro took his friend up in his arms, wincing as the hard, fake corpse bumped against him. It felt like ice.

“That’s not true,” Shiro told Matt, stroking a hand through his hair. “Matt, you nearly gave your life protecting Nanan. Not only did you fight against Merla with nothing but an electric prod and a blaster, but you have emotionally carried Nanan throughout this whole journey.”

Matt whimpered, pulling away from the body, which had resumed the form of Nanan. He
reached down, brushing a lock of pale hair from her frostbitten face, which seemed to be repairing: the discoloration was fading, color returning to her no-longer sallow cheeks.

“You’re already a great protector and parent,” Shiro encouraged him. “And besides,” he smiled. “You’re the kindest, funniest, most capable brother that Pidge or I could ever ask for.”

Nanan – now fully restored with healthily-glowing cheeks and a clean body – opened her eyes and burst into armfuls of beautiful pink fractals. Matt blinked, limply dropping his hands to his lap before glancing around in confusion. He looked first to Shiro and then to Asaara.

“What?” he mumbled, looking around the snowy garden as his confusion grew to concern. “This isn’t – Shiro, what happened?”

“No time to explain,” Asaara cut Matt off. “We have to wake the emperor.”

“Huh?” Matt’s perplexed voice was all but lost in the howling of the wind.

Asaara ran to the nearest door, hands already alight with her magick’s glow. Shiro’s heart caught in his throat.

“Wait!” he called out. Asaara froze, glaring at Shiro in annoyance.

Shiro hesitated. He knew Keith’s fears – the things that swarmed around in his head at night, and now made even him cry out in his sleep. Of the things Zarkon had done to Keith. Had threatened to do. Had done to Serro.

If Merla had subjected Keith to that, Shiro would never allow anyone else to witness it.

“Can I go in alone?” he asked. Asaara looked at him with a furrowed brow before her mouth set into a straight line of understanding and she nodded once.

“But make it quick,” she warned him. “If you take too long, I’m coming in after you.”

Shiro nodded in affirmation before joining in the effort to open the door. His heart shuttered in horror as the door began to slide forward, the organ nearly beating out of his chest before Shiro tumbled into warm dust.

The sun hovered over the New Mexico desert like the single, glowing eye of a Galra. Dry land stretched out around Shiro as far as he could see, red mesas obscuring his view of the pale horizon. Shiro turned around to observe the door he’d come through – it jutted out of the dust like an oddity, the frame unsupported by any building or walls.

Slowly he began to trek forward, stumbling in place as Keith’s silhouette materialized before him. He stood in the center of a circle of footprints, each eventually breaking away from the ring and traveling into the desert, disappearing into the dirt and dust—

All save for one track, which stopped just feet outside the circle, disappearing into a pile of shattered glass.

Keith immediately looked to Shiro – eyes tear-pink, but strong. He opened his arms to Shiro, allowing his fiancé to wrap him up in his embrace. Keith tucked his head beneath Shiro’s chin, nuzzling him affectionately.

“I knew it wasn’t real,” Keith said softly.
“How did you know?” Shiro inquired. Keith smiled, bringing him in for a brief kiss. He pulled away, expression gentle.

“Because you would never abandon me.”

Shiro’s vision shattered around Keith and he gripped the monarch close as the desert splintered around them and faded away.

Shiro awoke before he hit the ground.

Merla snarled, immediately descending upon Asaara’s prone form. Both were sweating from psychic exertion, looking agitated and exhausted, hair on end. Asaara immediately countered one of the red orbs barreling from Merla’s fist by forming a whip of light from her magicks.

Merla made a choked noise at the sight of the flaxen-pink glow, reeling backwards as she numbly allowed her cheek to be struck. The red ribbon covering the singed-out socket of her eye fluttered down around her, hair beginning to spill from its neat coiffure. Asaara took her hesitation as a chance to arm herself with her foil, diving towards her in an attempt to attack.

“FALSE MOTHER!” Merla shrieked as she approached, the scarlet discs of magick around her fists forming barriers as she gripped the foil and attempted to dispel of it. Instead, the saber pulsed with light, sending a blast of energy out towards Merla, who was flung several feet backwards onto the floor. She skidded some ways, her robes pooling around her like blood.

Shiro began to approach her, naginata held aloft, but froze when Merla’s shoulders began to tremble. Slowly, the trembles became more and more violent and the woman finally raised her head. The wound in her eye socket had reopened and blood was gushing down half her face, staining her hair pink as it fully slid from its ties, crushing down her shoulders and around her face like a waterfall. She was smiling, looking positively manic as she picked herself up once more, allowing the robes to pool down low on her shoulders, revealing a dark catsuit beneath.

Merla tilted her head back, regarding them from an angle that looked purely agonizing, “I see.”

The robes at her feet proceeded to catch fire, and she rose her hands up, bringing the flames with her before hurling them at Keith.

The emperor dodged easily, but the second the robes touched the ground, they became an inferno around the small group. Merla raised her hands in what appeared to be an elegant shrug before crowing out a harsh laugh and slapping her hands together.

“My, what a performance!” she giggled, tilting her head to the side. “What a show! You have no fucking idea how long I’ve wanted to drop the act! Are you happy now, Asaara?”

She dropped her hands limply to her sides, firelight dancing red in the glow of her eye, staining it amber. Her smirk immediately disappeared, expression eerily blank. Matt began to fire his gun, snarling when forks of flames came up beside Merla, flinging the blasts of energy away. She twisted her body, coiling the flames with her movements as she cackled.

“Oh you think you’re tough shit, huh?” Asaara yelled over the roar of flames. She banished her fencing foil, magicks gathering in her hands and twisting around her before they began to wrap around the flames like vines, beautiful flowers bursting along the lengths and vanishing the flames. Merla hissed, redoubling her effort, but seemed to physically buckle under the exertion of fighting against Asaara, her flames sputtering out around them. Matt lined up another shot, shouting when
Merla gave a violent jerk of her arm, triggering a flame to jump out at him.

“Matt!” Shiro called out as Asaara directed her magick to encircle Matt as well. Hissing, the fresh burns on his skin seemed to be dissipating in the wake of the Druid’s healing ability. Nearby, Keith was transforming his bayard from its sword form to the battle axe, taking cautious steps forward.

The battle slowed. Merla stood several yards away from Keith, what was left of her little flames still ensnaring her limbs like coiling snakes, preventing a direct attack. She was uncannily still, watching him more with distant curiosity than anything else. The blood from her eye socket continued to sluggishly drool down her face, giving her the impression of a mourner at a funeral pyre.

“Little Emperor Lo,” she smirked, raising her chin as Keith approached. “Have you come to give me the same treatment as your dear father?”

“My father is Thace,” Keith said between gritted teeth.

“Only tyrants murder in order to secure their position,” Merla returned almost instantaneously.

“Hypocrite.”

“I never claimed to be anything less,” Merla shrugged. “Lotor, killing me now will only further screw you in the eyes of the coalition I’ve gathered here. You’ve already spectacularly fucked yourself over by marching upon City Station in the first place.”

Merla struck out with a whip of flame, which Keith immediately countered with the pole of his bayard, wrapping the flames around it and dragging Merla forward. She cried out, falling to her knees as the flames surged one last time before flickering away into embers. She jerked once more, head snapping up as if on a string, bearing her fangs, which shone rosy through the blood that had spread across her mouth.

“KEITH!” Shiro shouted, starting towards his fiancé, but Merla had already struck.

Keith howled, Merla’s hand closing around the knee of his prosthetic leg. It glowed red-hot through the leg of his armor, the emperor gripping at his thigh where the prosthetic connected with flesh, dropping his bayard in the process. Immediately he ripped his hands back as they came in contact with the heat. He writhed, clearly trying with all of his might to remain standing.

However, Merla was beginning to shriek as Asaara’s light wrapped around her like spider webs, flinging her forcefully into her own embers which cried out with a high-pitched hiss. She flailed for a moment, hair beginning to burn away, patches of her catsuit melting into her skin before she finally rolled off of the hot section of the floor, panting loudly like a woman starved for water.

Keith fell to one knee, whimpering as Asaara rushed to his side, pressing her hands to his prosthetic and his upper thigh. As he was tended to, Shiro and Matt stepped up to Merla, their weapons held aloft.

The Druid rolled over onto her stomach, just barely raising her head to glare at them with her one remaining eye. The center was stained with the same violet scarlet as her magicks, pulsing as she panted and drooled. The scent of her burning hair and flesh was acrid in the hair.

“Wait.”
Shiro froze at the sound of Keith’s voice, immediately bringing his naginata to his side. He turned to his fiancé, allowing Matt to keep his blaster trained on Merla’s head.

“Don’t kill her,” Keith shook his head, standing with the help of Asaara. She helped him to get a head start before releasing his shoulders and Keith crossed the throne room to where Merla was curled on the floor. She stared up at him in genuine surprise, her face almost childlike in the confusion she showed there.

“What?” she whispered.

“I never intended to kill you in the first place,” Keith explained, gingerly kneeling down near to Merla. “I am not the man that Zarkon was.

“This isn’t for my benefit, either,” he added as Merla’s ruefully twisted mouth opened to make a comment. “I know you’re incredibly dangerous, but you’re also incredibly powerful. If some day you could change, I know you’ll be a great boon to Galra society.”

Keith turned to smile at Shiro, “I’ve seen people change in pretty miraculous ways before.”

He returned his attention to Merla, reaching out to set a gentle hand on her shoulder, “You can address your coalition once we’ve gotten everything settled, but I want you to tell them the truth of what you’ve done – of your ambitions.”

To Shiro’s surprise Merla smiled softly, looking – for just a moment – completely at peace.

“You know nothing of my ambitions.”

Asaara acted before Merla could, the plume of flames that the fallen Druid surrounded her body in immediately extinguished before they could burn more than Keith’s fingertips. Shiro felt himself moving as soon as he heard Matt’s gun go off.

He watched as Merla’s face went slack, her remaining eye widening in slight surprise before it was gone, half of her face eviscerated in the force of the blast from Matt’s gun. Her flesh split easily beneath the blade of Shiro’s naginata, which glowed bright orchid alongside his prosthetic. Shiro watched as her body seized around the blade, jerked and flailed almost comically, and then finally went lax.

Shiro immediately dropped his bayard, turning to Keith. The emperor was looking away, lower lip worried between his teeth.

“Keith I’m—,” Shiro began. Keith’s expression softened minutely as he looked over at his fiancé.

“No, it’s not your fault,” he shook his head. “She was going to try and kill us all in the last attack. It had to be done.”

Matt stepped up to the body, nudging it with the tip of his boot before crouching to retrieve Shiro’s untransformed bayard. Asaara approached the corpse as well, waving her hands to further constrict it with more of the rose gold bindings.

It was oddly quiet in the aftermath of Merla’s death. Shiro recalled the energy filling the Ossuary at the time he’d taken out Haggar – the ongoing sound and rumble of conflict after Keith had killed Zarkon. But here and now, in the massive black throne room, it was just as still as it had been when they’d boarded The Intrepid what had to have been only thirty minutes prior.
“Well,” Matt said conversationally, staring down at Merla’s corpse in disdain, as if it might leap back up any minute. “Where to now, Majesty?”

Keith allowed Shiro to help him back to his feet, leaning his weight on his fiancé. He looked exhausted and – even with the healing that Asaara had been able to provide – in pain. But even still, there was a regal sort of determination to his features that even Shiro had to take in with some amount of awe.

“I need to address the diplomats stationed here,” Keith said. “I’m going to take back my capitol.”

The center plaza of City Station was silent and cold, the buildings scarred with the results of yet another battle. Keith winced, leaning onto Shiro as his fiancé helped him to limp towards the hotel where the dignitaries waited for his arrival. As they traveled, members of the Vesh and military alike parted in the wake of their emperor, armor and weapons clattering as they dropped to their knees in deference, the murmurings of “Vol sa” echoing throughout the space.

Across the expanse of the plaza, Keith could see the seven dignitaries standing before the hotel on the very same platform where he had been coronated. There was no fanfare or cheering crowds this time, just the voices of the saluting people, an uncomfortable post-battle rustle, and the sound of Keith limping alongside Shiro. Matt and Asaara quietly brought up the rear of their small envoy, their footsteps almost harrowing in the maw of the First Ring.

“Emperor Lotor,” someone said venomously as Keith slowly approached; it was a young Stellite – hardly older than Keith himself – dressed in shining black armor not unlike his own. He was being barred from stepping off of the stage by a line of military officers who were gently attempting to urge the dignitaries back into their hotel. He snarled at those around him, surging up against their arms.

“Let him through,” Keith ordered, pushing gently on Shiro’s arm so that he could stand on his own. The Stellite finally broke through the barrier of arms holding him back and jumped off of the stage, towering over Keith as he arrived before him, snatching him up by the collar of his armor and yanking him up to the tips of his toes.

Shiro made a warning sound, arm glowing to life, but Keith merely held up a hand to stop him, expression stoic in the face of the stranger.

“I should strike you down where you stand,” snarled the stranger, giving Keith another shake.

“Rhanvar!” a woman among the dignitaries cried, stepping down off of the stage, bustling golden and black skirts held aloft as she traveled.

The prime minister ignored her, serpentine fangs bared in Keith’s face.

“You’ve made quite a show attempting to dissolve our coalition – going so far as to make an attack on your own capitol,” he continued. “I assume you’ve already killed our benefactress?”

“Merla was organizing you to suit her interests,” Keith explained, setting a calming hand on Rhanvar’s wrist. “I attempted to detain her, but—.”

“Let me guess? You slew her in the same way you did your predecessor?” Rhanvar smiled cruelly, giving Keith another shake.
“Merla is dead, yes, but at the benefit to all,” Keith continued, spying a recording drone out of the corner of his eye. Wincing, he continued: “Like I said, I was prepared to take her alive, but she forced my hand at the last moment when she tried to attack.”

“Rhanvar,” the insectoid woman who had climbed off of the stage reached up to set a gentle hand on top of the Stellite’s wrist. “Let him speak.”

The Stellite clicked his tongue, finally setting Keith down on his feet. Keith thanked the woman, extending a hand to her. Rhanvar continued to seethe beside her, towering over Keith.

“It is my utmost pleasure, Your Imperial Majesty,” she said, “I am queen Florea of Apis. Perhaps we should take our talks inside the hotel?”

“Whatever Lotor can say in the hotel, he can say before the eyes of the people!” a mouse-like woman draped in furs declared, gesturing sharply towards the broadcast drone.

“He’s… clearly injured…” a tiny veiled woman beside her remarked in a sluggish voice. “Perhaps… we should sit…”

“What are your terms?” a horned alien demanded, stepping off of the stage and joining Florea and Rhanvar’s sides. They wrung their hands, glancing nervously out of the corner of their eyes. “I’m sure something can be reached… to both the benefit of the empire and the Hardfeldt Moons?”

“Are you forgetting the five other planets represented here?” another woman with the face of a gecko demanded. “Not to mention the others in the Nacarpolit galaxy at large?” she glared at Keith, crossing her arms over her chest, fingers rattling in an irritated fashion. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” she demanded like a parent would chastise a child.

“Give the boy some air.”

Keith turned towards the front doors of the hotel, starting in horror at the familiar form that emerged – but quickly coming to relax as amber eyes rested on him. A man nearly identical to Zarkon hobbled onto the stage, weight resting primarily on an ornate metal cane.

“Duke Ryder –,” Rhanvar began anxiously, immediately silenced by a sharp look from his elder.

“Lotor,” Ryder began, slowly making his way down the stairs of the stage and approaching Keith. The three others clustered around the young monarch dispersed reverently, allowing the Duke access. “Or ‘Keith’ as I have been informed he likes to be called,” he smiled, the lines of his face drawing up almost wearily. “Has provided a great service to the people of Stell— not only did he depose of The Tyrant, he also showed great mercy to Captain Vaneer’s flotilla when she requested retreat, and—,”

In that moment, something within Keith clicked, and the resemblance to Zarkon – or rather, Orkah – became clear.

“—Emperor Lotor has been chosen by my old friend the Red Lion, a clear indicator of his worth as a paladin and as a descendant of my son,” Duke Ryder concluded, offering a hand to Keith. “The quality of character displayed in those feats tells me that Emperor Lotor did not dispose of Merla out of cruelty, but out of fear for our safety.”

The diplomats stared at Keith in various states of wonder, the red paladin flushing under their gazes before drawing himself up to his demure height.
“Thank you, Duke Ryder,” Keith smiled at his predecessor. “I… I haven’t come with a speech prepared,” he admitted. “But I wanted to let you all know, that I won’t condemn you for siding with Merla. I fled when the empire was at its most vulnerable and I took the long way around when it came to returning to both my people and those who had suffered the most at the empire’s hands – you.”

He stepped forward, glancing around as the dignitaries stepped off of the stage to surround him, the broadcast drone soaring high above them, “The colonized planets whose people were stripped of their rights – whose planets were worn barren by mining or by Quintessence harvest or slavery. You should have been my first priority, and for that I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to turn to Merla – to someone who sought to manipulate you – for help—.”

“The emperor… does not lie,” came the drowsy voice of the veiled woman. She stepped forward, removing her veil along with the mushroom like cap it was connected to, her amber eyes softly aglow with shame. “Emperor Lotor, I can speak to the others… as to Merla’s true character…”

“I am Queen Morelle of Tirmania,” she said slowly, bowing her head to him. “The planet where The Convent has been stationed… we have met with a paladin of Voltron before… the yellow paladin who calls himself Hunk… and he provided us with nothing but kindness and deference,” she smiled. “Merla, however… stole a creature called the mother scoby from us… in order to use its’ children’s destructive abilities to attack City Station and frame the Lord Regent with neglect.”

She gestured to the destruction around them, pointing out trails of slimy blumes, “Without the mother scoby… a great portion of Tirmania lacked its primary source of nutrition, a water created by the scoby and its children… Merla was using this to hold us captive to her will, and I complied to her wishes to become the first person… to join her false coalition… and for that… I am sorry.”

Morelle bowed deeply to the other dignitaries, who stared at her in various states of shock. The horned representative began to wring their hands, bowing their head in shame as they stepped forward.

“Your Imperial Majesty, I am President Dannika of the Hardfeldt Moons,” they said softly. “Merla promised me immediate annexation from the empire and financial support from the Druids if I were to join her coalition and speak of her merits. I’m sorry to have bowed to greed and lied to all of you, my friends.”

“You don’t have to worry,” Keith smiled benevolently. “Anyone would have acted as you did in your situations. And I… I need to do something I should I have done at the very beginning.”

The emperor gestured towards the broadcast drone, beckoning it closer to him as he stared straight into the dark lens winking at him, “As of this moment, I hereby deliver sovereignty to all the planets that have been colonized by the Galra empire. As emperor, I vow to do all I can to aid them in this transition and provide reparations. I can’t say I know much about governing or even how I’m going to go about doing this,” he turned towards the dignitaries in front of him, trying to hold back a wince as Rhanvar scoffed and turned his head away. “But even though I wish to retain authority over Gal for now, I promise I won’t go unchecked.

“At my coronation, the three parts of government – the military, the aristocracy, and the Druids – came together to crown me, and I believe that between these three governing bodies, a system can be established wherein we can all check one another, and the needs of the Galra people can be met.”

“Are you forgetting that thanks to your actions the Mother of Constellations is dead?” Rhanvar replied venomously. “How are we to know that you won’t insert someone of your own
choosing—.”

“Hey, so.”

Suddenly, Asaara was beside Keith, bringing up one palm alight with rose golden energy and showing it off briefly to the camera, “I’m the Mother now, and Merla never was. She actually was about to start killing kits to make sure that she inherited the Motherhood, but due to some magical bullshit, I—.”

“Lotor!”

A lone scream pierced through the plaza, Keith’s eyes falling on the dark armor of the admiral of the Galra military. Tora approached him on shaking legs, shoving the recording drone out of the way and falling to one knee. Her face was dirtied with blood and tears, bangs hanging in front of her eyes as she bowed her head and trembled.

“Please,” she said hoarsely. “Even after all I’ve done… please if anyone can do anything—.”

“Tora,” Keith began, wincing as he dropped onto one knee beside her, setting a hand on a pauldron. “Tora, what happened?”

“It’s my dad, he’s…” Tora drew in a sharp, gasping breath, nearly spitting out the next word through her tears. “He’s… fuck!”

She curled into herself, both knees landing on the ground as she pounded the pavement with a loose fist. Above him, Keith heard Shiro’s breath catch in his throat.

“Sendak is dead.”

Keith glanced up to see Maray approaching through the amphitheatre, arms wound tightly around their chest. Their hair had spilled free of its usual tail, trailing messily around their face, sticking to their wet cheeks. Their lips were thin, an unusual, quiet pallor having overtaken their typical mien.

“He was killed protecting...” Maray hesitated, glancing harshly to one side. “His men in the Mother Scoby’s ultimate attack. I’m…”

Asaara had suddenly dropped to her knees, hands secured around both of Tora’s pauldrons. She gave the younger woman a gentle face, expression insistent.

“Take me to him,” she said.

Tora stared up at her, eyes wide and pregnant with tears that glided down her face and left tracks in her dirty cheeks. With a weak cough, Tora took to her feet, cuffing her cheeks and gesturing for the others to follow her and Maray.

Keith complied, Shiro quick to support him as he limped along. Glancing over his shoulder, he espied that the delegation was following their small group as well, held back a respectable distance by Matt. For a moment he wanted to ask them to return to the hotel, but chose against it. If they wanted privacy, Tora or Maray would say, and at the moment the pair of them seemed too consumed with grief to make any mention of an audience.

Besides, Sendak deserved the honor of having such prevalent people attend his last rites.

Maray and Tora led them through the barren streets of the First Ring, to the steps of the Druid
temple, which were pocked with acid. Lance, Pidge, and Hunk stood sentinel to the building, the former heaving with tears while his friends comforted him. Asaara picked up the dirtied skirts of her robes, ascending the steps with quiet dignity as she passed through the front doors, calmly approaching the massive form covered with a white sheet.

The others stood at a respectable distance, surrounding the scene as Tora came to kneel beside her father’s body, removing a limp hand from below the sheet and holding it up to her cheek.

“Daddy…” she whimpered, shaking with tears anew. She looked up at Asaara as the Mother lowered herself to her knees beside her. “Please,” she begged hoarsely. “Take anything. Take everything, I can’t let him—I won’t—.”

“You will do no such thing,” Maray said sharply, falling to Asaara’s other side. They touched her shoulder, expression serious. “If you need anything, please take it from me, I can’t stand to see her suffer any more—.”

“I don’t need anything from either of you, a sacrifice is not necessary,” Asaara shook her head. “As a true mother I can… I can try…”

She reached out, hands already aglow in the soft flaxen pink glow of the Mother, and it was only then that Keith understood what she was about to do.

Taking a deep breath, Asaara opened her mouth and chills immediately raced up Keith’s spine, the fur on the nape of his neck standing upright as the purest note spilled from the Mother’s lips, echoing and trembling in the star-speckled eaves of the temple with such clarity that it brought immediate pricks of tears to Keith’s eyes.

Asaara trilled and tumbled through the notes with profound grace, the song immediately recognizable as the same verse that Haggar had screeched out in the snow to rouse Shiro. But this version was sweet and mournful at the same time, bright and uplifting, carrying all of Asaara’s hope and grief as it rose to cascading vowels and hushed to sweet, slipping hisses, filling the space with her intent.

Asaara’s eyes filled with tears as she sat up from where she was hunched over the body, throwing back her head as the beautiful trembles of her voice reached new heights, the soft glow of her hands wrapping around Sendak’s body like vines, reaching up to the ceiling of the temple in thick stocks, blooming in aureate flowers and filigree, withering as the song grew softer, rose-colored petals floating down over the assembled before they appeared to burst into beautiful sparks of light, of life, showering the area as Asaara took a deep, tremulous breath and cried out the last note, the emotion and ancient magicks behind it nearly deafening Keith as she and Sendak’s body were overtaken by the potent glow of her aura, blinding him and those around him.

The light slowly dissipated, Asaara’s eyes rolling into her head as she fell to the side, collapsed on the black tile, her robes and hair spilled out around her as she took deep, shaking breaths.

And then—

There was a deep, choking cough from beneath the blanket.

Tora cried out, she and Maray immediately wrestling with the sheet as they scrambled into Sendak’s arms, the Lord Regent coughing and blinking in confusion. He hissed, writhing below them in shock before immediately burying his face in Tora’s hair.
“Kit…?” he coughed, turning towards Maray and cupping their face in his hand.

“Sendak,” Maray sobbed, using their palm to push tears off of their face.

“You… don’t cry,” the Lord Regent mumbled, pulling them both close. Tora gasped out a laugh, sniffing loudly through her tears.

“Stupid,” she accused. “You can’t even…! Damn the stars, Dad!”

“What’s even…?” Sendak glanced around, staring mistily at the massive group of sobbing people surrounding him. “Ah—.”

His attention was immediately drawn away from the people around his small family when Maray took up his cheeks in their hands and kissed him deeply, pulling away only to press more kisses to his cheeks.

Hesitantly, Matt approached the family, kneeling down beside Asaara and helping her sit up.

“No, no I’m fine I just resurrected someone for the first time…” she mumbled, glaring weakly at the assembled before her eyes landed on Keith. “You should probably say something profound now, majesty.”

“I—,” Keith choked a little, wiping his cheeks and turning to the similarly-affected diplomats surrounding them. “I think it’s pretty clear that Asaara is the true Mother of Constellations,” he said, unsure of what else to tell them. “And alongside both her and Admiral Tora I plan to rule properly checked.”

“Don’t forget your husband,” Sendak mumbled thickly, tucking Maray into his chest and rumbling out a deep, almost-drunken purr.

“Husband?” Queen Florea blinked, staring between Keith and Shiro. She clapped her hands, tearful eyes suddenly alight. “You and Vrepmyza are wed?”

“We—,” Keith blinked. “I’m not sure this is really a good time to talk about—?”

“You guys got married without me there!” Lance cried out, charging into the temple.

“No, we’re— Lance this isn’t the time,” Keith said between gritted teeth.

“We’re engaged, yes,” Shiro confirmed calmly, taking Keith’s hand and drawing him close.

“So then we can expect a wedding on the horizon?” Rhanvar interjected, quirking an eyebrow. “Personally, I would feel much more comfortable knowing that Lotor could rule in constant check.”

“We’re—,” Keith began, and then Maray sat up from where they were cuddled against Sendak’s chest, looking positively manic.

“Oh?” they said, eyes sparking dangerously.

‘Oh God no…’ Keith thought, hoping that the others didn’t see him wince.
Hope you guys enjoyed this long boy of a chapter! It was certainly a blast for me to write. I'm curious if anyone recognizes a certain OC of mine...
Heart

Chapter by chocolatemoosey

“I really need to stop looking at myself in mirrors.”

“I think,” said Maray, pressing a pin into the fabric at Keith’s arm. “This is a perfectly sensible time to be looking in a mirror.”

Behind them, Pidge snorted from where she was resting on what she had dubbed ‘the boyfriend seat’, a small, plush divan situated opposite the three-glass mirror Keith and Maray stood before.

The penthouse suite was in a state of absolute chaos. Various swatches of white and ivory fabric tied up with maroon and black bows were coiled on the couches; rejected wedding clothes and fabric squares congesting the dining table alongside what had to be every wedding magazine that Gal had to offer; no less than six crumb-filled plates were strewn awkwardly over the coffee table.

Pidge had just finished being fitted for her dress; deep maroon robes in the Galra bridal tradition of high-fashion. She’d managed to fight off about every suggestion Maray had run by her thus far, nearly losing her mind when a pillbox hat done up with fishnet had cropped up as a suggestion. Keith would never forget the face she’d made when Maray had plopped it down on her head with a satisfied smile, clasping their hands beside their cheek.

Keith himself wasn’t one to judge Pidge, however, having repeatedly turned down almost every suggestion Maray had thrown his way and nearly giving the party planner a coronary in the process.

“I just want to wear my paladin armor,” Keith had sighed at what seemed to be the five hundredth frilly dress that Maray had brought up to the suite earlier that day. The look that they’d given him in response to that suggestion had really hammered in the reason Maray had been made Imperial Sentinel. Doing his best to scare away the threatening glare, Keith had said: “These seem more suitable for when you marry Sendak.”

Maray had turned bright purple and there had been no more frilly dresses suggested since. In fact, Maray had returned with a simple white box merely hours later.

“I was hoping,” they’d announced, resting it on the settee. “That we could come to a compromise?”

Keith quirked an eyebrow, “Okay?”

Maray beamed, opening the white box and removing a familiar set of gossamer robes, delicately beaded around the throat in silver.

“That’s…” Keith frowned, trying to place exactly when and where he’d worn the outfit.

“This is what you wore the day you sacrificed your leg for Shiro,” Maray explained, handing the outfit off to Keith. “It goes over a light grey flightsuit, if you remember. I recalled how graceful you looked in the snow, covered in blood…”

Maray produced a dreamy sigh as if this were a romantic memory rather than one of the most horrible days of Keith’s life.
“Unfortunately the outfit was ruined as a result,” Maray continued, handing the flightsuit off to Keith. “But fortunately the classical fashion statement picked up amongst the youth, and there have been many recreations of the outfit for sale.”

Keith flushed. So there were apparently teenagers running around dressed up in his clothes like he was a celebrity? Keith recalled fashion magazines on Earth showing the names of the stores and prices of the outfits that famous actors and singers had worn to awards ceremonies. Shaking his head at the thought, he dropped his bath robe and began to pull on the flightsuit. Unlike Serro’s old clothing, it was skin-tight from the get-go, but unfortunately flooded over his hands and feet.

Upon Keith’s leaving the bathroom with a defeated expression, Maray immediately mumbled “oh dear” and marched over to their sewing basket to grab their pins.

Pidge cackled, Keith glaring at her pointedly.

“As if you didn’t have to have yours hemmed by, like, a foot,” he countered grumpily.

“Yeah, but I’m not Galra,” Pidge retorted with a shrug.

“Half,” Keith corrected her, refocusing his attention on his reflection.

Once Maray had finished pinning, they returned to the box to remove the flowy, translucent robe and arranged it over Keith’s arms, clipping up the tiny hook and eyes in front.

“There,” they breathed, clapping their hands together happily. “What do you think?”

Keith rotated before the mirror, admiring the short train in the back before touching the beading at his throat and found he quite liked the look of the outfit.

“Pidge?” he inquired, turning to his best friend for her opinion. The brunette nodded in approval before smirking.

“What’s the nicest way of saying you’re one French product placement away from an Alphonse Mucha advert?”

Keith quirked an eyebrow, shooting his maid of honor a playful glare. Pidge collapsed into her seat laughing.

There was a knock at the door and Maray smiled, smirking warningly over their shoulder.

“I have no idea what you meant, but it better have been nice,” they said to Pidge, opening the door to the suite.

“STAG PARTY!”

There was a great commotion as Matt and Lance barreled in, bearing handles of booze above their heads.

“NO.” Keith said loudly, pointing angrily at his friends as they approached him, casting arms around his shoulders and – for some reason – beginning to sing Auld Lang Syne. “Did you two idiots practice this?”

“They spent an entire ven on it,” came Tora’s voice as she stepped into the room alongside Hunk. “I have no idea what they were trying to accomplish.”

“I brought more buttercream!” Hunk announced sweetly, stepping up to Keith to offer up a
little platter overflowing with several carafes filled with frosting.

“I already told you I liked all the other ones you made just fine,” Keith’s ears drooped as he accepted the tiny spoon he was offered and began to sample the buttercream.

“Yeah but there’s so many new flavors that Gal has to offer!” gushed the gourmand. “I feel like I haven’t even scratched the surface of the frosting possibilities!”

“Havva bean is fine,” Keith insisted, referring to the rough Galra equivalent to vanilla. “Feel free to make as many cupcakes with the other flavors of frosting though. Trust me Hunk, they all taste great.”

“Okay but like great or great-great?”

“They taste amazing,” the red paladin reassured him. He turned to Matt and Lance, who were scrambling around the penthouse, admiring the amenities. Both had already put both robes on over their clothes.

“No stag party,” Keith told them. “Go bother Shiro instead.”

“But Shiro doesn’t drink,” Lance whined.

“You’re underage!”

“There’s no drinking age in space,” Lance informed him, performing a strange little victory dance.

“It’s thirty seasons,” said Maray, removing the pinned robes from Keith.

“Sure you don’t wanna?” Matt offered from where he was raiding the mini-bar, shoving tiny alcohols and snacks into his bathrobe’s pockets.

Keith shook his head, “I don’t wanna be hung over for my wedding.”

“Suit yourself,” Lance shrugged, turning to Matt. “Ready to get shitty?”

“I’m ready to get a little tipsy so I can be sober by the time I need to go home and tuck my daughter into bed,” Matt said, already breaking open a candy bar.

“Boo!” jeered Lance.

“Go drink with Coran,” Pidge suggested with a flap of her hand, to which Lance scowled.

“No way dude! He’ll drink me under a table and draw shit on my face in permanent marker!”

“Hey,” Tora said softly as Keith went towards the bathroom to change. “Could I talk with you privately?”

Keith blinked, “Sure.”

Tora nodded to herself, bobbing her head once. “Cool. I’ll see you on the balcony in a few.”

Keith agreed, quickly changing into his casual clothes and stepping outside onto the balcony, leaving the cacophony of the penthouse behind him.

Tora rested on the balcony’s railing, staring out at the sparkling lights of the First Ring and the half-decorated amphitheatre below. Keith approached her, propping his arms up on the railing
beside hers.

“It’s been awhile,” he greeted her. “How’s it been?”

Tora shrugged and then smiled, “It’s been good, it’s been good. Dad’s been in a great mood and it’s nice to know that Maray’s going to be a permanent resident of the house – not that they weren’t already.”

She smiled over her shoulder at Maray through the sliding doors, watching as they attempted to herd Lance off of the already-overcrowded couch.

“It really seems like they’re happy together,” Keith found himself smiling, too. He reached out to touch Tora’s shoulder. “Maray’s a great person, I’m sure they’re going to make your dad really happy.”

Tora smiled back, touching Keith’s hand before her face fell, “Look, speaking of my dad…”

“Is it about the time you tried to kidnap me so he could coerce me into a political marriage?” Keith smirked.

Tora winced.

“I’m sorry Lo – Keith,” she corrected herself. “I just—.”

She sighed, dropping her hand from her shoulder and turning back towards the First Ring, “I know it was a shitty thing for me to do as a friend, and I don’t blame you if you don’t trust me or consider us friends anymore. It’s not an excuse, but I wanted to tell you why I did it.”

Tora tilted her head back, looking up at the false starscape. Usually, even in her off-duty fatigues, she had an air about her that demanded respect – that spoke of the kind of grace and behavior typically commanded by an adult. But in that moment, with the little pinpricks of light reflected in her eyes, with her ears looking too big upon her cropped haircut, Keith was reminded that Tora was hardly older than himself. He remembered the vulnerability and compassion she’d shown him after Zarkon had beaten him. That sort of behavior wasn’t fake.

“You already know how much my dad did for me while I was growing up,” she explained. “If it weren’t for him, I probably would’ve been beat to death or starved. He saved my life and gave me everything he had to offer even though he was still so raw from the death of his immediate family. He dressed my wounds, fed me, and brushed the tangles out of my hair. He taught me how to fight, how to shoot, how to defend myself – supported my ambitions to the point where he made me admiral not out of his own personal interest, but because he wanted me to be able to live my dream.

“Ever since he took me in I wanted to be able to give Dad something in return. But of all the things he wanted, I could never supply him with them. That’s why I planned to bring him to you, to see you guys married,” she dropped her gaze to Keith. “He’d never admit to it because he’s so obsessed with playing the power-hungry bastard, but the reason Dad wanted the throne so badly is so that he could prevent tragedies like the ones he experienced. Proper health care – both mental and physical – a military that’s not composed of ninety-nine percent fodder, provisions for people like his family who struggle to get by.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: my dad is good. And I wanted all of his desires to come true,” her stare became guilty. “But I never should have done so at the expense of your freedom. It was fucked up of me in… so many ways, what I tried to do to you. And I’m sorry for what I did to Blue, too.”
She broke eye contact, snorting at Lance, who was aggressively chasing a shot with an entire can of sugary soda.

“It was manipulative and it jeopardized the wellbeing of your entire team,” she explained. “Not to mention it hurt Blue to be away from you guys. He kind of needs his family, you know?”

Keith laughed as Lance’s face screwed up in disgust and he thrust an empty, tiny bottle of liquor at Matt who sniffed it, made a face, and passed it off to Pidge, who downed it.

“Oh,” Keith smiled. “We all need each other, I think.”

“I’m not asking for forgiveness,” Tora continued, and it was her turn to get her hand on his shoulder. “But I wanted to let you know how deeply sorry I am for the choices that I made.”

“Thank you,” Keith returned, squeezing her hand. “I… I wanna say I forgive you, but I have to be honest: it’s going to be a little while before I can do that. You hurt us all pretty badly.”

Tora nodded, “I can definitely understand that.”

“But,” Keith spoke up, gently pulling her towards him. “I want you to know that I still consider us friends.”

Tora made a happy noise as Keith hugged her, a soft purr working up in her chest. Keith purred along, giving his friend a little nuzzle.

“Sap,” Tora accused playfully, but allowed the behavior.

They broke apart moments later, exchanging final smiles before Tora jerked her head over her shoulder towards the penthouse, “Come on. I know you’re not drinking but I don’t wanna miss out on any of that booze.”

They returned to the inside of the penthouse. At this time, Maray was cleaning up as much of the mess as possible, arms laden with swathes of fabric.

“I’ll be sure to have your wedding clothes back to you as soon as possible Keith,” Maray was saying, wrapping one of the ivory swags around their neck like a scarf. “Please expect me bright and early in the morning. Say, half past ced?”

Keith choked back a groan, instead choosing to smile and nod, “Thank you for everything you’ve done, Maray.”

“It is my utmost pleasure!” the party planner beamed in response. “I don’t even mind the short time those dreadful dignitaries gave us to prepare! I’m giddy knowing that we’d even had time for a rehearsal.”

Keith’s ears went flat. He thought the rehearsal had gone wonderfully – unlike Maray, who seemed content to make sure that everything went off as specifically as possible. The amount of times they’d directed Keith and Thace to go up and down the aisle was insane. Keith figured that the only reason that the rehearsal had come to an end at all was because Sendak had started rubbing Maray’s shoulders and quietly convinced them that it was time to go home to rest as soon as Maray had begun to melt into his touch.

“You look like you need some help, Udi,” Tora laughed, stepping up to Maray to relieve them of at least half of their load. Maray smiled shyly at the familial term and allowed Tora to accept the armful of wedding things. Tora turned to face the others, “Sorry, but I think I’m gonna pass on
drinks tonight. Helping this one home is too important.”

“You say I can’t make it back on my own?” Maray teased, quirking an eyebrow.

“I’m saying you can’t without dropping everything,” Tora returned. “Imperial Sentinel or not.”

“Don’t worry Mx. Sendak!” Lance piped up. “We’ll make sure Keith is good an’ sentineled, I promise!”

“Lance, darling, you full well know my name is Maray, not Sendak,” the addressed Galra returned in confusion. Lance merely snickered in reply.

After seeing off Tora and Maray, the group retired to the sitting room. Pidge had changed back into her casual clothes and was currently probing the wall panels, admiring the light patterns that she was able to trigger.

“Which one makes the bed spin?” Lance grinned.

“That one’s in the honeymoon suite,” Matt returned, bouncing his eyebrows at Keith. “I heard it vibrates, too.”

“O-KAY,” Keith said loudly, immediately feeling his cheeks color as everyone but Hunk began to snicker provocatively. “No more of that. Nope. No thanks.”

“I can’t wait to meet my niblings,” Pidge smiled.

“What is it with you two and Shiro and I having kids!?” Keith shouted at Pidge, who skipped out of the way of his playfully-thrown fist. “Do you not realize that I have an empire to run?”

“We just think they’d be cute!” Matt pushed out a lower lip as Pidge sat down next to him, the siblings proceeding to make the same doleful expression.

“I refuse to be irresponsible because you two want kittens to play with,” Keith sniffed. “And don’t you have partying to do? I’ve got to go to bed since Maray’s going to wake me up at the ass crack of dawn.”

“Wah!” Lance sobbed dramatically. Keith all but picked him up by the shoulders and shoved him towards the door. He quickly disposed of Matt in the same manner, the brunet laughing the whole way.

“Are you sure you don’t wanna try any more frosting?” Hunk asked, shoving the carafe in Keith’s direction.

“Good night, Hunk,” Keith said as politely as he could. “Thank you so much for offering to make the cake.”

“I would’ve made the whole feast if I had the resources to cook for hundreds of people on my own—,” Hunk began, looking genuinely let down at losing the chance. Keith paled.

“Please don’t remind me how big this thing is going to be,” he grumbled, shooing Hunk out as well. He turned to Pidge. “You going out, too?”

“Nah,” Pidge shrugged. “I have to stay here to confuse any suitors who might want to kidnap you.”
“Excuse me?” Keith cocked his head.

“Old wedding tradition – Matt needs to brush up on his sword fighting if he’s gonna fight anyone in Shiro’s stead,” Pidge explained as she and Keith waved goodbye to their friends.

Keith scowled, “I can swordfight anyone myself.”

“I know,” Pidge grinned, turning towards the interior of the hotel suite. She opened one of the many antique-looking armoires that occupied the room and dragged out her duffle bag, extracting her pajamas.

She and Keith spent the next several moments in companionable silence as they prepared for bed, finally settling down on the massive, circular mattress in the center of the room. Swathes of mulberry fabric were draped over and around the bed, silky against the friends’ cheeks as they cuddled up close together.

“You miss Shiro?” Pidge asked as Keith grabbed one of the several pillows propping it up and hugged it to his side.

“Is it that obvious?” Keith produced an embarrassed chuckle before burying his mouth in the pillow. “Is it clingly of me?” he added with a little wince. Pidge shook her head.

“We’re in a high-stress environment wherein you two have been recently separated multiple times under deadly conditions for the duration of your relationship. And one time Shiro literally died,” she said. “I think it’s natural for you to want to sleep next to him. Besides –.”

Pidge playfully cast a leg around Keith’s, “Try as I might, I just can’t give the good D like he can.”

Keith burst into laughter, “Oh my God, get off of me ya weird!”

Sticking the tip of her tongue between her teeth, Pidge giggled impishly before hugging Keith close, resting her head on his chest.

“I can’t believe you’re doing the full marriage,” she hummed.

“Neither can I,” Keith returned with a hoarse laugh, “And what I really can’t believe is that six months ago I was eating beans out of a can in a shack I was squatting in and now I’m in charge of a massive empire spanning across almost all of known space.”

“Well goddamn, when you put it like that,” Pidge snorted.

Keith released a nervous laugh followed by a sigh, resting his chin on the top of Pidge’s head in order to pull her closer.

“Are you scared?” she whispered.

“Terrified,” responded Keith in a voice just as small. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I haven’t even taken a polyisci or a law class in my life.”

“The fact that you’re so concerned is a good sign,” Pidge told him, lying a comforting hand on his chest. “Besides, I don’t think Sendak will mind holding onto the reigns while you get everything figured out.”

“I never thought I’d hear you singing Sendak’s praises,” Keith grinned.
“Don’t push it,” Pidge scowled.

Keith laughed softly, settling down into the downy covers of the bed, “Pidge?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” Keith said gently. “I know I was kind of a dick to you when we first met – about you wanting to go after your family. Just know that I would’ve done the same for Shiro in a heartbeat.”

Even in the darkness, he could tell Pidge was smiling, “I know. Buuuut, I wasn’t exactly a basket of peaches to you, either,” she shrugged.

“Thank you,” Keith repeated, already feeling his eyes bead up with tears. “For everything you’ve done for me – even though we were just barely friends, you supported me through all the changes I’ve went through and you’ve been there for me even after that.

“The only person in my life for so long was Shiro and now I have friends and a family and… and you were the catalyst for that – for helping me open up. Thank you, Pidge. I wouldn’t have anyone else by my side as my maid of honor.”

Pidge snuffed, hiding her teary face in Keith’s chest, “You’re welcome you big dumb and… thank you for being my friend. Growing up I was kind of short on friends – being Miss Know-It-All and stuff – and during the time when I didn’t know where Dad and Matt were… you were really there for me, too. You kind of have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

“Love you, Pidge,” Keith said, pressing a kiss into her hair.

Pidge snuffled again, kissing his cheek, “I love you, too Keith.”

“So this is kind of the weirdest bachelor party ever?” Lance said, strutting down the streets of the Second Ring.

“I… don’t mean to be culturally insensitive,” Hunk chimed in gently. “But is this… usually the kind of thing done before a wedding?”

“Seems a little morbid if you ask me…” Lance added in a mumble.

“I agree it’s unconventional,” said Asaara. “But it’s something that needs to be done.”

“Thank you, Shiro,” added Matt. “Like Lance said, it may weird for humans, culturally, but I know she’ll appreciate it all the same.”

Shiro smiled at his friend, shifting the parcel in his hands. It had just been delivered to him by Asaara when his friends had burst into his hotel room with handles of alcohol, cheering for a stag party.

“Keith said ‘no’, ” Lance had explained.

Shiro had then asked Matt to show him to the Second Ring apartment where he was making his home with Sylvux and Nanan. Politely, Matt had invited the assembled over for talk and snacks.

As they approached the apartment door, Shiro could hardly quell his shaking hands. He
knew Nanan would never forgive him and – even if they were on much better terms than before – he was afraid of her rejecting the gift altogether.

Matt reached for his key card, only for the door to be cracked open by Sylvux, around whose waist Nanan’s arms were slung. She was smiling, looking flushed and out of breath.

“Asaara!” she cried in surprise, trotting up to the Mother for a hug. Asaara leaned down to her height, tucking Nanan into her shoulder and squeezing her tightly.

“Hi kit,” Asaara said softly, pressing a kiss to one of Nanan’s ears. The girl giggled as she released, half-hiding behind Asaara’s legs to direct a timid wave towards Lance, Hunk, and Shiro.

“Please,” Sylvux smiled, opening the door and gesturing inside. “Come right in, I’ll set out some snacks.”

‘Snacks’ as it turned out was nothing less than an entire meal. Hearty sandwiches and bowls of soup overflowed the counter within minutes, followed by pints of sweet-tasting guamnop spirits and fat slices of cheese and fruit.

The group struck up pleasant conversation while Nanan ran to and from her room, showing off the multitude of outfits that she and Matt had purchased and put together, topped off by the satin and tulle pink dress she would be wearing to the wedding. After this, she began to tire and Matt glanced at Shiro purposefully.

“Nanan,” the paladin said, taking up the parcel he’d set aside. He gestured her over to the living room so that they could speak privately. The kit blinked in confusion, following him over to the couch. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring you more, but—.”

He paused, extracting the little rose gold necklace from the package. On the end dangled what appeared to be a lachrymatory twinkling with aureate fluid.

“Quintessence?” the kit frowned, taking the little bottle offered to her.

“Asaara told me that the Druids keep samples of Quintessence from everyone in the military,” Shiro began to explain, keeping his tone as even and gentle as he could. “And since your father and his bones were already cremated—.”

“This is what’s left,” Nanan nodded, cupping the reliquary in her hands and pressing it close to her heart. “Daddy…” she whispered, eyes overflowing with tears.

To Shiro’s surprise, Nanan then leaned up against him and hesitantly he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Nanan opened the cup of her hands, staring down at the lachrymatory in silence before taking a little breath of air and beginning to sing. At first, Shiro thought it was a prayer, but quickly recognized to lyrics to be modern Galra as the song rang through the living room:

“Oh starlight, sweet starshine, my land and my sea. Wherever you go, well that’s where I’ll be. Just close your sweet eyes and I’ll take up your hand and forever I’ll hold you until the end.”

‘It’s a lullaby,’ Shiro realized, feeling his eyes overflowing with tears. Nanan concluded her song, pressing her lips to the little lachrymatory before draping the chain around her neck. She turned towards Shiro, pulling him into a full embrace.

“He’ll have a hero’s funeral,” Shiro promised, stroking little circles into her back. “So no one will ever forget the sacrifice that he made.”
“Thank you,” said Nanan, cuffing away her tears and pulling away from Shiro. She affixed the pendulum of the necklace, where it hung next to Asaara’s stone. “I… really dunno what to say. I’m just… so happy to have a part of him with me.”

“I’m happy that you have that now, too,” said Shiro, setting a gentle hand on her head. “If you ever need anything – anything from me or from the emperor, don’t hesitate to let us know, okay?”

“Okay,” she said softly with an earnest nod.

“Hey.”

Both Shiro and Nanan turned towards the archway that separated the living and dining rooms. Matt rested against the frame, wearing a gentle expression. Nanan smiled, leaping off of the couch to show him the necklace.

“I’m glad you like it,” the brunet smiled. “Are you okay to get ready for bed or do you need awhile?”

“I’ll go do it now,” she nodded in affirmation before hesitating. “Uhm…”

“What’s up babycakes?” Matt asked, tweaking one of her ears playfully. Nanan giggled.

“Is it okay if I call Zambrina and Rin to say hi?” she requested shyly.

“I’ll call Myzalta and see if they’re asleep yet,” Matt smiled, jerking his chin over one shoulder. “Come on, kiddo.”

“Wait!” Nanan cried, doubling back from the doorway to Shiro’s side. She beckoned him down to her height and Shiro leant an ear, expecting a secret but instead getting a little lick on the cheek.

“Thank you, Vrepmyza.”

And Shiro, in that moment, truly felt like himself.
Maray stood with one arm crossed loosely over their chest, the opposing hand cradling a mostly-empty martini. “And then he said to me,” they went on, “that I should save all the frilly dresses for ou–...” they trailed off, looking to their companion uncertainly. Sendak cocked a brow. “For uhm,” Maray stammered, turning back to the conversation. “For my wedding,” they finished in a rush, shot gunning the remainder of their martini.

Myzalta let out an amused roar of laughter, a knowing look settling over their fanged grin. Sendak ducked his head, ears flattening somewhat in embarrassment as he carefully plucked the now-empty glass out of Maray’s hands.

“Getting flustered now, are we, cousin?” Myzalta teased, elbowing Sendak.

“No,” Sendak replied flatly, no venom in his tone.

“I think he’s a little flustered,” Tora cut in, herself grinning. “But maybe only a little.”

“Whose side are you on?” Sendak frowned, nose wrinkling indignantly.

“My own, usually,” his daughter shot back.

“That’s just what it’s like to be an udi, isn’t it?” Myzalta gave a dramatic sigh, leveling their cousin a look. “Not that I or any of the family knew you even were one until now.”

“It never came up…” Sendak mumbled, uncharacteristically cowed in front of his family.

“Honestly, Sen, you should at least say hello every once and a while,” Maray scolded lightly, slipping their hand around his bicep. “Clearly they’re eager to return the gesture.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” Sendak smirked back. Maray swatted him.

“Really now,” Myzalta continued, growing sincere. “We’d all really love to see you around, you know. It’s been… well it’s been a right while, hasn’t it? And I know things were rough – no one faults you for keeping your distance. We’ve just been… well, we’ve been trying to give you your space, give you some time to heal. But we just want to assure you that you aren’t alone. We just didn’t know how to reach out to you without overstepping any boundaries or putting you in a place of discomfort. I just want to extend to you on behalf of the family that you’re missed but also supported and we’d all be glad and grateful to see you again whenever you have the time or feel comfortable.”

“Well I think you speak a lot more eloquently than most of them would have put it,” Sendak noted, eyes crinkling with a melancholic sort of amusement. “But to tell the truth,” he hesitated, glancing first to Tora and then to Maray, who cocked their ears curiously. “I…” Sendak hedged, gathering a breath. “I think I’d like to see everyone again. I think… I think I’m ready for that now. And…” he paused, the color of his cheeks belying how abashed he felt, “And I also think that now would be a fitting time, as I’d like to introduce them to Maray.”
“Well now!” Myzalta brightened. “You two really are like that, huh? I thought you’d just only agreed to date the other day but here we are already talking so serious.”

“Yeah, well, when dad’s in love he’s really in love, you know,” Tora quipped.

“I’m just more than old enough to know what I want and what I’m looking for,” Sendak returned with an aggrieved sigh.

“So then you think you’ve found it, huh?” Myzalta urged.

“Perhaps,” Sendak allowed cryptically. Maray let out a little squeak of surprise.

“Well good,” Myzalta nodded firmly. “You two seem really good for one another – someone’s got to keep you in line, anyway. Or at least make sure you’re feeding yourself. Back when you were a kit I swear you could just live on jerky and nothing else.”

“I –!”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Maray cut in eagerly. “I’m so glad to see my efforts here are valued.”

“Your efforts are more than valued,” Myzalta returned warmly. “You’re a lovely person, you know! And Imperial Sentinel to boot? It’s incredible!”

“Well I…” Maray stammered, now the one to be caught off guard.

“It’s not flattery, either,” Sendak asserted, seemingly recovered. “What my cousin says is true. I feel so, at least.”

“We all know that,” Tora smirked. “But dad’s right. We’d be happy to have you as family. Very proud.”

“Tora that’s –!” Sendak cut across with embarrassment.

“What? It’s true,” his daughter rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s not pretend like you two aren’t going to end up married. You practically are already.”

“Hmn, which makes me think,” Myzalta nodded seriously. “Maray, do you have any family recipes, by chance? Particularly soups?”

“Myzalta!” Sendak all but yelped.

“Soups?” Maray blinked back.

“Oh yeah!” Tora brightened. “Traditional Axana wedding sou–.”

“I will know no peace, will I?” Sendak interjected forcibly, his cousin and daughter immediately going into fits of laughter.

“I hope you don’t mind it?” Maray spoke up coyly, pressing slightly closer to their ilbe’s side.

“I…” Sendak deflated, eyes going soft. “No, I suppose I don’t.”

“Well if that’s the case then I’d better start telling you about how this one was as a kit,” Myzalta chuckled. “Because do I have some stories on him! I actually helped to raise him, you know? Back when he was school age one of the other kits dared him to –.”
“No, no, no, we are not getting into this,” Sendak promptly intervened. “No,” he pressed again as his cousin made to open his mouth. “The ceremony should be starting any minute now, anyway.”

“Why aren’t you with the uh, the wedding party?” Myzalta caved, peering through the throng of people as the crowd slowly began to take their places around the plaza.

“Because I’m not a part of Team Voltron.”

“Neither is Sylv’s ilbe though, right?” Myzalta hummed.

“You mean Matt?” Tora filled in. “I mean he practically is. But I figure they just wanted to keep it to just the humans. Well, excepting for Lo, that is. Besides, if dad was up there with all of them on the stage then he couldn’t very well take Maray as his date, could he? Pretty sure he turned down the offer just for that reason.”

“I…” Sendak exhaled audibly, not bothering to come up with a reason to defend himself. Maray flushed, cheek nearly brushing Sendak’s bicep in the imitation of a pleased nuzzle. “Honestly, though,” Sendak insisted. “The ceremony should be starting really soon.”

“I wonder how they’re doing,” Maray pondered, peering past the attendees to the building in which the wedding party was supposed to be assembled. “Hopefully they’re not too nervous.”

“Do I look like an ass?” Lance fretted, standing before a tall mirror from within the venue. “I think I look like an ass. And I’m gonna be on TV.”

“Relax,” Shiro laughed, nudging his friend lightly. “You look fine. And besides, you’re not even the one getting married.”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Lance sighed, straightening his tunic for the hundredth time that hour. “Jeez, here I am worrying about me – how are you doing? Nervous?”

“Incredibly,” Shiro admitted, smile strained. “I, wow. This is a lot. I mean, don’t get me wrong,” he added, holding up his hands, “I’m more than excited to marry Keith. Honored. But… all these people? And cameras? I just never imagined my wedding would look like this.”

“Yeah, well this is just the beginning of it,” Matt chuckled from his place lounged on a sofa. “But don’t worry, I don’t think Keith is looking forward to all the attention, either. And, you know, you’ve got a bunch of support so it won’t be so bad.”


“Don’t mention it,” Matt shrugged, rolling onto his side leisurely. “But really, man, we’re all here for you – and not just for the wedding, either. We’re with you guys for the long haul.”

“And I can’t express how much I deeply I appreciate it,” Shiro returned earnestly, expression softening to one of genuine gratitude. “Keith and I both. None of this would have been possible without you guys,” he went on, turning to his groomsmen. “And without so many others that aren’t here, too, alive and dead. We’ve all accomplished so much in the past few months: it’s hard to even process where we are now. We’ve carved out a future that few thought was possible and I couldn’t be more proud or more honored to have you guys with me here today.”

“Man, you’re gonna make me cry,” Hunk spoke up, cuffing at his eyes with a rueful smile.

“That’s our leader,” Lance chimed in. “Speaking of – when all this is said and done, do you
think you’re still gonna get up to paladin duties? Or Keith, for that matter? I mean… you guys will be kinda busy, right?”

“I don’t know,” Shiro thoughtfully confessed. “For as much as I’ve talked to Sendak and Maray I really don’t think I’ll really have an appreciation for all the responsibilities I’m about to take on until I’m there, you know? I hope to continue on as your black paladin,” he pressed, turning to Lance and resting a hand on his shoulder, “But if not then I trust you guys will be in good hands.”


“We’ll see where things take us,” Shiro concluded vaguely. “Keith and I have a lot to learn and get used to and that’s definitely going to affect how our team operates. That said, I guess you guys are going to have a lot to adjust to, too. I mean, seeing as you’re all getting knighted,” he ended playfully.

“I still can’t believe that,” Hunk shook his head. “I mean, it’s one thing to be a paladin and all but to actually be knighted? Like with a title? It’s so much!”

“Imagine how I feel,” Shiro chuckled, nerves returning.

“Whatever do you mean,” Matt began with a devious smile, “Grand Champion and Most Beloved and Revered Ilbe of The Most Illustrious and Wise Imperial Majesty Emperor Lotor of the Galra Empire, Prince Consort Shirogane of New Mexico?”

“Ugh,” Shiro responded emphatically.

“ Didn’t Keith have that all changed?” Hunk cocked his head.

“Yeah, he did,” Shiro confirmed. “Thankfully. He felt it was too reminiscent of the old regime, so he decided to have the full titles changed. They’re a lot simpler now, and more modest to boot, I think. Turns out you can make a lot of things happen when you’re the emperor.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Lance agreed. “Though I don’t think it was his idea to have the calendar changed.”

“No, that was the Vesh’s doing,” Matt spoke up. “It was actually the idea of our previous leader, Vektor. See – unsurprisingly – Zarkon made everything about him. Kind of like Caesar, come to think of it. So when he rose to power he restarted the calendar with the year 1 ZM, standing for ‘Zahtmog’ – basically, Imperial Time. Everything before that was renamed to being DZ or ‘d’Zahtmog’.”

“So ‘not Imperial Time’,;” Lance translated roughly. “Guess that makes sense. And now?”

“Well, I guess it’s not that creative,” Matt conceded. “But it’s Veshmog now. I mean, obviously it honors the Vesh but moreover it’s supposed to connote a shifting of values from being focused on imperialism to being focused on the people. Keith liked it immediately when Sylv and I brought it up.”

“It’s nice,” Hunk decided. “I think it really reflects how things are now. Everything really is different, huh?”

“Yeah,” Shiro hummed. “Everything from here on out is uncertain but you know, I think it’s going to be alright. Difficult, sure. But I think we can handle it.”

“You’re gonna make a great prince consort,” Matt encouraged, eliciting a blush from his best
friend at once. “And I’m not just saying that.”

“Thanks, Matt,” Shiro intoned, rousing Matt from the couch to ensconce him in a hug. “Seriously, you guys are great. You’ve all been super supportive today especially but if you keep it up I think I might cry.”

“We can’t have that!” Lance teased him. “I mean it’s not like you’re going to cry during your vows or anything.”

“Lance I am going to cry,” Shiro insisted, missing his friend’s tone entirely. “Honestly I don’t know how I’m going to keep it together from the moment I see Keith – I’m pretty much guaranteed to embarrass myself on galaxy-wide broadcast.”

“Aw, don’t worry, man,” Hunk shook his head. “I cry all the time – it’s not a big deal. Besides, I think it’s really sweet! I bet the empire will think so, too. I mean, pretty much everyone loves your love. It’s kinda a hot topic around here.”

“And on that note,” Matt perked up, craning around the others to glance at the clock on the opposing wall. “Looks like it’s about show time. You ready?” he grinned, turning to Shiro.

“Nervous,” Shiro prefaced with a smile of his own, “But I can’t wait to formally call Keith my spouse. I’ve been looking forward to this moment for a while now.”

“Well you look great,” Matt assured him, brushing imaginary dirt from one of Shiro’s armored pauldrons. Then, with a laugh, “Keith’ll be jealous that you got to wear your paladin armor to your wedding. The cape is a nice touch, though,” he added, plucking at the swath of black fabric affixed to one of Shiro’s shoulders.

“Yeah, he pouted a bit over that one,” Shiro confessed. “Still wouldn’t tell me what he’s wearing, though.”

“I think you’ll like it,” Matt answered mysteriously before falling in step behind his best friend. Shiro shot him one last anxious smile before nodding to the guards stationed before the large double doors. At his signal the guards advanced, the heavy oak giving way to a bright wash of light and the vaulting cheers of the crowd.

“Wow,” Shiro softly gasped, barely processing as his name and title were read before the assembled. His face reflected back at him from everywhere, screens showing the recordings of the drones bobbing excitedly before him but – despite his prior words – Shiro couldn’t be bothered to mind them, too taken in by the beauty around him.

He had seen the plaza done up in decadence before, not so very long ago during Keith’s coronation. Just as then there had been silken banners and elegant wreaths, a long carpeted runner bridging the path to the stage across the plaza. There had probably been as many people too, all done to the nines, eagerness apparent on their faces. But there was something remarkably different between that time and the scene spread out before him: the tension and fear had disappeared, the austere sterility of the venue replaced instead with life, with joy.

Shiro bit his lip around a quiet laugh. ‘This is really happening,’ he processed, warmth spreading through his chest in a giddy rush. ‘I’m really getting married. Things are finally, finally alright. Keith and I… we actually get to have this.’

Music struck up from somewhere to his right, the crowd reaching a crescendo and Shiro chuckled, their energy contagious. Steadying himself with a breath he stepped out onto the aisle,
waving to the people – his people – as he progressed to the stage. It was hard not to rush the procession, his steps only measured by the drone before him who helped to keep his pace. Mounting the final steps he found his place on the platform before a flowered arbor, the frilled pink blossoms dangling about his shoulders.

“You look pretty good, Prince Consort,” whispered a woman masked in rose gold as his groomsmen filled in behind him.


“If you insist,” the other replied, her amusement evident.

“Well thanks for officiating,” Shiro offered instead. “I know what we chose for our ceremony is a little unconventional by your standards.”

“Unconventional is good,” Asaara countered. “Change is good. And you two are actuating that. Speaking of…” she trailed off, nodding subtly towards the doors that Shiro had only recently vacated.

Shiro turned to face them, his breath catching in his throat as the crowd fell into reverent silence. Keith stood at the threshold, standing tall with shoulders straight, opaque white robes draping from the high beaded collar at his neck. A soft smile played over his lips, caught by the many projected screens of the plaza but despite them Shiro could see the way Keith seemed to brighten as their eyes found one another across the expanse.

‘I never want to look away,’ he thought at once, tears threatening to prick at the corners of his eyes. ‘I never want to forget this moment.’

The orchestra struck up another song, Thace appearing to Keith’s side and offering his arm. Keith turned to beam at his father, accepting it as together they stepped out onto the aisle, the crowd erupting into cheers once more. Pidge followed at a close clip behind them, any pretense of annoyance completely gone, her happiness for her best friend on proud display.

It took entirely too long for Keith to reach the stage, Shiro’s heart rocketing against his chest as finally his fiancé stood opposite him, cheeks flushed and Altean markings bright despite the royal mien he had managed to adopt.

‘Would you even believe me just two years ago if I told you it would end up like this?’ Shiro couldn’t help but wonder. ‘That you and I would be in this place? That you would have become this incredible person?’

It was so easy to picture the Keith of his past, the isolated and angry loner he had first met back in their days at the Garrison. The guarded hunch of Keith’s shoulders, the way his brows furrowed slightly as he calculated for any hidden agenda in the words of others, always on the defensive for new ways people may try to hurt him. Even later on as a newly named paladin, after they had been reunited after over a year apart, Keith had carried the unique and unequivocal burden of being alone. Shiro’s heart clenched at the memory.

‘You’ve come so far, love,’ he melted. ‘I’m so proud of the person you’ve become.’

“So,” Keith prodded under his breath, nodding down the length of his body. “What do you think? Worth keeping a secret over?”

“It’s gorgeous,” Shiro intoned in reply. “You’re gorgeous.”
“Jeez,” Keith laughed, eyes flicking away in an obvious tell that he was holding back the urge to tear up. Then, returning Shiro’s gaze with a shy one of his own, “Do you recognize it?”

“Yeah,” Shiro affirmed, fingers finding Keith’s and interlocking with them fondly. “This is what you wore that day in the Coliseum. When I… died. When you lost your leg.”

“I would have given anything, you know,” Keith returned earnestly. “Even if it was my life. Anything would have been worth it. You will always be worth that to me.”

“You can’t tell me stuff like that, Keith,” Shiro gently teased. “You’re going to make me cry, you know? And besides, neither of us can go anywhere for a while – we need to just enjoy being married first.”

“Yeah,” Keith softened. “That sounds more than good to me.”

“Then if you two are done being cute?” Asaara cut in, making both men share an embarrassed laugh. The Mother stepped between them, gesturing a drone closer so her voice would be amplified over the expanse of the crowd.

“To the people:” she began, “both those assembled here and those the galaxy over. We come together in spirit and in harmony today to celebrate the beginning of a new era and of the union of a not-so-new love.” Across from her Shiro could see Keith give a small laugh of admission.

“Today we crown Our Prince,” Asaara continued. “Whose coronation as emperor has been until this moment postponed due to the many dangers and struggles our empire has faced since the passing of the old regime. As such,” she paused, waiting for the vocal support of the crowd to die down once more. “As such,” she repeated, “Today marks the official beginning of our more peaceful world.” Again the crowd went wild, taking several minutes to settle. Asaara gave a little shrug, shaking her head as she waited.

“As you likely all know,” she asserted, regaining the attention of the assembled. “A coronation requires the blessings of all. So I pose to you, the people of Gal and to those sovereign citizens electing to remain within our new empire, both those of aristocratic means and those of very little – do you accept Lotor as your sworn protector? As the ambassador of your needs and the guardian of your posterity? Do you accept Lotor as your new emperor?”

“We do!” came the overwhelming chorus of the crowd. Asaara nodded, turning slightly to face Keith instead.

“And do you, Lotor, accept the blessings of the people? Will you promise to be their protector, ambassador, and guardian through any joy or hardship the empire may face?”

“I will,” came Keith’s confident reply.

“And now to the others, assembled in unity and equity among the everyman,” Asaara went on. “To the cabinet, the elected of the people. And to the military, the Imperial Army sworn to protect them. Do you accept Lotor as your head of state? As the executor of your counsel and of the rules and mandates you hereby set out forthwith? As the voice of action and reason in times of both war and of peace? Do you accept Lotor as your emperor?”

“We do,” came the certain rumble from throughout the crowd.

“And so do you, Lotor, accept the blessings of those elected by the people and those sworn to serve them? Will you promise to be their head of state, their executor, and their voice?”
“I will,” Keith repeated.

“And now to you, our seers of the stars and healers of the sick, the Druids. Do you accept Lotor not as your guiding light as in centuries gone by but as your honorable ward? Will you guide him and offer him counsel? Will you work with him to assure what is best for all under the separate spheres of Druidry and State? Do you accept Lotor as your emperor?”

“We do,” the Druids replied, their forms identifiable by the soft purple of their robes.

“Then I, as Mother of Constellations so by give my blessing as well,” Asaara proclaimed. “Will you then, Lotor, accept the blessings offered to you by myself and by my followers, the Druids? Will you promise to accept their auspice and to forfeit any inklings of ego for the betterment of the people? Will you recognize the unique and special sovereignty of the Druids under my care and promise never to infringe upon the separate but crucial spheres of our order?”

“I will,” Keith confirmed, the earnestness creeping back into his expression as he failed to repress the words, “And I so swear to never infringe upon the sovereignty or desires for sovereignty of any peoples, both within our empire and to those beyond it.”

The crowd erupted into clamorous cheers, the slender marks beneath Keith’s eyes flashing with surprised embarrassment. His gaze slid past the others to find Shiro’s once more, his fiancé nodding his support.

‘And to think you still are so shocked that your people… our people,’ Shiro mentally corrected himself, ‘are so endeared to you. You may not always come across as the typical ruler but that’s what makes you so appreciated. You speak from your heart, and that’s what’s won you theirs. It’s certainly won mine.’

Asaara was talking again, lifting a delicate filigree crown from a box offered to her by another Druid. “And so, with the blessings of the empire,” she announced, lofting the silver circlet above Keith’s bowed head. “We do so name you our ruler, Emperor Lotor of the Galra Empire.” The crown nestled neatly between Keith’s ears and he rose, facing the ecstasy of his people.

“Our Emperor!” came the vaulted cries. Keith beamed, too happy to check his expression in place of a more regal one.

“And now,” Asaara prompted, “we shall begin the ceremony I presume you all have most been waiting for – the marriage of our new emperor to his betrothed, our own beloved Vrepmyza.” She waited once more for the attention of the masses before finishing her announcements. “Now, as our empire has become a marriage of cultures and traditions so too shall this ceremony be. Today we will see a blending of rites of Galra, Altean, and human origin to honor the lineages of our emperor and his prince consort-to-be. Please offer them your silence and respect as you share in their joy on this most fortuitous day,” she concluded, stepping back at last so that Keith and Shiro could properly face one another.

Shiro advanced, heart thrumming so loudly he swore Keith and the rest of the empire could hear it, his mind awash and drunk with happiness. Taking Keith’s hands in his own they slowly knelt in tandem, finding the pillows that had been arranged for them below their knees. They settled before one another, hands relaxing intimately across their laps. And in that moment the rest of the world seemed to melt away, the sole being in Shiro’s existence being Keith and Keith alone.

‘No matter what happens from here on out we will always have this,’ Shiro thought, eyes already beginning to mist despite himself. ‘We will always have this moment, this memory between us, and these vows. Now please just let me remember all the words.’
Keith began to lead, lips curled in a way to suggest he was on to Shiro’s apprehensions and Shiro bowed his head slightly in confirmation, relaxing as Keith went on to recite a near copy of the vows they had watched played out before them between Serro and Thace saved in secret aboard the Blue Lion. They had practiced them a thousand times over, determined to get the words right, the importance of the exchange meaning so much more to them than simple tradition.

“Shiro,” Keith began, squeezing their fingers together gently. “Today I come together with you before the Mother and the stars to profess to you my love.”

“As I come together with you before the Mother and the stars to profess my love,” Shiro returned. He caught sight of Thace somewhere over Keith’s shoulder, his eyes wide in touched recognition, a hand pressed over his heart.

“I come together with you to share our friendship, our love, and our years together,” Keith went on, and Shiro could see that he, too, was beginning to tear up.

Shiro gave a sentimental laugh, echoing back the line: “As I come together with you to share our friendship, our love, and our years together.”

“Accept me with your heart, and I shall remain forever by your side.”

“I shall accept you with my heart, and I shall remain forever by your side,” Shiro promised warmly. “Will you accept me with yours?”

“I will accept your heart into mine,” Keith recited, beginning the next section of their vows. “Today we appear before the Gods of Altea to share with them and our friends – and our people –, the good tidings of our binding. I, Lotor – Keith – Emperor of the Galra Empire and the Red Paladin of Voltron and the Red Lion grant you my heart, my love, and my protection.”

“As I, Takashi Shirogane, Vrepmyza and the Black Paladin of Voltron and the Black Lion grant you mine,” Shiro swore. “Please accept my vow to you,” he went on, pulse thrumming with nerves.

‘Now’s the part he hasn’t heard,’ he prepared himself. Keith sat before him at curious attention, offering a small nod of his head as an encouraging prod.

“Lotor,” Shiro began, feeling his mouth go dry. “Keith,” he chose instead. “You are, have been, and always will remain my closest friend and dearest confidant. You have been there for me throughout my greatest joys and my hardest, most ugly hardships. You have supported me and sheltered me even when I did not feel that I deserved it. You have accepted me as I am and have allowed me to do the same for myself. You have given me more love than I could possibly know what to do with, more support than anyone I have ever known, and more joy than I can even convey. I swear to you here on this day that no matter the space between us, no matter the struggles we face, I will always love you, respect you, and honor you, no matter what.”

Keith released a laugh, soft and sentimental, tears streaming over the crests of his flushed cheeks, a look of pure, unadulterated love radiating from him. “No matter what,” he simply replied, tugging Shiro forward by their conjoined hands and capturing him in a kiss. Shiro laughed between their lips, returning the kiss, pulling apart only to rest his forehead against Keith’s own, staring into one another’s eyes as the world around them exploded into joyous noise.

“I love you, Keith,” he intoned, just barely audible between the two of them.

“I love you, too, Shiro,” Keith returned. “De luste da.”
“De luste da,” Shiro whispered, the world melting away as their lips met once more.

Chapter End Notes

And I cried in the car when Ches read me this part.

Sorry for the late post this week! And thank you all for your kind comments! <3

~Moosey
“Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you…”

Keith squeezed Shiro’s hand.

“Emperor Lotor and Prince Consort Shirogane!”

The limousine’s door popped open and Keith stepped out onto the pavement, twisting to keep his hold on Shiro’s hand whilst he waved to the crowds with his other. Turning fully, he helped Shiro out of the limo, the couple standing in front of the car for a moment, hands joined, to smile at the broadcast drones. Keith vaguely wanted to smack one out of the sky – he had no interest in further broadcasting his personal life to the masses.

Apparently sensing his husband’s stiffness, Shiro gently tightened his grip around Keith’s waist, bending to whisper “you’re doing amazing” to him before planting a chaste kiss on his cheek. Immediately Keith felt his tension unfurl – to hell with the paparazzi. Today was their day.

The drone and cheers of the crowd followed them as far as the security entrance of the memorial park, where Maray was already eagerly waiting, tablet in hand.

“The ceremony and wedding photos all turned out so gorgeous!” they gushed and ushered the couple along. “And that is not me fishing for compliments.”

“We couldn’t have done it without you, Maray,” Shiro smiled, the planner beaming in return. “Everything has been so amazing – it’s gone off without a hitch.”

“Impressive what can be accomplished with a few extra ven,” Maray gloated playfully. “Tyrannical reign aside, I must say I’m happy to be rid of Zarkon if only for having employers more mindful of time restrictions,” they tittered.

The trio stepped up to the high lattice gate that had been erected around the majority of the memorial park and Maray situated them near the entrance while they paged the emcee.

“Alright,” they beamed, urging them through the entrance and down the trellised hall that led onto the dancefloor. As soon as they stepped out onto the platform, Keith felt the tension seep out of his body. Standing around them in a massive circle were all their allies, family, and friends: a few members of the Vesh, Team Voltron, the Druids, and even parts of Merla’s coalition.

Keith smiled, ducking his head into Shiro’s shoulder, grinning when Pidge – at the forefront of the crowd – flashed him a thumbs up.

“Takashi,” Keith whispered, turning to Shiro and linking his hands around his neck. Shiro returned the gentle look, resting his hands on Keith’s waist.

“Surprise,” Keith whispered and had a split second to enjoy the look of confusion on Shiro’s face before the music started, the gentle pulse of electronic beats.
Shock and then happiness blossomed over Shiro’s expression, finally cumulating in a perplexed smile as the lyrics began, “How…?”

“Do you really doubt Pidge’s ability that much?” Keith looked away for the briefest moment to share a grin with his best friend.

“I don’t even wanna know how she managed to do it,” Shiro grinned, pressing their foreheads together as they began to dance. “Sing for me?”

Blushing, Keith complied and began to sing under his breath, so gently only Shiro could hear. He slid his hands down to cradle his husband’s face as he sang:

“I’ll be your respirator, I’ll be your pressure suit…”

It felt so long ago, those days in Shiro’s dorm where they first listened to the song and fell in love – slowly and sweetly like molasses falling from a cold spoon. So long since they’d lain in the grass beneath the belly of a massive Lion with Keith’s voice singing that song that had eased Shiro to sleep.

Leaving Earth, the discovery of Voltron, being stranded on Hydrus, the combining of the Black and Red Lions, discovering his heritage and the role he played in the Galra Empire – so much had changed in less than a year. And to top it all off, Keith and Shiro were finally together once more and not only were they a couple, but a married one at that.

Above them, the projected sky of City Station showed a shower of comets streaking across the sky, connecting constellations.

The song faded out and was replaced with a slow, sweet rendition of a waltz.

“Is this an appropriate time for me to step in?”

Keith glanced away from Shiro, smiling when he saw who had tentatively interrupted.

“Of course Dad,” Shiro smiled, kissing Keith’s hand briefly before handing it off to Thace. Keith purred, nuzzling his father’s chin, overjoyed to hear Thace’s deep purr in response.

The two stepped in to the proper dancing position and Thace began to twirl Keith across the dance floor.

“I’m so happy I finally found you,” Thace said softly, voice hardly audible over the music. Keith purred again, already feeling his eyes well up with tears.

“I’m… Dad, I don’t know how to say how happy I am that you did,” Keith smiled, vision misting over. Thace wiped a tear from his son’s cheek. “To know that I have a father – and had a mother – who loved me and wanted me.”

“I will always want you, son,” Thace smiled, bringing his arm around Keith and hugging him close. They pulled away from each other, Keith’s father blinking in mild surprise as he glanced over Keith’s shoulder. “Sendak.”

Keith turned to see the addressed man standing nearby, obviously waiting to cut in. Keith kissed his father’s cheek, squeezing his hand before turning to Sendak and resuming the dance.

“It would typically be customary fare for everyone who dances with you right now to give you money for your new household,” Sendak said in lieu of a greeting.
“I’m pretty sure we’re good on that front,” Keith said, wincing at the grandiose display of wealth fanned out around them. He deeply hoped that Maray hadn’t *purchased* the crystalline centerpieces at each of the tables. Sendak laughed.

“Maray’s… tastes will certainly take some getting used to for all of us, I think,” he admitted. His ears drooped. “Living in such a fancy townhouse is difficult enough.”

Keith laughed, “You’re being pretty flippant tonight.”

“I am also tipsy,” Sendak smiled. Keith laughed harder.

“Well, I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself –.”

“A-hem.”

Both parties turned to where Pidge stood nearby, corsage-decked hand held out to Keith.

“Go bother your ex,” she told Sendak, shooing him away with flapping hands as she took the lead with Keith. “Or at least get your datemate a drink of two, I think they’re about to have an aneurism with how much they’re micro-managing.”

“Ah,” Sendak nodded studiously, shuffling off towards his ilbe. He stopped, glanced over his shoulder, and bid Keith congratulations once more.

“He’s off his shit,” Pidge grinned.

“It’s the first time in a while he’s really gotten to relax,” Keith explained. “And he isn’t really drunk.”

“Ah,” Pidge nodded in understanding. “I guess I’d be drinking, too if I was at my ex’s wedding.”

“They’re on good terms!” Keith insisted. Pidge snickered impishly, spinning Keith off to Hunk and Lance, who each took one of his hands and began to sway to the music.

“Thank you for –,” Hunk sniffed loudly; Keith could see his eyes were bright pink with tears. “Inviting me to such a – a beautiful – *I am so happy for you guys!*” he bawled, huge tears plopping down his cheeks.

Keith laughed, pulling Hunk into a one-armed hug. Lance draped Keith’s other arm over his shoulders.

“Thanks you guys,” Keith smiled at them in turn, expression growing serious when he looked at Lance. “And… Lance, thank you for everything you’ve done for me. You kind of literally saved my life.”

“Psstt,” Lance blushed, waving away the notion. “Don’t even with the dramatics, Keith. That’s *my* thing. ‘Sides, you don’t have anything to thank me for yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean –?”

“BRIDE-NAPPED!” someone shouted, and Keith was yanked into Matt’s arms as another song started up.

Keith danced with Matt, Sylvux, Nanan, Allura, Coran, and all five of Sendak and Sylvux’s cousins before finding Shiro once more. He was currently dancing was Asaara, Tora taking Keith’s
hands as he approached.

“So,” she began conversationally, twisting along to the now fast-paced music. “How’s the married life?”

“It’s only been about an hour and a half,” Keith snorted. “But I’d say that the dancing with strangers and taking photos has been pretty great.”

“Ehh,” Tora shrugged. “Never know, it might get better with time. Hey, patit.”

Asaara glanced over, blushing almost grumpily at Tora, “I’m not your girlfriend—.”

“Not yet,” Tora grinned toothily. “Come and help me get my parents to sober up, they’re embarrassing me.”

Keith followed Tora’s line of sight to where Sendak and Maray were gracefully sweeping across the platform, their dancing putting every one of the other partygoers to thorough shame.

Keith was about to ask what was so embarrassing before Tora and Asaara were off, giggling to themselves. He sighed, shaking his head before joining up with Shiro, all but falling into his arms.

“Have a good time?” his husband asked, a knowing smile already tugging at his lips.

“I am all socialized out,” Keith grumbled as they rocked in a half-dance. “How’re you?”

“My ambivert energy stores are running low,” Shiro admitted sheepishly as Maray and Sendak swept through; the couples gave each other small waves. “Think I’ll make it to the toasts?”

“You’d better,” Keith arched an eyebrow. “Hunk will cry if you don’t try his cake.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Shiro smiled.

Keith smiled as well, his lips curling up deviously as he leaned up towards Shiro’s ear, “Think anyone will notice if we go disappear behind a shed for a few minutes?”

“Keith!”

“Well?”

“I…”

“I apologize for interrupting, but I am going to have to put a momentary end to your amorous pursuits.”

Keith and Shiro jumped simultaneously, turning towards Duke Ryder, who stood nearby, resting his weight on his cane.

“If you would?” he asked Shiro kindly, handing the cane off to him and bowing to Keith.

“Of course,” the couple responded in turn, Keith accepting the old duke’s hand. Ryder drew himself up to his impressive height, resting one large hand on Keith’s waist as they slowly began to dance.

“My son,” Ryder began once they were two songs in to their dancing. “Would have loved to be here tonight.”
“Oh?” Keith pressed gently, not quite sure of what else to say. Ryder smiled, nodding.

“He saw your mother as his daughter,” Ryder explained. “And would have seen you as his grandson, I’m sure of it. He would have been as proud of you as I am, young Emperor.”

Keith’s markings began to glow, “Thank you, I’m flattered.”

Ryder wheezed an ancient laugh, “You take after her in more than looks, you know.”

“Really?” Keith inquired, genuinely interested.

“Serro too was a fierce warrior with a strong sense for justice. She would have been proud to see how you acted on the day you faced off with Vaneer,” Ryder explained. “The Red Lion chose well.”

Keith blushed once more, thanking Ryder. He was more than slightly relieved when Lance arrived to take over in the dance. He could only put up with so many compliments for so long.

“You okay?” Lance asked as the next song started up, a jaunty fox trot.

“I’ll live,” Keith grumbled. “It’s just a little much having to deal with all this flattery.”

Lance rolled his eyes, “Oh yeah it’s just sooo hard when people are nice to you, huh?”

Keith bristled, “I’m not used to it!”

Lance snickered, “Okay, okay your royal travesty, don’t freak. Come on, I got something to show you. Let me just grab your dad.”

“My dad?” Keith echoed in confusion as Lance pulled away, dipping into the crowd of swirling people and emerging moments later with a confused-looking Thace. The blue paladin gestured for them to follow, leading them off of the dance floor and into the stretch of nature that made up the rest of the park.

Keith glanced up, expression softening as they traveled deeper in. The park was swathed in the wedding colors, trellises dripping with crystals tinkling softly in the simulated breeze and the trees were aglow in little fairy lights twinkling maroon. As they approached the central hub, dark monoliths began to rise from the ground, Keith leaning over to trace his fingertips over the names inscribed there in foreign characters.

“I was informed that this park is a memorial,” Thace supplied, turning towards another obelisk. “For everyone who died in the coup. Are these their names?”

Lance nodded, touching Keith and Thace’s shoulders, pointing with his free hand towards the centerpiece of the park: a pale statue lit from below by gentle blue lights.

“It’s more than a memorial to them,” he explained. Father and son followed his gesture, squinting over at the statue before his face went lax in disbelief.

“Is that—?” Keith whispered, setting off at a quick pace as he approached the statue, eventually breaking into a dead sprint.

Upon the base stood a depiction of an Altean woman rendered in marble, long hair caught in an unseen breeze. She was dressed in the familiar panoply of a paladin, a helmet tucked under one arm while the other extended beside her to stroke the back of a large lion standing beside her. They
both stared off into the same direction, expressions holding a similar amount of iron determination. Upon the base a bronze plaque provided a transcription:

_IN MEMORIUM_

OUR LADY SERRO OF ALTEA
BLUE PALADIN OF VOLTRON
MOTHER TO EMPEROR LOTOR I

Keith covered his mouth with both hands, immediately feeling his eyes well up with tears.

“Mom,” he choked out, reaching up to place his fingertips at her feet. Coins, blue candles, and dried flowers had been left on the base of the statue from the gala only nights before. “How did—how did anyone—?”

“I was there to hear a good chunk of the discussions,” Lance began to explain, stepping up beside Keith and setting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “The interest in your parentage started when you first came to City Station—apparently any and all information on your mom had been censored by the press up until Zarkon died. But ever since you left there’s been a huge amount of people who’ve looked into it, especially after you mentioned her at your coronation.

“She was the first person to ever publically oppose Zarkon’s rule,” he continued. “And, uh, kind of with a bang, too—supposedly she took out a good chunk of the First Ring with ol’ Blue when you two escaped. She’s become a sort of guardian for City Station.”

“That’s…” Thace began, cuffing at his own eyes as he came to stand beside his son, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Thank you so much Lance.”

“It’s amazing…” Keith sniffed, looking back up at the visage of his mother reverently. “To have confirmation that my people really feel that way about her…”

“How else would they feel about her?” Lance asked, looking genuinely perplexed.

Keith stared over at his friend, stunned. Silent tears continued to work their way down his cheeks as he leaned up against the base of the statue.

“As a conquest,” Keith admitted softly. Thace winched. “Zarkon’s property. As a…”

He winced, the next word too painful to say, but Lance had plenty of ideas as to what Keith was thinking.

“She’s a hero,” Lance said, setting a gentle hand on Keith’s back. “A paladin of Voltron.”

“After everything she had to endure,” Thace intoned, his voice just above a whisper. “I would never want her to be remembered as anything less.”

They stood there in silence for a while, Keith taking the time to steady his breathing while Thace gently patted at his back. After a moment of silence, Keith turned towards Thace, burying his face in his chest as he allowed him to stroke his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, Keith caught Lance shyly glancing away from the familial scene. With a sigh, Keith broke away from Thace, grabbing Lance by the wrist and pulling him into the hug as well.

“You got to hand it to him,” Lance smiled. “Sendak’s full of surprises.”
Keith stepped back in shock, “You mean this was—?”

“His idea? Yeah,” Lance confirmed with a bob of his head. “The obelisks, the statue, everything. He wanted to get it put up fairly quick, too – he said that City Station needed something to look to in their rougher times.”

“We really ought to stop being so shocked,” Thace chuckled. “We’ll have to thank him.”

“I don’t think he wants any thanks,” the blue paladin smiled, stepping away from the circle of his friends’ embrace. “He just wanted to show you his sincerity.”

“Well he’s done a damn good job of it thus far,” Keith laughed, turning towards his mother’s statue once more. He smiled before turning back towards the direction of the party, ears lowering just a bit as he inclined his head. “Thank you, Lance.”

The cake was cut, in the Earth tradition, and Keith nearly managed to smear the frosting all over Shiro’s face in the process of feeding him the first piece. After this, Galra tradition called for a Druid blessing, which was happily provided by Asaara and Nanan. The prayer they sang was a pretty, uplifting tune that grew almost jaunty in parts, and the voices of the other Druids gathered there eventually joined in an impromptu acapella choir.

Matt gave a speech that was as heartfelt as it was emotionally indecipherable and concluded with Matt bursting into tears, repeatedly declaring “I love you man!” to Shiro several times while hugging onto his arm. Pidge’s speech was short, funny, and insightful and Keith could have sworn her eyes misted up towards the end when she all but chucked the microphone at Thace. Keith was glad it was a private event, because he definitely teared up as his father declared his love and pride, and warmly accepted Shiro into their family as his son.

By the time the speeches had concluded, the wedding seemed to have wound down considerably, and the myriad of strangers attending began to bid the new couple farewell.

“Have fun tonight, you freaks,” Matt winked as he made his goodbyes. Keith waited until Nanan was facing the other way and flipped Matt off. Shiro playfully swatted at Keith’s arm.

“Is it time for a Voltron family hug?” Lance queried as he stumbled up to Keith, slinging an arm around his shoulder. Keith sniffed, halfheartedly shoving his friend’s mouth away from his face.

“You smell like liquor,” he frowned, wrinkling up his nose as Lance promptly flopped against him once more, Shiro draping an arm around Keith as he opened up his other to Pidge and Hunk. Keith smirked to himself, laughing softly as his family pressed themselves together. “Yeah, yeah. Bring it in, you goons.”

“Thank you all so much for being here,” Shiro said, looking to each of their friends in turn. “I couldn’t have thought of anyone else I wanted to share this day with.”

“Same goes here, you know,” Keith admitted with a deep flush. He pulled away a little, looking at the kind faces gathered around him and his husband: misty-eyed Hunk, tipsy Lance with a goofy grin, and gently smirking Pidge. “Before all of this… I never knew what it was like to have a family and – and what I said that day to Zarkon, when I cut the tracker out, I meant it. I chose my family. And I’ll continue to choose you again and again, never doubt that. Even though I can be…” Keith hesitated, tipping his head side to side in lieu of words.

“Standoffish?” Pidge suggested.
“Private?” quipped Hunk.

“A prick?” Lance grinned. Keith lightly kicked his shin for that.

“Yeah, har har,” he grinned sarcastically before resuming his speech. “Even though I can be… guarded, I wanted to let you know that I appreciate you more than I can put into words.”

“Same goes for me,” Shiro added in, squeezing Hunk close and bringing their circle tighter. “After I lost my mothers, I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to regain that sense of family again, but – but because of you guys, I found it. I have a family here with all of you.”

“Jesus, you’re gonna make me cry you saps!” Lance declared, tilting his head up towards the faerie lights so that his tears pooled up in his eyes. Hunk and Pidge were already sniffing loudly, cuffing at their faces in turn.

“I don’t have any siblings back home,” Hunk began. “But I think I know what it’s like to have them now.”

“People who you wanna punch as much as you wanna hug?” Pidge suggested, to which Hunk gave a hesitant shrug and then – grimacing – a nod. The green paladin threw back her head and laughed. “You guys are all nuts. Come ‘ere.”

The quintet squeezed each other together once more, finally breaking to stand in a circle and smile at one another before Pidge turned on her heel and began to march towards the exit.

“Welp, I’m getting out of here before Keith starts tearing off Shiro’s clothes, g’night losers,” she announced, waving her hand over her head without even looking back.

“Pidge!” Hunk squeaked, chasing after her immediately as Shiro shielded the side of his face with a hand, looking pointedly at the floor. His cheeks were bright red. Smiling, Keith leaned over to peck his cheek. Lance sighed dreamily as he watched them.

“Someday that’s gonna be me,” he observed happily, almost floating backwards. He stopped in his tracks, turning towards them with a mischievous look. “You know, I’m already an uncle so I know how good I can be with kids—.”

“Goodnight, Lance,” Keith said through gritted teeth as Shiro’s other hand came up, and he effectively buried his face in shame. Keith sighed, drooping in defeat as he watched his friends go. Wrapping Shiro’s arm around his waist, they started off towards the stragglers, the pair shaking their heads as they went.

“I don’t know what this new obsession is with us having kids is,” Shiro remarked.

“If I hear another word about it, I’m going to lose my damn mind,” Keith said with a slightly hysterical laugh, expression growing manic as they approached the table where the last of the partygoers were. It included Maray, Sendak, Tora, Asaara, Myzalta, and one of the later’s kits passed out cold on their chest.

Maray paused mid-conversation to smile at the newlyweds, “Well! I for one feel like this entire ordeal went swimmingly!”

“All thanks to you, Maray,” Keith smiled, breaking away from Shiro to give the party planner a brief hug. Maray made a delighted noise, squeezing Keith tightly before releasing them, looking beyond pleased.
“Are you heading out?” Sendak asked, rapping his knuckles lightly on the table. Keith nodded.

“Before I forget, thank you so much for including my family in the festivities, your majesty,” Myzalta said softly, as to not wake their kit. They inclined their head towards Keith and Shiro, who returned the gesture.

“It’s the least we could do, given the hospitality you showed me back on Gal,” Shiro smiled. At the sound of his voice, the kit stirred, smiling sleepily up at him.

“Vrepmyza,” she began in her sweet little voice. “You two gonna go make a princess now?”

“Tyrla!” Myzalta hissed, their cheeks glowing bright purple as Asaara and Tora burst into laughter and Maray smothered a snort inelegantly into their palm. Shiro just stared at the child, moon-eyed and red faced. Keith’s jaw worked, mouth producing nothing but a high-pitched keening sound.

Sendak sniffed, “Well, I think that’s our cue to leave.”

“What’s wrong?” the toddler asked as Myzalta began to apologize profusely. “Udi that’s what Mommy said happens when people get married!”

“That’s not something we ask people, sweetheart! It’s private!” Myzalta said to their child, picking up their pack and slinging it over their shoulder.

“But whyyyyy?”

“Maray!” Keith said a little louder than was absolutely necessary. Shiro looked ready to crawl into a storm drain and never come out. “Thank you so, so much for everything. Tonight’s been so beautiful.”

“Oh, it was my pleasure!” Maray glowed, affixing themselves to Sendak’s arm and resting their head on his shoulder. “I’ll page your driver right now – I saw to it that all your things have been moved to the honeymoon suite,” they added, giving Keith a very pointed stare. Keith smothered a blush with a smile, thanking their wedding planner as Tora came around to drape an arm over his shoulder, squeezing him to her side.

“Night Lo,” she said shortly. “And congrats.”

“Yes, congratulations,” Asaara nodded, giving Shiro a one-sided hug of her own. Keith glanced down to see that their spare hands were linked.

“Have a good night,” Tora smirked, pulling away while Asaara released a single barking laugh almost sarcastically.

“Your ride is here,” Maray informed Shiro and Keith, beginning to usher them towards the entrance of the closed-off plaza. “Please take care, and again – congratulations.”

“Congratulations,” Sendak echoed gently, draping an arm around Maray’s waist, hand splayed possessively over their hip. The two couples took a moment to share kind smiles before Shiro and Keith turned, listening to Sendak and Maray’s gentle commentary on their happy looks.

“That,” Shiro said as they climbed back into to safety of the limo, Keith half-tumbling into his lap. “Was probably the most embarrassing thing to ever happen to me.”
“I’m going to make a law forbidding anyone from talking about our sex life,” Keith grumbled into Shiro’s chest, pulling away to situate himself squarely in his husband’s lap. The slow traffic rocked them together, Keith resting his head on Shiro’s shoulder. The black paladin released a gentle sigh, bringing one arm up to cradle Keith close. They were silent for a few moments, simply basking in one another’s presence before Shiro released a giddy laugh.

Keith smiled, raising his head to brush their noses together, “What?”

“We’re married,” Shiro whispered, nuzzling back against Keith affectionately. He pecked his lips, bringing his hand up to card through Keith’s dark hair. “You’re my husband.”

“You’re my husband,” Keith beamed, pressing their lips together once again. “I know, it’s just – after everything, here we are.”

Shiro’s smile softened and he dropped his hand to Keith’s cheek, stroking his thumb along his jaw, “Here we are.” He echoed softly.

The limo drew to a stop in front of the hotel, the lights from the paparazzi already strobing against the tinted windows. With a grin, Keith reached down to squeeze one of Shiro’s hands.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Let’s make a break for it. As soon as the door opens we sprint for the elevator, ok?”

Shiro laughed along with his husband, nodding his approval as he squeezed Keith’s hand in turn. The two tensed against one another, Keith climbing out of Shiro’s lap and pressing close to the door. The driver approached, pulled it open, and –

Keith and Shiro tore out of the car and up the small flight of stairs that led up to the front door of the hotel. The bellhop jerked the door open as quickly as they could as soon as they spotted the royal couple hurtling towards them in a dead sprint. Keith and Shiro all put crashed into the hotel lobby, grinning and laughing as Keith smacked the elevator’s call button, tripping into the car when the doors slid open with a ping.

Shiro tumbled in after Keith, smiling in relief as the doors shut, finally separating them from the outside world.

They arrived at the honeymoon suite, still panting and laughing. They paused at the threshold, Shiro scooping Keith up as the later began to giggle out a series of protests. There was a minor struggle punctuated with many little kisses and teasing quips until finally, Keith hoisted Shiro up in his arms – armor and all – and promptly deposited him on the other side of the threshold.

They laughed again, kissing once more before Keith shut the door behind them, pausing and dead-bolting it for good measure. Shiro chuckled, posture finally fully relaxed as Keith moved past him, dragging a finger over the front of his chest plate before stepping into the bathroom.

“Oh wow,” Shiro remarked from outside, coughing softly. “This is… really nice, Keith.”

“It’s not like you didn’t stay in the third-nicest suite the hotel had to offer last night,” his husband chuckled, spotting a nondescript box sitting in the changing room and beginning to strip off his wedding clothes.

“I think this table cost more than my education.”

Keith laughed, opening the box and observing the contents with a grin, “What about the bath tub?”
“I don’t think it should be in such close proximity to the bed,” Shiro observed.

“We’ll be sure to put it to good use,” Keith smirked as he began to change, enjoying the cough that resulted from the quip.

“You want me to draw a bath?” Shiro asked after a short pause. Keith hummed thoughtfully, pulling the gossamer robe back on.

“Not right this second, no,” he said, taking a moment to remove his crown and set it carefully aside. He picked up a pair of white clips, affixing them to his hair along with the gauzy veil they were attached to. Taking a final few moments to check himself in the mirror, Keith stepped out of the changing room, propping himself seductively against the wall.

Shiro was facing away from him, preoccupied with unclipping the cape from his armor. He turned to Keith, mouth open as he made to pose a question before he spotted his husband, jaw going slack.

“Oh,” he said very softly. “Keith… I…”

“I believe ‘wow’ is what you’re looking for,” Keith smirked, hands smoothing over the lacy white negligée that clung to his body beneath the wedding robe. He brushed them down over his thighs, to where the attached garters clung to matching stockings.

“You’re really spoiling me,” Shiro commented softly, almost shyly, crossing the room towards Keith. His husband met him halfway, the couple standing in the middle of the room as Keith reached out, touching Shiro’s jaw with his fingertips, gently dragging them down to his lips and thumbing over them.

Shiro smiled, taking Keith’s wrist and pressing tender kisses into his palm. He pulled away, touching their foreheads together as Keith reached up, lacing his arms around Shiro’s arms as his husband’s hands crept up to grab handfuls of his ass, rubbing the soft lace against it. Keith hummed a happy moan, the pair of them grinning before coming together for a kiss.

Shiro gently rubbed the tip of his tongue against Keith’s lips, surging inside as he cupped Keith’s cheek, tipping him back to deepen the kiss. Keith brought up his opposite hand, running his fingertips along Shiro’s undercut, cupping the back of his head and pressing him closer for a brief moment before stepping away, taking his husband’s hand and leading him to the bed.

Keith sat on the mattress, raising his arms and dragging his hands down the unarmored length of Shiro’s abdomen, touching on the clasps on the side of his cuirass. Shiro stepped back momentarily to remove the armor, moaning as Keith leaned forward to press kisses to his stomach. He set the piece aside, making for the bracers on him arms while Keith worked off his belt and leg armor.

“Shit,” Keith hissed when the panoply had been stripped from his husband and placed to the side. He reached out to rub Shiro through his bodysuit, reveling in the soft groan Shiro admitted along with the aroused knit of his brow. “You’re already this worked up?”

Shiro blushed at Keith’s teasing, turning so that his husband could help with the zip on his bodysuit. Shiro knelt before him, sighing as Keith kneaded at his shoulders, briefly peeling away the lycra before resuming.

Shiro rolled his neck under Keith’s treatment, groaning when searing-hot kisses surged up his neck, punctuated with playful nips. He turned himself around, peeling away the rest of his bodysuit,
leaving him kneeling before his husband, naked.

Keith suddenly felt a rush of heat hit his cheeks – the look of sheer reverence Shiro was giving him was far too much. Mind-numbing arousal coursed down from the hollow of his throat to his cunt, his cock pulsing with need.

Slowly, Shiro took one of Keith’s legs, spreading it apart from the other before laying gentle kisses over his stockings and the soft expanse of his thigh.

Shiro ate him out with little flicks of his tongue and gentle, suckling pressure on his clit. Occasionally he would pull up to give Keith’s cock a languid suck, hike Keith’s leg higher to tease inside of him with the tip of his tongue.

When he finally came, it was there on the edge of the bed, Keith’s legs wrapped around Shiro’s waist as his husband thrust into him, moving with slow rolls of his hips, easing him along to completion. Keith got to his knees immediately, jerking Shiro with frenzied pulls of his wrist, moaning when his cum fell over his cheeks in hot strips.

Shiro was initially mortified, making to wipe away his orgasm before Keith drew his fingers through it, licking it from his fingers kittenishly. They climbed into the tub thereafter, Keith all but melting against his husband as they relaxed in the lapping heat of the water, crying out when Shiro edged him with flicks of his fingertips over his clit, shaking so violently that water splashed over the side of the bath when he finally came around Shiro’s fingers.

They made love again on the bed, holding each other’s faces, kissing each other slowly, taking time to enjoy the moment together and, eventually, fell asleep in one another’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue next week my loves!

<3Moosey
Epilogue

Chapter by chocolatemoosey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can’t believe we’re really here,” Keith murmured, squinting as a cloud of dust whipped up around them. “I can’t believe it’s even still here, to be honest,” he added after a minute, turning from the ramshackle house to where Shiro stood beside him. His husband shook his head in mutual disbelief, slipping an arm about his waist.

“Let’s go in, yeah?” he suggested, glancing about. “It doesn’t look like anyone else has been here since us.”

“Amazingly,” Keith conceded, taking Shiro’s hand in his as he led the way to the front door of the shack. He rapped upon it once, pausing to listen for any noise within and wincing as the heated metal stung at his knuckles. “Guess we’re in the clear,” he decided, opening the door with its still-familiar heaviness before stepping across the threshold.

Shiro coughed at once, holding his arm over his face as the dust began to settle once more, Keith closing the door behind them.

“Thought it’d be even hotter inside,” Shiro admitted, looking around at the faded photographs and papers that lined the wall to one side, red pins coated in brownish dust.

“If that were the case I don’t think I’d have ever survived the summers,” Keith shook his head with a rueful grin. “Still, it’s hard to believe that I really used to live here. Time sure goes by fast.”

“Six years since I last saw this place,” Shiro marveled.

“And five since we’ve been married,” Keith tacked on. “I never thought I’d say this but I think I may have gotten accustomed to palace living.”

“This place a little too, ah… rustic for you?” Shiro teased, moving to help his husband beat the dirt out of the couch cushions.

“Yeah,” Keith laughed, flopping down into the seat when they had finished and indicating for Shiro to join him. “But I’m glad to be back. I never thought I’d see New Mexico again.”

“Me neither, to be honest,” Shiro intoned. “Although the reasons for that have changed somewhat over time.”

“Well for starters it’s nice not to constantly be questioning our own mortality for a change,” Keith agreed transparently. “Hope we’re not getting too soft now that we’ve lived on City Station for so long.”

“Hardly,” Shiro frowned, nose wrinkling. “It’s not as though we haven’t kept up with our paladin duties.”

“You’ve kept up with your paladin duties,” Keith corrected. “Seeing as you’re still the acting leader and all. Although Lance has done a really nice job filling in for you when you can’t be
around. He’s come a long way, hasn’t he?”

“When he’s not busy being a celebrity, that is,” Shiro laughed. “He’s a perfect fit for it, however, and our people sure seem to be fascinated by him.”

“That’s because they’re still not entirely certain what a human is,” Keith chuckled. “And Lance is – god help us – the ambassador of the entire human race, apparently.”


“Yeah,” Keith nodded. “I hope his and Hunk’s meeting with the representatives at the Garrison are going well right now. I think the president might even be there.”

“Of the Garrison?” Shiro frowned.

“No, of like, the United States,” Keith corrected.

Shiro shook his head in disbelief, frowning a moment later. “I don’t even know who the president is anymore.”

“Me neither,” Keith hummed a moment later. “But I sure hope they’re open to the idea of intergalactic dealings. Even if not, the next step is to take this to the UN.”

“I’m not looking forward to that one,” his husband confessed, deflating slightly into the cushions.

“Shiro, we’ve toppled a galaxies-wide dictatorship and travelled to I-don’t-know-how-many planets now as ambassadors of peace – talking before the United Nations can’t be that scary, right?”

“Well, unlike you I still get nervous,” Shiro smiled ruefully. “Being emperor has really come to suit you, you know?”

“Well you’re a good prince consort,” Keith teased back. “Having not only that responsibility, but continuing work as leader of Team Voltron all while working alongside the Imperial Military to prevent threats the galaxies over as well as in-fighting? You’re nothing short of amazing, Shiro.”

“You give me too much credit.”

“Well you don’t give yourself enough,” Keith settled. “What do you think I’m here for?”

“To be my wonderfully supportive and amazing spouse?” Shiro answered knowingly, scooting closer to his husband and wrapping him up in an arm. Keith smiled up at him, inclining his head to sneak in a kiss that Shiro gratefully returned. With a contented smile Keith relaxed in his arms, resting his head against Shiro’s shoulder.

‘So much really has changed,’ he thought, eyes trailing over the compact space of what was once his home. ‘And at the same time so very little.’

For his part, Keith had done his best to rule as a fair and just emperor, taking his commitment to his people with great pride and seriousness. For his efforts he had won the continued admiration and support of not only the Galra Empire, but of those beyond it who looked to him as a worthy leader and ally.

It had helped, he imagined, that he had spent the past five years working on undoing what effects of imperialism he could, issuing reparations and granting freedoms to those who had
wrongfully been incorporated into the empire, making public knowledge the atrocities that had been committed to each sovereign planet and peoples. It was overwhelming work and at times it felt to Keith as though there would be no end to it but things were finally starting to peter out, the process becoming more gradual as those within the empire grew confident that their needs and concerns would genuinely be listened to and subsequently met.

Still, Keith couldn’t help but occasionally long for the freedom that had come with being just a Paladin of Voltron. He joined the team where he could, relishing in every mission he could sneak away to without risk of consequence. He missed Red and could tell that she often missed him, too, but the truth of the matter was that Voltron wasn’t needed like it once was and for that Keith was also grateful. At any rate it left him more time to work on one of his many projects as emperor, such as working out a means of establishing a parliament that could most fairly address the needs of the people.

In truth, the other paladins also had their hands full on most days. Lance had taken up modeling in his spare time, attaining overnight popularity with the youth of the empire who were always hungry for new information about the mysterious aliens known as “humans” – and Lance was more than happy to provide. When he wasn’t busy with that he was working alongside Hunk to try and bridge the gap of intergalactic relations between the empire and Earth – a tenuous thing that they were only just able to make steps towards. Hunk himself had taken up the mantle of Royal Chef and he had been loving every minute of it. He had been quick to work his way up the ranks of the imperial kitchens, learning new dishes with zeal and introducing the other chefs to ones of his own. He had been talking the whole flight back to Earth about how eager he was to tell his dad all about it once they had the free time to meet up, knowing the decorated Michelin Star chef would be more than eager to hear about his son’s exploits.

Pidge and Matt had gotten a leg up on him in this department, having already traveled back to Earth once to reunite their parents. From the way Pidge had told it the whole affair had been overly sappy and dramatic but Keith knew better – it was just Pidge’s offhanded way of saying she had cried just as much as the rest of them. She had also said that for as proud of her as her mother was for having become Keith’s Head of Technological Affairs (working directly under the impressive Ceris Zarturin nan Throk) that her news was more than a little overshadowed by Matt’s significantly larger news that he was not only married to a giant purple alien but that he had adopted a smaller purple alien with him, as well.

say the least their mother had rapidly cycled through the emotional alphabet in the span of several short minutes, finally deciding on indignation that she was not able to attend their wedding. When she found out that they hadn’t even had a wedding – as much as Matt tried to explain the reasons why – it was abruptly and resolutely decided that there would, in fact, be one. Keith smiled at the memory, recalling Matt and Sylvux’s happiness as they were surrounded by their friends and family and the entirety of the Vesh as they pronounced their vows to one another. Nanan had been made the flower girl, a position she had never heard of before within the constraints of her own culture and one that she had taken to with great gusto. The whole ceremony had been beautiful and the party afterwards more than memorable. Keith still wasn’t sure how Matt had made it back to the hotel with as sloshed as he was but was distinctly grateful that Sendak and Maray had already agreed to take care of Nanan for the next several nights – after all, their young kits had loved the company.

They had been the second to be married, only roughly a year after Keith and Shiro had been. Their ceremony had been televised much to Sendak’s embarrassment and chagrin with a second more private ceremony being held a few days later at his family home in Axana. Keith had found the difference startling, the mountainous traditions of the home planet radically different from the formal and elegant customs of City Station. The family had come together with bustling warmth, singing and dancing and cooking together as they wished the new couple well and Keith easily found
himself caught up in their merriment. For someone he had once seen as vicious and cruel, Keith had
never known Sendak to be more relaxed and open-hearted as he was on that day. This was only to
be trumped when his first kit, Enna, was born some months later.

“You two have got to get one of these,” Maray had teased them in a sleepy stupor as they
cradled their newborn in their arms, still worn out from the process of labor. Sendak had rumbled out
his support of the idea, almost incoherent through his purrs. Keith had urged Maray to take off as
much time as they needed for maternity, suggesting that they could retire from being the Imperial
Sentinel altogether if that would suit the needs of their new family best but in true Maray fashion the
Galra had persisted, settling back into the role once the first several weeks had passed. Keith would
have never imagined Sendak to take on the role of house husband as a result but he seemed to enjoy
his newfound lot in life with a passion, proudly boasting about his perfect little family whenever he
could slip them into conversation.

‘Well, I suppose he is a bit more than just a house husband,’ Keith reflected. Sendak had
continued to stay on as an advisor to he and Shiro, working as needed as more of a friend and
confidant than as a designated cabinet member. Still, he held considerable sway and respect among
those with titled positions and he took to his duties as seriously as he’d ever had. Even at that, Keith
suspected that if forced to choose between the roles of reserve Imperial Sentinel and father, Sendak
would have more than happily picked the latter. Now with three kits – including Tora – he was more
confident and loving than Keith could have ever anticipated.

Tora herself was doing well, still serving as the Admiral and – to Keith’s opinion – doing a
damn fine job of it. She and Asaara had been a couple for nearly as long as Keith had been married
and shared a modest house together within the First Ring of City Station. Keith had once turned the
tables on them, asking if they were planning on having children any time soon but the couple were
undaunted, casually declining given that Asaara’s role as Mother of Constellations meant that she
was already working with young children all the time and that perhaps sometimes she needed a
break. When she wasn’t coaching Nanan or her other students how to take up the old Druid ways of
counsel and healing, Asaara was spending most of her time trying to find ways to assist Keith in
establishing a parliamentary system – Keith couldn’t blame her for not wanting to take on another
considerable responsibility on top of all of that.

Still, his own burdens – and Shiro’s – hadn’t kept them from being pestered near constantly
about when they were planning on having children of their own, their answers always as polite and
evasive as they could get away with. It wasn’t as though they didn’t want children – they had been
more than communicative between the two of them about that – but when it came down to it they
just wanted to enjoy their youth and the early years of their marriage. All said, it was hard to ignore
the faint stirrings of parental desire when Keith held his baby sibling in his arms for the first time,
Ryla’s little hands pawing up at his own as he embraced them.

“Hopefully they’ll be more like your dad than like Annis,” Shiro had teased under his breath,
earning him an amused smile from his husband. “No offense to Annis, of course.”

“Yeah, of course,” Keith teased back, passing his sibling back off to Thace, who had been
glowing with pride. “But in a similar vein,” Keith had resumed once they were on their way out of
the newly-established hospital, “I hope our future kids are more like you than me.”

“I don’t,” Shiro had returned thoughtfully, interlacing their fingers as they wandered the
streets of Pryz, Thace’s hometown, “I wouldn’t want them to miss out on your fire.”

They had spent the next two months there on the mainland, staying at the residence Thace
shared with Annis and Lusox, the threesome sharing duties of raising baby Ryla and often relieved
from those same duties when Shiro and Keith took pity on them.

“I don’t know,” Keith hummed, looking over a spread of paperwork while cradling his sibling against his chest, “Maybe we should get one of these.”

‘I wonder if we’re ready now?’ Keith considered, settling further against his husband’s chest as they sat in contemplative silence upon the couch. ‘It’s not like we would be on our own – after all, I know Dad would be chomping at the bit to look after a grandbaby. He’d probably clear his schedule in an instant if I asked him to kitsit.’

Formally recognized as Imperial Father, Thace had risen to the position with all the grace and dignity of the prince that he had once been recognized as. Both Keith and Shiro would name him as their most beloved and trusted advisor without question, perhaps biased by the fact that he doted on them both something awful. While still continuing to work alongside the Vesh, Thace had come to play a much smaller role in their proceedings, instead taking on the position of Head of Restoration, a new division established within the first year of Keith’s reign. Thace’s hard and often times public work in undoing revisionist history and in bringing to light the cultures and histories of planets remaining within the empire had endeared him greatly with the public, his reputation already bolstered by the fact that he had been the past ilbe of the now greatly revered Lady Serro. Thace wasn’t entirely sure what to make of all the fuss, a bit embarrassed by the celebrity-like treatment and moreover just being happy enough to work on his own pet projects, such as working with the Druids to preserve the knowledge of centuries old oral traditions and the linguistics of Ancient Galran.

It was here that he, Allura, and Coran had become unlikely friends, the trio working together to further honor those last remnants of Altean language and culture spearheaded under a project established in the late King Alfor’s name. Their dedication sometimes had the trio leaving aboard the Castle Ship, searching reaches of the galaxies for some lost artifact or text, their journeys ardently chronicled for the enjoyment of the empire. But even at what sometimes felt like the farthest fringes of space, Keith always had peace of mind that they could return at a moment’s notice, Allura’s placating words and advice only a brief call away.

‘Really,’ Keith marveled. ‘How did I ever get to become so lucky? So… loved? This is more than I could have ever dreamed for myself, more than I ever would have dared to believe.’

“And I get to share it all with you,” he finished aloud, catching Shiro’s attentions.

“What’s that?” Shiro hummed, brushing back Keith’s bangs with a hand to get a better view of him.

“Nothing,” Keith laughed, angling around in his seat so their gazes could more easily meet. “It’s just… all of this? This place? It’s so unbelievable when you put it into perspective. At times I never thought I’d make it back here, least of all with you. I mean, I had always dreamed of that…”

“Of coming back here with me?” Shiro pressed.

Keith flushed, nodding. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I mean, it might sound strange to you but it was always something I really thought about. I spent so many nights in here, just totally sleepless, trying to think of anything within my power or outside it that might bring you back home. And finally I found you and we were launched right back out into space in an instant. Somewhere along the line things changed though, didn’t it? Space… City Station? That became home and I’m not even sure when it happened.”

“I know what you mean,” Shiro agreed, smiling wistfully. “But even still, it’s nice to see Earth again. I still want to see my grandparents, providing…” he trailed off uncertainly, instantly
nuzzled by his husband.

“According to what Matt was able to suss out they should be fine,” he placated, taking one of Shiro’s hands into his own and rubbing small consoling circles against the back. “You should be more concerned what they think of me,” he added lightheartedly. “I mean last they knew I was still a total hellion.”

“You’re still a bit of a hellion,” Shiro returned, easing at his husband’s playful tone. “And you’re right, they should be fine. I know it might be scary for you but I’m still excited for you to meet them. And moms, even if that might be a little weird or morbid to say.”

“No, it’s fine,” Keith insisted, raising Shiro’s hand to place a kiss to his wrist. “You’ve been to mom’s statue in the park with me tons of times, besides. I imagine visiting their graves will be a lot like that. Your old house, too.”

“Yeah,” Shiro gave a nostalgic smile. “They would have loved you, you know.”

“And I can’t convey how lucky and honored that makes me,” Keith replied, words soft. “Thank you for sharing these things with me, Takashi, even the painful parts.”

“Of course,” Shiro hummed, moving to cup Keith’s cheek in his upturned palm. “Being open with you, sharing these things with you, these experiences? It’s all a part of being your husband and it’s all something that I cherish because I get to experience it with you.”

“You’re such a sap,” Keith returned, blushing brightly. Shiro laughed openly, seeing through his spouse’s words easily.

“As are you,” he accused lightly. “But I am curious, Keith – why did you want to take me here exactly? I feel like there’s more you haven’t quite said.”

“Well,” Keith hedged, inclining his face against Shiro’s palm and pressing a kiss there. “For the longest time this place was all that I had, was the only place I had to call home. It was… I mean… the only concept I had of home, at least as a place. And so I guess it was always something I wanted to come back to and to share alongside you, even if it was in more of a metaphorical sense than a literal one. I mean,” he chuckled, shaking his head at the shoddy interior around them, “I’d hardly call these conditions ‘livable’ anymore.”

“I’d have to agree with you there,” Shiro grimaced. “But… still, Keith, thank you. I appreciate the sentiment and what this means to you.”

Keith smiled lopsidedly, staring deep into his husband’s eyes and overcome with a feeling of absolute clarity.

“W-what?” Shiro asked after a minute, his natural shyness creeping forward. “Did I say something weird?”

“No, it’s not like that,” Keith assured him calmly. “It’s just… nothing new, I guess. It’s something I already realized a long time ago. But still, being in this place now and feeling what I feel, almost from two points in time – as who I was back then and what I felt versus now? I had wished so hard to share this feeling of ‘home’ with you, had been so sure that I had to bring you here to really, truly experience it and all that time I had missed the mark. It wasn’t this house or this land or even New Mexico or Earth or any of that. It was just… you. Thoughts of you, Takashi. Even back then you had always been what ‘home’ was to me. You still are, you know. I just didn’t really realize it had been true for so long until just now, sitting here in this place with you. I guess it’s kind
of silly, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think it’s silly at all, Keith,” Shiro blushed, brushing forward to gather the other up in his arms, their foreheads pressed together. “After all, you’ve always been ‘home’ to me, too. That’s never going to change.”

“No matter what?” Keith softened, echoing back their wedding vows.

“Yeah,” Shiro promised warmly. “No matter what.”

Chapter End Notes

To everyone who's been with us this (almost) two-year-long journey: thank you <3 We’ve had such fun writing this series and your support has always filled us with joy and appreciation. We hope that you’ve been able to find as much joy reading this story that we have writing it. As always, much love!

~Chocolate Moosey

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!