Shelter From a Cold Storm
by Saremina

Summary

Of all the decisions Keith has had to make deciding what his life is worth is harder than he imagined. Deciding what the lives of his friends are worth? That's another story all together, though Keith could do without the strange connection he seems to share with Zarkon.

Or

What if Zarkon had tracked Keith instead of the Black Lion?

Season 2 AU starting from The Ark of Taujeer.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Funny story, the first chapter is something I wrote for a school thing, everything else I wrote because a friend of mine bribed me with insane amounts of chocolate.

I'm posting this now instead of later when I've finished this fic because season 3 is right around the corner and I want a plausible reason for any canon divergence that's most likely about to happen, besides this being an AU.

The small ship drifts through the vastness of space, and the heavy silence surrounding them makes the air hard to breathe. Keith doesn’t want to point out that they are alone, tired, and without help if the Galra come for them. He’s not sure if he wants to be right, and he’s not sure if he wants Allura to be right either.

He doesn’t know which would be worse in the end.

Allura falls into fitful sleep as time goes by, and Keith relaxes a little as the silence turns from uncomfortable to something more natural. He can’t help it, their situation and the way Allura talks about the Galra keep him on edge even as he does his best to pretend everything is fine. He worries Allura knows something’s going on — that maybe she knows there’s something wrong with him.

It keeps Keith from talking to her, and he almost regrets not telling Shiro about his situation. Shiro wouldn’t have judged him, but Keith knows he would never have looked at him the same again either. Keith can barely look into a mirror and recognize himself these days.

Keith groans quietly and buries his face in his hands, pressing his palms against his eyes to get the sting of tiredness out of them. He tries to convince himself they are doing the right thing, but he can’t quite shake the shred of doubt trying to creep into his thoughts.

Still, he’s acutely aware that they won’t have any way of knowing which one of them is drawing the Galra to them, and if it’s not either one of them then they’ve left the rest of their team alone, unable to form Voltron or pilot the Castleship very far. The thought fills Keith with ice and he wants to go back.

He doesn’t turn the ship around, the fear of him being what draws the Galra to them keeps him from going back.

Allura sighs and shifts in her seat, and for a moment Keith is almost tempted to push the strand of loose hair off of her face. She looks softer in her sleep, her expression getting more relaxed now that she doesn’t have to worry about their predicament or keep up the appearance of a leader. Keith wishes she could look like that more often.

Keith grinds his teeth and tries to come up with a plan in case they run into Galra, but he’s soon forced to face the fact that there’s virtually nothing they can do to protect themselves against one of their ships. Even if they could outrun a Galra ship they’d be left hunted and without immediate help, running from battle cruisers and scout ships and Zarkon.
They could stand their ground and fight, but if Zarkon comes for them Keith doubts they would win. He couldn’t even beat Zarkon with the Red Lion, the two of them won’t stand a chance on their own in their little shuttle, especially when Zarkon has Haggar and his army at his side.

Keith bangs his head against the back of his seat. They won’t even know which one of them Zarkon is tracking if the Galra show up. They’ll either be both captured or killed, or they’ll have to separate and hope Zarkon won’t go after the other.

It’s not much of a chance, but Keith grabs it with both of his hands and refuses to let go. He sets his jaw and decides he’ll sacrifice himself to give Allura a chance to escape if he has to. He can be replaced, Allura can’t.

As if sensing Keith’s unease Allura lets out a quiet moan before slowly opening her eyes. She blinks the sleep from them as she turns to face Keith, and soft, sleepy smile spreads on her face. Keith forces himself to smile in return, even if it’s just for a second.

“You should get some rest too. I can keep watch,” Allura says, and though her voice is kind her expression tells Keith he’d better not argue with her. Keith looks away, ignoring Allura’s eyes on him to the best of his abilities, but she refuses to take no for an answer.

“Fine,” Keith grumbles eventually. He can close his eyes for a minute to keep Allura happy.

He doesn’t mean to fall asleep.

Keith isn’t sure how long it’s been, but when he jolts awake he knows he didn’t just doze off for a few minutes. The heaviness in his bones and the mist that covered his thoughts making them slower than usual isn’t as prominent as it was before. Keith bites his tongue to keep himself from saying anything to Allura, not wanting to upset her over something he knows isn’t that important in the grand scheme of things.

“You didn’t miss anything,” Allura says as soon as she sees Keith is awake, and Keith gives her a nod in response.

The silence still makes him uneasy.

“I was thinking,” Allura starts and waits until Keith turns to look at her. “If we don’t run into any Galra we could stop somewhere and get something to eat.”

Keith can’t keep the surprise showing on his face, and the sound of Allura’s laughter rings in the small space like the wind chimes one of Keith’s foster families used to keep on their porch. Keith huffs and looks away.

“You’re so far from home and all you’ve had to eat is Altean food. I thought you’d like to try something new,” Allura explains and the smile fades from her lips. “And I’d like to see what has happened to the food culture in the past years,” she continues in a more subdued voice.

“That’d be nice,” Keith says, his voice almost as quiet as Allura’s. They share a brief smile before focusing on the view of the space opening before them. It seems larger than usual, more empty, and Keith doesn’t know what to do about it.
Keith almost hopes — for Allura’s sake if nothing else — that the Galra don’t come for them. He knows it would mean Zarkon is tracking them through something in the Castle of Lions, but he wants Allura to have her meal in some space restaurant. She deserves to have at least that.

Allura fiddles with the controls while Keith watches by without bothering to give his input. She’s the one who can actually read Altean, and though Red does help Keith understand it he’s not comfortable trying to correct Allura or Coran when it comes to written alien languages.

Keith is about to tell Allura they should head somewhere they won’t endanger anybody in case Zarkon comes for them, but that’s still close enough to some kind of a safe place in case they’ll need to make a quick escape when a monitor alerts them to an incoming ship. Keith curses under his breath as he pulls his helmet on before helping Allura see who is after them.

Neither one of them is surprised to see a Galra ship approaching them fast, and though they both have a second of quiet panic they pull themselves together quickly and get their ship going as fast as possible.

Keith knows they have no chance of outrunning the Galra and he knows Allura is aware of it too. He also knows the two of them aren’t enough to fight a whole ship full of sentries and soldiers, but maybe, since the Galra aren’t really after both of them, one of them could get away. Keith frowns and watches Allura steer the ship with quiet determination as he makes his decision.

“We’ll never make it,” Keith says, his voice calm and steady. Allura throws a glare at him before focusing on the space before her.

“They’re after only one of us,” Keith starts, stopping to consider his words. “I’ll go outside and wait for them while you get as far away from here as possible. If they’re after me you get away safely, and if they’re after you then I’ll call the others and we’ll come get you before they can take you to Zarkon.” His voice doesn’t leave any room for arguing, but Allura still turns to stare at him with incredulous eyes.

“And if they’re after you they’ll take you to Zarkon and you’ll be trapped there, and we won’t be able to form Voltron.” She sets her jaw in that stubborn way Keith has become all too familiar with, and though he usually admires that quality in her now it’s more annoying than anything.

“I can be replaced, you can’t. The Castle needs you. The others need you, and we didn’t get our asses kicked trying to save you just so you could get caught again because Zarkon can somehow track me. I’m not losing you because of it.” Keith stares Allura down with all the determination he has, and after Keith’s words sink in Allura seems to reconsider her position.

She lets her shoulders slump. “I don’t want to lose you either,” she replies, but her expression tells Keith all he needs to know.

“Pidge did some modifications to the ship. Press that button once I’m out, go back to the others and form a good plan before you come get me back. I’ll make sure we do the same if they’re after you instead,” Keith says and offers Allura a reassuring look before getting up. Allura sits up and steels herself before giving Keith a nod.

“Don’t let him get into your head.” Allura’s voice stops Keith before he can take a step forward. “Just remember we’re coming for you, no matter what he says or does,” she continues once Keith faces her.

“I will,” Keith promises and rushes out of the ship before he can think better of it.
Keith isn’t sure if he’ll ever get used to the feel of floating in space without his Lion or a ship to protect him, and with the Galra ship just barely out of his field of vision the unease he feels is almost suffocating. Keith watches Allura get to a safe distance from him, and he knows she hesitates before punching the button Keith had shown her and speeding out of sight, hopefully to safety.

Everything becomes silent. It’s peaceful despite the danger the incoming ship and the space itself pose, and Keith takes the chance to take a deep breath and calm his mind. He won’t have a chance if he lets his emotions take over.

The Galra ship appears sooner than Keith wants, and a mix of dread and relief fills him when the ship slows down.

Keith keeps his appearance relaxed and unassuming when the ship begins to pull him in. He has his hand ready on his bayard, his mind going through all the possible scenarios waiting for him in the ship, and though he’s sure he won’t be facing Zarkon or Haggar just yet he knows that’s what’s waiting for him in the near future.

Keith takes one last calming breath before he’s pulled all the way into the ship and gravity kicks in. He closes his eyes so he won’t be blinded by the lights while the sounds of the ship reach his ears and the warmth engulfs him as he falls on his hands and knees on the hard ground. Time stands still as Keith lets himself get accustomed to his new surroundings before opening his eyes and taking in the dozen Galra and the sentries standing at ready.

For a second nobody moves, then Keith launches himself at the nearest sentry with all the speed and strength he has.

Keith drives his bayard through the sentry and slices the side of a too slow Galra open before he’s knocked to the ground and his face is slammed into the cold metal hard enough to knock him out for a few seconds.

A small voice in the back of Keith’s mind that sounds a lot like Shiro tells him he was an idiot for challenging two dozen enemies when he was alone and as tired as he is, especially when the Galra most likely want him as a prisoner. Keith ignores it in favor of spitting out blood as he’s yanked to his feet and handcuffed. A Galra drives their fist to his temple, making Keith see stars and his senses blur until he’s not sure what’s real.

The sentries drag Keith through the halls without a word, and Keith is too out of it to pay attention to the quiet conversation the Galra are having behind him. He does catch a mention of Zarkon and something about a druid, but he can’t focus enough to make out the details. His head spins and the deafening sound of the steps around him echo in his skull more than they do in the hallway, and for a second Keith wonders if the ship is actually rocking in space like one would on sea.

The sentries throw Keith into a small, dark cell and lock the door behind them, leaving Keith cuffd and in pain, lying on the floor and trying not to throw up as he gasps for breath. It takes him a few tries, but eventually Keith gets his breathing under control, and he starts thinking about his situation.

There’s still a chance the Galra will go after Allura and they had just picked Keith up because he was there, but at that moment Keith feels a little better believing the Galra got what they wanted and his friends are safe. He’s not sure what he would do if the Galra got Allura too. He doesn’t even have a way of finding out if that happens.

Keith isn’t sure how long he spends in that cell, but after a while the spinning of his head slows
down. He pulls himself upright and sits by the wall furthest from the door. His nausea eases before
the door to his cell is opened again.

Keith doesn’t move.

There are two guards at the door blocking his exit, and Keith doesn’t trust his head to be quite as
well as he’d like it to be just yet. He decides it’s better if he doesn’t do anything to cause more
damage to it at that moment. He’ll need to heal a bit more before he’s comfortable challenging an
army.

The guards pull Keith to his feet and out of the cell, and Keith has no choice but to let himself be
dragged across the halls. They take Keith to the hangar and hand him over to a second group of
Galra that escort Keith into a small ship. It’s too big to be a proper shuttle, but Keith suspects it
could hold a crew of ten, maybe more. The Galra are having a quiet conversation just out of
Keith’s earshot, but he doesn’t have to hear them to know what’s happening.

He’s being taken to Zarkon.

The Galra leave Keith in another cell without bothering to uncuff him. The only source of light is
the small window at the top of the door that — unlike on the other ship — isn’t closed.

The dizziness has returned and Keith has to take a minute to regain his equilibrium again. He hopes
him playing nice will somehow make the Galra less careful around him so that he’ll get a chance to
escape. It’s not likely to happen but Keith has to try and think positive even as he prepares for the
worst.

Keith suspects he’s on some kind of a prisoner transport ship, and since he doesn’t hear anyone
else being loaded in he hopes Allura got away safely. He tries not to think about the possibility that
she’s already on the ship or that he’d just be unable to hear the guards bring her in.

Keith closes his eyes for a moment, half hoping he’ll fall asleep and into a coma just to annoy
Zarkon, but he stays awake, reminding himself of Allura’s promise to come and rescue him. If
she’s still free and out there Keith can’t let her risk everything only to find him on Haggar’s table
or dead, because Keith doubts Zarkon would do much else with him if he were unconscious.

The wait for the door to his cell to open again is long and boring and something Keith could do
without, especially when Shiro’s voice gently reminds him that patience yields focus. Maybe Keith
should try to be patient and gain some focus in the process, and maybe it will help him to at least
figure a way out of the handcuffs.

Keith doesn’t want to think about Shiro. He doesn’t want to imagine how Shiro will react if Allura
returns to the others without him and explains why Keith isn’t with her. He doesn’t want to
imagine the realization that Keith is in Zarkon’s hands, like Shiro had been, hit Shiro and the pain
it will bring him.

Keith pulls his knees up to his chest and presses his forehead against them, trying to think of
anything but his friends and what they might be going through. He’s got enough to worry about
with himself at the moment. Keith suspects he’ll be taken to the Central Command, and he might
or might not meet Zarkon before being thrown into a cell there. He wouldn’t be surprised if he’d
meet Haggar in the near future as well.

If Zarkon did indeed track Keith, be it by Galra magic or imprinting or some kind of tracking
technology, then he has what he wanted and Keith doubts he’s in an immediate danger of being
murdered. He hopes Zarkon won’t hand him over to Haggar the second he steps off the transport
ship, that maybe Zarkon will try to manipulate him like Allura seemed to believe he would, or maybe he’ll try to get Keith to tell him everything he knows about the other Paladins.

It seems to take hours, but eventually the soft, barely noticeable tremble of the floor that Keith had taken to mean they were moving stops, and Keith sits up in anticipation. Sure enough a few minutes later heavy footsteps stop behind the cell door, and after a brief, stilted conversation two guards open the door. Keith doesn’t move from his spot, but he keeps his head high and refuses to break eye contact.

The guards order Keith to get up and for a moment Keith is tempted to force them to get him up themselves, but he’s made the choice to play along and hopefully get the Galra to lower their guard around him, so he pulls himself up to his feet without much fuzz. His head still spins and he’s almost certain he’ll throw up if he’s forced to make too many sudden moves, but he lets the guards walk him out of the cell without saying anything.

The light on the hallway is so bright Keith has to squeeze his eyes shut to keep his headache from worsening and the speed the guards move in is a little too fast for Keith to keep up with, especially when he’s still dealing with a concussion, and they end up half dragging, half carrying him across the hallways and out of the ship.

The guards take Keith into a hangar of what he is sure is the Central Command, if for no other reason than the space is too big to be a part of anything else. The guards hand Keith over to another group that is much less patient with his shorter legs and unsteady state. They shove Keith to the ground when he’s not fast enough for their tastes, and he lands on his side, hurting his shoulder and almost banging his skull to the floor again.

The sudden change in position does nothing to help Keith’s already hurting head, and he kicks the Galra who hurled him to the ground in revenge. The Galra snarls at Keith and drives his foot into Keith’s stomach, knocking the air out of his lungs, bruising his bones, maybe even breaking them.

“Do that again and you can personally explain your disobedience of a direct order to the Emperor.” Haggar’s voice stops the Galra before he can land another kick, and he almost topples over Keith in his hurry to stand down.

Keith gasps for breath while Haggar makes her way to him, and for a short second Keith is almost thankful for her presence. She studies him with an expression Keith can’t read, but it gives Keith the time he needs to catch his breath and get a grasp on his new situation.

He assumes Zarkon is the one who gave the order that Keith isn’t to be harmed, and though he appreciates it for his own sake it makes him uneasy at the same time. Keith shifts to a more comfortable position, using it as an excuse to scan the hangar properly before fixing his eyes on Haggar. He can’t spot Allura so for the moment he assumes she escaped.

“Now what?” Keith asks before he can think better of it, but the silence was getting on his nerves and having Haggar study him like a particularly interesting test result isn’t his idea of a good time. Haggar smiles at him but doesn’t reply, and a sinking feeling falls over Keith.

“Secure him for now.” Haggar’s eyes don’t leave Keith’s face until he’s pulled back to his feet and dragged away, and Keith dreads to find out what’s in store for him. He’s starting to think the best case scenario is him having to deal with Zarkon, but if the glee in Haggar’s smile is any indicator that won’t be the case.

Keith wants to laugh at the absurdity of it all.
The trip from the hangar to the cells feels excruciatingly long. The guards shove Keith into yet another cell, and once again he’s left alone and cuffed in the dark. He spits the fresh blood out of his mouth and cringes at the feel of the flaking blood on his skin. The Galra could’ve at least offered him something to wipe his face clean with, and Keith regrets not having the mind to do so when the blood was still fresh and he might have gotten the worst of it off with his sleeve.

In the end Keith resigns himself to his fate for now. He’s too tired to care about how presentable he looks. His face feels horrible and his shoulder hurts too much for him to dare to move his arms while they’re still cuffed together.

Keith groans and drops his head to his knees, and lets his eyes fall close for a few seconds.

Keith gets an abrupt awakening in the form of Haggar leaning over him, and he’s not sure which god or star to thank for not screaming when he opens his eyes. Haggar smiles, and the friendliness of it is ruined by the cold glimmer in her eyes. Keith refuses to budge under her stare, even if he’d like nothing more than to get away from her.

“Can I do something for you?” Keith asks once the silence becomes too much for him to bear. Haggar takes a small step back.

“The Emperor will see you now,” she replies, and Keith weighs his options before pushing himself to his feet, hoping he looks less unsteady than he feels, and lets himself be escorted out of the cell by two Galra soldiers.

Haggar stays behind them, and Keith can feel her eyes on his back even though he can’t see or hear her. It’s more unnerving than the time he spent being transported to the Central Command. She’s like a ghost trailing somewhere just outside of Keith’s view, raising the hairs on the back of his neck up and sending chills down his back, making him want to run down the hall and away from her presence as fast as he can. The worst part is that for the first time since Keith got captured the Galra are taking his shorter legs into consideration and keeping their pace fast but manageable for Keith, which means they’re going slower than any other time Keith has been moved.

He’s almost tempted to tell them to hurry up.

Keith tries to memorize the route he’s being taken, but it’s hard with his concussion still giving him trouble combined with the strangeness of his surroundings. The only thing he knows for sure is that where ever Zarkon is isn’t close to the cells, and that the Central Command is a lot bigger than Keith thought it was.

He can’t see anything that would help him escape, and though there are signs of what Keith assumes are floor numbers and directions he can’t read them. He’ll have to come up with some other way of navigating the ship, assuming he can operate the doors on his own. If he got left alone he could always try taking a hand from one of the sentries marching up and down the hallways, but it would take time and he’d have to get a weapon first.

They take an elevator to a hallway that lacks the usual sentries patrolling them, and their journey stops before a set of doors close to the elevator. A wave of nausea hits Keith, and he pretends it’s because of his concussion and not over meeting Zarkon. He hopes the Galra can’t tell how uneasy he is.
Haggar moves past Keith to open the door and slide in, and Keith gets a few more seconds to prepare himself before the guards drag him through the doors and push him to kneel on the floor, and shove his head down so all he sees is the ground before he can get a good look at his new surroundings. Keith tries to fight it, refusing to bow before Zarkon, but he can’t do much against the strength of two Galra in his injured state. Keith grits his teeth and presses against their hold anyways.

“You can leave now.” Zarkon’s voice cuts through the air, and though the dismissal sounds almost like an afterthought there’s a coldness to his words that chill even Keith to the bone.

The guards release their hold on Keith and bow as they back away. Keith sits up as soon as he’s able to do so, but stays put on the ground, keeping his eyes down until he hears the doors close. He takes a quiet breath and lets his mind go blank for a second before raising his head, scanning the room quickly before locking his eyes on Zarkon.

Keith is a little taken aback to find he’s been taken into some kind of a small conference room, and he almost laughs at something as simple as a conference room apparently being universal. It would be more comforting if he could ignore Zarkon studying him with open curiosity.

Keith doesn’t look away. He considers pushing himself to his feet, but his legs hurt and he’s not interested in risking more damage to himself, and as much as he’d love to do the whole defiance act he knows his well being must come first, at least until he knows what Zarkon has planned for him.

Keith doesn’t notice Haggar moving behind him, and he starts when she grabs his shoulder and pulls almost gently. Keith takes the hint and pushes himself up, grinding his teeth together to keep himself from making a sound when his body protests to the movement. Haggar circles Keith once, taking his appearance in from head to toe before going to stand by Zarkon’s side by the windows. Keith shifts his weight and tries not to let the silence get to him.

Zarkon is the first to move, and he motions for Keith to get closer while he walks past the table near the windows to the small serving table by the far wall, and pours the liquid from the dark, metallic pitcher to a glass made of the same material before turning back to Keith who hasn’t moved from his spot.

“Sit.” It’s an order if Keith ever heard one, but he refuses to give Zarkon what he wants quite so easily.

Zarkon seems more amused than annoyed with Keith, and while Keith isn’t sure if he likes it he decides it’s probably better than anger. He glares at Zarkon while he makes his way to the head of the table and pushes a chair out for Keith before sitting on the edge of the table. Haggar circles Keith once, taking his appearance in from head to toe before going to stand by Zarkon’s side by the windows. Keith shifts his weight and tries not to let the silence get to him.

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Keith wants to accept the glass. His throat hurts and his mouth is uncomfortably dry, and he knows he’d feel better if he drank something. He takes another step forward without thinking. He’s quickly running out of excuses not to accept the drink, and though he clings to the last shreds of pride and defiance he has left at that moment he’s not sure if it’s worth it.

“I assume you have basic survival instincts despite the evidence to contrary,” Zarkon says and Keith thinks he can hear a hint of amusement in his voice. It’s enough to snap him out of his head and he throws a glare at Zarkon.
“How do I know that’s not poisoned or something?” Keith asks, making sure his words have as much venom behind them as he can muster.

Zarkon stares at Keith with unblinking eyes for a second too long for Keith to be comfortable with before taking a sip from the glass without a word and offering it to Keith again. Keith doesn’t move even though he’s just ran out of excuses not to accept the glass.

“If you do not want it that is fine. I am sure she will appreciate the chance to see how long it takes for you to wither away,” Zarkon says as he nods towards Haggar, his voice far too conversational.

Keith doesn’t waste a moment weighing his options, but he doesn’t hurry to take the glass from Zarkon either. He takes his time glaring at Zarkon as he closes the distance between them, minding his injured leg and ribs as he moves. Zarkon smiles at him when he accepts the glass and Keith wants to run.

Keith sniffs at the liquid before bringing the glass to his lips and taking a tentative sip. It’s bitter and a little too warm for Keith’s taste. He’s not sure he likes the almost thick texture of it, but after the first sip Keith downs the entire glass in one go.

“Sit,” Zarkon orders again and Keith obeys, but only because his leg is hurting and his head feels dizzy, and he doesn’t want to faint in front of Zarkon.

Keith ignores the satisfied look on Zarkon’s face and focuses on studying the bottom of his now empty glass. He’s sure it’s made of metal, but he can’t tell which one. The thin coating of some kind of transparent paint or glass keeps him from feeling it. Keith rubs the smooth edges while Zarkon studies him, pretending he’s fine even as his heart races and he feels like gasping for breath.

“Now, the nature of your stay here will be entirely dependent on you,” Zarkon starts as he stands and walks around Keith. “If you behave yourself and do not cause any unnecessary trouble you will have my protection, and you will be treated as a guest.”

Keith keeps his eyes glued to his glass, and when Zarkon returns to his side with the pitcher Keith lets him pour the glass full again without a word. Keith expects Zarkon to continue talking but he stays silent as he sits at the head of the table, placing his elbows on the table and resting his jaw on his interlaced fingers while Keith sips his drink.

“And if I don’t behave myself?” Keith can’t help but ask, and he’s glad his voice sounds steadier than he feels.

Zarkon tilts his head like he’s considering his answer. “Then you will be a prisoner and be treated as such. If you are lucky Haggar might have some use for you and you will not have to spend the rest of your life in a dark cell, at the mercy of people whose friends and family you have just murdered. I am sure they will appreciate the chance to express their displeasure at you,” he replies and offers Keith a pleasant smile.

Keith stills with his glass on his lips and stares at Zarkon, trying to figure out if he’s just throwing an empty threat at him or if he’s serious. Keith decides to take the threat as real. He looks away and weighs his options, even though he knows which one he should pick. He won’t be able to escape if he’s locked up in a cell being beaten by his guards or worse. He doubts he can get away from Haggar if she decides she wants to experiment on him, but if he plays along he might have a chance to escape, or at least he’ll be alive and in more or less one piece when the others come to rescue him. It should be an obvious choice and yet Keith can’t help but hesitate.
Keith turns his eyes to Zarkon and levels him with a hard stare. “What’s the catch?”

“Pardon?”

“You’re not offering me friendship or whatever out of the goodness of your heart. What’s the catch?” Keith frowns when Zarkon seems happy at his words. It’s not the reaction he was expecting.

“Do not concern yourself with it. I will not ask you for anything you will not give willingly,” Zarkon replies and something about his tone makes Keith’s skin crawl. He should say no because of that alone, but the alternative is likely to leave him dead before he can escape or be rescued.

“I’ll try,” Keith concedes eventually, sounding more resigned than he’d like, but it makes Zarkon happy so Keith doesn’t take it as a complete loss, even if it makes him feel sick.

“In that case I believe you have earned a shower. Get that blood off your face, perhaps some clean clothes. Haggar will see to your injuries. Do that without any problems and we will arrange a meal for you.” Zarkon turns his attention to Haggar who gives him a cursory bow before walking out of the room, leaving Keith alone with Zarkon.

Keith downs the last of his drink and tries to decide if he can fill the glass one more time when Zarkon takes the pitcher and does it for him. Keith hates the pleasant look Zarkon gives him. The whole situation makes him feel like the mouse a cat plays with before eating it.

Zarkon takes in a sharp breath, making Keith start, and looks at Keith with an almost apologetic look in his eyes.

“I do not believe I caught your name,” Zarkon says, and Keith can’t help raising a disbelieving eyebrow at him. He doesn’t buy that Zarkon doesn’t know all of the Paladins by name, and he’s not sure what Zarkon’s game is now.

“Keith,” he still replies. Zarkon tries it out silently a few times while Keith finishes his drink seconds before Haggar returns with the guards who had brought Keith in.

Keith gets up when he’s told to and lets the guards escort him to the door, even though he thinks it’s stupid and kind of pointless. Haggar looks at Zarkon and they seem to share some kind of a silent conversation for a few seconds before she glances at Keith and moves to follow him and his guards.

“I will see you later,” Zarkon calls after Keith as he steps through the doors, and Keith twists around to look at him before the doors close. The gleam in Zarkon’s eyes reminds Keith of a predator about to devour its prey, and he swallows around the sudden lump in his throat as the doors close and he’s escorted down the hallway.

He hopes the others are coming for him soon.

Chapter End Notes

Since I'm currently studying for a philosophy exam I'm going to be slow on the editing for a while, but I'll try to get the next chapter up asap.

In the mean time you can find me on tumblr.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So season 3 was a blessing since it confirmed a couple of my headcanons and that all AU’s are canon, and that’s pretty cool. It also turned one of the dumbest jokes I've written into this fic into canon so... yay?

I do feel the need to mention this fic isn't really going to be following the season 3 canon 100 percent, but this probably won't go way off canon either. We'll see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Keith’s surprise and delight Galra showers are fairly similar to Earth showers. He has to take a minute to figure out the controls and water pressure, and though the water stays a bit too hot for Keith’s preferences he relishes the feel of it washing away the sweat and blood from his skin. Soon even his head stops hurting. He’d stay there for hours if it wasn’t for the guards ready to take him to Haggar waiting for him.

Keith dries himself off and puts on the dark gray clothes he’d been handed, and though he misses the security and familiarity of his Paladin armor he thinks his new outfit could be worse. The material the clothes are made of is a bit rough, but they fit and are warm, and in the end that’s what’s important. To Keith it seems to be some kind of an under armor suit complete with soft shoes he wouldn’t dare to wear outside. He wonders if it's a typical prisoner uniform or a variation of the outfit Shiro had worn during his time with the Galra.

Keith shakes his head and pushes the thought out of his mind as soon as it appears. Thinking of what happened to Shiro won’t help him at that moment. He has to stay focused.

He leaves the showers, and though he’s tempted to resist, he lets the pale furred Galra tasked with him to cuff his hands again. Compliance is, for the moment, Keith’s best chance of getting to a position from which he can escape.

The two Galra walk him to Haggar in complete silence, their expressions sour and the set of their shoulders stiff. Keith suspects it’s because they’ve been tasked with guarding him.

Keith bites his lip and tries to memorize the route he’s being taken, and though he gets a general idea of where the showers are in relation to Haggar’s labs it’s not much of a start. He still has no idea where exactly he is on the ship or where he’d need to go if he got a chance to run.

When they enter Haggar’s labs the guards show Keith to a chair while Haggar walks up to them, motioning for the guards to give her space. The guards hurry away from Haggar’s reach far too eagerly for Keith’s comfort, but he does his best to appear calm. Haggar studies Keith for a long minute with a thoughtful frown on her face before nodding to herself and extending her hand to Keith.

“Let me see your wrists,” she says when Keith does nothing but eye her hand in distrust, and after thinking it over Keith extends his arms and lets Haggar take the handcuffs off.

She turns Keith’s hands a few times and studies the damage the cuffs have done to his wrists
before moving away and ordering Keith to follow her to another room. Keith hesitates before getting up and limping after her. *Compliance*, he reminds himself and tries to trust he’s doing the right thing.

The room looks a little like a doctor’s examination room, and Keith scans it from his chosen place at the door. There’s an examination table with bright lights hanging over it and a few pieces of technology Keith can’t recognize, and he’ll be happy to never know what they’re used for.

“Strip,” Haggar orders with her back turned to Keith, so she misses the look of pure disbelief and mortification on Keith’s face.

“Excuse me?” He blurts before he can think better of it, and Haggar turns to face him with an almost bored expression on her face and a small jar in her hands.

“I am under orders to treat your wounds, and not to have someone else do it. You’re limping and I know you’ve been kicked so it’s not just your face and wrists that are damaged. I can have the guards help you if you want but this will be easier if you cooperate.” Haggar moves to stand in Keith’s personal space as she talks, and Keith has to resist the urge to lean back to get away from her.

“Fine,” Keith grits through his teeth and waits until Haggar backs away before taking his clothes off.

He’s never been more grateful for underwear in his life, and though he’d rather be anywhere but in that small, strangely chilly room, he can appreciate Haggar’s clinical approach to the situation as she motions for Keith to hop on the examination table. Keith does as he’s told, and Haggar starts prodding and poking his injured knee and leg, comparing it to the one that hasn’t been hurt every once in a while.

After a careful examination Haggar applies a thin cover of gel from her jar on Keith’s injured knee and ankle. Keith trusts she knows what she’s doing, and he’s not comfortable enough around her to comment on anything without fearing for his safety, so he doesn’t ask what the gel is or what it does besides making his skin tingle.

Haggar takes a quick look at the bruise covering Keith’s stomach and gets a bottle from one of her many cabinets, and covers Keith’s whole mid section with the cold oil from it. It seems a bit excessive, but Keith doesn’t know anything about Galra medicine so he keeps his mouth shut.

The gel on Keith’s knee and ankle have dried by the time Haggar is satisfied with treating Keith’s bruises. Haggar stops to study Keith’s injuries for a moment, almost like she’s contemplating her next move. She takes a deep breath before turning her attention to Keith’s face, deciding against whatever she had considered, and Keith stays still while she applies the oil on his face.

“I would put your leg in compression to help you walk, but since you are not going to be moving around I’m sure you will manage without it,” Haggar says, and though her voice is politely conversational Keith still hears the sharp reminder of his status on the ship behind her words.

Keith doesn’t say anything. He suspects Haggar is doing the bare minimum for him anyways, and only because Zarkon ordered her to, and he’s not going to pick a fight with her over a twisted knee. He still forces a brief smile just to show Haggar he’s not scared of her. Haggar returns the smile and stabs Keith’s arm with a needle without a warning, looking all too happy at the hiss of pain Keith can’t suppress.

“What the fuck?” Keith glares at Haggar and gets only a small smirk in response.
“You can get dressed now,” she says and moves to the desk filled with instruments Keith can’t begin to name, and Keith pulls his clothes on as fast as he can. If Haggar notices his hurry she doesn’t say anything, and by the time she turns her attention back to Keith he’s already standing by the door and ready to go wherever he will be staying.

Haggar shows Keith back to the guards still waiting for them, and she tells Keith someone will bring him something to eat shortly while he’s being handcuffed again. Keith wonders what shortly means in Galra terms, and though he’s starting to feel like he’s starving he doesn’t have to spend his time in the dark.

The guards take Keith to a cell, and this time he gets to have a dim, purple light run along the edge of the ceiling instead of all consuming darkness. Keith counts that as a win. He has no idea what time it is or whether or not the light is because it’s officially day on board the ship, or because Zarkon is playing games with him. At that moment Keith doesn’t really care, he’s just happy he doesn’t have to spend his time in the dark.

There’s nothing of use on the walls or the floor, and the door is locked from the outside. The only thing in the cell besides Keith is a small toilet in the corner, for which Keith is grateful for. It’s one less thing for him to worry about.

Keith sighs and decides to sit by a wall to give his leg a chance to heal, and as he sinks down to the cold ground he takes note of the faint outline of a small opening at the bottom of the door. It’s too small for Keith to fit through and he knows he can’t open it without even trying. He suspects it’s used for food deliveries or something similar.

He lets his mind wander once he settles into his spot. His thoughts drift to Shiro and whether this is what it was like for him, and if he’ll be thrown into an arena too after Zarkon grows tired of him. He hopes not, he doubts he could survive as long as Shiro had. He doesn’t have the patience to think his way out of life threatening situations like Shiro does, he’s too prone to acting to the point Lance of all people has to tell him to stop and think. He’d never survive fighting to death in front of a loud crowd, day after day.

Keith sighs and bangs his head to the wall, and curses at the flash of pain it causes. He’d assumed the concussion had healed when he stopped feeling so woozy on his feet and his head stopped throbbing, but on hindsight that might have just been the thirst. He needs to be more careful.

He needs to start thinking before acting.

Time seems to slow down to a crawl and the world around Keith becomes distant. Keith wonders if Haggar drugged him or if it’s just his concussion still acting up.

Maybe Zarkon had poisoned him after all.

Eventually the door to his cell opens and the pale furred Galra from before steps in with a tray. He glares at Keith like he’s offended by his mere existence, and Keith would take it personally if he wasn’t wearing a similar expression himself.

“Feeding is every other quarter. Anything but food misses from the tray you don’t get more for the next ten quarters. Leave the tray at the door when you’re done. You get checked on when we have the time. Got it?” The Galra sounds annoyed, and Keith has to resist the urge to snark back at him. Instead he offers a short nod as a reply and watches while the Galra sets the tray down and leaves. Keith waits until the door closes before surging forward.

The food he’s been given consist of a glass of the same drink Zarkon had given him, something resembling a slice of bread though the color is almost black and it’s bitter and hard, and a bowl of
mostly tasteless white goo. Keith doesn’t complain, he’s too hungry to care what he’s eating as long as it’s safe and keeps him alive. He finishes the food and the drink, and takes the opportunity to fill the glass with water from the tab connected to the toilet.

The water has a strange aftertaste, but Keith is more concerned about staying hydrated than the taste. He leaves the tray along with the glass by the door like he was ordered to. He doesn’t know how long a quarter is, let alone ten, and he’s not about to find out at the expense of food.

Keith settles down in his spot at the far wall, his stomach finally full, and he lets his eyes close just for a moment.

Keith doesn’t have a way to count the passing of time. The dim light stays on at all times, and Keith begins to resent it with every passing moment. The only thing Keith can count is the meals he gets, but since he has no concept of the time between them he can’t say if it’s been a few days or a week. He’s been checked on once, so he assumes it hasn’t been too long since he was placed in the cell, but then again the Galra might not care that much about his general well being, or Keith might have been asleep and missed a check. His muscles ache from lying on the hard floor and his body feels stiff.

He’s tired all the time, and he’s starting to think there’s something in his food that causes it. Or maybe it's the light, Keith can’t be sure.

The one thing Keith can really do is think. He’s come to the conclusion that Zarkon was after him and not Allura, mostly because of the one meeting he’s had with him. Keith doubts Zarkon would’ve taken such an interest in him if he wasn’t important in some way. Keith also realizes he’s in a unique position to help Pidge get her family back. He’ll have to be careful when approaching the subject of the Holts. He decides he’ll try to gain some sort of a rapport with Zarkon first, and when the time is right he’ll try to at least get a clue as to where they are.

Keith is waiting on his sixteenth meal that’s already late by his understanding when his cell door opens, flooding the tiny space with light that makes Keith blink rapidly to keep his eyes from watering too much. Keith doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong, but the lack of food and the frustrated look on the now familiar Galra’s face make him uneasy.

“Get up. You’re getting a shower,” the Galra snaps and shows Keith the handcuffs he’s carrying. Keith eyes him for a few seconds before pulling himself to his feet and offering his wrists to the grumbling Galra. He’s not going to ruin a chance to get a shower, he stinks and his skin itches, and he’s happy for a chance to stretch his legs.

Keith isn’t surprised to see another guard waiting outside the cell door, and he’s escorted to the same showers he’d been in the last time. He gets a towel and a new pair of clothes that Keith notes look cozier than his current ones even when they’re folded. He’s not sure why that is but he’s not going to complain, and he hurries out of his clothes and into the too hot shower, washing away the grime and sweat his skin got covered in even in the cell.

It’s the heat of the ship and the staleness of the air in his cell, and the clothes that chafe his skin. He knows it could be a lot worse so he refuses to complain, even as he prays the others will come get him soon. He hopes their plan will be better than the one they had when they saved Allura, especially now that they are down one Paladin. They’d still have to figure out how Zarkon was
tracking Keith in the first place, but at least they now know he was the one causing the problem.

Keith would like to stay in the shower and let the water soothe his aching muscles, but getting out of the shower on his own once he’s clean is preferable to having someone barge in and tell him to hurry up. He steps out of the hot spray of water with a heavy sigh and dries himself off.

He changes into his new, clean clothes, that turn out to be a more comfortable version of his first ones, as well as a kind of wrap shirt with elbow length sleeves. The deep, dark red color reminds Keith of the desert at sunset, but he forces the thought out of his mind.

Keith takes a deep breath before he steps out of the showers and faces the guards waiting for him. They handcuff him and take their places at Keith’s sides, and to Keith’s dismay start walking him to away from the cells. Keith thinks about asking where they are taking him, but he doubts he’d get an answer.

Keith doesn’t have to try very hard to figure out he’s being taken either to Haggar or Zarkon, and he’s not sure which would be worse. They walk past the turn to Haggar’s labs, and he almost sighs in relief before realizing he’s most likely being taken to Zarkon. Keith wishes he’d at least got to eat something first, though the shower suddenly makes more sense. Of course they wouldn’t take him to meet the Emperor all smelly and dirty.

The guards take Keith to the same conference room as before, and as he expected Zarkon is waiting for him. They throw Keith into the room and bow before their Emperor before rushing out of the doors, leaving Keith to pick himself up from the floor.

Zarkon doesn’t take his eyes from the pad like device in his hands or acknowledge Keith in anyway, and for a moment Keith wonders if he could slip out of the room without being noticed. He doubts he could pull it off, but he refuses to walk up to the table either.

“Did you want something?” Keith asks, not really expecting an answer, but the silence starts to get on his nerves and he doesn’t want to be toyed with.

Zarkon responds by kicking the chair next to him out for Keith, and Keith can’t stop himself from taking a quick step forward when he spots the plate filled with actual food, not the goo he’s been fed for who knows how long. Keith stops, hesitating for a moment before deciding he wants the food more than he wants to defy Zarkon.

Keith takes the seat by Zarkon’s side and takes in the delicious smelling meat and vegetables, and his mouth waters at the mere idea of tasting it all. He’s still handcuffed though, and he can’t spot a fork or any other utensils, and considering he’s always had a spoon up until that moment he can’t help but think that this is Zarkon’s way of humiliating him.

“All chance you could uncuff me? Or at least give me a fork? A spoon? Maybe some chopsticks?” Keith gives Zarkon the most patient look he can muster, and waits until Zarkon looks up from his pad.

Keith raises an eyebrow and shows Zarkon his wrists.

“I am supposed to trust you with a sharp object with your hands free?” Zarkon regards Keith with amused eyes, tilting his head as he places his pad down. “You did try to kill me once already.”

Keith laughs before he can stop himself. “I couldn’t beat you with Red and you’re worried I’d get you with a fork?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Zarkon replies with a small smile on his lips, and it’s almost like
they’re sharing a joke. Keith hates it, but he’s missed talking to someone and the stress he’s been under doesn’t feel so bad if he has something to smile at, even if it’s only for a second.

Zarkon turns serious and studies Keith with too sharp eyes. and the change makes Keith pay closer attention to him. He want to fidget and avert his eyes, but he forces himself to remain still. Keith won’t give Zarkon the satisfaction of making him outwardly uncomfortable with a single look.

“Consider the food as a reward for your good behavior. If you choose to turn it down you are free to return to your cell and wait for your next meal there, and I will know better than to offer you an alternative in the future,” Zarkon says, giving Keith a moment to process his words.

Keith knows it wouldn’t be the end of the world for him to leave and wait for the next meal in his cell, but the goo the guards bring him isn’t good and the meat in front of him is too inviting to turn down.

“And the fork? Or the cuffs?” Keith asks despite knowing he won’t get either.

“Those are privileges you will earn in time. Accept my kindness, offer yours in return, and you will be fine. You are already treated better than most of our prisoners and I would hate to see that change.” Zarkon smiles, and though he sounds friendly enough Keith doesn’t miss the unspoken threat that he could wind up finding out just how the other prisoners are being treated if he doesn’t do what Zarkon wants.

“I thought I was a guest,” Keith says.

“You are, which is the only reason we are having this conversation,” Zarkon replies.

Keith isn’t sure what he’s supposed to say to that, so he forces a brief smile he knows is insincere at best before turning his attention to the food before him. Keith figures there’s nothing else to be said about the matter and picks at the food with his fingers, testing it to make sure he won’t burn himself before tearing a piece of the meat off and tasting it.

It’s better than Keith imagined and he has to choke back a moan at the first bite. The meat is rich and tender with a taste that reminds Keith of lamb and chicken, and he has to make an effort not to eat too quickly. Zarkon keeps his eyes on Keith for a minute before focusing his attention to his pad. Keith spares a second to be glad for it.

Keith finishes his plate and the glass of the bittersweet green liquid he thinks might be a Galra equivalent of juice. He wipes his fingers clean on the napkin he’s been given and enjoys the feel of a good meal in his stomach. He doesn’t want the moment ruined so he closes his eyes and leans back in his chair, and enjoys the quiet, pretending Zarkon isn’t there by his side.

Of course it doesn’t last very long.

“I am curious as to what you are thinking,” Zarkon says without taking his eyes from his pad.

“How nice the peace and quiet was before you broke it.” Keith shoots back, immediately regretting his words. He’s supposed to play nice, get out of his cuffs and maybe stab Zarkon with a fork if the opportunity were to present itself, ot pick a fight.

“If you want to be alone I can have you escorted back to your cell,” Zarkon offers, his helpful tone ruined by the coldness of his gaze.

Keith turns his eyes to Zarkon and mulls over his options. He could go to his cell, but he doesn’t know if Zarkon would take that as an offense. A bigger part of Keith just doesn’t want to go back
to being alone in that tiny room.

“How long is a quarter?” he asks, hoping it will keep Zarkon from kicking him out of the room. Zarkon studies him for a long moment before taking a deep breath and setting his pad down.

“Before we developed a need for more precise units we measured time in periods of habitability on our home planet. Mornings, days, evenings and nights. Four parts of a single day, four quarters. It is an archaic and rather useless system now, but we never quite got over the habit,” Zarkon explains, and Keith mulls over his words.

“Habitability?” Keith can’t help his curiosity, and if nothing else he’s learning something about the Galra.

“Days got hot, depending on where you lived dangerously so. We liked to avoid activity outside during those times.” Zarkon leans back in his chair and regards Keith with an almost friendly look on his face. Keith doubts he can ever be truly, sincerely kind to anyone.

“The Galra are nocturnal?” Keith figures it would explain the dimness of the lights and the darker shades of colors they seem to favor.

“We tended to spend the days inside, but in some places the nights got too dark and cold to do anything as well. We took advantage of the dusk and the dawn and the hours when the sun was not too high as well as the night, and slept in the hours between. I guess you might say we are mostly crepuscular with nocturnal tendencies,” Zarkon replies, and Keith nods as he considers the new information on his enemy, especially Zarkon’s choice of words.

“Is there anything else you want to know?” Zarkon asks, breaking Keith out of his thoughts.

Keith bites back the impulse to start questioning Zarkon on things he knows won’t sit well with him, and he suspects the Galra homeworld that apparently was instead of is belongs on that list. Still, there is one thing that has weighed his mind since his capture even more than how Zarkon had tracked him.

“I’ve been wondering if you found my shuttle,” Keith says, hoping his words sound more convincingly innocent than he thinks.

“I had no interest in pursuing the Princess if that is what you are worried about. She is not with us,” Zarkon replies with a knowing smile playing on his lips. “Anything else?”

Keith is surprised Zarkon admitted to having let Allura go, but the knowledge of her safe escape still eases his mind. For a moment he considers asking about the Holts, but it might be too soon for that.

“Does the light have to be on all the time?” Keith asks instead. “In my cell. Humans are kinda programmed to require a couple of hours of darkness a day. It’s starting to get on my nerves,” he continues at the curious look on Zarkon’s face. Zarkon is quiet for a few excruciatingly long seconds, and Keith worries he’s said something wrong.

“I will consider it,” Zarkon says eventually, and Keith takes what he can get. “Unfortunately I have to attend to other matters now. Do try not to cause any trouble so we can do this again,” Zarkon continues in a tone that’s a fairly good imitation of apologetic.

Keith still wants to ask about how Zarkon even tracked him across the universe. He definitely doesn’t want to go back to the cell, but he knows his best chance is to play along and be a good prisoner for now, even if it’s not what he wants to be doing.
Keith goes quietly when the guards come to take him. He doesn’t fight when he’s shoved back into his cell, and when the door slams shut behind him he takes a moment to come to terms with the small space again.

It takes three or four quarters going by the meals, but the lights turn off without a warning and Keith is plunged into darkness. He freezes for a second — the sudden change in lighting catching him off guard — but once he realizes what has happened he lets out a relieved breath and closes his eyes. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed the dark and the illusion of night.

It becomes a routine of sorts, and Keith clings to it with everything he has. He gets the tasteless goo every now and again, the lights go off for some time after the fourth meal, and he gets checked on every seventh meal. Keith gets to take a shower only when Zarkon wants to see him, which isn’t very often.

As much as Keith hates it he’s slowly starting to wait for their short meetings, mostly because of the food and partly because of the chance to talk with someone. He suspects it’s exactly what Zarkon planned for; he’s becoming the preferable option for the loneliness and there’s little Keith can do about it.

Keith sighs, expecting the lights to zap on any minute now, and pretends he doesn’t hope that he’s going to be taken out of his cell when that happens. He’s been behaving himself even if the boredom is starting to get to him, and he’s hoping for some kind of a change before his restless energy makes him do something stupid.

Keith tries to think of his time with Zarkon as gathering information, though all he’s got so far is that the Galra — in addition to being a crepuscular species — don’t trust what Zarkon calls outsiders, they prefer warm environments, and from what Keith has gathered they have an obsessively strong sense of community and culture.

In exchange for all Zarkon has told him Keith has offered a few unimportant facts of his own life, making sure he tells Zarkon nothing that he can use against either Keith or the other Paladins. He tells Zarkon he was the best pilot of his class, that he enjoys reading and he can cook a few dishes, and that he’s never been very good with people.

Keith is trying to decide what the next tidbit of information he could share with Zarkon should be when the cell door opens and Haala, the pale furred Galra tasked with Keith’s well being and transportation, sticks his head in and gives Keith the familiar long suffering glare. Keith smiles at him, knowing it will annoy him, and stands up.

“Let’s go,” Haala says and Keith offers his wrists without prompting.

Keith gets to take his shower and change his clothes before Haala escorts him deeper into the ship, and Keith has memorized the route to the conference room well enough to know he’s not being taken there.

“So what are we doing today?” Keith asks, his voice friendly mostly because he knows Haala won’t like it, and gets a sharp shove in return.

“I just feed you and take you where I’m told to take you, and make sure you’re alive every now and then,” Haala replies like he always does when Keith tries to get him to tell what’s going on.
Keith wouldn’t be surprised if Haala actually didn’t know anything about what goes on with Keith, but he keeps asking, if for no other reason than to talk to someone who isn’t Zarkon.

“But you do know where we’re going and I don’t,” Keith points out and glances at Haala’s face, almost smiling at the annoyed frown on his face.

“It’s a secret,” Haala says and, to Keith’s surprise, flashes him a sharp toothed grin before going back to staring ahead and looking annoyed. Keith stumbles briefly, but he doesn’t miss the brief smirk that crosses Haala’s face.

Keith thinks he might have made a friend.

They take the elevator up several floors, and when the doors open Keith is met with curious gazes from the Galra moving up and down the hallway. He feels like a zoo exhibition and he’s tempted to tell Haala to move faster. Keith knew there were other Galra on board the ship, he’d even seen them before, but being marched down a hallway in handcuffs in an area that probably doesn’t see many prisoners isn’t fun. The Galra share a few hushed whispers before their expressions go from curious to barely concealed hostility, and Keith almost looks down.

Haala walks Keith to the end of the hallway and through a set of doors that lead to an observation deck of all things, and Keith takes the room in with wide eyes. He’s not surprised to see Zarkon, but Haggar’s presence isn’t something he was expecting. They are having a conversation with a third Galra Keith hasn’t seen before, but when Zarkon sees Keith has arrived he turns his attention away from the Galra and motions for Keith to come closer.

Keith has learned it’s best to do what Zarkon wants, and though he’s tempted to disrespect him in front of one of his officers he knows it won’t do him any good. Zarkon gives Keith his version of a friendly smile as Keith approaches, leaving Haala standing by the door.

“This is Thace.” Zarkon waits until Keith and Thace share a cursory nod before continuing, “he has kindly volunteered to help Haggar with a minor problem we have.”

Keith doesn’t have to be an expert on the Galra to be able to tell Thace hasn’t volunteered to do anything, but he stays quiet and pretends he hasn’t been ordered to do something he doesn’t seem to want to do. Keith can relate to it a little too well for his comfort, and for a second he hopes Thace hasn’t done anything to warrant Zarkon’s wrath before deciding it’s none of his business.

“That’s nice,” Keith says when he realizes Zarkon expects a reply.

Haggar smiles, amused for some reason, and heads for the doors. Thace takes the opportunity to follow her, though he throws an unreadable glance towards Keith before walking out of the room with Haala in tow. Keith would go with them if he could.

“I thought you might appreciate the view,” Zarkon says after the door closes and steps aside so that Keith can get a better look out of the window, and though the view of the passing ships and the structure that makes up the Galra Central Command is impressive Keith has trouble believing it’s the only reason Zarkon brought him there. He still takes the time watching the ships moving in strange formations past the window before turning to Zarkon.

“Any chance I get to see a nebula next?” he asks, making sure his voice is dripping with sarcasm, and to his surprise Zarkon laughs, the sound of it sharp and short, though Keith can hear the genuine amusement behind it.

“Perhaps someday,” he replies and moves to the soft looking chairs at one side of the deck, leaving
Keith alone by the window.

Keith takes one last glance at the view before following Zarkon, the furniture looking too inviting for him to stay away for any longer. He takes note of the tray on the small table in the middle of the seating arrangement, and though it looks more like a tea serving than a meal Keith can’t wait to get a taste of it.

Zarkon points at the chair by his side when Keith reaches him, but Keith ignores him in favor of slumping down on the small couch instead. He can’t help but sigh quietly when he sinks into the soft cushions. Zarkon eyes him for a second before pouring two cups of tea and placing one of them before Keith, and if he doesn’t like Keith picking the couch over the chair he doesn’t show it.

Keith is too busy trying to become a part of the couch to have any interest in Galra tea. He’s been either sitting on a cold hard floor or on a less cold, hard chair for who knows how long, and the softness around him feels like heaven. Zarkon doesn’t say anything about it, so Keith doesn’t try to pay attention to anything else.

The cuffs weigh on Keith’s wrists, and he’d ask Zarkon to take them off if talking didn’t seem like such a hardship all of the sudden. He curls into a comfortable ball and lies down on the couch, letting his eyes fall shut. He means to take a minute or two at most to enjoy himself, but the softness and the low, barely audible hum of the ship lull him to sleep before he realizes what’s happening.

Eventually Keith drifts back to wakefulness, unsure how long he’s been out, and though he feels rested the heaviness in his bones and the warmth surrounding him try to drag him back to sleep. Keith is tempted to let that happen until he realizes the reason he woke up in the first place is that he can’t feel his hands. Keith groans and shifts his weight off of his arms, and another to remember he fell asleep in front of Zarkon of all people.

“Fuck,” Keith mutters into the cushions and takes a second to curse his life to hell and back before gathering what remains of his dignity and sitting up.

“The tea should still be warm if you want it,” Zarkon says, sounding far too amused for Keith’s liking. Keith turns to glare at him, and he’s not surprised to find Zarkon has pulled his pad out and has his eyes on it rather than Keith. It should be a relief but it’s not.

“I can’t feel my hands,” Keith states in response, getting Zarkon’s full attention. Keith lifts his arms as much as he can to show the cuffs and the deep impressions they’ve left on his wrists, and even Keith is a little surprised at how white his hands are.

Zarkon studies Keith for a moment before putting his pad down and getting up. Keith watches him round the table, and he shuffles to the corner of the couch when Zarkon sits by his side. Zarkon doesn’t mention the few inches of distance Keith manages to put between them, instead he reaches for Keith’s wrists and unlocks the cuffs without a word. Keith doesn’t hesitate before shaking his hands to get his blood flowing properly again, and he’s so focused on the welcomed tingling of his hands he misses Zarkon reach for him.

Keith jumps when Zarkon’s claw brushes against his forehead as he pushes a loose strand of hair out of Keith’s eyes, leaving Keith’s skin burning from the contact. It’s not what Keith ever expected from him, and he stares at Zarkon with wide unblinking eyes. He can’t remember the last time anyone touched him in such a gentle way. Maybe Shiro before he went on the Kerberos mission. It doesn’t help that nobody besides Haala has touched him since his first day in the Central Command, and Haala is rough and always keeps his contact with Keith to the bare
minimum.

Keith doesn’t know how he’s supposed to react to this.

He solves the problem by grabbing his cup from the table and chucking down most of the tea in one go. It’s too fruity and sweet for Keith and he burns his mouth, but it’s preferable to seeing that imitation of kindness on Zarkon’s face. Keith stuffs one of the deep yellow cookies into his mouth for good measure, and though it’s dry it’s not bad. The fresh, citrus like taste balances the sweetness of the tea out nicely if nothing else.

“You are supposed to eat them while you drink the tea,” Zarkon says, and he’d sound helpful if it wasn’t for the poorly concealed amusement in his voice. Keith doesn’t reply, but he refills his cup and picks another cookie, and and takes small bites of it between sips of tea. They’re definitely better that way.

The spot on Keith’s forehead Zarkon had touched burns, and he wonders if he’s allergic to him. Keith tries to ignore the heat radiating from Zarkon, and for a second he considers moving to one of the chairs before the thought that it might be exactly what Zarkon wants crosses his mind. He wants to get away as much as he wants to lean into it and let himself enjoy the warmth of another person. He takes a bite of his cookie and pretends he doesn’t hate himself just a little.

“I do have other matters to attend to, and as much as I enjoy these moments of ours I cannot put them before my people,” Zarkon says when Keith is finishing his second cup of tea, and suddenly Keith can’t breathe. He doesn’t want to go back to the cell. He doesn’t want to leave the warmth and softness of the couch.

“I’ll wait here,” Keith tries, knowing it won’t work.

Zarkon looks almost apologetic as he stands, and Keith waits with baited breath, hoping for the impossible while he walks around the small table.

“I cannot let you do that,” Zarkon replies as he turns to face Keith again. “I will bring you here again if you behave yourself.”

Keith opens and closes his mouth a few times, trying to come up with anything to keep him in the observatory deck for a little longer. He can’t go back to the cell just yet.


“You are causing trouble now,” Zarkon counters, and Keith snaps his jaw shut.

He’s not ready to find out what his punishment for not behaving in a way Zarkon wants is. Keith doubts Zarkon is the type to accept an apology, so he sighs and stands up, hoping it will satisfy Zarkon enough to at least not take what he already has away. Zarkon eyes Keith for a few seconds longer before walking to the door, and Keith follows him at a slower pace.

Haala is standing in the hallway, looking like he’d sprinted across the ship to get there before Zarkon opened the door. Zarkon tosses the handcuffs to him and walks away without a word, and Keith tries not to worry over it. Zarkon is probably just late for a meeting or something. Haala raises an eyebrow at Keith, but Keith isn’t in the mood for a chat, especially not about Zarkon. He starts towards the cells without waiting to be cuffed again.
I'm aiming to get the next update up later this month, maybe in a few weeks or so. In the meantime I hope you enjoyed this chapter :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Notes

This chapter was basically a birthday gift to a friend, and working her favorite tropes and ideas into this fic was both fun and a pain in my butt. But hey, I appreciate the challenge and I think I made it work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith gets to keep his occasional nighttime and his meals, but Zarkon doesn’t call for him again. It means Keith doesn’t get his shower, and soon his clothes start sticking to his skin. His hair isn’t doing much better, and though he manages to wash his face with the water from the tap it doesn’t help much.

He’s restless and anxious, and the cell starts getting to his head. He misses Haala and his patented long suffering glares. He even misses Zarkon’s presence and the niceties that come with him. The new prisoner down the hall screaming murder at any chance they get doesn’t help his mood either.

Keith knows what Zarkon is doing. He’s not sure he’s ever seen such a blatant assertion of dominance in his life, and he knows that’s what it is. There’s no other reason for Zarkon to abandon him in a cell over him asking to stay on a couch for a few hours. What annoys Keith most is that — even though he knows what’s happening — it’s still working. The small cell and isolation are a good punishment, though Keith knows things can get a lot worse than they are.

Keith buries his head in his knees and tries not to scream in frustration. He’ll have to talk to Zarkon and get this sorted out. He’s getting to the point where he’s willing to apologize if he has to, and he really doesn’t want to apologize to Zarkon for anything. Ever.

The lights start to go out at random intervals rather than every fourth meal, and the food stopped being a useful measurement some time ago. Keith suspects it’s been a week or two since the last time he was out of the cell, but he can’t be sure. It could very well have been a couple of days or even a month.

Keith has developed a habit of stretching and practicing his combat skills as much as he can in the small space over time, so he tries to distract himself by honing his forms for a few minutes before giving up. His whole body hurts and his head is throbbing. He thinks it might be the food and the fact that he hasn’t even been able to eat properly for a while, not to mention the lack of any kind of bed.

Keith slumps on the floor, but it’s too cold, and he’s about to get up again when the door opens and Haala steps in. Keith fixes his eyes on him, hoping to be ordered to stand, but Haala only levels him with an irritated look.

“You’re not eating,” he states and crosses his arms, making it clear to Keith that he’s not going anywhere.

“Just haven’t been hungry,” Keith replies as he leans his forehead on his knees.

“You do realize I’ll be in trouble if you starve to death,” Haala argues and steps into the cell. Keith
sighs and bangs his head on his knees.

“I’m not starving myself. I’m just not hungry. You try eating that stuff you call food for as long as I have and we’ll see if you still wanna eat.” Keith throws a tired glare at Haala before burying his face back in his knees.

“Suit yourself,” Haala huffs, and when Keith makes no move to acknowledge him further he leaves the cell, and the door slams shut with finality that makes Keith flinch.

He should’ve asked Haala to get him an audience with Zarkon. He could’ve asked for a shower or something else to eat. He could’ve just talked to another person for a few minutes, even if he didn’t really feel up to it.

Keith doesn’t know what’s wrong with him anymore.

His headache is getting worse and he coughs against the dryness of his throat, and tries to find the energy to get some water. He’d sleep just to pass the time, but the sharp pain flashing through his muscles at his every movement keeps him awake. Keith doubts the exercise helped with that.

Eventually Keith dozes off, and he gets a food delivery while he’s asleep. When he wakes up he stares at the tray in disgust. He’s sick of the food and he’s sick of the cell. He’s beginning to suspect the temperature has been dropped, and he curls into a tighter ball to stop the shivers running through his body before sighing and accepting the fact that he has to eat, if for no other reason than to keep Haala off his back.

The food tastes like dirt in his mouth and Keith gags even as he forces himself to eat two thirds of his bowl of goo and half of the too hard slice of bread. He gets the drink down easier, but it doesn’t stop his stomach from turning. He prays he doesn’t throw up as he lies down on the floor, pressing his forehead on the cold surface to alleviate the throbbing behind his eyes.

The light turns off, and Keith welcomes the darkness and the sleep that eventually comes with it.

Keith dreams of Red.

He’s back in the Lion, safe and warm, and Red sings ancient songs in his mind. Keith isn’t sure why, but he does his best to reassure Red he’s alright. He gets an unimpressed mental shove in return, but some of the worry he’d felt radiating from Red seems to have eased a bit.

Keith wishes he’ll never wake up from the dream, and though the sadness coming from Red hurts him he doesn’t want to see the inside of his cell again. He’d rather have dream Red than that.

Despite what Keith might want he gets dragged out of his dream by Haala shaking his shoulder a little too hard. Keith groans and tries to shove him off so he can go back to sleep. His head is killing him and his whole body is burning, but Haala doesn’t let up, so his only choice is to get up.

“What do you want now?” Keith snaps and glares at Haala who shows him the now familiar pair of handcuffs, and a wave of relief washes over Keith.

He’s getting out.
The lights in the hallways are too bright and Haala has to guide Keith to the elevator so he won’t bump into anything. He also keeps their pace a lot slower than usual, and Keith isn’t sure if he appreciates it or not. Haala takes him to the showers, and for once Keith takes his time soaking in the hot water. It eases the chill in his bones and the pain in his muscles, and the constant throbbing of his head isn’t so loud there.

Keith stays in the shower until can’t take the heat anymore, and he changes into the clean clothes that, to his surprise and relief, includes a shirt before trudging back to Haala. He gets cuffed again and Haala walks him to an elevator that takes them up more floors Keith cares to count for, and since he doesn’t understand the written language the markings on the control panel have little meaning to him. Haala knows where they are going and that’s good enough for Keith at that moment.

"So are we friends now?" Keith asks only for Haala to bare his teeth at him.

“I’d rather jump into a black hole. You’re my assignment, and until that’s not the case I’m taking care of you to the best of my abilities.” Haala glances at Keith and tilts his head. “But you’re not the worst person on that cell block so I guess I won the nanny lottery,” he concedes, and Keith accepts the compliment with a tired smile.

The doors open and Haala nudges Keith to get him to move, and Keith takes a deep breath before stepping out of the elevator. He lets Haala guide him towards a set of doors Keith hasn’t seen yet, but before they can reach the doors Haggar steps through them.

Keith stops in his tracks, making Haala bump into him. Haggar’s attention zeroes in on Keith and she walks up to him, studying him closely with every steps she takes. Keith does his best not to fidget under her gaze.

"You’ve looked better,” she remarks, and Keith makes an effort not to roll his eyes.

"I know," Keith says, his voice sounding more tired than he’d like.

Haggar studies his face for a long moment before stepping aside and walking away, and Haala urges Keith to move forward with a gentle tug of his shirtsleeve. He takes Keith to the doors and opens them so that Keith can step in, but he makes no move to follow, and it should probably worry Keith more than it does. Haala closes the doors and Keith frowns at them before turning to see where exactly he is.

He stops caring about Haala’s presence when he realizes he’s in a throne room complete with a dais, because of course Zarkon is the type to have a throne on a dais. Keith would’ve been more surprised if he didn’t have one, though he suspects it’s more psychological than egotistical — a place for Zarkon to look down on his subjects and assert his status as their Emperor of over ten thousand years. Keith wouldn’t be surprised if the Galra thought of Zarkon as a god of some kind by now.

Keith is so wrapped up in his thoughts he doesn’t spot Zarkon until he’s standing right in front of Keith, and Keith has to take a step back to keep his personal space intact. Keith looks past Zarkon, more from a desire to not to see the look in his face than to avoid craning his already stiff neck.

“You do not look well,” Zarkon says, and this time Keith can’t stop himself from rolling his eyes and letting out a quiet laugh.

“So I’ve heard,” Keith replies and spares a brief glance at Zarkon’s face. He’s a bit taken back by the apparent concern marring Zarkon’s features. Keith doesn’t know what to do with it. Zarkon
isn’t supposed to look at him like that.

Keith stays frozen in place when Zarkon touches his chin and gently lifts his head. Keith keeps his eyes averted while Zarkon studies him. The single point of contact burns Keith’s skin, and the heat spreads from his jaw to his throat and face, filling him with a soft kind of warmth he can’t remember ever feeling. He wants to lean into the touch and push Zarkon away for giving it to him.

“I hope you understand how precious my time is. The only reason you are here is because Haggar has agreed to attend to some urgent matters so that I can see you,” Zarkon says and gives Keith a few seconds to answer before adding, “you are causing trouble again.”

“I’m just not hungry. Didn’t think that would be a problem.” Keith risks a glance at Zarkon, and to his relief he’s looking at Keith with patience rather than worry or anger. Keith fixes his gaze back to the wall and waits until Zarkon is done staring at him into submission.

“Come sit down,” Zarkon says and steps away from Keith. Keith hates the unnatural hint of kindness in his voice. He does as he’s told, but the whole situation feels wrong.

Keith slumps down at the bottom of the dais and watches Zarkon from the corner of his eye as he moves to sit two steps above Keith. The cold hardness of the steps isn’t doing Keith any favors, and he almost leans into Zarkon just to feel the heat radiating from him.

Zarkon solves the problem for Keith when he presses his hand to Keith’s neck and pulls his head to rest on his knee. Keith closes his eyes as the heat overtakes him even through Zarkon’s cool armor, and when Zarkon pulls his hand back Keith hates himself for wanting it back. Keith doesn’t have long to miss Zarkon’s touch before his hand is back on Keith’s neck, this time without the barrier of his gloves.

Keith tenses at the touch and the warmth that seeps through his bones. When Zarkon squeezes the tense muscles at the base of Keith’s neck he lets out a quiet, involuntary whimper, and though it gets Zarkon to repeat the action Keith wishes he could take it back. His face heats up in shame, and he’s grateful for his hair for hiding it as he scrunches his eyes close and bites his tongue to keep quiet.

Zarkon keeps massaging Keith’s neck and shoulders, and eventually Keith’s head starts throbbing with the renewed blood flow. It’s preferable to the tension headache he’d been having for who knows how long, but Keith still wishes the relief had come from anyone but Zarkon.

He knows it’s a game and Zarkon is winning without even trying, but Keith doesn’t have it in him to pull away from Zarkon’s touch. It’s too comforting and relaxing, and Keith is having a hard time thinking straight. He blames the blood rushing to his head. He can barely hear anything over it.

A faint voice in the back of Keith’s mind is screaming at him, telling him something is wrong, that he should pull away and get his act together, but Keith doesn’t listen to it. He knows he’s lost this fight already so he might as well enjoy the tension leaving his muscles. The rational part of his mind that’s still working reasons that, if Zarkon thinks he’s breaking when he’s not, it might be something Keith can use to his advantage.

“You need to eat something.” Zarkon’s voice breaks through the haze in Keith’s mind. He presses his thumb to a particularly sore spot between Keith’s shoulder blades, and Keith has to take in a sharp breath at the flash it sends down his back.

“I put anymore of that goo in my mouth and I’m gonna throw up,” Keith mutters once he’s sure his voice won’t waver. Zarkon’s hand stills and Keith barely keeps himself from pressing against it.
He wants to punch himself.

“Then I will get you something else,” Zarkon replies, and Keith groans softly before turning his head to look at Zarkon.

“I’m really not hungry,” Keith insists. He doesn’t feel as sick as he did before, but he’s not too keen on the idea of eating something good now and then going back to the usual stuff.

“I can have Haggar feed you if that is what you want.” Zarkon smiles, knowing he’s already won.

Keith sighs in defeat. He’s not going to take any chances with Haggar, and he knows that last time he tried to argue with Zarkon is the reason he’s in his current mess to begin with. “You guys eat soup or something?”

Zarkon inclines his head and squeezes Keith’s neck before pulling out his pad and tapping the screen for a moment. Keith turns away from Zarkon and closes his eyes.

“It’s not just the food though, it’s the floor. It’s making me so tense I feel sick,” Keith says quietly, more to himself than to Zarkon, and maybe if it wasn’t for the Galra hearing he might have missed it.

“You can have a pillow,” Zarkon says and taps on the pad a few more times before putting it away and continuing to work on the knots in Keith’s back. Keith isn’t sure how a pillow is supposed to help him sleep better, but he takes what he can get. At least he’ll have something soft to sit on.

Keith loses track of time, and he barely notices the doors opening and a druid walking in with a tray. They set the tray down by Keith’s side and offers him a small vial with yellow liquid in it. Keith glances at Zarkon who inclines his head encouragingly, and Keith accepts the vial and downs it in one go. He grimaces at the taste, but neither the druid or Zarkon pay him any attention.

Keith waits until the druid is gone before turning his attention to the bowl of soup by his side, and he has to admit the scent of it is inviting. Keith starts to reach for the bowl, but Zarkon stops him by grabbing hold of his arms and taking the handcuffs off. Keith almost thanks him, but he’s not willing to give Zarkon that just yet.

Instead he takes the bowl in his hands, mindful of the heat so he won’t burn himself. He’s not sure if he can take the spoon the druid had brought to him, and he’s acutely aware of Zarkon when he reaches for it. He doesn’t get told no or stopped, so he dips the spoon in the soup before Zarkon can decide Keith hasn’t earned utensil rights.

The soup is definitely better than the goo. Keith isn’t really hungry, but he eats all of the soup that he thinks tastes like mashed vegetables and fish, even though it’s thick and bit too spicy for Keith’s liking. He feels a little better after finishing the bowl, and to his relief the headache and pain that’s plagued him for so long have quieted to a background annoyance.

Keith knows he’ll be going back to his cell now, and he readies himself for it so that he won’t cause another scene over the same matter two times in a row. He’s about to stand up and show some initiative when Zarkon grabs his hair and pulls his head back. Keith fights back the instinct to attack Zarkon, and though he stays tense he realizes that while Zarkon’s grip on his hair stings, it’s not as painful as it could be. It’s more of a warning than anything.

“I do not want to hear you doing something like this again,” Zarkon says and levels Keith with a hard look. “I am giving you a pass this time because you caught me in a good mood, but next time you are going straight to Haggar and she can deal with you in any way she sees fit.”
Keith does his best to nod despite Zarkon’s grip on his hair. He’d ask if he can have a change in his diet but he’d rather push his luck some other time. He keeps his eyes locked with Zarkon’s and hopes his expression is more calm than he feels. Zarkon leans forward and Keith feels the ghost of his breath on his face, but he keeps from flinching or trying to pull away.

“You are welcome,” Zarkon says and offers Keith a friendly smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

It’s a game and it dawns on Keith he can play it too if he dares, and he has very little to lose and a lot to gain. He twists his body, ignoring the pain in his muscles and scalp, and leans his weight on Zarkon’s thigh to keep his balance in the awkward position he ends up in. He forces a smile of his own on his face, and feels a bit more confident when Zarkon’s eyes widen minutely, more with curiosity than surprise.

“Thank you,” Keith replies, doing his best to sound sincere, and keeps his eyes locked with Zarkon’s. He wants to run away and never come anywhere near touching Zarkon again. His arm is burning from their contact.

He prays he’s doing the right thing.

For a few long seconds nothing happens, even the air seems to have stilled, then Zarkon huffs and lets go of Keith’s hair only to run his fingers along Keith’s jaw.

Zarkon runs his thumb along Keith’s cheek, and the pure fascination on his face keeps Keith still. The softness of his fingertips takes Keith by surprise, and for a moment he wonders if it’s just Zarkon or is it typical of all Galra. The soft warmth spreading to his bones certainly seems to be a Zarkon thing.

Zarkon runs his finger across Keith’s brow, pushing Keith’s hair out of his eyes, his touch gentle and almost cautious. Keith swallow and he’s suddenly grateful for the support he gets from leaning on Zarkon, he doesn’t think he’d be able to stay still without it. He’s never wanted to escape as much as he wants at that moment.

His skin feels too tight and hot.

Zarkon tilts his head and squeezes Keith’s cheek with that same gentleness, his claws a little too close to Keith’s eye to be comfortable. Keith raises a wary eyebrow at him while making sure he remains otherwise motionless.

He’s close to shaking with the need to escape.

Zarkon lets go of Keith’s cheek and observes the hot redness Keith feels on his skin like it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. He rubs his thumb down the red spot before letting his hand fall, his fingers brushing against Keith’s lips and sending a sharp jolt down his spine. It’s not the kind of pleasant jolt Shiro could elicit from Keith, but something dark and cold.

Something’s wrong and Keith has no idea what it is. He shouldn’t have tried to play Zarkon.

“I am afraid it is time for you to go now. I do have an empire to run,” Zarkon says, his voice soft, an unnerving contrast to the sharpness in his eyes. Keith nods and pulls back from Zarkon and the warmth he alone seems to radiate, making sure his movements don’t show Zarkon just how badly he wants to be out of the room. He has to reorient himself as he gets to his feet, and he keeps an eye on Zarkon even as he backs away.

Zarkon doesn’t get up from his comfortable sprawl on the dais. He follows Keith’s movements with a lazy sort of way that brings a big cat contemplating an attack to Keith’s mind, and the small
smile playing on his lips doesn’t help with the image. Keith reaches the door and focuses on getting it open, only to be stopped by Zarkon calling after him.

“Goodbye.” Zarkon smiles at him, the friendliness taking a sharp edge, and Keith hesitates for a second before getting out a bye in reply and darting out of the room to the hallway where Haala is waiting for him.

Turns out a Galra pillow is big enough for Keith to more or less curl up on, even if he has to be in a very tight ball to fit on it, and he spends several blissful hours lying on top of his new, soft bed. Haala calls him a privileged brat, but the bite behind his words is lessened by the amused quirk of his lips.

Keith’s next surprise comes when his next meal isn’t the usual goo, but more like greenish, mashed potatoes with bits of tasteless meat sprinkled in. The bread is familiar but the drink has a more lemony taste to it than it used to. Keith eats it all up, if for no other reason than to keep Zarkon from sending him to Haggar.

Haala keeps a closer eye on Keith than usual, and sometimes he exchanges a few words with Keith beyond a grudging acknowledgment of his existence. It’s not as bad as before, even if Zarkon seems to go back to ignoring Keith again. Keith handles it better now that he has new food and his soft pillow to sleep on, and his grip on reality stays stronger. Even the prisoner down the hall has quieted down into a mild inconvenience.

“Any chance I could get a shower?” Keith asks Haala one day, getting only a shrug in return before Haala disappears from the doorway. Keith knows it’s a long shot and he doesn’t expect to get what he wants, but his clothes itch and his hair is sticking to his skin, and now he can at least say he tried to do something about it.

To Keith’s surprise Haala returns some time later and takes him to the showers, grumbling under his breath the whole time. Keith doesn’t get a shirt like he usually does, but he can do with the under armor suit. He suspects the shirts are only for when he goes to see Zarkon. Keith doesn’t mind. He’d like to think his well being isn’t tied to what he’s wearing.

Keith knows better than to linger in the shower. Haala won’t get him there again if he stays too long, and Keith would like to be able to get showers when he needs them, not only when Zarkon wants to see him. Keith tries to hide his smile when Haala looks mildly impressed at his speed.

“Do I finally get a grand tour as well?” Keith asks just because he can, and Haala sighs and looks up, his ears drooping, before dragging Keith back towards the cells.

The shower did Keith good, and though he feels strange returning to his small, confined cell after it he prefers being clean. Haala makes a comment of the shower being more for his benefit than Keith’s, since he’s the one with sensitive sense of smell and it’s his job to take care of Keith.

“Glad I could help,” Keith says before falling silent. They’re approaching the cell blocks and Keith’s mood drops. He doesn’t miss the small, confined space. He could do with some action, even a walk around the ship, anything to help him get rid of his excess energy.

Keith opens his mouth to get one last jab at Haala before they reach the cells, but Haala stops and yanks Keith behind him in a fast motion that almost gives Keith whiplash.
Keith stumbles but he doesn’t fall, and he glares at Haala. “What the hell is your problem now?”

“Shut up.” Haala spares Keith a brief glance before focusing his attention forward, his ears perking as he tenses.

Keith stills as well. He peeks at the hallway from behind Haala, trying to hear what he hears, but besides the natural sounds of the ship Keith hears nothing. Then — under the quiet hum of the ship — Keith hears a thud that echoes through the hallways.

Haala takes a step back, and Keith follows his example. The sound becomes louder every second, and the hallway reverberates with it. Keith readies for a fight out of habit. Haala does the same, setting Keith on edge for a second before he calms his mind.

For a second nothing happens and the ship seems to fall silent, then a huge lizard like alien bursts through the cell block doors and rushes down the hallway.

Keith doesn’t have time to react or even get a proper glimpse of the alien before Haala shoves him out of the way. Keith’s head bangs against the wall, disorienting him for a moment.

Someone is yelling orders to the others. They want the prisoner kept alive.

Keith blinks a few times to get his vision to focus on the scene before him, and his eyes widen when he spots the lizard alien clinging to the wall, swinging their long tail furiously from side to side to keep the guards away. They’re not much bigger than Keith, but he’s still wary of the tail and the rows of sharp teeth in their mouth.

Keith isn’t sure if he should cheer them on or not. The alien makes the decision for Keith when they jump at Haala, crushing him to the wall in one fast motion, before turning their attention to Keith, their sharp teeth gleaming even in the low lighting of the hallway.

Keith has a second to realize he’s screwed before the alien lunges at him. Keith raises his hands to protect his face from getting chewed off, and the alien sinks their teeth into his arm as they push him to the ground. Keith curses and tries to twist away, only to get his arm nearly torn apart in the process.

The weight on top of Keith is crushing his lungs and the lizard claw at his face, barely missing his eyes. There isn’t much Keith can do with his hands tied. He tries kicking, but it has no effect on the person above him.

Keith is sure he won’t survive the fight in one piece.

Haala sinks his claws into the alien’s jaws, forcing them to ease off of Keith with an agonized screech. Keith gasps for breath and rolls away from the fight as the two other guards help Haala drag lizard to a safer distance.

It takes Keith a second to catch his breath and push himself to his feet. The alien is smashing their tail into the guards in an attempt to escape their hold, and they’re moments away from getting loose again.

Keith moves forward before he thinks it through and directs all the anger building inside him into one swift kick to the alien’s face. It disorients them enough for the guards to get a hold of their arms and inject them with some kind of a sedative, and they grow groggy in a matter of seconds.

Keith kicks the alien again, putting all the force he can to the attack, and he readies for a third strike when Haala grabs him by the waist and lifts him off the ground.
“They’re down,” Haala says, repeating the words a few times until the blood stops thrumming in Keith’s ears and he can take a deep breath.

He’d lost control.

“I’m good,” Keith pants once he gets his voice back, and Haala sets him back down on the ground. He keeps a wary eye on Keith even as he checks the others have the prisoner contained.

Keith doesn’t pay him any attention. The blood dripping into his eyes messes with his vision and his arm hurts from being chewed on. Keith has the passing thought that he might die from blood loss if he doesn’t get help soon.

The guards are laughing about the whole thing already. Keith would let them have their fun if he could, but he needs help. He nudges Haala’s side to get his attention, and though Haala seems annoyed at the interruption he turns serious when he looks at Keith.

“I’ll get the pet looked at. Get that out of here,” he says to the other guards before turning to Keith and showing him back to the elevator. Keith frowns at Haala, wondering what his words meant but not daring to ask while they are within hearing distance of the others.

“Can you walk?” Haala asks, and Keith nods in response. Haala has Keith lean on the wall while he taps on the panel by the door and sets their destination.

“Why did you call me a pet?” Keith asks now that they are alone.

Haala glances at Keith and shrugs. “Well, you are the Emperor’s pet, aren’t you?”

Keith raises an eyebrow, not quite believing what he’s hearing. “I’m no one’s pet.”

“You sure about that?” Haala counters with an amused smirk on his face. “You’re not exactly a prisoner either.”

Keith glares at Haala until he drops the smirk and sighs, and bites his lower lip while he mulls over something. Keith doesn’t have much energy to care what the Galra think of him, all he knows is he’s not anyone’s pet, not now, not ever.

“It’s just what the guards call you, don’t take it personally.” Haala offers Keith a somewhat sympathetic smile. “And besides, it keeps everyone treating you well.”

Keith supposes it’s an upside, and as long as Zarkon doesn’t think of him as his pet Keith is willing to let it slide. The blood loss is starting to get to him, and he has better things to worry about than his image around the Galra.

When the elevator stops Haala doesn’t ask if Keith can still walk before picking him up. Keith is almost thankful for it; he doesn’t think his pride would’ve allowed him to say he needed help.

Haala carries Keith to a medical bay, and dumps him on an examination table and frees his hands while a druid comes to hover over Keith. Haala explains what happened, and the druid moves away to what to Keith looks like a fancy, translucent computer screen connected to a terminal of sorts, and they tap on it a few times before writing something down on their pad.

Keith glances at Haala to see how he should be feeling about the situation, and since he looks more or less at ease Keith relaxes a little. It’s probably just a normal procedure and Keith will be fine.

The druid moves to rummage through the cabinets, and when they turn around they are stretching a piece of silvery fabric into a larger shape. Keith watches with cautious eyes as they cut the
shredded sleeve off and wrap the fabric around Keith’s injured arm, and tighten it until the pressure is almost too much for Keith to be comfortable with.

“ Stops the bleeding,” the druid explains at Keith’s wary expression. Keith nods and lifts his arm to study the dressing. He thinks it’s made of some specialized fine fabric, and it feels cold on his arm, but as long as it keeps him from bleeding to death Keith is going to let it be.

The druid moves on to cleaning the blood off of his face and Keith almost tells them not to bother until the bleeding stops, but he figures they might be disinfecting the wounds before patching him up so he keeps quiet. They tap Keith’s face gently every now and then, and Keith wishes the druids didn’t wear masks so he could tell what they were thinking.

“You can’t keep out of trouble.” Haggar’s voice makes Keith flinch, and he fixes his eyes to the doorway where she’s standing.

“Actually I was minding my own business and you guys failed at inmate control,” he points out, and to his relief Haggar smiles.

“A minor technical difficulty,” she replies as she comes to take a look at Keith’s injuries. The druid that had been taking care of Keith slips away quietly to continue whatever they were doing before Keith was brought in.

Haggar spends a long moment studying Keith’s face while Haala grows more uneasy by the minute. She hums softly before leaving Keith and the room, and Keith turns to glance at Haala. The ease he had has been replaced by something akin to trepidation and Keith would ask him if he’s afraid of Haggar, but he suspects that’s a given even among the Galra.

Haggar returns a few minutes later with a bottle of quintessence, and Keith eyes it cautiously, not liking where things are going at all. Haggar smiles at him and settles the bottle down by his side.

“Would you rather scar your face?” she asks as she works the bottle open. Keith sighs and shakes his head, figuring honesty is the best way to go with her. He keeps quiet while Haggar applies the quintessence to the wounds on his face. It still tingles in an unnatural way like the first time he’d come in contact with it, and having Haggar’s face so close doesn’t ease Keith’s mind.

“I assume you can handle a bruise,” Haggar says and taps the sore spot below Keith’s right eye. “I’m not wasting this on bruises and scrapes that don’t need it,” she continues as an explanation, and it’s good enough for Keith.

“Sure,” Keith replies, and Haggar leaves Keith’s face alone with a satisfied expression.

She moves to take a look at Keith’s arm, and for a moment Keith worries he’ll bleed to death there on the table. She removes the dressing and makes an interested noise at the bite and the blood still pouring from it before applying the quintessence to it.

Keith watches with fascination as his flesh starts to knit itself together and the wounds become smaller as Haggar applies layer after layer of the quintessence on his skin. In the end the only proof Keith has of the injury is the blood on his arm and his torn clothes.

“Wash yourself and get some rest,” Haggar says when she’s satisfied with Keith’s state.

Haala motions for Keith to get off the table, and he shows Keith to a small bathroom. “I’ll get you something clean to wear,” he says and disappears out of the door, leaving Keith to figure out how the taps work on his own. It takes him a minute but eventually Keith gets the water running, and he washes his face and hands before soaking his hair for good measure.
Keith is drying his hair when Haala returns with a clean set of clothes. His ears are pressed against his head and Keith wants to make a joke about hissy cats, but he’s not familiar enough with Galra culture to know if it would go over well.

“Told you I won the nanny lottery,” Haala says, his voice tense despite his attempt to sound unbothered. “Who else can say their charge's first idea was to kick the life out of the person who tired to eat them?”

“Sorry,” Keith says only to be waved off by Haala.

“It’s fine.” Haala bites his lip and frowns thoughtfully. “Though I would’ve expected that from a Galra, not someone like you,” he admits after a few beats.

Keith stops drying his hair. He hadn’t meant to go off on the other prisoner that was probably just scared for their life, and he doesn’t want to be compared to the Galra. Haala must see Keith’s displeasure at his words since he shifts his weight from one foot to another and sighs.

“Just change your clothes so that I can get rid of you for a few quarters,” he says and leaves before Keith can reply.

Keith groans and runs his hands across his face. He shouldn’t be upsetting the only person who is anywhere close to being his friend. He changes his clothes as fast as he can with the blood loss making him slower than usual, and hurried after Haala.

Keith finds him standing as far away from Haggar as he can without being too obvious about avoiding her, and Keith takes a deep breath before walking up to him.

“I don’t think I could pull purple fur off,” he says as a way of apologizing. Haala snorts, and Keith takes it as a victory.

“I need him,” Haggar cuts in from across the room, and Keith grimaces before he can think better of it.

Haala gives him a warning look, and Keith schools his expression into something more neutral before approaching Haggar. She has Keith sit down on a chair before she injects him with something, and Keith contemplates the pros and cons of asking what it was.

“To keep you from getting an infection from the bite,” Haggar explains. Keith almost thanks her before a thought crosses his mind and he frowns.

“I don’t think Galra antibiotics work on humans,” he points out. Haggar studies him with a thoughtful expression for a few seconds before turning fully towards him.

“We did rather extensive studies on the other humans we’ve had stay with us,” she replies, and gets a gleeful gleam in her eyes when Keith’s expression darkens. He hadn’t needed the reminder that Haggar had tortured Shiro — that she might still be experimenting on the Holts.

“We wanted to know how to keep them alive. That requires knowledge of physical and biological aspects of a species,” Haggar explains.

Keith doesn’t like it, and he hates that he can see her point. He bites his tongue to keep himself from saying something he would regret later and looks away from Haggar. She leaves Keith to his thoughts, and Haala comes to get him as soon as she moves away to the computer terminal.

“He’s staying here,” Haggar says before Haala can even open his mouth, and Keith turns his
attention to her, staring at her with wide eyes.

Haggar looks at them over her shoulder. “I’m sure the Emperor will want to see him later.” She points to the examination table. “Lie down and rest. We will monitor you to make sure the blood loss won’t affect you negatively.”

Keith wants to argue. He’d feel safer in his cell, but Haala is already leaving and Haggar has focused her attention back on the screen before her. Keith stays still for a couple minutes out of spite before the events of the day catch up on him and he starts to feel woozy. He figures he might as well lie down for a while, though he doubts he will be able to sleep with Haggar in the same room.

Red is concerned about something. Keith doesn’t know what, but the dread in Red fills him and he can’t breathe. He knows he’s dreaming, Red tells him that much, but it doesn’t feel like it. Red is trying to shield him from something. She won’t let him see what, and Keith isn’t sure he likes her making that choice for him.

He wants to know what Red is so worried about.

Red growls, the sound of it almost too loud in Keith’s mind, and her consciousness curls tighter around Keith. He tries to wiggle free of her to get even just a peek of what she’s so concerned about, but no matter how much he tries to tell her everything will be fine she won’t let him see.

The pressure around him grows suffocating.

Keith doesn’t understand what’s wrong.

Chapter End Notes

The next update is probably gonna be at the beginning of next month since I'm gonna be focusing more on my studies than writing for the next week.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

So a few things about the title change. Now, as a rule I do not go to the tag of the ship I’m writing for, because then I see a cool summary and I read the fic and then I feel horrible about my own writing and it’s not fun. Reason #1 I have a dozen unpublished and unfinished fics lying around somewhere.

Which leads nicely to the first reason for the title change.

As the amazing Wenzel (whose work all of you should definitely check out) pointed out, our fics shared a similar title, which leads to the second reason which is that I wanted to change the title anyways and this is the perfect time to do so.

As you know from the A/N of the first chapter I posted this sooner than I wanted because of season 3, which is why I had to publish this under the working title, which was a Twilight Zone joke. Not kidding.

So I chose to name this fic after the folder this fic is in (The Shelter Files, because I’m original and I need to hide my work from nosy people). This is also now officially a two parter with two oneshot side stories.

Hope you’re ready for the ride.

(also I’m an airhead who didn’t realize I have several chapters already more or less edited so you’re getting this way before I thought possible)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith jolts awake, thinking he’s been slapped, but there’s no one near him. His eyes dart around the room before landing on Haggar standing a few feet to his side. She seems curious about Keith, like he’s an especially interesting specimen that’s just done something unexpected. Keith takes a deep breath, calming his breathing and mind, and looks away from Haggar. His head feels like someone took a baseball bat to it.

“Bad dreams?” Haggar asks, and there’s something in her voice that makes Keith not want to answer.

“Headache,” he still replies, not wanting Haggar to think he’s avoiding her.

Haggar tilts her head minutely before taking a few steps closer to Keith. “You lost a lot of blood,” she reminds him, but Keith doubts that’s it.

He knows he didn’t just imagine Red’s presence in his mind, and he knows she had been protecting him from something, he just has no idea what. Maybe she’d sensed Haggar’s presence and reacted to that. Keith could certainly understand it.

Still, Keith feels like he’s forgetting something important. He doesn’t get a chance to mull on it for long before Haggar drops a deep maroon shirt on his lap with a command to get dressed. Keith does as he’s told, knowing he’s going to be taken to Zarkon, and stretches his back once he stands
up. Haggar offers him a drink and Keith accepts it, though he eyes it suspiciously before taking a sip.

He makes a face at the coppery taste. “What’s in this?” he asks before taking another tentative sip.

“If I were to tell you what is used to make that drink would you be able recognize any of the ingredients by name?” She smiles at Keith, knowing his answer already. Keith sips the drink in order to avoid answering her.

“It will help you recover from your blood loss faster,” Haggar offers, and Keith nods as he finishes the drink. It’s good enough for him.

Keith expects to be handcuffed before being escorted out of the medical bay, but Haggar simply orders him to her side and walks out of the doors. Keith wants to ask about it, he’s never been allowed to walk around with his hands free before, but he keeps quiet in case it’s an oversight on Haggar’s part.

“I don’t need to cuff you to keep you in line,” Haggar says, seemingly reading Keith’s mind. Keith doesn’t bother answering, though he sees her point. She can do weird mind altering magic, Keith can throw a punch, there’s not really a question who would win that fight.

Keith follows Haggar into an elevator and tries to guess where they are going. He’s hoping for the observation deck but he doubts that will happen any time soon. He’ll be happy with the conference room or something similar, as long as he doesn’t have to go to the throne room again. He doesn’t want a repeat of the last time he was there.

The elevator doors open and snap Keith out of his thoughts before he can dwell too deeply into the memory of Zarkon’s hands pressing into the sore muscles of his back. Keith keeps his face straight when Thace steps into the elevator and throws a mildly curious glance at Keith before focusing on Haggar.

“I have the report you wanted,” Thace tells her, his voice carefully respectful.

“Bring it to me later,” Haggar replies, and Thace inclines his head before stepping behind them.

Keith can feel his eyes on him, and though he tries to ignore it he hates being stared at, and he ends up glancing at Thace from the corner of his eye. Keith isn’t sure if his reading of Galra expressions is accurate, but under the curiosity Thace seems almost concerned. Keith doesn’t understand why that would be though. He understands the curiosity, but concern for someone you don’t know doesn’t seem like something a Galra would do.

Thace looks away and the elevator doors open before Keith can figure him out. Haggar pulls Keith out, and he throws one last look at Thace before the doors shut behind him. Keith follows Haggar down the familiar hallway to the conference room, and though he’s a little disappointed he doesn’t get to see more of the ship he’s not going to complain. The conference room usually means good food.

Haggar opens the door and Keith walks in without waiting for her permission. His heart beats a little faster when Zarkon approaches them, and Keith walks past him, intending to avoid him and hurry to the table, only to be stopped when Zarkon grabs his throat.

Keith lets out an alarmed noise before he can stop himself, and clutches Zarkon’s arm with both of his hands as he’s pulled back into Zarkon’s view. Keith relaxes a little when he realizes he’s not going to be strangled, and he tries to ignore the burning of his skin where Zarkon is touching him.
Zarkon tilts Keith’s head back so he can get a better look at the scrape and bruise on his face. Keith keeps his eyes on Zarkon, watching the curiosity disappear as his expression hardens. Zarkon moves his gaze to Haggar, and his face softens minutely. He lets go of Keith with a one final glance at his injuries. Keith takes the chance to flee to the table and the food waiting for him.

Haggar and Zarkon exchange hushed words while Keith examines his plate of space fish and orange salad. It looks edible enough, and Keith hopes it will taste as good as it smells. He’s picking at the salad with mild interest when Zarkon taps his shoulder.

Keith looks up with a raised eyebrow, and Zarkon hands Keith a fork before he moves to sit at the head of the table.

“You trust me not to stab you? I already beat up one lizard today,” Keith jokes, feeling silly even before the words leave his mouth.

Zarkon tilts his head, his lips quirking in amusement. “I wil take my chances.”

Keith bites his tongue and stabs his fork into the fish. He ignores Zarkon’s eyes on him and focuses on the food in front of him. He’s not sure how long it’s been since his last meal but he’s starving, and even Zarkon’s quiet observation doesn’t bother him at first. Eventually it gets old, but Keith finishes his plate before turning to him on principle.

“I assume you’re staring for a reason,” Keith says, playing with his fork like he used to do with his knives when he was still in his little shack in the desert.

“You continue to be interesting,” Zarkon replies.

“Because I kicked someone? That’s not a very high standard.” Keith grips the fork tighter and regards Zarkon with an unimpressed expression.

“Because you could have died and your first reaction was to attack the person who tried to kill you. Who, I might add, was already detained. Apparently the guards had to restrain you as well. Eventually it gets old, but Keith finishes his plate before turning to him on principle.

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“Because you could have died and your first reaction was to attack the person who tried to kill you. Who, I might add, was already detained. Apparently the guards had to restrain you as well,” Zarkon corrects him.

Keith’s mood drops. He hates his reactive nature and he hates that the Galra appreciate it. It had gotten Keith into trouble at the Garrison more often than he’d like to admit, and though Shiro had helped he him learn better self-control Keith never quite got the hang of it, not in the same way Shiro had.

“It was not my intention to offend you,” Zarkon says after a long minute.

Keith scoffs despite himself. “Usually I get told off for going too far,” he admits quietly.

“You let them off easy. You did not even break their bones,” Zarkon replies. Keith assumes he’s going for reassuring but it’s not working.

Keith taps the fork against the table and focuses on its the dark surface to avoid seeing the look on Zarkon’s face. He’s not sure what would be worse, amusement, interest, or that approving look the Galra would probably kill to get from him.

Keith makes a point of not reacting when Zarkon removes his gloves, and he suppresses a flinch when Zarkon pulls Keith’s chair closer to himself. Keith closes his eyes when Zarkon places his hand on his neck, the gentle, soft warmth sweeping into Keith against his will.

Keith feels like leaning into the touch for half second before he lets his head fall on the table, not
caring what Zarkon thinks of him. Zarkon pulls his hand back, and though Keith is happy about it a part of him misses the warmth. Keith grips his fork tighter and imagines how satisfying it would be to drive it into Zarkon’s eye.

“Perhaps you should go rest,” Zarkon suggests.

Keith shakes his head and frowns at the table. “I just need space,” he replies. Zarkon leans back in his chair, and though it is technically what Keith asked for he worries he’s crossed a line.

“Get up,” Zarkon orders. Keith’s head snaps up and he looks to Zarkon with confused eyes. Zarkon doesn’t repeat himself, but his expression tells Keith he doesn’t have a choice. Keith frowns even as he pushes himself off his chair.

“Walk around.” Zarkon waves at the room, almost as if he’s dismissing Keith, and pulls out his pad.

Keith stares at Zarkon for a few seconds, waiting for Zarkon to stop ignoring him, before rolling his eyes and starting to walk around the room. He’s annoyed for a minute before the tension starts to leave him. He wanders around the room, the fork still securely in his grip, and the pointlessness of it helps clear his head a little. He ends up standing in front of the window on the farthest wall, watching the ships pass by in a slow pace.

Keith sighs. He knows he’s not going to be rescued any time soon. Allura and the others can’t form Voltron without him, and short of them finding a new Paladin for Red their options are extremely limited. As far as Keith knows they’re operating on four Lions and the Castleship, and those aren’t good odds against Zarkon’s fleet. If Keith is lucky the others have gone to see the Blade of Marmora and they are forming a rescue plan with their help.

Keith turns his eyes to Zarkon’s reflection on the window, wondering if he should ask how he had tracked Keith across the universe. He doubts he’d get answer so he decides to keep quiet for now. He’ll stay calm and focused, and feign compliance up to a certain point. Keith bites his lip and regards Zarkon’s reflection, wishing Zarkon would make his life easier and act more like a cartoon villain than whatever it is he’s doing now.

Zarkon puts his pad down and glances at Keith before standing up, and though Keith knows the smart thing to do would be to avert his eyes he keeps his gaze on Zarkon’s reflection even when he comes to stand behind Keith.

“Better?” Zarkon meets Keith’s eyes in the window. Keith nods reluctantly and averts his eyes for a second to avoid having to look at Zarkon’s self-satisfied smirk.

“You should go rest now,” Zarkon continues, and though rest is starting to sound like a good idea Keith doesn’t miss his cell. He meets Zarkon’s eyes in the glass and forces a smile on his face.

“Or I could stay here for a while.” Keith bites his lip while Zarkon stares at his reflection with an expression Keith can’t begin to read. “If it’s not a problem,” Keith adds hastily.

Zarkon regards him for a long moment before inclining his head. “Tea?”

“Okay,” Keith replies, relieved he doesn’t have to leave just yet.

Zarkon looks at Keith for a second longer before returning to the table and his pad. Keith watches him go, unsure of what to make of him. Keith is glad that they seem to have more or less returned to keeping their personal spaces intact, but in a way it only makes that one time that wasn’t the case seem out of place and harder to forget.
Maybe that was Zarkon’s intention all along.

Keith stays by the window until a druid brings them the tea and leaves. He drudges to the table and takes his seat, moving his chair back to a safe distance from Zarkon and carefully placing his fork on the table. He keeps quiet while Zarkon pours him a cup and pushes it before him, and sips the tea tentatively, making a face at the bitter taste. He wonders if the Galra have some kind of sweetener he could use, but decides against asking about it.

Zarkon focuses on his pad again and Keith pulls his legs underneath himself, and they lapse into an easy silence. It’s almost nice. Keith lets the moment stretch, wondering if Zarkon would mind if he talked. He decides to test it by clearing his throat to get Zarkon’s attention, and slowly Zarkon turns his gaze to Keith, looking mildly curious.

Keith isn’t sure what he should say. He’s never initiated conversation with Zarkon just to talk, he’d always had something important in mind. He traces the edges of his fork absently and bites his lip, trying to come up with a safe topic to talk about.

“Do you guys have books?” Keith ends up asking, feeling a bit stupid at the question but standing behind it.

“Yes,” Zarkon replies as he lowers his pad and gives Keith his full attention. Keith decides to take it as a victory. “Why?” Zarkon asks when Keith doesn’t say anything.

“Just curious,” Keith starts and hesitates for a second before continuing, “I get bored in the cell so I’ve been wondering what Galran literature is like.”

“You cannot understand our written language,” Zarkon reminds him.

Keith sighs and turns his eyes to the dark liquid in his cup. He’s not sure what subjects he can bring up without annoying Zarkon. He’d ask about the Lions and Voltron, but he’s not ready to hear what Zarkon has to say about that. In fact he’ll be happy to avoid any and all topics that might lead to ideological or political conversations.

“I could learn to read it?” Keith risks a tentative glance at Zarkon.

“And why would I allow that? You are still considered an enemy combatant. Teaching you to read our language would be counterproductive since it would give you an advantage.” Zarkon leans back in his chair, interlacing his fingers and tilting his head.

Keith raises an eyebrow at him. “I’m an enemy combatant? I thought I was your guest.”

“You are also a Paladin of Voltron,” Zarkon points out. Keith grits his teeth and grabs the fork into a tight grip before taking a calming breath and relaxing his grip. Zarkon lets him have his moment, though Keith is acutely aware of his eyes on him.

“What am I gonna do alone in a ship full of your sentries?” Keith asks through his teeth, trying to keep his voice steady and calm.

Zarkon leans forward, his expression turning cold. “A ship full of sentries? Is that what you told yourself when you murdered my people without hesitation? You do realize there are actual living beings on board this ship? Or did you not stop to consider the consequences of your actions before you allowed an alien child to drag you into her vengeance?”

“You hurt Shiro,” Keith snaps before biting his lip and looking away.
“I will not insult you by apologizing,” Zarkon says after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence has passed. Keith hates that he appreciates it. “But I have to ask, why is this person so important to you that you would go to war for him?”

Keith doesn’t want to tell Zarkon about Shiro, but he knows not answering would get Zarkon to draw his own conclusions.

“He’s family,” Keith admits, his voice quiet. “I didn’t have anyone else and you took him away.” Keith digs the fork into his hand. Zarkon doesn’t say anything.

“He didn’t come back the same,” Keith mutters to himself, absently hoping Zarkon doesn’t hear him.

The fork is about to break Keith’s skin when Zarkon takes hold of his hand and pries it away from him. Keith watches his movements from the corner of his eye, hating the warmth that slowly creeps up his arm at the touch. He tries not to compare it to a twisted, concentrated dose of the warmth the Lions seemed to radiate.

It used to be a comfort when he was piloting Red.

Zarkon places the fork down before he rubbing gentle circles into Keith’s irritated skin. It’s not comforting like Keith thinks it’s supposed to be, and though he tenses he doesn’t pull his hand away.

“Alfor was captured once,” Zarkon starts, catching Keith’s attention. “It was before Allura was born. He was trying to save hostages from slavers, but it turned out the hostages were actually part of the slaver group, they were acting as bait. It took us ten days to rescue him, but the slavers had given him a drug he was allergic to and he was in a coma. So I destroyed their ship while they were still in it. Alfor made a full recovery a few days later.” Zarkon stops rubbing circles to Keith’s hand, seemingly lost in thought for a moment.

“It took him a while, but eventually he told me he wished I had not destroyed that ship, that he did not think they deserved it. He felt like he had made me do it.” Zarkon lets go of Keith’s hand and regards him with a somewhat sympathetic look in his eyes, and Keith has to look away.

“He also told me I should learn to take a step back and forgive,” Zarkon adds, his tone almost joking, and Keith cracks a brief smile despite himself.

“You just don’t want me to stab you with a fork,” he replies. Zarkon smiles and inclines his head.

“True, but it is not a bad piece of advice. And I am starting to get a hang of it,” he says with a small, proud smile that makes Keith huff and raise a disbelieving eyebrow.

“I forgave you for destroying my ships, murdering my people, attacking the Central Command, and trying to kill me, did I not?”

Keith can’t find a good argument against that, so he keeps quiet and downs the rest of his now cool tea. The silence stretches but neither one of them is willing to break it. Keith tries not to think about what Zarkon has just told him too hard, he’ll have enough time and space to go over everything once he’s back in his cell where he can actually think.

Soon enough Haggar knocks on the door and steps in to remind Zarkon of an engagement he has to attend. She waves for Keith to go with her, and Keith follows her out of the room with a thoughtful frown on his face.
In the end Keith decides to take Zarkon’s story about Alfor with a grain of salt, though he accepts the message as somewhat useful. It doesn’t really apply to Keith’s situation since he’s got reasons beyond what was done to Shiro to justify bringing Zarkon down. It’s just the personal aspect of his crusade. The suffering Allura has gone though is another part of it, and the fact that the Galra Empire is as evil as they come is just a nice icing on the cake.

Keith just wishes Zarkon hadn’t brought up them killing actual people and not just destroying ships and sentries. Keith had known there were casualties, but he had avoided thinking about it to the best of his abilities. He didn’t want to think about what it made of him, and as long as he could pretend their enemies weren’t people everything was fine.

He suspects Pidge hasn’t fully comprehended the reality of their actions, he’s fairly certain Lance and Hunk know at least on some level, but neither one of them acknowledge it. Shiro knows, even if he doesn’t say anything. Allura and Coran know, and though Keith appreciates them not bringing up the Galra they inevitably have killed on hindsight he thinks they should have mentioned it before they allowed five strangers to pilot Voltron.

Keith shakes his head and groans, pushing that particular line of though out of his mind. He’s not going to let Zarkon turn him against his friends, no matter how valid his point may be. He tries to think of anything but his friends. Keith succeeds for a few minutes before he starts worrying about Shiro. He knows Shiro is painting nightmarish images of what the Galra are doing to Keith, and he hates he can’t tell Shiro he’s fine.

He hopes the others will come for him soon.

The door to his cell opens, surprising Keith since he doesn’t think he’s not due to another checkup for some time. Haala sticks his head through the door, making a face at Keith that usually means he’s been tasked to do something he’d rather not do. Keith perks up, curious as to what’s going on.

“I’ve been ordered to offer to take you exercising,” Haala blurts out almost too fast for Keith to understand.

Keith jumps to his feet and hurries to Haala before he can slam the door shut on his face and claim Keith declined. “I’m ready to go when you are.” Keith grins and offers Haala his wrists. Haala’s ears flatten against his head and he bares his teeth at Keith before pulling out the handcuffs.

Haala walks Keith to the elevator, his ears drooping the whole way. Keith doesn’t pay him much attention, his mood hasn’t been higher in weeks and Haala’s crankiness is not going to ruin it. The elevator ride isn’t as long as usual, and when the doors open Haala shows Keith to a sparring room that’s empty save for the dark haired Galra sitting on the floor and tapping away on her pad.

“Don’t break the pet and let me know when you’re done kicking his ass,” Haala tells her while he uncuffs Keith. He waits until she waves in acknowledgment before giving Keith an apologetic pat on the shoulder and walking out of the room. Keith looks at the door closing behind Haala, suddenly worried for his safety. He shakes it off fast, and focuses his attention on the Galra before him.

Not for the first time Keith wishes he had pockets to stuff his hands into as he walks up to the Galra and stops before her, giving her the time she needs to finish whatever she’s doing on her pad.
He tries not to pay too much attention to the shredded edge of her left ear and the burn scar traveling down her neck, disappearing under the high collar of her uniform.

“I’m Marzila. I’ll deal with you in a keesek,” she says without looking up.

Keith has no idea how long a keesek is, but he doesn’t say anything about it. Instead he relaxes his stance and looks around the room, taking in the wide open space. The floor isn’t covered in anything to soften it, and Keith wasn’t expecting it to be, but he is curious about the thin light lines running across the dark floor. There’s nothing of interest on the walls, but Keith takes note of the door at the back of the room. He suspects it’s some kind of an equipment room or a storage space. There are a few benches by the back wall, and the only thing on them is a lonely bag that must belong to Marzila.

“Okay. I’m done,” Marzila says and gets up. Keith takes a step back, giving her a chance to take her pad to her bag. She observes Keith with sharp eyes as she approaches him again, curious about her new opponent. Keith keeps his expression calm even as he sizes her up.

Keith doubts he’ll be able to take her on in a direct hand to hand combat, simply because he knows she’s stronger and faster than Keith, and he’s not exactly in ideal shape. He could try to get her by surprise or use his smaller size to his advantage. If nothing else he’s going to learn something about Galra fighting styles.

“Let’s see what a Paladin of Voltron can do,” Marzila says and grins at Keith before throwing a punch at his face.

Keith dodges, puts a bit of distance between them, and regroups before Marzila can attack him again. Keith dodges a few more punches before getting an opening to drive his foot into her knee. Marzila laughs as she takes a step back, and Keith smirks at her.

Keith changes his strategy and moves forward. He aims for Marzila’s ribs, landing one punch but missing another, and Marzila drives her elbow into his jaw.

Keith is too close to her to dodge it, and he falls on the ground with a pained huff. He avoids the kick Marzila aims at his head, and scrambles to his feet before she can strike him again.

Marzila doesn’t give Keith a chance to regroup again, and she forces Keith to retreat to avoid her attacks. Keith blocks her, trying to find another opening to turn the situation in his favor.

He’s quickly realizing his chances at winning the fight aren’t high. He’s stiff from sitting around in his cell all day and he’s lost muscle, and the food he’s been given doesn’t give him the energy he’d need to be at his best. Marzila claws at Keith’s face and trips him when he tries to dodge, and Keith falls to the ground with a huff.

Marzila kicks him in the ribs before standing down with a satisfied smile. “I guess you’ve got talent,” she says as Keith drags himself to his feet. He has to grit his teeth against the pain shooting through his body.

“I’ve spent weeks in a cell so I’m not exactly at my best right now,” Keith replies, and after seeing the amused glint in Marzila’s eyes he sighs. “Not that it’s an excuse.”

“I guess I’ll be training you until you are at your best then,” Marzila laughs and pats Keith’s head. She looks thoughtful for a second before ruffling his hair and laughing at the indignant noise Keith makes as he hurries to get her hand off his hair.

“So what’s your weapon of choice?” Marzila asks while Keith runs his fingers through his hair.
“A sword. I’m good with knives too.” Keith gives up on his hair and focuses on Marzila instead. She seems to think Keith’s words through.

“I can’t give you one, but we can talk about a short staff when you stop being so easy to beat,” she says eventually. Keith doesn’t argue, though he can’t wait for a chance to get his hands on something resembling a weapon.

“Can I ask why you’re doing this?” Keith asks.

Marzila shrugs. “I was a combat instructor for a while until I transferred here. Before that I was part of a special task force until I got caught in an explosion. You’re my physical therapy.”

Keith raises an eyebrow. He should’ve figured there was a catch to his exercise, but Marzila seems nice and if she gets something out of their sparring too then Keith is happy to help.

“Ready for round two?” Marzila asks out of the blue, giving Keith a second to process her words before sucker punching him.

Keith decides it’s time to play dirty and goes for her ears.

By the time Haala comes to pick Keith up he’s bruised and exhausted, and feeling better than he has since coming on board the ship. Marzila is sitting next to him on the floor, breathing heavily and rubbing her jaw where Keith had kicked her.

Haala raises an eyebrow at them and crosses his arms. “Good to see you’re both still alive,” he says, his voice teasing rather than mean. “I almost expected to see him choking on his own blood by now.”

“I like him,” Marzila replies as she stands and offers Keith her hand. Keith accepts the offered help and climbs to his feet while Haala walks up to them.

“Of course you do,” he grumbles, but there’s a smile playing on his lips. Marzila laughs and pulls Haala to her by the neck, and presses her forehead to his.

Keith looks away.

Haala and Marzila exchange a few quiet words Keith ignores on purpose, then Haala takes in Keith’s appearance and sighs. “I guess I’ll take him to get hosed.”

Marzila laughs and moves past them to get to her bag on the bench. Haala glances after her before cuffing Keith and walking him out of the room before Marzila can return to them. Keith wonders if he’ll get to see her again. He hopes so, he enjoyed their sparring.

Keith gets to take a shower, and there’s a bigger than usual meal waiting for him in his cell. He eats everything before curling on his pillow, feeling genuinely tired for the first time in forever.
He’s still tired when he wakes up.

The heaviness in his bones can’t quite be explained away with the exercise, but Keith doesn’t know what else it could be. Maybe he’s gotten used to sitting still, and his body just can’t adjust to the stress as fast as it used to.

Keith’s mind drifts to Red. He tries to reach her, getting only a faint sense of her existence in return. He wonders if he needs to be asleep to communicate with her, or if it’s just the distance between them making it hard for him to reach her. He used to be constantly aware of her comforting presence in the back of his mind, and the loss of it makes him feel empty. Keith could ask Zarkon about it, but bringing up Voltron with him isn’t on Keith’s to do list.

The air seems chillier than usual. Keith isn’t sure if the Galra have finally lowered the temperature like Keith had asked in his first days in the cell, or if it’s something else. He won’t complain about it. He might have gotten used to the heat, but the cooler air is a blessing he’d rather not loose.

Keith stretches and settles into a more comfortable position on the pillow. His body aches, but it’s a pleasant and familiar sort of ache from his exercise. Keith has avoided thinking about it, but he might have to thank Zarkon for allowing him that chance, if for no other reason than to get another chance to spar with Marzila. He groans at the thought, but if thanking Zarkon is what it takes to keep his exercise rights then that’s what he’ll do. He’ll go insane if he has to spend the rest of his life only in a cell and Zarkon for company.

Keith rolls onto his back on the pillow and stares at the ceiling. If he closes his eyes he can imagine being back in the Castleship with his friends, though he can’t pretend to actually be there. He can almost see Lance showing off his Blue Lion slippers, and smell Hunk’s cooking. Pidge would be deep in some project of hers, and Coran would be sharing some outrageous anecdote from the past that would make Allura laugh.

If Keith could he’d sneak into Shiro’s bed and curl up next to him like he did a few times before the Kerberos mission. He misses it. He misses the closeness and easiness of it.

He misses Shiro.

The sentries patrolling the hallways walk past Keith’s cell, and Keith tries not to imagine how similar it must be to what Shiro had gone through. Keith figures that at least they’ll have some similar experiences to talk about once he gets back to the others. The thought sours his mood, but there’s not much he can do about it in the silence and dullness of his cell.

The food gets delivered, giving Keith something to do for a short period of time.

He drags himself up and across the cell to the tray, feeling more sluggish than he’d thought he would. He hadn’t expected to be up to his normal standards after having a first real workout in a long time, but he hadn’t thought he’d be in such a bad shape afterwards.

Keith decides to give himself a few more days to recover.

Keith doesn’t start feeling any better as time passes. On the contrary, he begins to think he might be getting sick. It’s not a thought he wants to have while being held prisoner by the Galra. His head is throbbing and every muscle in his body is hurting, and he knows the cold he feels isn’t because
the temperature has been lowered.

He worries he might throw up.

Keith doesn’t know how long it will be until Haala stops by next, but he hopes he’ll feel better before it. He’s not keen on the idea of letting the Galra study him because he’s managed to contract some weird alien flu. He’s sure Haggar would get a kick out of it, but Keith would rather not give her that chance.

What worries him is that he rarely gets sick. He was usually the only one who didn’t get the virus making rounds through the Garrison students, and when he did get sick it was horrible but never lasted for more than a few days. He has no idea if this is just another rare incident where he’ll be unable to do anything for a day or two before bouncing back, or if this will be worse.

Keith focuses on resting.

He curls on his pillow and tries to sleep until his next meal comes, and he eats as much of it as he can stomach before moving back to his pillow. He’s freezing and a thin sheen of sweat makes his clothes stick to his skin.

The lights go out and Keith sighs in relief. The dim light was beginning to irritate his eyes. He buries his face in his pillow and relaxes slowly as sleep takes hold of him.

Keith loses his sense of time and surroundings.

He’s aware of Haala coming to his cell and talking to him, and Keith thinks he answers him, though he’s not entirely sure he’s making much sense. His brain feels groggy and his mouth is a little too dry to form coherent words. Haala curses and picks Keith up, sending flares of pain through his body. Keith tries to complain but Haala doesn’t listen.

The next thing Keith is aware of is Haggar leaning over him. It’s something he could’ve lived without and ideally she would move away, but Keith doesn’t have the energy to tell her to do so. Haggar asks him something, but Keith can’t focus on her words enough to answer.

His limbs feel too heavy.

Haggar moves away, and the light she was blocking blinds Keith. He lets out a whimper and scrunches his eyes shut to block the light. The sharp pain on his arm let’s Keith know he’s been injected with something.

Keith’s mind numbs and the pain in his body doesn’t bother him quite as much. He welcomes the sleep taking over him.

A distant commotion drags Keith into wakefulness.

He becomes aware of himself in stages, first realizing he’s lying on something softer than the
operating table from before, then comes the fact that despite his skin burning he feels frozen to the bone, and the sounds he hears are coming from around him and not from another room like he first thought.

Keith manages to crack his eyes open, and the lights of the room blind him for a few seconds as he tries to focus on the figures darting around him. Keith recognizes Haggar even without being able to fully focus his vision on anyone, but the other Galra around him remain too blurry for him to identify.

Haggar comes over to Keith, poking and prodding his tender body for a few agonizing second before leaving him alone. Keith tries to turn his head to see where she’s going and to get a look at something else than the too distant ceiling, but his muscles refuse to cooperate.

Keith falls somewhere between sleep and awake. He’s vaguely aware of people moving around him. Someone injects him with a drug that makes his body feel nonexistent.

His head fills with nearly unbearable pressure that seems to come from the inside of his mind. Keith isn’t sure if it’s just his imagination, but he thinks he might cry out as he tries and fails to move his hands to protect his head.

Red comes to his aid and curls around his mind, lessening the pain a little.

The pressure goes away after a while, and Red’s consciousness fades into the back of Keith’s mind. Keith tries to open his eyes to see what’s going on, but he doesn’t have the strength to do so. Or maybe he just can’t get his body to do what he wants. He’s freezing under the burning blanket someone has laid on top of him.

It takes him some time, but eventually Keith manages to open open his eyes just a little. He thinks the figure by his bed is Haggar. He’s sure the person walking up to her is Zarkon. Keith wants to reach out or say something. He wants someone to tell him what’s going on.

Haggar and Zarkon exchange quiet words that Keith can’t comprehend through the fog in his brain before Haggar moves away from Keith’s thin line of sight. Keith can’t keep his eyes open for any longer, and he lets out a small noise of complaint as his eyes close. He starts drifting to unconsciousness again.

The last thing Keith is aware of is Zarkon’s quiet voice saying something in a language he can’t understand.

Chapter End Notes

An important question!!

Do you guys want to read the oneshot ‘side stories’ I’ve written for this? At this time there’s two of them, and since I’ve got 17 chapters already written, 5 of which are more or less pre-edited, I could try to fit them somewhere logical in my publishing plan. If you guys are interested in reading them.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Due to popular demand I'm gonna post the side stories when I figure out exactly where they fit in this all, and when I get the time to properly edit them.

Keith is comfortable despite the cold still clinging to his bones, and he burrows deeper into the softness surrounding him. There’s no light to hurt his eyes, and wherever he is it’s silent. The pain in his head has been reduced to a dull ache, and though his body feels unnaturally heavy he can move his limbs, even if it takes a lot out of him.

Keith drifts somewhere between sleep and awake, trying to get some warmth into his body. The covers on top of him are burning his skin, but he feels cold, and it’s suffocating him.

Keith doesn’t know what to do about it.

He cracks his eye open, but the darkness keeps him from getting a clear look at his surroundings. All he can tell is that he’s not in his cell, and he’s fairly sure he’s not in any kind of medical facility either. If Keith didn’t know any better he’d say he’s in someone’s bed. He thinks he might laugh a little, but he can’t be sure. Maybe it’s the fever.

Wherever Keith is he likes it. Everything is soft and cozy.

He’s not sure how long he has been drifting, but Keith becomes more aware of his surroundings when he hears someone move around in the adjacent room. Keith pulls the covers over his head, wrapping himself in a snug cocoon of softness in an attempt to block out the unwelcome noises. He wants to remain in his comfortable, quiet bubble a little longer. The noises stop eventually and Keith smiles at the silence, and lets himself drift back towards sleep.

For a moment Keith is aware of nothing but the comfortable softness, then someone taps his head through the covers. Keith doesn’t care if the small noise of complaint he lets out as a protest is childish. He burrows deeper into the bed, and refuses to open his eyes.

Keith almost thinks he’s been left alone before the covers are gently pried away from him. Keith tries to grab for them, but his limbs are heavy and hard to move, and in the end he gives up and cracks an eye open to glare at the person who dared to bother him. Even in his feverish state Keith is surprised to see Zarkon looking down at him.

Zarkon without his crown, to be exact. Keith frowns, thinking his fever must be a lot higher than he thought. Keith had been almost ready to believe that thing was glued to Zarkon’s head, and if this isn’t a hallucination caused by fever he’s not sure what he should think. It’s certainly not a situation Keith wants to find himself in.

“You should eat,” Zarkon states as a way of greeting, confirming that Keith is not hallucinating.

Keith tries to see if there’s food waiting for him, but since the only source of light is coming through the cracked door Keith can’t see anything like a plate or a tray near him, and his nose is
too stuffy for him to smell any food.

“I’m not hungry,” Keith mumbles and buries his face into a pillow.

“It is just soup. If you think you cannot get up I will bring the plate to you,” Zarkon replies. Keith knows he’s not going to win if they start arguing, and he doesn’t have the energy to pretend he can.

“I’m not getting up,” he says, his voice muffled by the pillow, and to his surprise Zarkon leaves the room without a word. He had expected to be told off at least once before getting his way. Keith lifts his head to look after Zarkon, but his muscles feel weak and his head feels heavy, and he buries his face back in the pillow with a defeated groan.

Zarkon returns shortly with a deep plate, and to Keith annoyance he turns on a dim light. It’s not as irritating as the lights in the hallways or Haggar’s labs, but Keith still has to take a moment to get his eyes adjusted to it. Zarkon has returned to his side and he’s sitting on the floor of all places by the time Keith sees more clearly.

Keith blinks slowly at Zarkon, only now realizing he’s wearing actual clothes instead of his typical armor. It makes Keith a little uncomfortable, but he keeps quiet and tries to be discreet as he studies Zarkon and his multiple layers of dark, heavy looking clothing. It can’t be comfortable in the dry heat of the ship.

It doesn’t take Zarkon long to see what he’s doing, and he sits back and lets Keith ogle him for as long as he wants. Keith’s face heats up, but he’s not sure if he’s blushing or if it’s just his fever acting up.

Zarkon waits until Keith pulls himself upright and leans against the hard headboard before he hands Keith the plate and a spoon. Zarkon sits by Keith’s side while he tries not to spill any of the soup on the covers. Keith appreciates the quiet, he’s not sure he’d be up to maintaining a conversation just yet. He doesn’t feel hungry, but he manages to finishes most of his soup, enjoying the way it warms his insides. He feels a little better with his belly full, and he wonders how long it’s been since he last ate.

Zarkon takes the plate away while Keith settles back down. He returns a minute later and sits back on the floor next to Keith, leaning his elbows on the bed and resting his chin on his interlaced fingers.

Keith pulls the covers over his head.

“You seem better,” Zarkon says, getting Keith to peek out from under the covers.

“It’s the bed,” Keith replies and takes a moment to marvel at the confused line that appears on Zarkon’s brow. “It’s really comfy,” he explains.

“It should be, it is mine.” Zarkon offers Keith a pleasant smile. Keith would give him some kind of a reply, but he’s too dumbstruck by the revelation to do anything but stare at him in silent horror.

Zarkon observes Keith with an almost kind look in his eyes. “There was an incident that required Haggar to pull her druids away from their little projects. Unfortunately it left you unprotected.” Zarkon tilts his head, and if Keith didn’t know better he’d mistake it for apologetic.

“Someone tried to kill me?” Keith asks, faintly remembering a commotion around him.

“We have dealt with her,” Zarkon replies, too casual for Keith’s liking.
“You killed her.” Keith wants the conversation to be over, but even with his fever he’s fairly certain he can’t order Zarkon out of his own bedroom.

“Not yet. Haggar is going to question her first.”

Keith doesn’t want to imagine what that will be like, and luckily his brain is too sluggish to paint any images of it. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, deciding he’ll worry once he’s healthy again.

“Why am I here?” He asks as he settles more comfortably on the bed.

“This is the safest place in the entire ship, and you are not exactly in any condition defend yourself. We will weed out any possible accomplishes your would-be-assassin might have had and you will be safe again,” Zarkon replies. Keith chews his lip and tries to wrap his mind around what he’s just been told.

“You’ve been here for two quarters. Haggar thinks you should be up in your feet by tomorrow,” Zarkon offers.

Keith sighs and opens his eyes to blearily stare at Zarkon. “You’re throwing me back in a cell then?” Keith frowns at Zarkon’s smile.

“Would you rather stay in my bed?” Zarkon raises an eyebrow as his smile widens. “Now that would be interesting.”

Keith would punch Zarkon if he had the energy. He settles for throwing the dirtiest look he can muster at him instead. Zarkon laughs, and Keith mentally rolls his eyes since actually doing so feels too taxing.

If Keith wasn’t sick he wouldn’t hesitate to tell Zarkon off. He’d tell Zarkon he’d rather die than sleep in his bed for another night. In fact, he would be walking out of the door without waiting to hear what Zarkon has to say about it if he could. But Keith is suffering from some strange alien illness, and he can’t convince himself that he doesn’t want to stay where he is. Even if it’s Zarkon’s bed he’s in, after the cell and Haggar’s hard examination table it feels like heaven, and Keith doesn’t want to give it up just yet.

If Keith wasn’t sick he would be able to do a lot of things. But Keith is sick, and he wants to feel that warmth Zarkon radiates. It might be the only thing that can make him feel like he’s not freezing to the core under the hot covers.

Keith reaches out, the sluggishness of his movements hiding his hesitation, and touches the side of Zarkon’s face softly with his fingertips. Zarkon stills, his eyes widening minutely, and Keith is a little bit proud of himself for catching Zarkon off guard. Keith traces the scar on Zarkon’s face absently, wondering where he got it but not daring to ask in case it’s something that will upset Zarkon.

“You’re really warm,” Keith mutters, feeling stupid as soon as the words have left his lips. Zarkon’s expression softens and he leans against Keith’s hand. He looks like he wants to say something, but he says quiet. Keith wonders why.

Keith’s fingers tingle as the familiar warmth begins to spread through his hand. Zarkon grasps Keith arm gently when it starts to shake, and Keith tries not to feel grateful for it. He wants more of the warmth but he doesn’t know how to ask for it. He’s not sure he’d even know what he’d be asking for. He presses his hand against Zarkon’s face and wills the warmth to spread faster.
Something shifts in Zarkon’s expression, and — much to Keith’s disappointment — he drops Keith’s arm and stands. Keith wants to call him back, but the words die in his throat when Zarkon takes off his boots and discards his coat on the floor. Keith wants to ask about Galra fashion and he almost laughs at the idea. He’s too busy wondering about multiple layers of clothing in a hot environment to notice what’s going on around him until the bed dips as Zarkon climbs on it. Keith lets out a surprised sound as he scrambles to sit up, but Zarkon pushes him back down.

“Calm down,” Zarkon says, sounding amused more than anything. Keith swallows around the lump in his throat, his heart beating so fast and loud there’s no way Zarkon can’t hear it, but he lies back down like Zarkon asked. At least he won’t keel over if he faints from the dizziness.

Keith keeps a wary eye on Zarkon while he settles on the bed by Keith’s side, his back pressed against the headboard. Keith doesn’t think he could tell Zarkon to get off the bed, considering it’s his, but Keith isn’t sure he likes what’s going on. He could try to roll onto the floor and escape the situation that way.

Zarkon pulls Keith up and arranges him until he’s more or less resting in his arms. Keith tenses, but as warmth engulfs him he gives up and presses himself against Zarkon. A small sigh escapes Keith’s lips and his fingers clutch at the thick fabric of Zarkon’s clothes. He traces the thin, silver embroidery on Zarkon’s clothes, the abstract seeming pattern against the dark fabric catching his attention even in the dim lighting.

“Haggar will come see you when she has the time, in the meantime you should try to sleep,” Zarkon says quietly. Keith offers him a small nod in reply and closes his eyes. He’s comfortably warm and his thoughts grow sluggish. He presses closer to Zarkon and lets his mind wander.

Keith tells himself it’s the fever and a simple case of touch starvation.

Zarkon wakes Keith up a while later to talk with Haggar. Keith doesn’t have to leave his warm cocoon entirely, but he does have to sit up so that Haggar can run a quick scan on him. Keith blinks against the lights that are brighter now than before, and answers Haggar’s questions about how he feels.

“You are still running a fever,” she says, her eyes glued to the stream of information on her pad. Keith nods in agreement, and glances at Zarkon hovering over Haggar’s shoulder. He seems strangely curious about whatever he’s seeing, but Keith is too tired to care enough to worry about it.

“I’ll give you a sleep aid. You need rest,” Haggar tells Keith and pulls a bottle from the small bag she’d brought with her. Zarkon steps aside when she reaches for Keith’s glass and pours some of the red liquid into the water, turning it a strangely pale, luminescent pink. She hands the glass to Keith and orders him to drink it all, and Keith does as he’s told.

“What’s wrong with me?” Keith asks as he hands the glass back to Haggar.

“The Skovorohi bite transferred bacteria into your bloodstream, it caused an inflammation,” Haggar replies as she packs her bag.

“I thought you gave me something for that,” Keith says. Haggar stills, and shares a look with Zarkon before offering Keith a brief smile.
“We had not tried the antibiotics on someone of your... species before.” She waves him off as she stands. “I know more now. That mistake won’t happen again.”

Keith frowns, but the drugs kick in before he can start questioning her further. His eyes close against his will, and he has to fight to stay awake just a little longer. He hears Haggar head to the door, but she stops before she can reach it.

“He is well enough to leave,” she says quietly. Keith wonders who she’s talking to.

“No,” Zarkon’s voice replies. Keith would roll his eyes if he could, he’d forgotten all about Zarkon’s presence.

“I cannot afford for what happened today happen again,” Zarkon continues more quietly, and Keith has to use all the energy he has left to hear him. “That cannot happen when I am in the presence of the commanders. Or anyone else for that matter.”

Keith tries to force his eyes open. He has to hear what Haggar says next, but though he hears her voice he can’t make out the words. He fights the sleep taking over him to the very last second.

When Keith wakes up again the room is dark and he’s alone. There are no sounds breaking the silence surrounding Keith, but he still hesitates for a few minutes before sitting up and pushing the covers aside. His heart hammers in his ears as he slowly puts one foot to the ground, followed by the other after a few seconds.

Keith pushes himself to his feet, and though he feels uncomfortably weak his fever has subsided enough for him to move around. He tiptoes to the door and opens it, and lets out a sigh of relief when he sees Zarkon has left the lights on for him. Keith takes a curious glance at his surroundings before stepping through the door. He makes locating a bathroom his first priority.

He finds one easily, since it’s behind the only door he can open. He takes in the room that’s wide and open but in a compact sense, and the shower in the corner that’s probably larger than Keith’s cell. The vanity has some trinkets and bottles on it, but Keith ignores them, believing Zarkon would not appreciate it if Keith moved his things around. He wonders about the bench with comfy looking cushions and the sliding door covering most of the far wall, but Keith is too interested in the possibility of food to snoop further.

Keith imagines Lance would be disappointed in him when he doesn’t linger in the bathroom. He’d probably say something about how a bathroom tells you everything you ever need to know about a person, and how Keith missed out on a great chance to find Zarkon’s weakness. Keith smiles to himself as he exits the door to find out if the tray he spotted on a table in the other room near the wall covered in shelves is for him.

Keith doesn’t realize he’s starving until he’s removing the lid off the plate of vegetables and fish, and he sits on the closest chair and pulls the plate to him. The voice of one of his many foster parents tells him to not to eat too fast or he’ll throw up.

Keith takes his time enjoying his food, even if it’s not as hot as he assumes it should be. He finishes the whole plate and the glass of juice, as Keith has decided to call the different drinks he’s been given. He sighs and twirls the glass slowly, momentarily lost in thought.
Finally, after several minutes of sitting there staring at the bottom of his glass, Keith takes a proper look around the room. He takes in the shelves covering most of the wall on his right that are full of things he can’t begin to name, as well as a shelf dedicated solely to books and on the very middle of them all — to Keith’s surprise — a sword. He’s not surprised Zarkon has one, just that he’s left it in plain sight where Keith can reach it.

Keith stands up, making his way to the sword and reaching out to it, stopping with his fingers hovering just above the blade. It’s beautiful, the pure white of it is eye catching against the darker colors of the room, and the thin purple carvings running along the edge of it make Keith think they might be words. It kind of reminds Keith of the sword Zarkon had used in their fight, though it’s more stylized and quite a bit smaller. Keith wonders if one is modeled after the other.

Keith decides not to touch the sword. It feels too much like a trap, and maybe Keith can gain something by not arming himself. Zarkon keeps telling him trust is earned after all, and Keith can’t think of a better way to earn trust than to leave such a tempting weapon untouched.

Feeling good with his reasoning Keith moves away from the sword and studies the various objects on the shelves with curious eyes. He takes a liking to the small orb with a galaxy swirling slowly inside of it. He smiles as his eyes drift to the books, and though he can’t read any of the several languages they’re written in he stills leafs through some of them.

Keith is a bit surprised when he finds one book written in Altean, and he picks it up and moves to the couch at the nice little seating arrangement at a quiet corner of the room. He flops down on the soft cushions and lies down, and once he’s settled comfortably he starts leafing through the book. He doesn’t pretend he can read all of it, but every now and then Red translates words and sentences to him. It doesn’t help Keith get an idea what the book is about, but the somewhat familiar text is comforting.

Keith wonders why Red can’t translate all of the book. He thinks it might be the distance between them, but it wouldn’t explain why Keith can still understand the spoken languages. Maybe it takes more to translate text than speech. Keith could ask Zarkon about it, but in the end he decides he doesn’t care enough to bring Voltron up around him.

Keith closes his eyes for a moment and tries to reach out to Red instead. Maybe if he takes a quick nap Red will explain things to him. Keith knows it’s a slim chance, but he has nothing better to do, and he’s growing tired.

A bang wakes Keith up.

He jumps, surprised by the sudden noise, only to find Zarkon studying him with mild amusement. The book Keith had been leafing through is lying on the small table in the middle of the seating arrangement.

“You cannot read Altean,” Zarkon says.

“I can read some words,” Keith replies as he pushes himself to a more upright position. Zarkon studies Keith for a few seconds longer before taking the book back to its rightful place. Keith gets the impression it’s a silent command for him to not touch it again.

“That sword is nice,” Keith starts, motioning awkwardly at the sword on the shelf when Zarkon
“It is a Zhuva ceremonial sword. If you touch it I will have to break your arms,” Zarkon’s expression leaves no room for argument, so Keith stays silent. He hadn’t expected to be handed the sword, but the weighted silence isn’t what he wants either.

Zarkon sits by the table with his pad in his hands, his interest in Keith seemingly lost. Keith should let it be and get more rest while he can. His stomach growls softly and Keith fights back a blush, he doesn’t need Zarkon making a comment on his hunger. To his relief Zarkon doesn’t seem to have noticed anything.

“What’s that?” Keith asks when the silence gets too oppressive, pointing at the orb with the galaxy inside it.

“Photography of sorts. The Lu’ih took it when they first reached the edge of their galaxy,” Zarkon replies, and looks up from his pad. “Are you going to keep bothering me the whole night?”

“I just thought we could talk,” Keith says. The request for food dies before he has even decided if he should voice it as Zarkon frowns at him.

Zarkon sighs, but he sets his pad down and turns to fully face Keith with a patient look. Keith isn’t sure what topic he should approach first, but in the end he decides to prioritize.

“Am I going back to the cell?” Keith asks, his hunger momentarily forgotten as he waits for his verdict with baited breath.

“Do you want to go back?” Zarkon counters, his voice too conversational to ease Keith’s mind.

“No.” Keith figures there’s no point in lying.

“Then I assume you have a reason as to why I should keep you in my space?”

Keith bites his lip and averts his eyes for a second. He hadn’t thought about having to come up with a reason to not go back to his cell. Zarkon’s patient silence isn’t helping him.

“I’m good company?” Keith wants to smack himself as the words leave his mouth, especially when Zarkon smiles in that amused way that Keith tries not to interpret as fondness.

“I can have you brought to me any time I wish to see you,” Zarkon replies. Keith bites his tongue to keep himself from saying something that would get him in trouble.

“You said I’m not a prisoner,” Keith says, his voice more quiet than he intended.

“That is true,” Zarkon confirms. Keith can’t stop the mirthless laugh from escaping his lips. Zarkon tilts his head, as if he can’t understand Keith’s reaction.

“You’ve got a funny way of making your guests feel welcome.” Keith gives Zarkon a smile that feels more like a grimace before pulling his legs up to his chest and playing with the seam of his pants. He feels Zarkon’s eyes studying him, but Keith makes a point of not acknowledging him.

The silence stretches, turning from reserved to uncomfortable. Keith has to make an effort not to break it.

“I was not aware it bothered you so much,” Zarkon says eventually. Keith has trouble believing him, but he doesn’t think arguing it will do him any good. Instead he shrugs and focuses on his
“Could I trust you to not cause any trouble I were to allow you to have a room?” Zarkon’s voice snaps Keith’s attention to him immediately.

“Yes,” Keith hurries to reply. His heart beats faster as he sits up, excitement flooding his body for the first time in forever.

“You would have to earn your place,” Zarkon says as he leans back in his chair, steepling his fingers and considering Keith with a thoughtful look.

“I don’t care,” Keith says. He will do almost anything to get out of that cell for good. He doubts he can stay sane in there much longer. Zarkon regards him for a few seconds longer before reaching for his pad and looking something up on it while Keith waits impatiently for him to be done.

“There is a problem with a ventilation shaft in the lower floors. The engineers suspect a blockade of some kind. I want you to crawl into that shaft and fix the problem,” Zarkon says, raising his eyes to meet Keith’s. Keith doesn’t hesitate before agreeing. It doesn’t sound bad and it will give him a chance to see what the ventilation system looks like in case he’ll need to use it as a part of an escape plan.

“If you can do that and I hear no complaints about your performance or behavior, I will consider granting you a room.” Zarkon gives Keith a pointed look. He doesn’t need to say that if Keith fails he won’t be seeing the outside of his cell anytime soon, if ever.

One thing occurs to Keith, and he considers his words carefully before speaking. “Can I stay here until then?” Keith hopes the almost surprised look on Zarkon’s face is a good thing.

Zarkon narrows his eyes briefly before his expression shifts into something that makes Keith regret speaking up. “Come here,” Zarkon orders.

Keith takes a moment to weigh his options, but in the end the cell seems like the worse option. He stands and makes his way to Zarkon with wary steps.

Keith stops before Zarkon, staying just out of his reach. His fever has subsided enough for him to want to keep some distance between them. It doesn’t stop Zarkon from frowning minutely at him, and reaching out for Keith’s arm. Keith does his best not to flinch when Zarkon’s fingers twist around his elbow.

Zarkon pulls Keith closer, and the now familiar warmth sweeps through his clothes and up his arms. Zarkon rubs his thumb against Keith’s arm in soothing circles, and Keith relaxes a little.

“Would you like to have dinner?” Zarkon asks too casually, catching Keith off guard.

“Please tell me there’s no hidden agenda in that,” Keith blurts before thinking what he’s saying, and he immediately blames still being sick on his inability to keep quiet. If he was lucky the floor would open up and swallow him, and spit him out in space where he would quickly die. He’s too busy trying to pretend he’s not as red as his Lion to notice the brief flash of confusion on Zarkon’s face.

“Why would there be?” Zarkon tilts his head. “Do your kind not eat dinner with others without one?”

“Dinner sounds good,” Keith mutters, his face burning up, and he looks anywhere but Zarkon’s amused face. His pointed avoidance and his desperate attempt to regain his dignity causes him to
miss Zarkon gently taking hold of his hands.

Keith jumps when his hands touch Zarkon’s jaw, and his eyes snap to Zarkon, his breath catching his throat. His eyes lock on the point where his hands are pressed against Zarkon’s skin. He keeps expecting to feel cool and dry skin, but all he gets is warmth and strange softness.

Keith tenses when Zarkon lets go of his hands and grasps his wrists instead, gently pressing his face against Keith’s hands. Keith swallows. He doesn’t know what’s going on, and he doesn’t like the way his thoughts aren’t quite as sharp as they should be.

“Will fish be alright?” Zarkon asks, his voice strangely soft, and Keith nods, not really caring what they are having for dinner, he’s much more concerned with finding the will to care about what’s happening to him.

Zarkon’s eyes are too clear and focused as he studies Keith with a barely visible, satisfied smirk. “Sit.” He pushes Keith’s hands from his face and guides him to the chair next to his.

Keith blinks as he sits down. He shakes his head to clear off the fog clouding his mind while Zarkon arranges for their dinner to be delivered. A chill runs down Keith’s back even though the room is warmer than he’d prefer.

Something is wrong with him.

“You look unwell,” Zarkon says, his voice a little too casual, and Keith turns his eyes to him. “Perhaps you should rest after you have eaten.”

Keith is still trying to find his voice when a druid enters and brings them their dinner. The druid places a vial of pale yellow liquid before Keith, and Zarkon waves them away without a word, his attention still focused on Keith.

“Drink the medicine. It will make you feel better,” Zarkon says. Keith hears the hint of command in his voice.

Keith reaches for the vial, but drops his hand on the table when the thought that it’s not actually medicine hits him. He’s not sure what he can trust at that moment.

Zarkon doesn’t miss Keith’s hesitation, and he observes Keith from the corner of his eye as he cuts neat pieces off of the fish on his plate. Keith stays motionless for a few long minutes, trying to make sense of his situation. He’s acutely aware of Zarkon’s eyes on him, and it’s starting to make him anxious.

Zarkon sighs and puts his fork down before reaching for Keith’s hand, and it’s enough to snap Keith out of his head. He snatches his hand away before Zarkon can touch him, throwing an angry glare at his direction.

“Don’t touch me,” he says in a low voice, and under any other circumstances he might take pleasure in the surprise in Zarkon’s eyes. “You’re doing something to me,” Keith continues, convinced he’s right.

Zarkon’s expression is unreadable as he regards Keith. “I am not doing anything to you.”

“Don’t lie to me. You’re doing something to me. I’m not stupid.” Keith almost gets up and leaves the table, but he has enough sense to know it would only make things worse. Zarkon doesn’t look happy with him as it is.
“I have never thought you are. And I do not lie,” Zarkon says in a tone that only manages to make Keith more upset. He reaches for Keith again, and this time Keith bolts to his feet, almost causing his chair to topple over in his hurry to put more distance between them. Zarkon doesn’t look happy about it, but at least he lets Keith go.

“I can’t think when you do that,” Keith says quietly, and admitting it is almost worse than keeping silent about it.

The understanding that flashes on Zarkon’s face so fast Keith almost misses it does nothing to alleviate Keith’s distress.

“Come here.” Zarkon motions for Keith to step closer to him, but Keith refuses to move. He takes a step back when Zarkon’s calm mask cracks with annoyance.

“If I have to get up I will throw you in the darkest cell I can find and leave you there until there is nothing left of the person you are,” Zarkon says, his voice far too calm, and Keith swallows as he fights the urge to run.

He doesn’t like seeing the cold, vicious sharpness in Zarkon’s eyes. He doesn’t want to be close to Zarkon when he’s looking at Keith like that.

He doesn’t want to be locked in a cell again.

Keith doesn’t move until Zarkon sighs and slowly pushes his chair away from the table. He starts and hurries to Zarkon before he can stand, telling himself it’s preferable to a cell.

A satisfied smirk crosses Zarkon’s face and he extends his hand to Keith, expecting him to take it without a complaint. Keith feels sick, but he keeps telling himself he can’t survive in a cell forever. He definitely can’t escape from one. So Keith swallows down his nausea and the urge to scream, and he gives Zarkon his hand.

He feels like he just lost a war he didn’t know he was fighting in.

“I have no interest in harming you,” Zarkon assures Keith. “And no one in here will make you do anything you are not willing to do, so stop worrying and sit down.”

Keith can’t believe Zarkon. He gently pries his hand back, and after a moment of hesitation under Zarkon’s scrutiny Keith returns to his seat. He doesn’t like the satisfied smile that grazes Zarkon’s face. Keith takes a second to just breathe before he picks up the fork in his hand and starts eating.

Keith feels a little better after finishing his dinner, and he accepts the tea Zarkon offers him after downing the bitter medicine in the vial. He’s not sure if he should ask where he will be spending his night, and when Zarkon stands and picks a book from the shelf on his way to the couch Keith decides to stay silent. He settles for drinking his tea at a leisurely pace at the table.

“You need to rest if you intend to work tomorrow,” Zarkon’s voice pierces the almost comfortable silence.

Keith takes a long sip of his tea to buy himself some time before speaking. “Am I going back to my cell or...” He trails off, unsure of how to continue. Zarkon looks up from his book.

“If you want.” Zarkon closes his book and gives Keith his full attention while Keith tries to decide how best say he’d rather stay where he is.

“I could stay on the couch,” Keith says eventually.
“No,” Zarkon says, and at Keith’s fallen expression he continues, “I’m not leaving you alone with weaponry.”

Keith can’t really argue a fair point.

“You can sleep in the bed. You are small, you do not take up a lot of space. And I still have to see to something tonight so it is most likely free for the night anyways,” Zarkon says. Keith isn’t sure what he’s supposed to say, and he’s not sure if the cell is actually preferable to Zarkon’s bed.

Still, the bed is inviting and warm and comfortable, unlike his cell with its cold floor and oppressive air. Besides, if Zarkon is going to be working the whole night Keith gets the entire bed to himself, and he doesn’t have to worry about the implications of actually sharing a bed with Zarkon. Keith almost wishes Zarkon was pressuring him to either stay or go.

Keith argues with himself for a good minute. He can’t deny he wants to have one more night on a real bed before he gets thrown back in his cell or be given a room which might or might not contain one. He might be doomed to sleeping on pillows and hard floors for the rest of his life. Zarkon doesn’t say anything while Keith debates the matter.

“I guess I could stay,” Keith says eventually, his voice soft and unsure, as if he speaks quietly enough it won’t feel like a betrayal or like he’s selling his soul to Zarkon.

Zarkon nods and returns his attention to his book. “Then go to sleep. You need to be well rested for tomorrow.”

Keith doesn’t wait to see if Zarkon has something else to say. He hurries to the other room and curls on the edge of bed before he can convince himself he’s making a big mistake. He tries not to think of his friends as he settles under the covers.

He hopes Red won’t try to reach him.

He dreams of a red desert, and if it wasn’t for the strange sky he might believe he dreamed of home.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna try to get the next chapter up before I have to give my finals my full focus for a few weeks.

Hope you liked this!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna ramble about the little side story I decided to post for you at the end notes so stay tuned.

Also it's 5am here. Guess who got stuck watching Hannibal again. I'm gonna regret that in a few hours.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith stares up at the opening to the ventilation system with doubtful eyes. The Galra around him smirk at him, knowing he has agreed to do the worst job available in such short notice.

Keith had woken up alone in Zarkon’s bed, and he’d barely finished the breakfast laid out for him before a druid had come to fetch him and dress him in protective gear that feels like leather and limits Keith’s movements to the point of making him uncomfortable. The druid had said it’s because the outfit isn’t made for humans.

“You have a map of that or something?” Keith asks, waving at the small opening on the wall he’s supposed to climb into. He’s not thrilled about going into a ventilation system that, apparently, still had some security measures on without some kind of a guide.

“Or maybe you could shut the security off so I won’t get vaporized?” Keith turns to face the stern faced head of the maintenance team, Kano, and raises a pointed eyebrow.

“I’ll guide you. You couldn’t make sense of the blueprints anyway. And we’ll turn the security off as you go,” Kano replies as he crosses his arms. Keith stares at him for a second longer before returning his attention to the narrow opening near the ceiling. He’s not interested in arguing, and he definitely doesn’t want to know how far he can push Kano before he loses his temper. He looks like he could snap Keith in half if he wanted.

“Well, let’s see what a Paladin of Voltron is good for. Besides murdering people with a giant robot,” someone says, the sneer on their face obvious in their voice. Keith bites his tongue and repeats the mantra he had settled on a minute after meeting his new teammates.

I’m getting out of my cell if I do this.

Keith takes a deep, calming breath and repeats the sentence in his head a few times before taking the light the small woman offers him. Keith suspects he’s taking up her job, but she doesn’t seem to mind it. Keith checks the earpiece he’s been given as well as the small device he’s been told will let Kano and his team see what’s blocking the system once Keith reaches it.

When he’s ready Keith turns to nod at Kano, who lifts him from the ground and helps him climb into the ventilation system. The crawlspace is illuminated by dim lights running across the floor, and though Keith has never had much trouble seeing in poorly lit spaces he’s glad he has a better light with him.

“Go straight until the intersection, then turn right,” Kano calls after him, and Keith acknowledges
him before heading deeper into the narrow maze.

Keith has to give the Galra kudos for keeping the ventilation system dust free, even if the tight quarters leave him feeling a little claustrophobic. He has enough room to move more or less comfortably as the system is designed to fit a small Galra if need be, but the dim lights and the still operating security systems, and every sound echoing loudly in the small space make him uncomfortable.

Keith takes a deep breath and notes the markings on the walls that he assumes are floor or section numbers of some kind.

“Go left,” Kano’s voice comes through the earpiece.

“Got it.” Keith takes the turn and points the light to the tunnel before venturing deeper into it.

“You should see the blockage after the next left turn,” Kano informs him, and Keith acknowledges him before speeding up a little. His head is beginning to throb with dull pain, and he wants to be done with the job before it gets worse.

Keith reaches the corner and stops. He points the light down the shaft and peeks around the corner to see what is causing so much trouble. There’s something black at the end of the crawlspace, but he can’t make out what it is. He bites his lip and chews it for a few seconds before crawling closer to the dark mass, cautious and curious at the same time.

The mass seems to move away from Keith, and he stops at what he hopes is a safe distance. “I see it,” Keith tells Kano and follows the instructions for setting up the camera.

“Hold the light up and stay still,” Kano orders, and Keith does as he’s told. He observes the mass, noting the almost silky look of it as the thing moves slowly around in its spot. Keith can’t see anything resembling a face or a body, but he’s in space and the universe is a strange place, so he doesn’t let it bother him.

“That’s enough. Come back,” Kano orders, and Keith backs up to the last intersection where he turns to face the way he’s going and hurries out of the ventilation system with Kano occasionally reminding him of the correct way.

The Galra help Keith safely to the ground when he reaches the opening. Keith had almost expected them to leave him to figure the landing out on his own, so he’s pleasantly surprised by the assistance. He mutters a thank you to them as he turns to face Kano.

“Did you touch it?” Kano asks, and Keith shakes his head while the other Galra take the equipment from him.

“I think it’s alive,” Keith says. Kano hums in agreement.

“It’s an organism from space. It got in and grew. We’ll get rid of it. You should get yourself checked in case it’s contagious,” Kano says as he writes on his pad. Keith stands in the sidelines, unsure if he should make his way to the medical bay on his own or wait for someone to take him there. Kano must catch on his hesitation since he orders one of the techs to show Keith the way.

Keith doesn’t exchange any words with his guide, and he gets left alone at the entrance of the medical bay. The door closes behind Keith while he scans the room for Haggar, but she’s nowhere to be seen. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to do, and as he tries to decide on his next course of action a druid appears by his side.
“Go there and wait,” they say and point at the examination table at the end of the room. Keith thanks them and makes his way to the examination table. The druid disappears, and no one else in the room pays attention to him.

Keith hops on the edge of the table and lets his legs swing in the air as he looks around the room, observing the druids going on about their work. Keith can’t tell what they are doing exactly, but they seem to have some kind of an experiment going on. He almost misses Haggar entering the medical bay and heading his way.

“Is this going to be a regular thing with you?” She asks when she reaches Keith, and though she seems annoyed at first glance there is a hint of amusement in her voice that eases Keith’s mind a bit.

“There was some kind of an organism in the ventilation system,” Keith explains.

Haggar picks up a few instruments before making sure Keith hasn’t been infected with anything. She studies his eyes and has him breathe into a device that she says analyzes the air in his lungs, and after careful examination of the results of all her tests she declares him healthy.

“Have you been feeling well?” Haggar asks, and though Keith isn’t sure if it’s the wisest course of action he tells her of the headache.

“It’s an after effect of your illness. It will pass,” Haggar replies, and since it had been Keith’s initial suspicion as well he accepts her much more educated opinion.

“The Emperor wants to see you when he’s free. Since you are not in optimal health yet I’ll take you to his quarters. He will join you shortly,” Haggar says, motioning for Keith to follow her. Keith hops off the table and hurries after her. A druid stops them for long enough to shove a pile of clean clothes in Keith’s hands.

“Is Zarkon okay with this?” Keith asks once they’re on the mostly empty hallway.

“Yes,” Haggar replies without bothering to even glance at Keith. “We have determined that a cell is not the ideal place for you when you are recovering from an illness,” she adds.

Keith could’ve told them as much, but he’s glad his health is being taken into consideration, even if he’s not entirely comfortable with his new housing arrangements. There’s no reason for Zarkon to allow Keith in his quarters, no matter how sick he is, unless there’s something else going on. He doesn’t buy Zarkon’s claim about it being the safest place for him. There’s no way they couldn’t have arranged a secure place to hide Keith in while he was sick.

“Is there a particular reason I’m allowed in Zarkon’s quarters?” Keith asks, though he doesn’t expect to get an honest answer.

“It is the safest place in the ship,” Haggar replies without looking at him.

Keith rolls his eyes. “Besides that. I’m pretty sure there are a dozen other places I can wait for Zarkon besides his quarters or a cell.”

Haggar doesn’t tense, exactly, but Keith gets the impression she doesn’t want to talk about this.

“The decision has been made. The reasons behind it are none of your concern,” she answers, her voice clipped, and though a part of Keith is happy to get confirmation for his suspicions, even bigger part of him slowly fills with dread.
He doesn’t question Haggar further.

“I’ll have someone bring you food. Shower and change your clothes before that,” Haggar says when she lets Keith into Zarkon’s quarters.

The door shuts behind her, locking Keith in. In a way it’s worse than a cell, and Keith swallows down his trepidation. He takes comfort in the knowledge that he already knows his surroundings, and that he has some time to himself before Zarkon returns.

Keith takes a quick shower and changes his clothes, and to busy himself he folds the outfit he’d worn earlier and places it on a chair.

A druid brings him a tray of food soon after he’s settled on the couch, and they take Keith’s folded clothes away without a word. Keith wonders if only the druids are allowed in Zarkon’s space. He wouldn’t be surprised by it; if he was ruling an intergalactic empire he’d be picky about the people he let in his quarters as well.

Keith settles down to eat the soup he’s been brought, taking his time and enjoying the moment of peace he’s been granted.

Keith ends up sprawled on Zarkon’s bed, his headache growing more intense with each passing minute. The bed is soft and the room is dark, and if it’s anything like the migraines Keith had when he was younger it should help.

It doesn’t, but by the end Keith reaches the conclusion that he’s not in any shape to get up.

He pretends to be asleep when Zarkon arrives, and if he can tell Keith’s awake he doesn’t say anything. A small part of Keith appreciates it. Zarkon places a glass by the bed, but Keith doesn’t have the motivation to look what’s in it. He settles on listening to Zarkon moving around his quarters.

It takes Keith what feels like an hour to pull himself up and glance at the glass of water Zarkon had brought him. Keith drags himself across the bed and drinks it, hoping it will alleviate his headache. It doesn’t do much, and Keith groans as he curls back on the bed.

The covers smell like Zarkon, but Keith tries to ignore it.

Keith is too tired to move, even when Zarkon comes to sit on the bed by his side. Zarkon gives Keith a moment before he leans over Keith to look at his face, placing his hands on either side of Keith, trapping him in his spot.

“You seem unwell,” Zarkon remarks.

“Just a headache,” Keith mutters in reply. He cracks an eye open to glance at Zarkon’s face hovering a little too close to his own.

“I will have Haggar send you something for that,” Zarkon promises after scrutinizing Keith for a long second.

Keith closes his eyes while Zarkon leaves the room, and he ignores Zarkon when he returns a few
minutes later. Keith tells himself he doesn’t enjoy the way Zarkon rubs gentle circles against his scalp, easing the thrumming in his head just a bit. He’s aware of Haggar entering before she asks him to sit up. She makes Keith drink a salty tasting liquid, and orders him to rest until his head stops hurting.

Zarkon leaves with Haggar, leaving Keith alone in the dim room. His mouth tastes horrible and he wishes he hadn’t drunk all of the water in one go. He almost thanks Zarkon when he brings him a new glass. Keith sips the cool water, his head feeling a little better already, and listens to the muffled voices coming through the door. His attention doesn’t focus on them until he hears his own name.

Keith puts the glass down, and after a second of internal debating he sneaks closer to the door to hear the conversation better, ignoring the pounding in his head in favor of possibly learning something important.

“I could take him to the medical bay,” Haggar’s carefully polite voice comes through the door, and Keith grimaces at the mere thought.

“Last time I left him in your care he almost died.” The friendliness of Zarkon’s voice does little to hide the cold sharpness of his words. “He stays where he is until I say otherwise.”

Keith isn’t exactly relieved, but he’s okay with not having to go with Haggar. He wishes he could see what is happening on the other side of the door as the conversation halts for an agonizingly long moment.

“He is a distraction,” Haggar says eventually in a carefully controlled tone.

“I am not distracted,” Zarkon counters immediately.

Keith frowns at the door and presses more tightly against it.

For a moment Keith hears nothing, then Haggar’s voice comes through the door. “I don’t have experience with this. I cannot predict how this will develop, or what the effects are. But I do think it would be better if he would stay... in a more appropriate place.”

“I have full confidence in your ability to solve this. And what you consider appropriate does not interest me.” There’s a finality in Zarkon’s voice that Keith recognizes by now. He’s not surprised that Haggar doesn’t say anything in response.

“What of Voltron?” Haggar asks eventually, piquing Keith’s interest.

“They cannot form it without Keith. Do not worry about them,” Zarkon replies. Keith remains glued to the door, hoping to hear some kind of news of his friends.

“Then it would be a good time to get the Lion's back,” Haggar says. Keith shakes his head, his breath catching in his throat. They can’t go after Voltron.

“The Castle has gone beyond my reach. We will track them once they resurface.” The barely contained annoyance doesn’t ease Keith’s mind, and Keith hopes Allura will keep the Lions and the Castle far away from Zarkon.

“And Keith?” Haggar asks.

“You do do not like him,” Zarkon says instead of replying her. Keith wishes they would just say what they are planning to do with him already.
“I don’t mind him personally, but the effect he has on you concerns me. Perhaps a little distance between you would be best for now,” Haggar says in a carefully controlled voice.

Keith frowns, not knowing what she’s talking about. He doesn’t have any effect on Zarkon, at least none he can see.

“He does not have an effect on me. And I think you have expressed your opinions enough for one day.” Zarkon’s voice makes it clear the conversation is over.

A heavy silence falls in the next room. Keith holds his breath, feeling the tension between Haggar and Zarkon even through the door.

“Focus on finding out how to fix this. If distance is what will help I will take your advice,” Zarkon says, almost pacifying, and though Keith can’t see Haggar the tension in the air feels lessened.

“Until such time, however, I will keep Keith as close to me as I deem appropriate or necessary. Your concerns on the matter have been taken into consideration,” Zarkon continues. Keith can almost see the defeated slump of Haggar’s shoulders.

“How is the relocation coming?”

Keith frowns, not knowing what Zarkon means.

“Our original plan is not plausible at such short notice, but we have an idea for a temporary placement. Should you approve of it, of course,” Haggar replies.

Zarkon is quiet for a long moment, and Keith wonders what he’s thinking.

“It is fine. It is a controlled space, at least. We are not likely to get any surprises this way,” he says eventually, though there’s a tenseness to his voice that Keith doesn’t think is a good thing.

The door to the quarters opens and closes, and Keith stays still for a few seconds before sneaking back to the bed. He doesn’t dare to go through the door, and he doesn’t know what to make of the conversation he just heard. He doesn’t have the needed pieces to understand what Haggar and Zarkon were talking about. He doesn’t know how to make Zarkon tell him what’s going on.

Keith becomes increasingly aware that something more than him being just a prisoner is going on. He had wondered how Zarkon had tracked him, but he hadn’t come up with anything worthwhile, and the conversation he just heard makes him worry the answer won’t be as simple as he’d hoped.

Keith doesn’t get a chance to ponder on it further before Zarkon calls him to the other room. Keith swallows, his heart beating too loud in his ears, but he makes his way to the door. He doesn’t hesitate before opening it, and he does his best to appear calm as he faces Zarkon.

“Sit down.” Zarkon points to the seat next to him by the table, and Keith does as he’s told. Zarkon’s gaze on him is sharp and calculating, and Keith avoids his eyes to the best of his abilities while trying to appear like that’s not what he’s doing.

“I do not appreciate eavesdropping.” Zarkon starts as he pushes a cup of tea in front of Keith.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You are a poor liar and I have very good hearing. I know all the sounds of this place,” Zarkon says, his voice hard. Keith bites his tongue and meets Zarkon’s eyes, and he’s mildly relieved he sees displeasure rather than anger on Zarkon’s features.
“You’re not exactly forthcoming with information,” Keith says, hoping it suffices as an explanation.

“I cannot tell you what I do not know,” Zarkon replies. It’s not what Keith expected, but he thinks Zarkon is being honest.

Keith busies himself with sipping his tea, and he almost burns his tongue in the process. He’s not sure if he should ask, but since he’s been caught he doesn’t see any harm in prying.

“What’s Haggar worried about?” Keith faces Zarkon and meets his gaze.

Zarkon expression shifts from controlled neutrality to frustration so briefly Keith almost misses it. “She believes you are distracting me from more important matters,” Zarkon replies eventually, sounding almost annoyed with the concept.

“Why?” Keith asks, intent on pressing the matter until Zarkon orders him to stop.

“Because you are in my quarters rather than your cell,” Zarkon replies, but it doesn’t sound like the whole truth.

“What does she need to fix?” Keith asks after the silence stretches for a minute.

“I heard you did well with your task today.”

Keith would laugh if he wasn’t so taken back by Zarkon’s words. He’s been stonewalled before, but he never thought he’d get such a horrible attempt at it from Zarkon.

“You’re deflecting,” Keith points out, refusing to let Zarkon get away with it with such a bad attempt at changing the subject. Zarkon narrows his eyes at Keith, but there’s no real hostility in it.

“It is nothing you need to concern yourself with,” he says. “Now, tell me about your day.”

Keith would laugh if he wasn’t so taken back by Zarkon’s words. He’s been stonewalled before, but he never thought he’d get such a horrible attempt at it from Zarkon.

“‘If it’s something that affects me then I’m concerning myself with it,’” Keith states, ignoring Zarkon’s attempts at changing the subject. This time the glare Keith receives isn’t as indulging, and he knows he has to be careful if he wants to avoid being thrown into a cell.

Keith sighs and adopts a more soft expression. “I just think it would be better if I knew what’s going on. I could tell you if something was off. It’s called cooperation in case you didn’t know.”

Zarkon huffs, but his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “I gain nothing from telling you information that I am not sure I can trust you with. Even if you might need it.”

Keith considers it. He understands Zarkon’s point, he wouldn’t arm his enemies with any crucial information either. It becomes a matter of offering Zarkon something worth the information in return, but Keith isn’t sure he has anything Zarkon might want. All he has is himself, and that’s something he’s not willing to give to anyone on board the Central Command, least of all Zarkon.

Still, he has to try.

“So what would you have to gain from telling it to me?” Keith asks, trying not to sound as nervous as he feels.

Zarkon leans forward, resting his elbows on the table and interlacing his fingers, and regards Keith with interest. “Are we bargaining now?”

Keith shrugs and sips his tea.
“What do you have to offer me?” Zarkon asks, seeming genuinely curious in Keith’s reply.

“I’m not giving you anything on my friends that might put them in danger.” Keith keeps an eye on Zarkon as he considers Keith’s words.

“What are you good at?” Zarkon asks, taking Keith by surprise.

“Um, swords. I was the best pilot of my class,” he starts, but Zarkon interrupts him with a raised hand.

“Tell me something I am not aware of yet,” he orders.

“I lived alone for a year so I’m pretty good at housekeeping and I make decent lasagna,” Keith replies. He’s not sure if it’s any good, but it’s something Zarkon shouldn’t already know.

Zarkon thinks it over, the minute of silence weighing heavy on Keith as he waits for Zarkon to speak.

“If you help with basic maintenance of the ship I will not have you put in your cell,” Zarkon says, and before Keith can accuse him of changing the subject again he continues, “I will need something more for what you want.”

“I don’t really have anything to give,” Keith says, feeling defeated.

“That is not entirely true.” Keith raises a confused eyebrow. “I will tell you what you want to know if you agree to enter an arrangement,” Zarkon says, suddenly serious.

Keith leans back, eyeing Zarkon warily. “What kind of an arrangement?”

“I will give you a room down the hall and you will work during the day. You will allow Haggar to run her tests on you. You will join me whenever I have the time and you will remain in my company until I say otherwise. If I tell you to do something you will do it without a single complaint,” Zarkon replies matter of factly.

“I get to say no to anything I’m not comfortable with,” Keith counters before even thinking the offer through properly.

“You can say no if I ask for something you are incapable of complying with, and we will decide on a compromise. If you lie to me even once about anything I will lock you up in your cell and leave you there to rot,” Zarkon says. Keith isn’t sure if he’s just made things better or worse for himself.

Keith takes a moment to think through his choices. He doesn’t think Zarkon is asking for too much, considering it might be Keith’s life on the line if he doesn’t know what’s going on, but he’s not sure he can trust Zarkon. He can’t be sure of what would be in store for him if he agrees.

“How about this; I will allow you to test this arrangement for two weeks, and if you are not comfortable with it we can either negotiate something else for what you want or forget it entirely. If you agree to the arrangement you have to follow it for six more weeks before I decide if you have earned what you want,” Zarkon suggests, and it’s a lot easier deal to agree to. Keith can handle two weeks.

“Okay,” he says, even though he knows he can’t really trust Zarkon. He might just be toying with Keith and decide Keith hasn’t earned the information, but Keith has to take the chance. He can’t just sit back and not do something. If nothing else he might be able to earn Zarkon’s trust and learn more about the ship.
Zarkon smiles as he stands, and he ruffles Keith’s hair as he walks past him. Keith suppresses the need to glare at Zarkon and tries to get his hair under control while Zarkon retrieves his pad from the couch. He manages to settle the worst of it by the time Zarkon returns to his seat.

“Your room will be ready in the morning. You can stay here tonight or go to your cell. In the meantime I would like to hear about your day,” Zarkon says, and though Keith isn’t entirely happy he’s not getting his room just yet he tells Zarkon about his adventure through the ventilation system. Zarkon has dinner delivered to them, and Keith manages to get him to tell more about the artifacts on his shelves while they wait.

Later, when Zarkon is in a visibly good mood, Keith convinences him to let Keith stay on the couch just for one night. He doesn’t feel like Zarkon is letting him stay out of the kindness of his heart, but he doesn’t have to go back to the cell and that’s what he decides matters the most.

He’ll deal with Zarkon’s possible ulterior motives later.

Chapter End Notes

So, I posted first part the 'meanwhile in the Castle of Lions' story. It is absolutely not required reading, and it does contain some spoilers for the overall plot of this story, but nothing major. It's just that some of the things that are addressed in that fic don't pop up in this until later chapters, and vice versa.

I'm gonna be focusing on my finals for the next two/three weeks, so an update might happen, but I make no promises.

Hope you enjoyed this!
The Galra hate Keith.

That’s the only explanation that makes sense to Keith as he tries to reach the filter in the back of the ventilation shaft. The smell wasn’t bothering him until he got close to the filter, but now that he’s within reach of it the musky stench of rot is too obvious to ignore, and he wishes he’d been given some kind of a mask to protect his face.

“You’re doing great,” Kano’s amused voice tells him over the comms. Keith would tell him off if he could open his mouth without throwing up. “Just eight more to go.”

The Galra really hate Keith.

It takes Keith a better part of the day to change the filters in the lower levels of the Central Command, and by the time he’s allowed to shower he’s sure he’ll never get the stench off of his skin.

Keith gets ushered out of the shower by a druid who hands him a tray and takes him to his new room. Keith feels strange living so close to Zarkon, but all things considered he’s not going to complain. It’s the safest floor to be on, and it’s peaceful. Safety on a short notice, as he had been told when he’d asked about it. Keith doesn’t buy it, but he’s not going to mention it in case bringing his doubts up would cost him his new room.

There are no loud inmates keeping him awake or sentries walking down the hallway. Keith takes some comfort in Zarkon’s quarters being at the very end of the hallway, and his room being almost halfway to the elevator. A little distance between them is probably good, at least if Haggar is to be believed.

His new room has a Keith sized, triangle shaped bed pushed into a corner, and a small table with a single chair, and though it’s a little cramped it might be the best room Keith has ever had. There’s even a tiny bathroom, and a drawer for him to put his clothes into. He doesn’t get his own shower, but Keith can live with that.

He falls on the bed that’s nowhere near as soft as Zarkon’s and closes his eyes for a moment with a satisfied groan. Later he finds out the door to his room is locked, but it doesn’t surprise him. He wasn’t expecting to have any freedom to move around the ship.

He spends his time exploring every corner of his room while he eats the fruits and vegetables that he’d been given. He drinks the tomato juice looking liquid while he sits by his table, and when he can find nothing new in his room to study he lies on the bed and enjoys the peace surrounding him.

Keith doesn’t get called on by Zarkon that evening, but he does get a nice warm meal brought to him. He sleeps soundly, though he doesn’t feel quite as rested in the morning as he had waking up
Kano makes Keith do all the jobs no one else wants. Keith gets to scrub stains off of floors that the machines usually doing the job can’t get rid of, and crawl through the vents and maintenance shafts, and after he returns from a crawlspace under the hangar, covered in oil, Kano tells him he’s sure Keith was sent by the stars themselves to keep his team’s furs clean. Keith barely resists the urge to punch him.

Keith is exhausted by the time he gets to take his shower. He’s not expecting Haala to be waiting for him once he enters the hallway.

“I did not miss you,” Haala declares.

Keith smiles despite himself. “Likewise.”

Haala scoffs and pushes himself off the wall. “Come on then. I have things to do today,” he says as he starts heading down the hallway.

“What things?” Keith asks, his curiosity getting the best of him.

“I have a social life that you are thankfully not a part of. If you must know, the mess hall at the twentieth floor is serving alcohol and snacks today,” Haala replies. Keith wonders what a drunk Galra is like, and decides he’s glad not to witness a group of them.

“Sounds fun,” Keith says, and though he means it and he’s happy Haala is getting to spend time with his friends, he’s filled with sudden bitterness. He’d like to go and try strange alien cuisine with his friends, but he’s stuck being a prisoner with a carefully controlled leash.

Haala glances at Keith but says nothing.

“How long is a Galra week?” Keith asks in order to fill the silence. It had dawned on him that morning that the Galra idea of a week, or what translated into a week, might be vastly different from what Keith thought it to be.

“A week? That’s either nine days or eleven standard days depending on your measuring system. Why?” Haala gives Keith a curious look.

“Just trying to figure out how time works with you guys,” Keith waves him off. He’s not about to tell Haala the truth behind his curiosity, even if his mood sinks through the floor.

“Well, you’re working on a different cycle than we are. You sleep more than we do for starters, and apparently the Emperor himself has ordered Kano to not work you for more than a quarter a day. That’s less than a half of the regular workday we do,” Haala says with a shrug. He doesn’t seem bothered that Keith doesn’t have to do as much as he does in terms of work hours, but if Keith has learned anything about the Galra, Haala probably considers him lazy or something similar.

“Well, humans aren’t built to work for several quarters,” Keith replies, though he’s not sure why he has a sudden need to defend his honor. It shouldn’t matter if the Galra consider him a good worker or not.

“We figured,” Haala assures him.

They come to a stop in front of Haggar’s labs, and after showing Keith in Haala goes his own way. Keith doesn’t wait to hear the door shut behind him before walking further into the lab in hopes of
locating Haggar or one of her druids. The faster he’s done with this the better.

“Take a seat,” Haggar’s voice comes from behind Keith. He starts and turns to face her before taking the offered seat by her workstation that’s covered in trinkets and papers and pads.

“I’m going to scan your brain,” Haggar states.

Keith narrows his eyes, his brow knitting together, and leans away from her. “No.”

“I need to make sure the sickness you had didn’t do any damage to you. Unless you want to suddenly lose your ability to control your limbs. You might even have parasites up there,” Haggar explains, and though it doesn’t ease Keith’s mind he reconsiders his position.

Keith has no way of knowing how the illness had affected him, and he knows that just because he’s not suffering from any visible symptoms doesn’t mean he’s well. And he really doesn’t want parasites in his brain.

So Keith lets Haggar guide him to lie down on an examination table without another complaint. She attaches several small, round pieces of cool metal that stick to his skin with what seems to be willpower to his head. Keith closes his eyes when Haggar picks up a hand held device she calls a scanner. She shines a bright blue light at Keith’s face without a word, and though Keith’s eyes aren’t open the light still feels blinding. The light shifts from blue to deep orange after a while, and dims to more tolerable brightness levels, much to Keith’s relief.

The whole operation is painless if a little frustrating, and over in a matter of minutes. Haggar pulls the small pieces of tech off Keith’s skin without taking her eyes off of the terminal displaying the test results. Keith glances at the screen as he pushes himself off the table, but he doesn’t know what the wavy lines going up on one side of the screen mean, or what the text scrolling down at a fast pace say.

“You can go now,” Haggar says and waves Keith off. “Your brain is fine.”

Keith hurries out of the lab and down the hallway before he realizes he’s alone with no idea where he’s supposed to go. He’s debating going back to Haggar and asking her what he’s supposed to do when a druid barely a head taller than Keith appears around the corner.

“I’m not really sure where I’m supposed to go,” Keith says before the druid can draw their own conclusions as to why Keith is standing in the middle of their path.

“Elevator,” they say, and Keith bites back a sarcastic comment about their helpfulness.

“And where might this elevator be? And how do I operate it if I can’t read the controls?” Keith asks instead.

The druid points down the hallway. “Go left and put your hand on the panel to call the elevator. Put your hand on the panel in the elevator and state your name and rank to activate the voice control, then state your destination,” the druid says, and if they don’t like walking Keith through basic elevator controls their voice doesn’t betray it.

“And what might my rank be, exactly?” Keith asks.

“Guest,” the druid replies and continues on their way.

Keith watches them go before turning on his heels and following the directions he’s been given. He finds the elevator easily enough, and he places his hand tentatively on the panel next to it. He
has to wait for a moment for the elevator to arrive, but when it does he’s glad to find it empty.

Keith hesitates as the doors close behind him, and he bites his lip as he places his hand on the panel.

“Um, Keith. Guest?” For a second nothing happens and Keith worries he’s trapped in the elevator, but then the panel lets out a low ping.

For a moment Keith imagines telling the elevator to take him to the closest hangar or a control center, but he harbors no illusions about his chances of escaping without a proper plan. Going on an exploration trip now wouldn’t do any good to him.

“I want to go to my room,” Keith tries, unsure of what the correct command is. The elevator hums as it begins to climb, and Keith lets out a relieved breath. It must have an inbuilt map of the ship, and his room must be marked on it. Keith doesn’t know how he should feel about it, and he decides not to dwell on it. It’s probably just a standard procedure.

The elevator halts and Keith steps out of the doors as soon as they open. He’s relieved to see he’s in the familiar, quiet hallway that holds his and Zarkon’s rooms. Keith has no idea what’s behind the other doors on the hallway, and if he wasn’t so worried about getting caught or stepping out of line he might try and find out. As it is he heads for the familiar door of his room, relieved when he can open the door on his own.

There’s a tray waiting for him along with a small pile of clothes. Keith sits down to eat, deciding to sort the clothes later.

“The Emperor has requested your presence,” the druid standing by the door says.

Keith groans, but he pushes himself off the bed. It’s been a few days since Keith has seen Zarkon, and though he doesn’t mind the change on his routine a part of him dreads what’s waiting for him.

“Can I change my clothes first?” Keith asks, indicating the work uniform he’s still wearing. The druid inclines their head and leaves Keith to put on clean clothes.

Keith hurries to strip out of his uniform and pull on a clean pair of pants that he considers the easiest part of his outfit, and the three shirts he had figured went together after extensive study of the few garments he’d been given.

Galra fashion is, in Keith’s humble opinion, too layered and complicated to be practical. He gets the first thin, coal black shirt on easily enough. It’s more or less like a regular shirt with a high neck, and Keith can work with it.

The second shirt is a little harder, and wrapping it around his body and tying the thin strings in the right order takes Keith a bit longer. The soft burgundy fabric of the collar fits snugly against Keith’s neck, and the sleeves are long enough for him to pull over his thumbs. Since the rest of the shirt fits perfectly Keith assumes the sleeves are supposed to be that long.

The third shirt is, to Keith’s eyes, black, though he thinks he sees hints of red in it when he holds it against light. He hates this shirt. He has to wrap and tie it around his body while remembering to make sure he’s got the hems in right order so that he can fasten the bottom one to the shirt he’s
already wearing with the two well hidden buckles. He repeats the process on the still loose side with a frustrated sigh. The long sleeves are slightly looser than on the second shirt, and Keith isn’t looking forward to eating with them.

Then he gets to hunt for the piece shimmery, deep red fabric that he has to tie around his waist and pull into a knot so the shirts won’t hang loose on his body.

Once he’s done with it he adjust the whole outfit before pulling on the boots that almost come up to his knees, and fastening the straps so they feel secure in his feet. It’s needlessly complicated, and though Keith knows Earth has similar clothing he still doesn’t like it. He’s always preferred clothes that are quick and easy to put on, and the Galra clothes aren’t like that. He feels uncomfortable in them.

Maybe that’s the whole point.

Keith sighs and exits the safety of his room, and follows the druid to a door halfway between his room and Zarkon’s. Keith’s curiosity is immediately piqued. The druid leaves him in a room with a nice view of the space surrounding them, a table that’s surrounded by a comfy looking chairs, and a small seating arrangement in the quiet corner at the back.

The thing that surprises Keith the most are the carefully arranged potted plants around the room. They’re nothing special, and Keith can see only one of them blooming, but they’re a strange sight in the Galra vessel. He’s less surprised by the carefully organized books on the shelves at the far end of the room.

Keith thinks it would be a good place to entertain friends.

The table has a dinner set for two, but Keith doesn’t touch it. Instead he makes his way to the window. The ships passing by look far away, and they remind Keith of how protected his prison is. He moves away from the window before the view makes him depressed and goes to look at the books, even if he can’t read them.

Keith is too busy sitting on the floor and trying to figure out how the seemingly seamless green sphere works to pay much attention to Zarkon when he enters the room, though he does take note of his lack armor. Keith adjusts his weight on his legs, but he doesn’t uncross them or stand up even when Zarkon approaches him.

“Press the top and the bottom and twist the sides to opposite directions,” Zarkon says as he comes to stand beside Keith.

Keith locates the two barely there dents in the sphere and presses on them, and after a little maneuvering he manages to twist the sides. The sphere clicks and opens, and Keith pulls the sides apart to get a better look at the insides. He finds a long, winding piece of what feels like silk but acts like paper neatly folded in the sphere. The fabric like paper spirals along the edges of the sphere, taking up all the space on both halves, and upon closer inspection Keith sees the markings covering the paper.

“It is a children’s story,” Zarkon explains.

“Seems a bit complicated for a child,” Keith says.

“The Ayu believe knowledge must be earned. This is one of their simplest puzzles.”

Keith raises an eyebrow and glances at Zarkon. He closes the sphere and places it back where he found it before pulling himself to his feet. His muscles protest the movement, still sore from a day
of having to hold a pipe still while Kano and Raz took their time fixing it.

Keith steps around Zarkon, intending on going for subtle avoidance. It’s a solid plan in his mind; avoid Zarkon without actually avoiding him. Shiro had called it polite ignorance when he’d done it to one of his instructors.

“Come here.”

Keith stops halfway across the room, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up at Zarkon’s tone. He turns around, trying not to let the dread building inside him overwhelm him.

Keith stops just out of Zarkon’s reach, keeping a cautious eye on the subtle frown marring Zarkon’s features. Zarkon closes the distance between them before Keith can react, his hands grabbing Keith’s face to prevent him from backing away. Keith’s eyes widen and he freezes as Zarkon leans down to breathe in the scent of Keith’s hair.

“You smell strange,” Zarkon says, and Keith would laugh if the situation wasn’t so absurd.

“Why do you know how I smell?” He asks instead, his voice incredulous. Much to Keith’s relief Zarkon pulls away, though he stays too close to be anywhere near comfortable.

He doesn’t let go of Keith’s face.

They stare at each other for a long, uncomfortably silent minute, Keith baffled by the whole thing and Zarkon looking at him with something akin to accusation in his eyes. The frown on Zarkon’s face deepens slightly, and Keith’s hands twist as he barely stops himself from grabbing a hold of Zarkon’s wrists.

“Seriously, I have no idea what you mean,” Keith says when the silence becomes too much to bear.

“You smell strange,” Zarkon repeats. “What did you do today?”

“Um, I helped fix some piping and took a shower. That’s pretty much it,” Keith replies. Zarkon scrutinizes him, and Keith has to force himself to remain still. “Maybe it’s the stuff Raz has to put on his fur. Apparently he’s got a rash or something. He says he’s allergic to me,” Keith continues. Raz had ruffled his hair throughout the day so maybe some of his ointment had stuck on Keith.

Zarkon scrutinizes Keith for a second longer before letting go of him. “Either stay away from him or learn to wash that stink off,” he says and moves past Keith to the table and the food waiting for them.

Keith has to take a moment to get his bearings again. He even sniffs his hair to see if it really has a strange scent to it, but all he can smell is the soap he’d used.

Apparently Galra have a significantly stronger sense of smell than humans. Keith is still a bit weirded out when he joins Zarkon by the table, and he keeps as much distance between them as he can justify. Zarkon glances at him but doesn’t comment on it.

“What else have you been doing?” Zarkon asks right when Keith is about to take a bite of his meal. Keith shoivos his fork into his mouth and takes his time chewing, trying to decide what will be enough information to satisfy Zarkon.

“I’ve done what Kano tells me to do. I’m pretty familiar with the vents now. Haggar scanned my brain and I rode the elevator on my own. I figured this out on without any help.” Keith indicates his clothes, earning a small smile from Zarkon.
“It looks good on you,” Zarkon says. Keith doesn’t blush, exactly, but it’s close. He’s not used to having his appearance complimented. “Haggar told me about the scan, and I must admit I am a bit surprised you did not start wandering around when you were not supervised.”

Keith’s fork stops halfway to his mouth. “I could’ve done that?”

“Yes.” Zarkon offers him a sweet smile.

Keith decides not to be disappointed by the revelation. He might have gotten into trouble if he’d wandered off. He doesn’t ask if that would have been the case. It was probably a test to see what he would do anyways.

“Have you done anything interesting today?” Keith asks just because he hopes it’ll catch Zarkon off guard.

“Not yet,” Zarkon replies. If he’s surprised by Keith’s question he hides it well.

They finish their dinner, Zarkon asking Keith questions about his time with Kano and his team and not truly answering any of the questions Keith throws his way. Keith isn’t surprised by it, but it frustrates him nonetheless. Once they’re done with the dinner Zarkon has Keith bring the teapot and cups to the couch in the corner. Keith sits on a chair when Zarkon picks the small couch where he can monitor the entire room from.

“You may go now,” Zarkon says as he leans back in his seat with a cup of tea.

Keith studies him with thoughtful eyes. He was about to pour himself a cup, but if Zarkon doesn’t want his company it wouldn’t be smart for him to stay. On the other hand it wasn’t an outright command, nor did it sound like one.

“Can I go after a cup of tea?” Keith asks just to be sure. Zarkon considers it for a while before inclining his head in that way Keith has begun to understand is the Galra equivalent of a nod.

“I assumed you are tired,” Zarkon says.

Keith shrugs. “I’m just sore. It’ll pass.”

Zarkon puts his cup down and waves Keith to join him on the couch. For a second Keith ignores him, then he remembers he’s supposed to do what Zarkon asks. He takes his tea with him and sits on the opposite side of the couch despite Zarkon making room for him by his side. Keith doesn’t have a chance to get comfortable before Zarkon pulls him closer.

“You have a strange habit of making everything difficult,” Zarkon says, his voice conversational, as he moves Keith into a position he’s happy with. Keith doesn’t say anything, and since Zarkon has positioned him in a way that leaves his back to Zarkon he doesn’t hide the grimace that crosses his face.

Zarkon presses his palms into the sore muscles in Keith’s back and lets the pressure and the warmth take care of the rest. Keith closes his eyes, and after a moment he leans against Zarkon’s hands. He can accept the touch easier when it’s doing something for him, and when he can’t tell Zarkon to back off without breaking the agreement they have.

“I would like you to take tomorrow to work on this room. The shelves need reorganizing and the plants need to be tended to. You will also need to wash the windows and the floor,” Zarkon says, digging his palms deeper into Keith’s back as he speaks.
“You don’t have machines that can do that?” Keith asks even though they both know he’ll do what Zarkon wants.

“Yes, but I like to have it done by hand every once in a while. Call me old fashioned,” Zarkon replies. He moves his hands to Keith’s shoulders.

“I think you’re just old.”

Zarkon laughs, and Keith smiles despite himself. His brain feels nicely mushy. Keith tenses when Zarkon pulls him back, but he reminds himself of their arrangement and doesn’t fight it. Keith lets Zarkon guide him to lean against his side, and after a few seconds of hesitation Keith lets himself enjoy the warmth of another person.

Keith doesn’t know why it affects him so much. He’s never been one to seek out physical contact, but the way he makes sense of it was that previously he’d had the opportunity to seek contact with friends. He didn’t have that with the Galra, and he’s grown touch starved. That combined with whatever Galra strangeness Zarkon is doing to him has to be the reason for what’s happening to him.

“Do you like your room?” Zarkon asks as he runs his fingers gently through Keith’s hair.

“It’s nice,” Keith replies.

Zarkon rests his jaw on top of Keith’s head for a second before huffing and pushing Keith away. “You need another shower.”

It’s Keith’s turn to laugh. He doesn’t understand why the non-existing smell is so offensive to Zarkon, but it kind of reminds him of the cat his foster parents had who refused to touch her bed after a dog had sniffed it. Keith keeps it to himself though.

“I’d have to borrow your shower if it’s that important to you,” he says instead, and when Zarkon doesn’t say anything he assumes the subject has been dropped.

Keith is taken by surprise when Zarkon stands and pulls him up with him. He’s even more surprised when Zarkon drags him to the door without a word. Keith doesn’t have a choice but to follow Zarkon, but he doesn’t become worried until Zarkon pulls him down the hall, opens the door to his quarters, and drags Keith towards the bathroom.

Keith tries to voice a protestation, but one look from Zarkon reminds him of the agreement he’s under. He can either say no and lose any chance of finding out what is going on, or do what Zarkon wants. Keith decides that an unplanned shower is not the worst thing that could happen to him. Zarkon shoves Keith into the bathroom unceremoniously.

“Try to be more thorough this time,” he orders and leaves Keith alone in the room.

Keith rolls his eyes as he starts undoing the strings and buckles of his clothes. He doesn’t waste time hopping into the shower, leaving his clothes in a crumpled heap on the ground.

The hot water hits Keith’s face and he almost groans. Even the shower is amazing. Keith kind of hates Zarkon for having all the good stuff.

Keith makes a point of soaping himself completely, and after a moment of careful consideration he does it again for good measure. He’s not giving Zarkon any excuses to comment on his scent again.
When Keith steps out of the shower his skin is red from the burn of the water, and he can’t remember ever feeling quite as well scrubbed. He grabs the nearest towel and rubs it against his hair without paying attention to his surroundings.

“Do you require a dryer?”

Keith jumps and yelps as he spins around to face Zarkon. He has the sense to cover himself as he tries to catch his breath. Zarkon raises an unimpressed eyebrow and shows Keith the small bluish jar in his hand.

“This will keep your skin from drying too much,” Zarkon says and walks up to Keith, ignoring Keith’s distress over the situation. “And you are not putting those again.” Zarkon points to the crumbled heap of clothes.

Keith opens and closes his mouth as he tries to find the right thing to say. “A little privacy please?”

Zarkon tilts his head, as if he’s confused by Keith’s behavior, until realization dawns on his face. “There is no need for that.”

“I disagree,” Keith says and pulls the towel higher.

Zarkon sits on the low bench by the wall and places the jar by his side. “I have never quite understood the obsession with modesty some races have. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed,” Keith insists.

“Is it a cultural thing then?” Zarkon asks, and Keith’s exasperation only intensifies when he realizes Zarkon is genuinely curious.

“No, it’s—” Keith shuts up and considers his words carefully. “I mean it’s sort of cultural. You’re not supposed to see another person in any state of undress without their permission. Especially when you have a pretty fucking severe power imbalance with said person.” Keith bites his lip, chastising himself for not controlling his tongue.

Zarkon considers his words. “I am not sure I follow.”

“You’re holding me prisoner,” Keith reminds him. “I can’t leave this place. I can’t even leave my room. This isn’t exactly okay in our books.”

“You want to move around the ship?”

Keith can feel his blood pressure rising. He knows Zarkon is baiting him but he can’t let it go. “I want you to leave me alone!”

Something in Zarkon’s expression shifts. “If you want to be alone I will have you escorted back to your cell.”

Zarkon stands and gives Keith a pointed look as he walks away before Keith can correct himself and tell Zarkon he doesn’t want to go to a cell again, he just wants some privacy while he’s naked save for a towel.

“Shit.” Keith hurriedly dries himself off and, just because he doesn’t want to upset Zarkon even further, he rubs some of the oil from the bluish jar onto his skin. He doesn’t have the time to marvel at how soft the oil leaves his skin.
Keith almost puts his clothes on before remembering Zarkon had told him not to do so. He solves the clothing issue by wrapping a towel around his waist and draping another around his head so his wet hair doesn’t leave droplets of water everywhere. He grabs the jar as he goes, though he doesn’t know what he’s going to do with it.

He finds Zarkon sitting on his couch with a pad in his hand, and if it wasn’t for the minute flattening of his ears when Keith enters the room Keith would assume everything’s fine. Keith stays by the bathroom door, shifting his weight from one foot to another as he considers his options. He doesn’t want to hear someone is on their way to take him to a cell, but he fears anything he says will make Zarkon send him away if he hasn’t already made that call.

Someone has to break the silence eventually, and Keith decides to risk it. He has to coax himself into saying the truth he doesn’t like admitting. “I’m not good with people,” he says, his voice subdued. His eyes drop to his toes.

Zarkon doesn’t say anything, but Keith can feel his eyes on him. He shrugs, “I like company, but I just... I don’t know. I don’t fit in so I learned to be by myself.”

Keith risks a glance at Zarkon, but he can’t read the expression on his face. Zarkon puts his pad down and regards Keith as he leans back on the couch and entwines his fingers, and rests his hands on his knees. The silence stretches until Keith feels like he might snap.

“As you know, the Galra are a communal race. We rarely live on our own, most of the crew on board even share rooms. We require emotional and physical proximity with another person to stay healthy and balanced, and extended isolation tends to be harmful to our psyche. As a result it does leave us with a very poor sense of personal space and privacy,” Zarkon says. Keith looks at him, unable to come up with anything meaningful to say.

“I can’t reach my back,” he says instead, raising the jar in his hand and forcing a smile that he drops after a second. He decides he can give up his personal comfort for this one time in order to not ruin everything he’s worked for.

Zarkon stares at him for a second before waving Keith to come closer, and for once Keith doesn’t hesitate. It’s better to stay in Zarkon’s good side for now, even if it means allowing Zarkon to touch him.

Zarkon takes the jar from Keith, and though Keith feels a bit uneasy turning his back on Zarkon he doesn’t show it. A shiver runs down his spine when Zarkon starts applying the oil to his skin.

Keith takes a slow, deep breath and calms himself, thinking over Zarkon’s words in order to avoid thinking about his hands on his bare skin. He’s not sure what to make of it, and he’s not sure if he should have admitted to his own problems with socializing. Still, something sticks out.

“I haven’t gotten the impression you guys are really sociable,” Keith says, though he’s willing to admit his idea of social is probably different than the Galra’s.

“We know when we are supposed to work and when we can socialize,” Zarkon explains. Keith accepts it and focuses on the next issue he has.

“What about you?” Keith asks.

Zarkon’s hands still for a second. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you have people you spend time with?” Keith glances over his shoulder to gauge Zarkon’s reaction, but he can’t read the expression on his face.
“It is not that simple,” Zarkon replies, and there’s an edge to his voice that Keith can’t quite pin down.

Keith waits for him to continue but he remains quiet. “How come?”

“I am the Emperor. I cannot just go to the mess hall and start a conversation,” Zarkon says, his voice a bit too tense for Keith to miss.

It doesn’t take much for Keith to understand what Zarkon means. Everyone on board the vessel is under his rule, so of course it’s not going to be easy for Zarkon to make friends. There’s probably no one on board who looks at him and sees anything but someone to be bowed before and obeyed. Keith doesn’t think he could live like that.

“But you said you need socialization,” he says before thinking better of it.

“I am fine. We were not quite as dependent on other people when I was born. Besides, if I want company there is always someone who will offer it.” Zarkon doesn’t sound too happy about it, and Keith thinks he gets why. Who wouldn’t want to become friends with the Galra Emperor of all people, whether it’s for personal gain or just the possibility of fame. It can’t be easy to be around people when you can’t be sure of their motivations.

“So you don’t really have anyone.” Keith turns around, ignoring the frustrated huff he gets for his trouble, and frowns at Zarkon. He doesn’t know why he can’t let it go, if anything he should be happy Zarkon isn’t living the perfect Galra life.

“It is fine. Relationships are a hassle that I rarely have time for, and more often than not they end in disappointment. I do not need that,” Zarkon insists.

Keith doesn’t know how he’s supposed to react to that. Zarkon takes his silence as an invitation to start applying the oil to his stomach. Keith doesn’t stop him. He doesn’t want to care about this. He needs to be happy about it.

He needs to be happy about it.

Zarkon’s fingers trail down Keith’s sides, and finally Keith takes a step back. Zarkon looks up to his face, and Keith crosses his arms in an attempt to cover himself a little, even if it feels like a futile thing to do.

“Go to bed. You look tired,” Zarkon says, and on any other day Keith would bounce at the chance to get away. He’s not sure why he’s not out of the door yet.

“Go on. You are keeping me from work,” Zarkon says with an almost amused voice. Keith doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do or say, so he walks away.

Chapter End Notes

I'll post the next chapter most likely at the beginning of October, since I've got two exams next week.

I gotta say about the clothes in this story, my original plan was to make the Galra fashion style be really simple with light, airy clothes that would be more suited for
deserty conditions, but then I thought 'what would annoy Keith the most', and I had to change it.

Hope you liked this!
So I finished school and, assuming I pass all my exams, I’m gonna graduate in a few months. How cool is that? Spite truly is the best motivator ever.

Cleaning windows, mopping floors, watering plants, and organizing shelves of alien books isn’t what Keith expected. He’d thought he’d be done in a few hours, but as he sits in the middle of the mess he’d made of the books, his muscles aching from the strain of the day, he vows to never become a book collector.

It feels like a punishment, though Keith doubts it’s meant as one. The druid who had let him in didn’t seem to think so. In fact, from what Keith gathered from the druid’s confusing words, if he did well there was a possibility he might be allowed to freely move between his room and the private observation room.

He sighs and picks up the pad he had been given with an unhelpful guide on what order the books should be sorted in. He’d been told to start from the top and just match the titles to the order on the pad, but no one had bothered to tell Keith how to locate titles on alien books. There was no rule on where the title was supposed to be, and as Keith went through the list and the books around him for the hundredth time he considered giving up and telling Zarkon it can’t be done.

Keith finds the book he was looking for and places it on the shelf before slumping back on the ground to locate the next item on the list.

The menial work does grant Keith the chance to think, and his thoughts drift to his less than ideal conversation with Zarkon the night before. The conclusion Keith draws is that his reaction to Zarkon’s lack of social life was a case of misplaced sympathy born out of his own experiences with exclusion. Keith feels better about the whole thing after figuring it out, and though he doesn’t get rid of his feelings on the matter, at least he knows what it is, and he can act accordingly and ignore it to the best of his abilities.

By the time Keith drudges back to his room he’s ready to fall into bed and sleep for a week. His brain hurts. He barely remembers to eat before curling under the covers and drifting away. He doesn’t feel like he’s gotten any rest when a bang on the door wakes him up.

Keith doesn’t need to guess who it is, and he drags himself up with a groan and changes his clothes quickly before heading out of the door. It’s the only time of the day he can open it from the inside, and he appreciates not having to wake up to a druid hovering over him every day.

“Morning,” Keith says to the druid tasked to take him to do his work that day. He doesn’t get a reply, but he wasn’t expecting one.

The druid takes him to the labs, and though Keith tries to get an answer as to why he only gets silence in return. Haggar isn’t there, but the druids seem to have a plan for him. To Keith’s surprise they run a complete physical check up on him, and even test his bone density and strength. They tell Keith it’s to make sure they don’t ask him to do something that might damage him.
Zarkon must have ordered it after Keith had complained about being sore the night before. If they were concerned about his wellbeing they would have run the tests before putting Keith to work.

Eventually Keith is released and escorted to work. He’s happy to be back with Kano and his team, and away from the nightmare that is Zarkon’s bookshelves.

“Where’s Raz?” Keith asks when he meets up with the team. He’s acutely aware of the absence, since Raz is usually the first person to make a comment on his presence.

“He’s working with another team today,” Kano replies, his voice a bit too clipped.

It doesn’t take Keith long to realize Raz didn’t switch teams because he wanted to. Zarkon must have had him transferred, and Keith spends the day imagining the ways he could tell Zarkon off for it.

“Let the bots loose,” Esta says, climbing out of the maintenance shaft. Keith moves out of her way, and as soon as Kano is done programming his tiny bots he releases them to deal with the minor wiring issue.

Keith expects to be ordered to another location, and Kano does raise his eyes from his pad to him, but someone calls Kano’s name before he can tell Keith what to do next. Keith turns around, and he can’t help but smile a little when he sees Marzila coming towards them.

“I need him,” she says and points at Keith. Kano shrugs and waves Keith away.

Keith waves goodbye to the others and follows Marzila down the hallway and into an elevator. He doesn’t ask where they are going or why Marzila needs him, but he keeps an eye on their surroundings when they exit the elevator.

“I’m going to teach you a few moves, and then we’re going to find Haala and get a snack,” Marzila says, noticing Keith’s uncertainty at their destination.

Keith relaxes and nods. He hadn’t realized he could use some honest exercise until the opportunity presented itself, but now he couldn’t be happier to spar with Marzila.

“I heard you got out of your cell,” Marzila says, her voice politely curious.

Keith shrugs. “Did Haala tell you that?”

“Yes. He was very happy to be rid of you,” Marzila flashes a bright grin at Keith. “He likes you though. He just has a weird way of showing it,” she continues. Keith had figured it out a long time ago, but he doesn’t say anything.

They enter the same room they had first met in, and Keith has a moment to re-familiarize himself with the space before Marzila orders him to take the protective gear he’s wearing off. Keith complies before following Marzila to the center of the room.

She tries to teach Keith some basic Galra combat forms, but Keith doesn’t do too well with them. They agree that it’s most likely because of their different physiques. Keith still tries to integrate some of it into his own style, and eventually he figures out how to adapt the forms to fit him. He gets a busted lip from Marzila, and she gets a hard kick to her side, but at Marzila’s insistence they take it easy.

“I have other stuff to do later,” Marzila explains when they head back to the elevator. Keith doesn’t mind, his muscles ache and his lip stings, but he feels good and that’s what matters to him.
“You should take a shower before we get food. You stink,” Marzila says.

“How sensitive are the Galra senses anyway?” Keith asks, though he doubts he’ll get an accurate answer.

Marzila shrugs as they stop by the elevator doors. “We have really sensitive hearing and smell, but our eyesight works better at dimmer lighting. I mean, it’s still good, bright lights just bother us. We usually wear protective lenses when we know we’re going to be in bright light for extended periods of time.”

“Like sunglasses?”

“What are those?” Marzila asks, sounding confused.

“They’re glasses with dark lenses that keep the sunlight from burning your eyes,” Keith explains.

Marzila shrugs. “They're not glasses, but the principle is same.”

The elevator doors open, and Marzila shoves Keith in. Keith almost slams into Thace from the force of it, and Marzila beats him to the apology.

“It’s fine,” Thace says as he takes a step away from Keith.

Keith wonders if he should apologize for being sweaty, but he decides against it. Thace eyes him curiously, and the only reason Marzila doesn’t pick on it is because she’s busy shoving Keith to the furthest corner from Thace. Keith shoves her back.

Thace eyes them for a moment longer before focusing on the pad in his hands. Keith studies him from his spot behind Marzila. He’s not sure what to make of him, but Marzila seems to respect him.

“I heard there’s a delay in the Kel section comms,” Marzila starts, her voice carefully respectful.

Thace glances up from his pad. “It will be dealt with soon. The delay shouldn’t last over four quarters,” he replies. Marzila inclines her head as a thank you.

“Why’s there a delay?” Keith asks, ignoring Marzila’s ears flattening against her head and the shove she gives him. Thace seems almost taken aback by Keith’s curiosity, and Keith expects he’s not getting an answer.

“The communication from the Kel section must travel through a nebula. Sometimes it makes it difficult for signals to get through,” Thace explains, his voice patiently calm.

Keith doesn’t get a chance to ask further questions before the elevator doors open and Marzila drags him through them. Keith has to make an effort not to fall down.

“You can’t just start asking stupid questions from everyone you meet,” Marzila snaps without slowing down her pace. “He’s a department head. You don’t just ask stuff like that from them,” Marzila continues, completely ignorant how the fast pace is making it difficult for Keith to keep up with her.

"Sorry,” Keith says.

“You should be. Do you even realize how bad it will be for me if you get into trouble or piss the wrong person off under my guard?”
Suddenly Marzila’s mood makes a lot more sense to Keith, and he feels bad for questioning Thace. “I can tell Zarkon you did nothing wrong,” he offers.

Marzila stops so abruptly Keith runs into her. “Do not be so disrespectful at the moment, please. And I don’t need you to fix my problems,” she says slowly. Keith doesn’t need to be explained why addressing Zarkon by name rather than title is an issue, he’s heard enough of that from Kano’s team.

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of something I did,” he replies, and some of the anger sweeps out of Marzila’s expression.

“That’s sweet, but I can handle myself,” she says. “Let’s just get you clean and non-stinky, and then we’ll get food. You’ll love the mess hall.”

Keith smiles and nods.

Keith takes his shower, and Marzila brings him clean clothes. Keith doesn’t get upset when Marzila bursts into the showers without a warning since Zarkon’s explanation of the Galra customs are still clear in his mind, though he does jump a little, and when Marzila tilts her head curiously while Keith scrambles to cover himself he explains the basic nudity customs of Earth to her.

Marzila doesn’t quite get it, but she accepts it and leaves Keith to dress himself. She’s waiting for him when he exits the showers, and she takes him a few levels down to a busy hallway.

Keith sticks to Marzila’s side without needing to be prompted. The Galra around them throw curious looks at him, some even going as far as openly pointing at Keith.

“Why are you dragging that around?” Someone calls. Marzila only bares her teeth in response.

“Ignore them,” she says to Keith, and Keith does his best to take her advice.

They reach the mess hall, and Haala is already waiting for them there. He has gotten them a table at the far end of the wide space. Keith has to keep himself from bumping into the tables and chairs scattered around the room.

It’s not like the cafeteria in the Garrison with its long tables and careful structure. The tables here are smaller, holding approximately six people, but since many chairs have been moved and some tables have been pushed together it’s hard for Keith to be sure. The Galra working in there don’t seem to appreciate the mess though.

The few officers still remaining are too deep in conversation to be interested in Keith’s presence.

“The last lunch cycle ended a while ago. You can still come here, but most have gone back to work,” Marzila explains as they make their way to Haala.

“This is going to be fun,” Haala says as Keith and Marzila settle down, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Marzila nudges his shoulder with her head and steals a piece of bread from his plate.

“What do you want?” She asks from Keith.

“‘I don’t know. What’s good?’ Keith tries to get a look at the kitchen, but he can’t tell what they’re serving.

“Try the Folog,” Haala suggests.
“What’s that?” Keith asks.

“Fried meat with dressing and bread. It’s a bit greasy but delicious.” Haala slaps Marzila’s hand from his plate without taking his eyes off of Keith.

“I’ll try it,” Keith agrees, and Marzila tells him to wait while she goes and places their orders. Keith keeps a curious eye on her, trying to see what the appropriate way of ordering food is like in the Galra culture.

“So, what did Raz do to you?” Haala asks.

Keith shrugs. “Nothing, why?”

“Just wondering why he went from a sure promotion to scrubbing gunk out of turbines. Did you know we have bots for that job?” Haala leans forward, but despite his accusing words his tone is nothing but curious.

“I didn’t mind Raz, but apparently the stuff he puts on his fur offends Zarkon’s senses even after I’d showered.” Keith ignores Haala’s tensing at the mention of Zarkon’s name. He’s glad Haala doesn’t scold him for it, even though he can tell he really wants to do so.

Marzila returns with their food a while later. She tells Keith they could’ve gotten the food brought to the table, but the server is a friend of hers and she was already busy with other things. Keith thanks her and focuses on his plate.

The food smells great, and Keith’s mouth waters before he takes the first bite. Marzila and Haala talk quietly while Keith gobbles down his food. He’s suddenly starving, and the conversation the two Galra are having makes little sense to him. He gets the impression they’re talking about family, and it doesn’t really interest him.

“So, what have you been up to now that I don’t have to babysit you.” Haala turns to Keith, ignoring the annoyed angle of Marzila’s ears.

“You know what I’ve been doing,” Keith replies and stuffed his mouth full of meat so he doesn’t have to talk. Haala narrows his eyes at him.

“Tell me more about your culture,” Marzila cuts in. Keith is happy he’s busy chewing his food, as it gives him time to think of an answer that doesn’t give out anything important but will still satisfy her curiosity.

She makes a comment to Haala about Keith’s earlier explanation as to why it wasn’t okay for her to interrupt his shower when he gives her a confused look.

“That’s why you never assume people are okay with the same things you are. You’ll end up causing a situation,” Haala tells her before turning to Keith. “So, life on your planet. Bore us with that.”

“Well, it depends on where you live. Families are more individual units where I’m from and we have shitty standardized tests, for example,” Keith says between bites.

“Sounds miserable,” Haala replies as he steals a vegetable from Marzila’s plate.

“There’s also a lot of water and rain and in some places we get freezing cold winters,” Keith continues. Both Haala and Marzila make disapproving faces, and Keith hides his smile behind a bite of bread. He expected them to disagree with winters just because they’re from a hot world.
“I couldn’t stand living on a rainy planet,” Marzila says, getting an agreeing head tilt from Haala.

Keith has to take a sip from his drink before he speaks. “Why not?”

“You ever see anyone with a fur get wet?” Marzila gives Keith a pointed look. “I can handle water, because I’ve got a thin enough fur for that, but stick Haala in a humid space and he’ll frizz up. It’s a nightmare,” she says, and Keith has to fight back his urge to laugh.

Keith hadn’t thought about what water would actually do to the Galra. He’d just accepted the similarity of the showers tho those back at home, and ignored anything else.

“So if some of you can’t shower how do you guys keep clean?” He asks.

“Well, those who don’t react well to water usually take dry baths. It’s this synthetic stuff that’s sort of like ash or sand, depending on the user’s preference. I’m pretty sure some of the higher ups might have the real stuff rather than synthetic. We also have sonic showers and while they’re super efficient they’re not fun, and they’re used mostly in the medbay,” Marzila explains.

Keith wonders if the dry baths are similar to the dry shampoo one of Keith’s foster siblings used put in his hair. He wonders if Zarkon has a dry bath. He’d check, but he has no idea what one even looks like. For all he knows the stuff comes in a jar and isn’t even an actual bath.

Keith shares a few more insignificant details about life on Earth, and though Haala mostly scoffs at him and focuses on the remnants of his bread and drink, Marzila is genuinely curious. She tells Keith bits about growing up in a Galra family in return.

Keith would have liked to stay with them for longer, but his head begins to feel heavy and he thinks rest is the best thing for him at that time. If he gets a chance to return to the mess hall he’ll remember to eat a little less a little slower.

Keith’s dull headache doesn’t ease, in fact it gets worse, and though he goes to do his assigned work in the morning Kano orders him to the sidelines before half of the day is over. Keith mutters a thanks to him, and spends the rest of the day making sure everyone has the equipment they need close by.

He’s glad to get back into his room and curl on his bed.

Keith doesn’t take Kano’s advice to go to the medical bay. He’s getting used to the headaches that seem to come and go, and though this is one of the more persistent ones, Keith doesn’t want to draw attention to it. He still tells himself he’ll go see someone about it if the headache doesn’t go away or gets worse come morning, just to be sure it’s nothing serious.

Keith barely eats any of the meal he’s brought that the evening. The food makes him want to throw up, and he just wants to sleep for a few hours.

The room feels too hot and for a moment Keith contemplates getting up and seeing if he can still open his door so he can tell someone to lower the temperature. He assumes the door is locked just because it’s always been locked, but knowing Zarkon that might not be the case. And hadn’t the druid said Keith might receive the freedom to visit the observation room on his own?
In the end Keith decides sleep sounds like a much better option than getting up.

Keith doesn’t remember falling asleep, but he wakes up to excruciating pain shooting through his head. He clutches his head as the pain nearly overwhelms him, and scrambles off the bed as soon as the worst of it subsides and rushes to the door.

He needs help.

The door isn’t locked, and Keith thanks whatever force is looking out for him for it as he stumbles into the darkened hallway and takes a few steps towards the elevator. He almost falls on the ground when another wave of pain shoots through his brain.

Keith abandons his attempt to reach the elevator and heads Zarkon’s door instead, hoping he’s there and not somewhere else. He slams his hand on the panel, not really expecting the door to open. It doesn’t, and Keith settles for banging his fist on the door as hard as he can. He doesn’t think he can stay standing much longer.

The door opens, and Keith stumbles through it, falling on the ground when Zarkon dodges him. Keith barely registers the pain in his hands as he stops his face from hitting the floor.

“What are you doing?” Zarkon sounds tired, and under normal circumstances Keith might feel a little bad for probably waking him up.

Keith slumps on the floor. “My head’s gonna kill me,” he manages to say. His eyes are watering from the pain and he can taste the bile in his mouth, but he forces himself to look up to Zarkon.

Zarkon tilts his head, confused, before crouching down and brushing the hair off of Keith’s face. His expression turns serious.

“Come sit on the couch,” he says, and to Keith’s relief Zarkon helps him get there. He doubts he could’ve made it on his own.

“Wait here,” Zarkon orders and heads to the closed door Keith has never been allowed to go through. Keith buries his face in the cushions. His lungs fill with the unmistakable scent of Zarkon, but he doesn’t care. His head is splitting in half.

“Get up.” Keith hears Zarkon’s words, but he has trouble processing them. When he doesn’t act as fast as Zarkon would like he pulls Keith up and makes him sit.

“Haggar will see to you. She will take you to the medical bay if she thinks that is needed,” Zarkon says, and Keith can only nod weakly in response. He wonders if Zarkon understands what a nod is. The Galra don’t use nods the same way humans do.

Zarkon stays by Keith’s side up until the moment Haggar walks through the door, digging through her bag for something. Zarkon moves out of her way, and Keith lets her examine him.

Keith answers all of her questions to the best of his abilities, and he follows all her instructions as she pokes and prods him. Haggar runs the familiar strange bluish light around Keith’s head, her eyes glued to her pad.

“Stress,” she eventually declares and injects Keith with something before heading to the door with an unreadable look thrown in Zarkon’s way.

Zarkon follows her, glancing at Keith before walking through the door and into the hallway. Keith closes his eyes and leans his forehead on his knees. The waves of pain subside slowly, too slowly
for Keith’s liking, but he still shudders with relief as the shooting pain loses its edge.

“Better?” Zarkon asks as he enters the room. Keith nods without lifting his head from his knees before remembering nods might not mean anything to Zarkon.

“Yeah,” he mutters just so there’s no confusion.

Zarkon heads to his bedroom. “Then you can go back to sleep.”

Keith doesn’t move. Leaving doesn’t feel like a safe option, he’d be alone if the pain returned, and he’s not sure he could make the trip to Zarkon’s room again if the need arose. He follows Zarkon, intending to ask if he can stay on the couch for one night, but when he steps inside the bedroom he can’t find the right words.

Keith waits for Zarkon to tell him to leave again, but nothing happens. Keith takes a step closer to the bed and twists his fingers, his breath catching in his throat as he expects to be kicked out.

For a small eternity nothing happens, then Zarkon lifts the covers in an invitation that Keith is quick to accept. Keith climbs under the covers at a decent distance from Zarkon, and he almost settles down before Zarkon pulls him closer without a warning. Keith tenses for a second before he’s filled with warmth, and he relaxes a bit.

Keith focuses on the sound of Zarkon’s breathing and the feel of his heartbeat against his back, and lets it calm him. He settles in Zarkon’s arms and lets his mind drift back to sleep.

Keith glares at Zarkon and crosses his arms. “This is bullshit,” he states, his voice colored with anger and annoyance.

“We have an agreement,” Zarkon reminds him far too casually, leaning back on the couch.

“I thought I was dying, I think your blackmailing is irrelevant at this point.” Keith stands a little taller and hates that it doesn’t have any effect on Zarkon.

“I am not giving you what you want when it will not benefit me.” Zarkon smiles that annoyingly polite smile of his, and Keith has to clench his fists so he doesn’t punch it off his face.

“I’m tired of your games,” Keith says.

Zarkon takes a deep breath and pretends to consider Keith’s words. “Your health is not in danger, and that will not change, so unless you have something to give me in return you can go back to your room and wait until you have earned what you want.”

Keith refuses to move. He knows he doesn’t have anything to give to Zarkon, and he knows he’s fine now, but he’s not sure if he can take another night like the one before. It’s been hours since he woke up, and he still keeps expecting the headache to return.

He fears he won’t survive the next time.

Zarkon studies Keith for a loaded moment before letting out a breath that tells Keith in no uncertain terms that he’s tired of the conversation, and stands up. “Go back to your room or I will have you sent back to a cell. We both know you have nothing to offer me, so do not bother wasting
my time,” Zarkon says and walks past Keith on his way to the table where his cup of tea has been brewing.

Keith stays still as long as he dares before making a hasty retreat for the door. He stops before he can open it. He has some bits of information he thinks are irrelevant that he could offer, but he’s not sure if it’s worth of possibly not dying in a cell. Or his room, since Zarkon will most likely lock him in there again. He doesn’t know what to do.

Keith doesn’t need to turn around to know Zarkon’s eyes are on him. He can feel them burning a hole into the back of his skull. Keith turns to face him and asks, “Are you going to lock me in again?”

“We shall see,” Zarkon replies. It does nothing to reassure Keith, but he decides it’s not a fight he should be having.

Keith nods more to his own benefit than Zarkon’s and opens the door.

“I expect you for dinner,” Zarkon calls after him. Keith stops and nods again before hurrying away.

He stays in his room for the day, worrying himself sick over what’s happening to him. Maybe the cell would be a better place to be, at least there he wouldn’t have to be so close to Zarkon. Maybe that’s the reason for his problems, and distance is the solution.

Keith imagines not going to dinner and earning himself a trip back to the cells. He might have done it if not for the fact that he still doesn’t know what’s going on, and he needs that information to fully understand the situation and come up with a way to get out of it.

Keith doesn’t bother putting on better clothes before making his way to Zarkon’s quarters. It’s not much of a rebellion, but it makes Keith feel a little better, especially when Zarkon’s expression dips somewhere close to disapproval for half a second. Keith pretends not to notice it as he walks to the table and sits down without waiting for Zarkon to tell him to do so. He’s already picking at his food when Zarkon joins him.

“Are you going to be difficult the whole evening?” Zarkon asks. Keith doesn’t bother answering.

Keith isn’t really planning on being difficult, he’s leaning on subtly pushing the boundaries to see what he can get away with. He only hopes Zarkon isn’t in a bad mood under the mask of mild amusement.

“I have been wondering about this plan of yours,” Zarkon’s voice cuts through Keith’s thoughts, and he looks up only because it might be important. “What happens after you have taken over my empire?”

Keith shoves a forkful of salad into his mouth to buy himself time to decide on the best answer.

“Besides you not terrorizing innocent people?” Keith retorts when his mouth isn’t full anymore, and to his surprise Zarkon smiles at him.

“And what about the person who takes over after me? What if they are even more inclined to ‘terrorize innocent people’ as you so elegantly put it? What will you do then?” Zarkon asks as he focuses his attention solely on Keith.

“Then we’ll deal with them too,” Keith replies.

“You will be fighting a war you cannot win. At some point you will face someone who does not
have a problem with burning the universe down just to get back at you. Then what?"

“Or maybe your precious empire collapses in on itself,” Keith snaps before biting his lip and focusing on his plate.

“Yes, a Galra civil war across the universe sounds like a desirable outcome. The innocent people you are so concerned about will surely be grateful when they end up as collateral damage,” Zarkon replies.

Keith fights the urge to glare at Zarkon. He doesn’t want to hear what he has to say. He doesn’t want to consider the possibility that they might not win. He doesn’t want to see the smug look on Zarkon’s face. Keith stabs his fork through a piece of meat and hopes the screeching sound it makes against the plate hurts Zarkon’s ears.

“My people will never follow an Altean child, and neither you nor one of your would-be-paladin friends have what it takes to lead them. I doubt you have a suitable leader for my empire stashed somewhere, so the smart thing would be to bargain with me. Of course you would have to let go of your pride in order to do that.” Zarkon studies Keith a bit too intensely.

Keith glares at Zarkon without knowing how to respond. His anger deepens when it seems to be exactly the kind of reaction Zarkon wanted from him. Keith looks away and hopes Zarkon can’t see what’s going on in his head from his expression. The last thing he needs is for Zarkon to start poking at the sudden uncertainty growing in him.

“Maybe we would’ve considered talking if you weren’t insane,” Keith says without looking up and shoves the last of his dinner to his mouth before Zarkon can get mad and send him away.

“If you say so,” Zarkon replies instead, and it’s almost worse than him getting mad. Keith wants to throw his plate at him, but he has the sense to realize that probably wouldn’t end well.

“How long until you tell me what’s going on?” Keith asks in an attempt to change the topic.

Zarkon stays quiet for a long time, and though Keith doesn’t fidget it takes effort for him to remain still. He wants to say something to break the silence, but he’s holding onto the hope that Zarkon will answer him in some constructive manner.

“Unfortunately I have to leave tomorrow and I am unsure when I will return. If you can continue your daily routine until then I will consider telling you what you want to know when I return,” Zarkon says, and though his voice is conversational Keith knows better than to trust it.

“Okay,” Keith replies, mimicking Zarkon’s tone as well as he can. He doesn’t ask where Zarkon is going even though he’s close to vibrating with curiosity.

Zarkon doesn’t miss it, but he doesn’t address it either. Keith isn’t sure if it’s a good thing or not.

“You can go now,” Zarkon says and stands, leaving Keith alone at the table. Keith takes his time finishing his drink before getting up and hurrying out of the door and into his room.

Keith sits on his bed and stares at the wall, trying not to get his hopes up, but at the same time he knows it’s most likely his best chance of escaping, especially if Zarkon takes Haggar with him.

Keith would have to be careful and convince everyone he’s playing by the rules set for him, but if he can do that and he’ll still be allowed to use the elevator on his own he could try to make it to the hangar. He thinks he’s familiar enough with the general layout to find it by now.
Keith doesn’t get much sleep that night.

Keith tries not to be discouraged when the security around him is suddenly tighter. He isn’t constantly guarded, exactly, but he knows he’s being watched and he doesn’t get to use the elevator on his own. He pretends it’s fine, mostly to give the impression he wasn’t planning to escape the first chance he got.

Keith does his job as well as he can, and though he’s burning with the urge to run for his life he stays where he is and focuses on the voice that sounds like Shiro reminding him to be patient.

Keith wishes he was better at it.

Six days pass, and Keith is sure Zarkon is going to return before he gets a chance to even try escaping. He’s close to ready to curse his entire life to hell and accept his fate as Zarkon’s prisoner. Maybe in time he can bring the empire down from the inside.

Keith’s muscles ache from the stress of work by the time Kano decides to start using him as an errand boy. Keith is happy to stretch his legs, and he takes his time as he makes his way to get some tools Kano realized he’d forgotten to take with him. Keith has no idea what he’s supposed to look for, exactly, but the more time he can spend alone the better.

Keith stills, his hand hovering over the elevator panel. He’s alone. He has to look around to confirm his realization, his heart racing as he takes in the empty hallway.

Keith presses his hand to the panel and takes a deep breath as the doors open. He steps in and watches the doors close with baited breath. He’s alone and Zarkon has gone away with Haggar.

“Keith, guest. Hangar,” Keith says, his voice a lot steadier than he feels, and does his best to calm his mind as the elevator starts. The whole world narrows down to the elevator doors.

Keith bolts when the doors open. He runs down the hallway, hoping he remembers the route correctly. He gets through two sets of doors before he hears anyone approaching, and Keith smirks as he ducks into the nearest vent. At least he got something out of working with Kano.

The officers walk past Keith, and Keith waits until he’s sure they’re gone, but he doesn’t return to the hallway. Instead he continues his journey through the ventilation systems. It’s slower but Keith hopes he’ll get past the guards and sentries by the hangar faster that way.

Keith’s jaw clenches when he realizes he’d vastly underestimated the amount of staff in the area. He has to exit the ventilation system a little further from the hangar doors than he’d like, but he makes it work.

Keith dodges the sentries patrolling the hallways and sneaks into the hangar. He’s harboring no illusions about flying a fighter away from the Central Command, but if he can to slip into one of the ships he would be flown out of there, and as long as he picks a small ship he can take the crew out. Or he could hop off wherever the ship stops.

The Galra seem to be in the middle of loading one of the larger ships. Keith observes them from the shadows, trying to figure out the best way to get on board the ship.
Sneaking past the guards would be difficult, but there’s a chance Keith could pull it off, especially if he could cause a distraction of some kind. Or he could hide in one of the crates the Galra are hauling into the ship, he just has to be careful not to be seen. It’s safer, so Keith decides to go with it.

Keith takes the first change he sees to rush to the crates. He thinks he can fit into the bigger ones, but he has to be quick so he won’t be spotted. He picks the crate in the furthest corner, and taps on the security panel, but he can’t get the lid open.

Keith doesn’t curse out loud, but it’s close. His route back to his original hiding spot has already been blocked by sentries. Keith’s heart races as he takes in his surroundings. He doesn’t have a way to escape. He’s barely concealed and he can’t get away. The Galra will see him the second they come to get the crates. Keith suspects he has less than a minute before he’s caught.

The Galra are getting closer, and Keith decides to go to plan B.

Keith waits until two of the guards return to the crates, and aims a hard kick at the Galra closest to him. Keith gets him by surprise, and grabs the weapon from him. He doesn’t hesitate before charging the weapon and shooting the other guard.

Keith is ready for the Galra and the sentries.

He shoots the sentry approaching him before bolting for the small scout ship, intending to see if he can get the thing moving on his own. Keith takes full advantage of his small size and agility, and for a moment he’s sure he’ll make it.

He doesn’t see the Galra on his left until they knock Keith’s feet from under him, sending him flying to the ground. Keith’s arms hurt from the landing and he loses his grip on his weapon, but he doesn’t stop to worry about it. He rolls to his side away from the Galra, dodging the kick aimed at his side.

Keith scrambles to get to his feet, only to have his balance knocked off by someone grabbing his leg and sending him tumbling to the ground again. A Galra grabs Keith’s hair and slams his face into the ground. Keith twists and tries to get away and to his feet again. He gets a hard kick to his ribs for it, and he feels several of them breaking. Keith bites his tongue to suppress a scream.

Searing pain shoots through Keith’s head, and everything turns dark.

Chapter End Notes

I’m thinking next chapter some time next week?

Hope you liked this!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, this chapter gets a bit dark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith wakes up in pain on a cold, hard floor. He knows he’s in a cell before he opens his eyes, and the only thing he’s wearing are the dressings wrapped around his injuries and a pair of too thin underwear. He cracks his less painful eye open, only to be confronted by total darkness. He can’t see anything at all, not even a sliver of light under the door. He doesn’t even know how big the cell is, or where the door is.

Everything hurts. Keith makes himself as small as he can and closes his eyes, concentrating on finding the least painful way to breathe. He should’ve had a better plan.

He doesn’t know how long he’s been in the cell, but his body feels frozen and he shivers from the cold. He wishes he had clothes.

Maybe this is what Shiro had gone through.

Keith shakes his head to get the image of Shiro’s face out of his mind, he doesn’t need to feel worse than he already does. He needs to focus on keeping a level head until he gets out of the cell.

He remains still until he can’t stand the cold of the floor anymore. His muscles ache and his movements are sluggish, but he pushes himself up and sits in the darkness until he gets his breathing back under control and his head stops spinning. He hesitates for a second before feeling around his surroundings, hoping to find a wall to lean on. He crawls to the left and fumbles in the dark, but eventually his fingers touch a wall.

Keith leans against it and closes his eyes as he waits for the numbness in his fingers and toes to subside.

The cell isn’t big. Keith walks the length of it on weak legs, leaning on the walls for support, and counts every side as approximately six steps. He spends a few hours deciding that it amounts to a little over six and a half feet. He can’t be sure he’s right, but it keeps him busy for a while and that’s what matters the most.

He can’t see anything, but to Keith’s relief he still has a toilet, even if he doesn’t have running water. It leaves him woozy with thirst on top of starving, and the little food and water he gets is tasteless and cold. Keith misses his meals with Zarkon after the second second tray of cold, tasteless goo and hard bread. After the fourth serving he wants his original prison food back.

The worst thing for Keith is the silence. He can’t hear anything besides the sounds he makes. He tries tapping his hands on the ground, humming, and eventually even thinking out loud. Nobody
comes to check on him or say a word to him when his food gets delivered through the small opening at the bottom of the door.

Keith tries to remember what the Garrison had taught them about isolation. He’s supposed to busy himself mentally and not lose hope of rescue.

Keith laughs, the sound of it hollow as it bounces off the walls.

Nobody is coming to save him and he doubts anything will be entertaining enough to keep his mind occupied forever. He still tries going through the lectures he’d taken in the Garrison, then the books he’s read, and finally he tries to reach Red to no avail.

Keith huddles in the corner and buries his face in his knees. He thinks he hears someone calling his name, but the voice is too far away for him to be sure. He covers his ears and hums until he falls into a slumber.

Time has no meaning in the dark, and all Keith can do is think, and the conclusion he draws quickly is that escaping was a stupid idea. Zarkon would have found him again, and if Keith had just stopped to think he wouldn’t be in this situation now.

He doesn’t know why he didn’t stop to think about what he was doing.

Keith buries his face in his knees and curses. He should have been more patient. He would have been fine if he’d stayed where he was. There was nothing wrong with having a tiny room and working, and occasionally spending time with Zarkon.

He should have stayed where he was.

Keith jolts awake, unsure as to why until he realizes someone is gripping his leg. He starts and kicks at nothing as he presses himself into the closest corner. He can’t see anything, but he knows something is in the cell with him. The darkness seems heavier and somehow blacker than it was before.

The cell spins and Keith’s breath catches in his throat. His head keeps getting lighter and lighter.

Something grabs Keith’s leg again. He kicks at it until he’s free, and pulls his legs under him and tries to press himself even closer to the wall. His eyes burn and he’s shaking.

He darts forward, swinging his arms in the air, trying to grab onto whatever is in the cell with him. There’s nothing there, but he can hear faint laughter.

Keith screams.
Keith lies on the ground, oblivious to anything around him. Nothing seems real anymore.

Sometimes Keith thinks he hears footsteps, and once he’s sure Shiro is calling out to him. Sometimes he swears something touches his legs and arms, but there’s never anything there when he tries to grab it. Despite the dark he keeps seeing something in the corner of his eye, but it’s never there for long.

He feels watched.

It doesn’t take Keith long to figure out he’s moved from just being stressed by the isolation to hallucinating and paranoia, but it doesn’t make any of it go away or feel less real.

Keith would be happy about his ribs slowly healing if it didn’t take away the pain that made him feel like he still existed.

Keith doesn’t believe it when the door opens even when the light from the hallway blinds him. His eyes burn and he tries to blink away the tears the sting brings until the light becomes too much and he has to cover his eyes.

It’s the worst hallucination yet.

Keith’s arms are twisted from his face and a heavy set of cuffs is snapped on them. Keith tries to fight as he’s pulled out of his cell and across the cold floor. The lights of the ship burn his eyes even through his eyelids.

He’s starting to think he’s not hallucinating anymore.

The floor burns him and his arms are on fire from being dragged on the ground by the cuffs. The bandages still wrapped around his body do little to keep the air of the hallways from freezing him.

Everything is too loud and too bright.

Keith doesn’t know where he is or where he’s being taken, and it feels like an eternity filled with pain and burnt skin before he’s thrown on the ground and left there. Keith curls into a ball and covers his eyes, his back pressing against a hard edge of some kind, but he can’t be sure what it is, and he’s not opening his eyes to see it.

He misses the dark of his cell.

For the longest time Keith hears nothing but the hum of the ship and the sound of his own breathing. It hurts his ears.

Keith becomes aware of another presence near him, but opening his eyes is too much to ask and he’s not sure if it’s another hallucination. Maybe he’s dreaming and he wakes up in another kind of
nightmare.

The silence stretches until Keith is certain he’s either dreaming or he’s completely lost his mind. He can’t be sure if the steps he hears are in his head or real, but past experience has taught him they’re not real.

“I thought we had an understanding,” Zarkon’s disappointed voice says. Keith covers his ears and hums the first song that comes to his mind under his breath. He doesn’t need to start hallucinating Zarkon in addition to his friends and the invisible monster in his cell.

“I left you alone for less than a week. I decided to trust you against my better judgement, and you betrayed me,” Zarkon’s hurt voice continues.

Keith frowns. Maybe he’s not hallucinating or dreaming after all, but he can’t believe it’s real either. He’d open his eyes and check if he could. Slowly, Keith becomes aware of his lack of proper clothing, and he curls into an even tighter ball.

He prays it’s a dream.

When Keith doesn’t respond the hopefully imaginary Zarkon sighs and closes the distance between them. There’s a rustle, and Keith is enveloped in warm darkness.

He could cry as the pain in his eyes starts to subside. After a while he dares to crack one eye open. It takes him a few tries, but eventually he’s able to process most of his immediate surroundings, even if everything seems blurry.

Keith reaches out and brushes the tips of his fingers against Zarkon’s leg. He lets himself get lost in the feel of another person near him. He didn’t think he’d ever experience it again.

“You could at least apologize,” Zarkon says. Keith takes a moment to process his words, and mouths an apology, only then realizing Zarkon can’t hear him.

“Sorry,” he says, his voice hoarse from the lack of proper use. He shifts closer to Zarkon and presses his palm against his foot.

After a while Keith’s eyes become too tired to keep open any longer, and he has to close them. He holds on to Zarkon a little tighter, fearing he’ll disappear if Keith doesn’t have him in his sights at all time. At least Zarkon can’t see his bandaged, definitely sweat covered and most likely bruised body. Keith lets himself relax.

Zarkon shifts, and Keith lets out a small, alarmed noise. Zarkon stills and takes a deep breath. Keith holds on to him a little tighter.

“What am I supposed to do with you?” Zarkon sighs, speaking more to himself than to Keith. “I hoped you would not be trouble.”

Keith’s eyes burn, though he’s not sure if it’s from shame or from the strain of seeing light again. “Sorry,” he mutters, the word too heavy in his mouth.

“Come here,” Zarkon grabs Keith’s arm and forces him off the ground. Keith’s throat closes and he tries to pull himself free from Zarkon’s hold. He can’t have Zarkon send him away yet. He needs a moment longer with another person.

“Stop squirming,” Zarkon orders, almost exasperated, and wrestles Keith into his lap. The cape covering Keith falls aside, leaving him exposed to the light and the too fresh air.
Keith freezes. He isn’t ready for this. It’s too much, Zarkon is too warm and his skin burns from so much contact with another living person. He’s too aware of the state he’s in and the way he fits in Zarkon’s arms. The light stings now that he’s not protected by Zarkon’s cape and he has to press the palms of his hands against his eyes until he sees stars.

Zarkon pets Keith’s hair and pulls him closer. “Do you think you can behave now, or do you need more time in a cell before we can talk?”

Keith shakes his head so fast he feels dizzy. “I’ll be good.”

“In that case I have a proposition for you,” Zarkon starts, and settles Keith better in his arms before continuing, “I am willing to house you in my quarters until I think you can be trusted to be on your own again.”

Keith keeps waiting for Zarkon to continue, but he remains quiet. Eventually Keith nods. He’d agree to going back to his first cell, there’s no way he’s going to say no to staying in Zarkon’s quarters.

“I will give you a cushion to sleep on and you will have a limited space to move in. You will do what I want or you will go back to the isolation cell. Do you think you can manage that?” Zarkon lifts Keith’s chin, and even though Keith can’t open his eyes to see the look on Zarkon’s face he nods without hesitation.

Zarkon pulls Keith closer, and after little hesitation Keith rests his head against Zarkon’s chest. Zarkon runs his hand along Keith’s spine and rubs circles across his thigh, his touch soothing.

Keith bites his tongue so hard it hurts and presses closer to Zarkon.

After being stripped from his bandages and underwear, hosed down and roughly dried, and an eye examination that leaves him in tears Keith gets thrown into Zarkon’s quarters, still handcuffed and without any clothing. His eyes have been bandaged so Keith has a choice between crawling on the floor until he reaches something or staying still.

He chooses staying still.

Keith is too tense, too unsure of his situation, and too exposed in the open space. He fears it’s a cruel joke and soon someone will come and take him away. He starts worrying he’s supposed to be in a specific spot, but he fears he’ll screw up somehow if he moves.

Eventually the door opens and closes, and Keith becomes aware of Zarkon’s presence. He barely dares to breathe as he listens to Zarkon move around. Keith tries to figure out where he is but since he isn’t sure of his own position in the room he can’t be sure of anything but Zarkon’s general distance from him. Keith’s heart races in his ears, and he loses track of Zarkon. He tries to calm his breathing and not panic.

“Come here,” Zarkon orders, making Keith jump. Keith bites his lip and opts for feeling around the floor to make sure there’s nothing around him.

“Don’t get up. You will hurt yourself if you trip on something,” Zarkon says, and Keith can hear the amused smile in his voice.
Keith swallows down his pride and crawls towards Zarkon’s voice, trying not to feel humiliated. He moves slowly, feeling his surroundings with his hands until he touches Zarkon’s leg.

Keith curls his legs underneath him, but he’s not sure where he’s supposed to be facing. Zarkon takes care of his problem by grabbing his jaw and lifting his face up. Keith does his best to keep his breathing under control while Zarkon examines him. The familiar warmth of him seeps through Keith, and Keith tries to let it distract him from the reality around him.

“Your eyes will heal in time. Keep the bandage on until you are told otherwise, unless you would rather spend the rest of your life blind,” Zarkon says. Keith isn’t sure how he’s supposed to reply so he keeps quiet, hoping it’s not the wrong thing to do.

Zarkon lets go of Keith’s jaw. “Now, you will remain here unless you are needed elsewhere. You get what I think you deserve or need. Keep quiet and do what I say and you will be fine. In time, when I decide you can be trusted again, we can talk about other housing arrangements.”

Keith swallows, unsure of how to feel, and tries to not think of himself as a glorified pet. He’d rather do this than be in a cell, and he nods his understanding, hoping it’s the right thing to do.

“Here.” Zarkon presses something against Keith’s lips, and Keith opens his mouth after a second of hesitation. A thick, sweet substance hits Keith’s tongue and it takes him a moment to find the right pace to swallow so he won’t choke. Zarkon feeds Keith all of it, and to Keith’s relief he feels marginally better.

Something clinks, like metal, and when Zarkon asks for his hands Keith hopes it’s keys for his cuffs. Zarkon presses something cold and hard against Keith’s skin right above his handcuffs, and wraps it around his wrist without a word. Keith bites his lip to keep quiet. Whatever is around his wrist is definitely metal, but that’s all he knows for sure. Zarkon wraps a similar metal circle around his other wrist.

“These will keep you from straying,” Zarkon explains as he takes the handcuffs off. Keith waits until Zarkon lets go of him before touching the metal on his wrists.

As far as Keith can tell they’re light, seamless bracelets pressed snugly against his skin, and Keith can’t move them an inch. He doubts he’ll be getting rid of them any time soon, and he doesn’t want to risk more cell time by trying. He crosses his hands on his lap and tries to find a comfortable way to hold his head without being awkward. He ends up facing somewhere to his left.

Keith stays by Zarkon’s side, even when his legs begin to hurt from the hard floor and strain of sitting still for so long. Zarkon doesn’t strike Keith as the type to appreciate fidgeting, and Keith doesn’t want to risk upsetting him so soon after getting out of the cell.

Eventually Zarkon stands, steps around Keith, and leaves him sitting there on his own as he walks away. Keith remains still and listens closely to Zarkon’s footsteps, wondering what he should do now.

“Come this way,” Zarkon calls, and Keith turns around before pushing himself up to his knees, intending to get up. “Stay on the floor.”

Keith stills, but he lowers himself back to the ground and crawls to Zarkon, moving slowly around the furniture he bumps into on his way. Maybe Zarkon’s insistence he doesn’t stand up has some merit to it, not that Keith will say it out loud.

He stops when his fingers brush against Zarkon’s feet. Zarkon steps aside, and though Keith can’t
see what’s in front of him he thinks it’s important somehow.

“This is where you stay when I am not here,” Zarkon says, nudging Keith forward with his foot. Keith takes the hint and moves forward until his hands land on a soft cushion. “You have an arms length of space to move around, and mind the water set aside for you.”

Keith feels around his cushion while Zarkon talks. It’s big enough for him to comfortably settle on, and after carefully feeling around the floor by the cushion his fingers find the glass of water.

“Thank you,” Keith says, his voice quiet and unsure.

“Try not to ruin things this time round,” Zarkon replies. Keith shrinks into himself and listens to Zarkon walk away.

A door opens and closes, and Keith curls into a small ball and tries to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I actually did some research into sensory deprivation and isolation for another project. It was creepy.
Since I’m currently running a fever I’m not gonna make promises on the next update, but I’m assuming I’ll get it up by the end of next week. Most likely sooner.

Hope you enjoyed this! (things get better I swear)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Despite my sinuses trying to kill me I got this done. Yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith wakes up covered in something warm. It takes him a moment to remember where he is, but once he does he breathes out a shaky sigh of relief.

He’s out of the cell.

Keith sticks one leg out of the warm cocoon he’s in to relief the muscle ache, only then realizing he’s acquired a blanket after falling asleep. It takes him a little fumbling around and breathing in the familiar scent of Zarkon to figure out that it’s actually Zarkon’s cape, not a blanket, and he’s not sure what to think of that. He pulls his leg back under the cape and turns to his other side, hoping to get a bit more sleep.

When Keith wakes up the next time he takes a minute to just enjoy not being on a cold, hard floor. The next thing he does is locate the glass of water. He’s careful not to drink everything in one go since he doesn’t know when he’ll get a refill. When he puts the glass back down it clinks against something, and Keith is surprised and relieved to find a small plate of fruit by his side.

Keith busies himself by playing with the clasps on Zarkon’s cape and slowly eating the sugary fruit. The almost undetectable hum of the ship is a welcome change for the total silence of the cell, and though Keith can’t see he enjoys lounging on the soft cushion for the day. His skin itches whenever he shifts, but he chalks it up to being in contact with soft fabrics instead of hard floor.

He doesn’t run into any problems with his situation until he needs to use the bathroom.

Keith learns quickly what Zarkon meant when he said the bracelets would keep Keith from straying. The second he tries to go further than few feet from his cushion searing pain shoots through his arms. Keith jolts back, biting back a scream, and returns to the safety of his cushion. He doesn’t dare to move again, half from the desire to not be in pain, half from the fear of being sent back to the cell.

Keith sits in the middle of his cushion, only moving to uncross his legs when they begin to turn numb. By the time Zarkon returns Keith is squirming from discomfort and anxiety. Zarkon’s disappointed sigh does nothing to ease his mind.

“You could not handle two quarters before stepping out of line,” Zarkon says. Keith would prefer him angry rather than disappointed. “Perhaps you need more time in a cell.”

Keith shakes his head until his hair covers his face.

“You betrayed my trust again,” Zarkon points out. “Why would you do that?”

“You need to go to the bathroom,” Keith starts, hesitating for a few seconds before continuing, “I need to go to the bathroom.”
Keith bites his lip, hoping the truth is enough. “Please?” He adds just to be sure.

Zarkon doesn’t say anything, but after a moment he comes to Keith’s side and grabs him by his arm, yanking him up. Keith stops breathing when Zarkon pulls him forward, but the pain he expects doesn’t come. Zarkon must have disabled whatever it was that stopped Keith from leaving the cushion earlier.

Keith stumbles as Zarkon drags him to the bathroom door, but he makes it there without falling or losing control of his bladder. Zarkon leaves Keith by the door without a word, and Keith hurries to relieve himself. He has to fumble around to find the sink, but once he’s done drying his hands he realizes the trouble he must be in.

He wasn’t supposed to move from his spot.

Keith tries not to panic while he finds the door, but he trembles as he stops by it to catch his breath. He doesn’t know what to say to make Zarkon keep him where he is, but he hopes he can win some points if he does what he thinks Zarkon wants him to do.

Keith steps out of the bathroom and falls on his hands and knees before making his way to where he thinks the couch is. He lets out a quiet sigh of relief when he bumps into Zarkon’s legs. He hopes that not walking was the right thing to do. Keith settles on the floor, and after a brief internal debate he presses his forehead against Zarkon’s knee, enjoying the warmth of another living being, even as he keeps expecting Zarkon to kick him away.

“I will wake you up tomorrow morning so this will not happen again,” Zarkon says. Keith nods against his knee.

Some of the tension leaves Keith’s body when he realizes he’s not going back to his cell. Zarkon pushes the hair out of Keith’s face, dragging a sound almost like a quiet purr out of Keith.

“You will get food when Haggar comes to check your eyes,” Zarkon says. Keith nods again.

Keith lets his mind wander until Haggar arrives. He’s acutely aware of his nudity, and though his inability to see helps him feel a bit more at ease with his lack of clothes he still wishes for a pair of underwear if nothing else.

By the time Haggar arrives Keith has lost his sense of time again, and his legs are getting numb from sitting on the floor. Keith hears Haggar place something that sounds like a tray on the table, but without a visual confirmation he can’t be sure of it. He tries to discreetly smell the air, but whatever she brought with her doesn’t have strong enough scent for him to catch.

“Turn here,” Haggar’s voice comes from Keith’s side. Keith almost jumps, he hadn’t realized how close she was, but he does as she says and shuffles on his spot until he’s facing in her.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Haggar orders before she undoes the bandage covering Keith’s eyes. Haggar presses a cold instrument to the corners of Keith’s eyes. Keith remains still, wondering why Haggar needs to study his face if it’s his eyes that are the problem. He can’t be sure, but as far as he knows extended darkness will definitely mess with vision, and he isn’t surprised the light
hurts, but he can’t see any reason for studying his eyelids so closely.

“I’m going to open your eyes now,” Haggar says, keeping her voice calm and professional.

Keith takes a steadying breath and steels himself while Zarkon takes a hold of his head, his touch almost gentle even as he keeps Keith from moving. Keith focuses on the warmth seeping from his touch and tries to think about anything but opening his eyes.

The light feels like it’s melting Keith’s eyes, but he bites his tongue and bears it. He’s not sure if his eyes are bleeding or if he’s just tearing up, but he does his best to remain still. Haggar takes an eternity studying Keith’s eyes, and by the time she’s applying cold eye drops and redoing the bandage Keith is sure he’s been permanently blinded and all he’ll ever see is burning light.

“We’ll put the lenses in tomorrow,” Haggar says. Keith has no idea what she’s talking about, and he’s in too much pain to really care.

Zarkon bumps into Keith as he stands up, but it doesn’t slow him down as he walks up to the table while Haggar gathers her things. Keith listens to him pick up the tray and take it across the room, and set it to the ground. Haggar is opening the door by the time Zarkon returns to Keith’s side.

“Go to your place and wait until I return,” he orders. Keith does as he’s told, though he waits until the door closes after Haggar. “Eat your food,” Zarkon says before following Haggar out of the room.

Keith settles on his cushion and pulls the tray closer. It’s not a big meal, but the soup and tea fill Keith up, and he burrows under Zarkon’s cape once he’s finished the meal.

On hindsight Keith realizes nobody explained to him what Haggar intended to do to him.

The pair of druids that fetches him are courteous enough to wrap him in a light sheet of fabric before dragging him out of the safety of Zarkon’s quarters and all the way down to Haggar’s laboratory. Keith realizes where he is when the druids strap him to a table and inject him with a sedative.

He’s not sure if he’s happy about it, and by the time he wakes up again he’s too out of it to really care. He’s also back in Zarkon’s quarters, unless Haggar decided to move his cushion with him.

Keith closes his eyes and goes back to sleep. He’ll figure it out later.

Keith hadn’t realized it earlier, but his eyes aren’t covered by a bandage anymore. He’s a little alarmed when he can’t see a thing and his eyes feel itchy. He stays still, hoping Zarkon will come back soon and tell him what’s going on. He should’ve put up a fight when the druids came, for all he knows he’s been permanently blinded and he didn’t even try to stop it.

By the time Zarkon arrives Keith has worked himself into a minor panic attack.
Keith sits up and waits until Zarkon is ready to talk to him. The stiffness of his muscles starts getting to Keith before Zarkon settles by the table, and if Keith’s nose is right he’s got tea and cookies with him.

“You can come here now,” Zarkon says.

Keith bites his lip, wondering if he should ask about his eyes as he starts crawling towards Zarkon. By the time he’s sitting at Zarkon’s feet he’s decided he’s not going to ask about it his eyes without prompting. Zarkon had told him not to talk without permission, and he’d rather be blind in company than a cell.

Zarkon grasps Keith’s jaw and tilts his chin up, turning his face from side to side. “Haggar put protective lenses in your eyes so you do not have to wear a bandage all the time. She wants you to say if they bother you. She did not have a pair that fitted you so she had to make a new ones and she could not be sure they would be an ideal fit,” Zarkon explains, and Keith feels a little better.

“My eyes itch,” Keith admits.

“That is normal. It should go away by tomorrow. In the meantime you are getting a shower,” Zarkon replies and nudges Keith until he takes the hint and moves over.

Zarkon leads the way to the bathroom. He places towels out for Keith where he can easily reach them before leaving, and Keith familiarizes himself with the distance from the towels to the shower before stepping in and finding the soap and getting the water running.

The water soothes Keith’s stiff muscles, and he stays there until his whole body thrums with renewed blood flow. He soaps himself carefully, remembering how sensitive the Galra sense of smell is, and after he’s done with the shower he spends several long minutes enjoying the softness of the towels against his skin. He tries not to think about the thinness of his arms and legs or the bones he’s not supposed to feel through his skin.

Keith isn’t surprised when Zarkon comes to check on him after taking so long.

“Sit here,” Zarkon orders and guides Keith to the bench. Keith bites his tongue and holds the towel tighter around himself when he Zarkon kneels before him. Not seeing makes it all worse, and Keith fiddles with the towel until more or less hidden behind it.

“Do not start that.” Zarkon sounds more frustrated than annoyed. Keith stops and eases his hold on the towel, but giving it up feels like an obstacle he’s not ready to tackle. He still lets Zarkon take it from him.

The sound of a lid being screwed open makes Keith’s heart jump, and he presses his fists to his thighs to ground himself. Zarkon begins to apply cold oil to Keith’s arms without a word, taking a little too much care to rub it into Keith’s skin.

Keith tries not to tense when Zarkon’s touch leaves his skin prickling and too sensitive. He puts it up to his time in the cell. He wants to ask if he can apply the oil himself, but the words can’t get through the lump in his throat. He wishes he could see. Maybe it would make Zarkon’s touch burn a little less.

Keith bites his tongue and lets the pain dull his other senses.

Zarkon moves from Keith’s arms to his chest. Keith closes his eyes and focuses on keeping his breathing slow and steady. His skin is too tight and hot, and he reminds himself that his other senses are stronger because he can’t see and he’s been alone for so long. It’s nothing unusual. It
will pass.

He still hates it and he wants his eyesight back.

Zarkon runs his hands across Keith’s collarbone, dipping his fingers into the hollows of his throat. Keith’s skin feels like it’s burning. It’s not the familiar comforting warmth of Zarkon’s touch, but darker and twisted that rots something deep inside him. It must be a severe case of touch starvation and over sensitivity of his senses.

Or maybe it’s just the effect Zarkon has on him, amplified by the isolation and blindness.

Keith takes a deep breath and holds it in when Zarkon starts applying the oil to his face. He presses his hands on his thighs and digs his uneven nails into his skin until he bleeds. Zarkon’s hands still for a fraction of a second before he rubs the oil on Keith’s cheeks.

Keith would scream if his throat wasn’t closing up.

He wants to know what kind of expression Zarkon is wearing. He wants to know how screwed he is. He hates that he’s being played with and he can’t even see the smugness on Zarkon’s face. He considers biting Zarkon’s thumb until he bleeds, but it’s not worth spending the rest of his life in isolation.

Keith’s face must be red, be it from shame or Zarkon’s touch, he doesn’t know. He’s not sure if he wants to know. His eyes burn and he blinks, but it’s the dry kind of burn that feels like wind blew sand into his eyes. He focuses on anything but Zarkon’s hands on him.

It would be a lot easier if he could see.

Keith tries to think about anything but Zarkon. He tries to imagine what Shiro might be doing, but it only makes things worse. Shiro would never let this happen to him, and he’ll give Keith that heartbreaking, disappointed look when he finds out about this.

Keith curls his hands into even tighter fists and recites a recipe for cookies while Zarkon starts applying the oil to his sides. His fingers count Keith’s ribs one by one. Keith closes his eyes, knowing it does nothing to alleviate his distress.

Zarkon runs his hands down Keith’s sides and along his hips, his thumbs brushing a little too close to Keith’s groin. Keith’s knee jerks up and collides with Zarkon’s jaw with enough force to hurt before he has a chance to think it through. Zarkon pulls away with an irritated huff, and turns away from Keith.

Keith opens his mouth to apologize, but the words don’t come out. Zarkon stands and walks out of the room before Keith can try again.

Keith tries not to panic, but his breathing comes in shortening, fast bursts and his world narrows down to him being dragged down the halls into a cold cell. He knocks the jar of oil down as he scrambles to his feet, but he doesn’t care.

The floor seems to move away from Keith as he steps in the spilled oil, and he trips and falls to the ground, his arms flailing in an attempt to avoid the inevitable collision. Keith barely manages to stop his face from smashing to the floor. Pain flairs through his wrist and shoots up his arm. He groans and holds his hurt arm to his chest as he pushes himself to his knees.

He’s not sure if he should try to get up again.
Keith feels around the floor to see how far the oil has spilled, but he only manages is to spread it even further. He doubts Zarkon will like his floors covered in sticky oil. Keith grabs his towel from the bench where Zarkon had put it and tries to soak the oil in it, hoping he’ll get at least the worst of it cleaned.

“Leave it,” Zarkon says, making Keith jump in surprise. He hadn’t heard him come back.

Keith drops the towel and sits back on his feet, trying to hide his trembling and calm his breathing. He can feel Zarkon’s eyes sizing him up.

Keith swallows and looks down.

“Get up,” Zarkon orders, and the sharpness of his voice makes Keith flinch. Keith stands, slowly, and fists his uninjured hand by his side. He hides his injured arm behind his back, deciding it’s better to not concern Zarkon with that too.

Zarkon grabs Keith’s arm and yanks him away from the mess on the floor. Keith tries to keep upright, but his legs turn to jelly against his will, and the oil does nothing to help him to keep his balance. Zarkon is going to throw him in a cell and leave him there forever. Keith stumbles and crashes into Zarkon’s side.

Zarkon sighs, his anger obvious, and Keith has to bite back a whimper. “Are you incapable of behaving?” Keith shakes his head, sending droplets of water flying everywhere.

“Sorry,” Keith mutters, wondering briefly if he should be bowing for a better effect before deciding he’s still got some dignity left in him.

Zarkon lets go of Keith with a sigh, and Keith can almost see him stop himself from crossing his arms.

“I’ll be still,” Keith promises, hoping it’s enough. He’s not sure what he’s willing to give Zarkon in return for staying out of the cell, and he’s not ready to find out, but he’s sure he can handle Zarkon’s hands on him for a few more minutes.

“You kicked me,” Zarkon reminds him, and if Keith didn’t know better he’d think Zarkon sounds almost impressed.

“Sorry,” Keith says again. Zarkon takes a hold of Keith’s arm again and pulls him forward.

Keith panics, his heart thrums in his ears and his limbs turn numb as he stops moving and pulls against Zarkon’s hold. He’s not going to a cell without a fight this time around.

Zarkon stops so abruptly Keith slams into him again. “Stop.” Zarkon squeezes Keith’s arm so hard Keith has to grit his teeth to keep quiet.

“You kicked me in a cell again,” Keith pleads before biting his lip. Zarkon drops his arm, and to Keith’s dismay he stays silent.

Keith hesitates before taking a step forward and reaching to where he thinks Zarkon is. He finds the fabric of Zarkon’s clothes and clutches them in his fist, tightening his hold when Zarkon doesn’t tell him no. He steps closer to Zarkon until he can smell the scent of him under the oil spilled on the ground and the soap clinging to his own skin.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, Zarkon places his hand on Keith’s neck. Keith presses his face into the soft material of Zarkon’s clothes and soaks up the warmth he radiates. Keith tries not to tear up
when Zarkon rubs a slow circle against his neck, alleviating the worst of the fear boiling inside him.

“Don’t lock me in a cell,” Keith repeats softly against Zarkon’s clothes.

Zarkon takes a deep breath and pats Keith’s head. “You are blue,” he says, his voice strangely tight, like he’s trying not to laugh.

Keith frowns, not knowing what Zarkon means, and takes a step back. He hopes the confusion on his face is enough to prompt further explanation.

“The oil is dying your skin bright blue,” Zarkon says, and this time Keith can clearly hear the amusement in his voice. Keith looks down on himself, cursing his lack of sight.

“It didn’t do that last time,” Keith says more to himself than to Zarkon.

“This is not the same oil. This helps with the discoloration. It has to be applied properly so it will not do this. I would let you do it yourself if you could see, and I assumed you would not want one of the druids touching you when you cannot see them,” Zarkon replies. Keith frowns again, though he’s thankful for not having to do this with a druid.

“Discoloration?” Keith tilts his head and runs his hand down his arm. Zarkon grabs his wrist.

“Do not spread it further, your skin will not absorb more of it. Our specialist says it is caused by your skin being too dried,” Zarkon says, and Keith can hear him consider something. “Haggar was supposed to tell you about it.”

Keith shakes his head once, she hadn’t said anything about it to him.

“She has a lot on her mind.” Zarkon doesn’t sound too upset about it, but Keith doubts Haggar forgot anything.

“Just stand by the sink and let me finish with this. And do not kick me again.” Zarkon nudges Keith to get him to move.

Keith shuffles to the direction of the sink, keeping his uninjured hand in front of him so he doesn’t bump into anything. Zarkon follows him after picking up the jar.

Zarkon tells Keith to sit at the counter, and Keith decides he was better off sitting on the bench. Zarkon drops to his knees and continues where he left off, and though Keith doesn’t knee him again he really wants to. His body still responds to Zarkon’s touch in the worst possible ways, and Keith twists his banged up wrist, hoping the pain will distract him.

“You are making a big deal out of nothing,” Zarkon remarks as he rubs the oil on Keith’s leg. It doesn’t take Keith long to figure out what he means.

He hates Galra senses.

“I don’t—” Keith bites his tongue, unsure of how to word his thoughts so he won’t say the wrong thing.

“I am old enough to know the difference between wanting and a natural reaction to being touched after long period of isolation,” Zarkon continues like Keith hadn’t said anything. “Stop thinking so little of me and relax. I would rather not be kicked again.”
Keith blushes. Of course Zarkon has a way of rationalizing everything. Of course Zarkon is acting like an adult and making Keith feel like a child. He hates it, but there’s nothing he can do about it.

“Try talking. It might distract you,” Zarkon suggests. Keith takes a deep breath and wracks his brain for a safe subject.

“I can’t think of anything to say,” he admits eventually.

“Tell me about your parents,” Zarkon says.

The growing heat in Keith’s belly disappears. He licks his lips, trying to decide if it’s a topic he wants to approach before nodding to himself.

“My father left when I was young and I never met my mother. I grew up in foster care, but I never really settled on any of the families I was placed in,” he says matter of factly, satisfied with his answer.

Zarkon is quiet for an agonizingly long moment. He finishes spreading the oil on Keith’s left leg, and moves to his right one, and Keith fights back the urge to fidget.

“I hurt my wrist,” Keith says when the silence becomes too much for him to bear.

Zarkon’s hands still. “Is it broken?”

“No,” Keith replies.

“Do you need anything for it?” Zarkon resumes spreading the oil to Keith’s leg, any hint of concern disappearing from his voice.

“A brace?” Keith doesn’t think it would be wise for him to crawl on the floor with a sprained wrist, but he keeps that opinion to himself. Keith can’t see it, but he thinks Zarkon inclines his head in agreement.

Keith does his best to ignore the way Zarkon’s warm hands feel on his thigh. He reminds himself that any reactions his body might have are completely normal and Zarkon won’t use them against him. Zarkon seems to be done with his leg a lot faster when Keith doesn’t focus solely on waiting for him to stop.

“Let me see your back,” Zarkon says and takes a hold of Keith’s elbow to guide him safely off the counter. Keith is mindful of not stepping on Zarkon or kicking him again, and after a little maneuvering he’s standing with his back to Zarkon, and nobody got hurt in the process.

Zarkon leans past Keith to grab something, and the soft material touching Keith’s arm makes him startle. “Wipe your hands and arms,” he says as Keith accepts the towel.

Keith assumes his hands are still blue from the oil, and he takes great care to get it all off while Zarkon applies the oil to his back. His skin feels softer and more flexible, and Keith is a little surprised he hadn’t noticed how bad his condition had gotten.

“I will get you a brace. Dry your hair in the meantime,” Zarkon says as he stands. Keith nods without looking at him, his attention focused on cleaning his hands. He doesn’t move to drying his hair until he hears Zarkon leave the room.

Keith doesn’t know how long he stands there with a towel in his hair, trying to get the water off, but the sob that breaks from him catches him off guard. He’s not sure what upset him, but the
rational part of his mind tells him he’s stressed and overwhelmed, and he needs to get a grip. He scrubs his hair more vigorously and tries to calm himself before Zarkon returns.

“There is no need for that,” Zarkon’s voice comes from behind Keith, making him bite his tongue and try to force the tears in his eyes back.

Zarkon walks up to Keith and turns him around. Keith presses the towel to his front and keeps his head down until Zarkon lifts his chin with a gentle touch. Zarkon keeps Keith’s head still for a few seconds before taking his injured wrist and turning it a few times. Keith bites his lip when his arm flares with pain.

Zarkon places the brace on Keith’s wrist and tightens it after making sure it’s a good fit. “Better?”

Keith nods and takes a sharp breath through his nose to stop it from running. His eyes sting from the tears he couldn’t keep from falling. He tries not to hate himself when Zarkon brushes the tears from his face. Keith wants to lean into his touch and not feel so alone.

“You are safe,” Zarkon says with a too soft voice. Keith sniffles and tilts his head down. He needs to believe Zarkon but he doesn’t know if he can. “I will keep you safe.”

Keith closes his eyes and leans into Zarkon’s touch, wishing he was anywhere but there.

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna try to get the next chapter out before 13th. We'll see how that goes.

Hope you liked this!
This chapter would've been up hours ago but I got into a talk/argument about Zarkon's height with a friend. It was fun and my life has been forever changed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith accepts his place and does what Zarkon says. He doesn’t see a point in fighting when the only thing it will bring him is an eternity in a cell, and not fighting brings him a nice comforter and a cushion, regular meals, and a warm place to stay. He even gets a pair of underwear when his skin begins to heal from the rash.

Keith prefers his current housing arrangement to a cell, and if he ignores his ideological differences with Zarkon Keith can pretend he is somewhat pleasant to be around, at least most of the time.

It takes a few days, but eventually Keith stops caring he doesn’t have clothes. He’d asked for a shirt, but Zarkon had told him it might encourage him to try to escape again. Keith doesn’t know if it’s the whole reason, but he doesn’t push it, Zarkon might punish him for it.

Another thing Keith doesn’t dare to ask about is the quality of his meals. Zarkon feeds Keith sweet things that taste good but never quite take the hunger away in the mornings, and in the evening he gets thick liquid soup he has to drink from a deep plate. Sometimes a druid brings him a bowl of fruit during the day.

The only real problem Keith has at the moment is that Zarkon hasn’t been in his quarters for six meals, which Keith counts as two or three days, he can’t be quite sure which it is. A druid has been bringing Keith his trays and letting him into the bathroom, so he doesn’t have to worry about that, at least.

Keith is getting lonely, and the quiet and isolation is starting to remind him of his time in the cell.

He starts when the door opens, but the steps that enter aren’t Zarkon’s. A tray drops before Keith, and the steps retreat the same way they came. Keith swallows and sits on his cushion, falling into a pit of despair for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and reaching for the tray. He’ll feel better when he’s not hungry.

Keith busies himself with going over the brief conversations he’d had with Zarkon before he’d disappeared, trying to find some sign that this was coming. He comes up with nothing, and he lets out a frustrated sigh as he lies on the cushion. He wishes he had some way of contacting Zarkon. He could trigger the security grid keeping him in place, but that would make Zarkon angry with him, and Keith doesn’t want Zarkon angry.

His mind races, going from one possibility to the next, until his thoughts slowly grow sluggish, and he drifts into a light, dreamless slumber.
The door slams shut and Keith jolts awake. He barely resists the urge to hold his breath as he focuses on listening. It doesn’t take him long to recognize Zarkon’s footsteps, and he sighs in relief. He hasn’t been abandoned after all.

The second thing Keith notices is how tired Zarkon’s movements are. Keith sits by the wall and bites his lip as he tries to decide if he should say something. A tray hits the table and Keith decides against talking.

“Go take a shower,” Zarkon orders, his voice colored with weariness. Keith does as he’s told and follows the now familiar route to the bathroom.

It takes Keith a moment to find a towel and the jar of oil that won’t dye his skin if applied wrong. Keith doesn’t know how long he has, but since Zarkon had seemed tired he takes the fastest shower he can while still carefully scrubbing himself from head to toe. He almost skips the oil, but since Zarkon expects him to take care of himself he applies it hurriedly but thoroughly before finding the door and stepping out.

Keith waits for Zarkon to tell him what to do, but he hears nothing. Keith hesitates before taking a step into the room, then another. Since Zarkon doesn’t tell him no Keith shuffles to the couch, keeping his hands in front of him to keep himself from bumping into anything, and still hearing no objections even though he’s walking. Keith wonders if it’s a test, and drops to all fours before following the edge of the couch as he heads to the table.

Zarkon isn’t there either, but that doesn’t stop Keith from finishing the plate of soup and drinking the too sweet juice left out for him. Keith isn’t sure what he’s supposed to do now. Usually he sits by Zarkon’s feet and relaxes and listens to whatever Zarkon wants to talk about. He doesn’t know what to do if Zarkon has left him alone without trapping him in his spot.

Keith sits on the floor and thinks. He could go to his cushion on his own and pretend he can’t leave it, but his curiosity takes over and he pushes himself off the floor and heads for Zarkon’s bedroom instead, his steps slow and cautious so he won’t bump into anything. He just needs to be sure Zarkon has left before he settles on his cushion.

Keith’s breathing quickens when he reaches the door, and he hesitates before opening it just enough to stick his head in. He doesn’t get told off, so Keith opens the door more and slips in. He holds his breath as he sinks to the floor and crawls to the bed as quietly as he can.

The tension threatening to take over his body eases when he finds Zarkon asleep on the bed, his breathing slower and more relaxed than usual.

Keith reaches out and brushes his fingers against Zarkon’s arm just to be sure he’s there, and frowns when he gets no reaction. When Keith slept in Zarkon’s bed he’d had to be careful not to shift in a wrong way so Zarkon wouldn’t wake up. Keith nudges Zarkon’s arm a little harder, but gets no response.

Keith slumps on the floor, leaning his back on the bed, and pulls his legs to his chest. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to do, but going to his cushion and spending the rest of the evening alone until he grows tired again doesn’t sound like fun. He settles for gently pulling the edge of the blanket from the bed and trying to find the best way to wrap it around himself. He wonders if he could bring his cushion in there for one night.

Zarkon’s hand falls on Keith’s head without a warning, and Keith lets out a quiet yelp, much to his dismay. He’s glad he can’t see the look on Zarkon’s face.
“Are you going to sleep there?” Zarkon asks, his voice heavy from tiredness.

“I could get my cushion?” Keith feels terrible for hoping Zarkon will say yes.

“You could get in the bed,” Zarkon replies.

Keith swallows, his throat dry. He shouldn’t, but he wants to crawl into the bed and curl next to Zarkon, and fall asleep surrounded by the warmth of him.

In the end Keith’s need to not be alone wins, and he hesitantly climbs on the bed. He curls under the covers, staying as far away from the soft pillows and Zarkon as he dares.

“I’m not really tired,” Keith admits.

“Just try not to bother me,” Zarkon says, sounding half asleep already.

Keith settles down and listens to Zarkon’s slowing breathing. He doesn’t have anything to do and he couldn’t be less tired. He wonders if he could get his head on a pillow without waking Zarkon. It seems like a good way to spend his time, so Keith makes sure to keep an ear on Zarkon as he starts his journey to the pillows.

It’s harder than Keith thought — he’s never met anyone who wakes up as easily as Zarkon — but he enjoys the challenge. After a small, tense eternity Keith gets his fingers on a pillow, grinning in victory as he pulls on it gently. Zarkon shifts and Keith freezes. He lets go of the pillow and bites his lip before reaching for Zarkon to make sure he’s still asleep.

Keith’s fingers brush against Zarkon’s jaw, his touch gentle and cautious. Zarkon’s breath touches Keith’s wrist, leaving his skin burning at the feather light contact.

Keith wonders how bad it would be to spend his life like this. It’s what he’s most likely going to do at that moment. He could accept it, maybe he could even grow to be content with his life some day, but he doubts he’d ever be happy. He still doesn’t know what’s causing his headaches or the way he reacts to Zarkon’s touch, or how Zarkon tracked him in the first place.

“You are thinking too loud.” Zarkon’s voice snaps Keith out of his thoughts.

“Sorry,” Keith mutters. He’s not sure how his thinking could have woken Zarkon up, but he decides it’s not worth questioning. He lets the silence stretch and waits for Zarkon to fall asleep again.

“Is something wrong?” Zarkon asks, sounding sincere enough to catch Keith off guard. He almost says nothing.

“How did you track me?” He asks, not expecting an answer.

Zarkon shifts, and Keith stifles a disappointed sigh. He tells himself it doesn’t matter, and that Zarkon will tell him about it when he’s ready.

“When do I get my eyesight back?” Keith asks, his voice subdued.

“Haggar is working on it. Your eyes process light differently than ours so she needs to make a new pair of protective lenses so you will not be permanently blinded. It is not a priority for us so it takes some time,” Zarkon replies.

Keith mulls over his words. He understands why his ability to see wouldn’t be important to anyone
but him, but hearing Zarkon say so still stings. He decides to keep his opinions to himself and rolls around, turning his back to Zarkon.

He doesn’t want to talk anymore.

A silence falls over them, and Keith thinks Zarkon has fallen back to sleep until he wraps his arm around Keith and pulls him closer. Keith scrambles, trying to escape his hold, but he calms down when Zarkon doesn’t let him go.

“If I were to tell you how I tracked you across the universe I would require something in return,” Zarkon says, pressing his jaw against the top of Keith’s head.

Keith grimaces before twisting in Zarkon’s hold until they’re facing each other. Keith might not be able to see, but he feels better without his back to Zarkon.

“What do you want?” Keith asks, trying to hide the dread inside him.

“Haggar wishes to run a few experiments on you. If I tell you how I found you, you will let her do what she needs to do with you,” Zarkon replies.

Keith’s blood runs cold. The memories of Shiro’s nightmares and the Robeasts tell Keith to say no, but the part of him that knows he needs the information keep him quiet.

“She will not harm you,” Zarkon assures Keith, and though Keith doesn’t know if he can trust Zarkon’s word he doubts he’ll get another chance to learn the truth. Besides, Zarkon will have Haggar run her experiments anyways, no matter what Keith’s opinion on the matter is.

“As long as she doesn’t start dismembering me,” Keith says.

“Do not worry, I prefer you the way you are,” Zarkon replies. Keith can hear the smile in his voice.

Keith takes a deep breath. “Okay,” he agrees with a surprisingly steady voice. He feels like he’s giving up his life and he wants to throw up.

“You seem to be tangled in my bond with the Black Lion. I keep reaching you instead of it.” Zarkon doesn’t sound too bothered by it, but Keith feels violated and offended. “Haggar will find a way to fix it,” Zarkon adds.

Keith shakes his head minutely as he tries to process the new information. “How did this even happen?”

For a second Zarkon doesn’t say anything, but Keith feels the bed shift. “We do not know.”

It does nothing to ease Keith’s mind, but it explains why Haggar wants to experiment on him.

As Keith works to process the situation it dawns on him that as long as he’s with Zarkon and their connection remains unbroken Zarkon can’t find the Black Lion or the Castleship. It makes him feel marginally better about being imprisoned.

“So you can, what, read my thoughts or something?” Keith can feel the color leave his own face.

“Nothing like that,” Zarkon laughs, but Keith isn’t convinced. “Sometimes I get impressions,” Zarkon admits when Keith doesn’t stop frowning.

“Like when?” Keith presses.
“When you are highly emotional or focused on something, or if I lower my shielding,” Zarkon replies. Keith isn’t entirely sure what shielding means for Galra, but he’s seen enough sci-fi movies to suspect it’s some type of mental defense thing. He doesn’t ask for clarification.

“Like when you’re trying to sleep?” Keith’s lips quirk up much to his annoyance. Zarkon huffs in amusement.

Keith’s smile fades slowly, and a thoughtful frown takes its place. “Why don’t I get impressions from you?”

“I have had a long time to learn to keep my thoughts to myself,” Zarkon replies. Keith thinks he sounds bitter, but he can’t be sure. Maybe it’s their connection, maybe it’s wishful thinking that Zarkon is capable of normal emotions, but Keith would definitely be happy about being able to keep his thoughts and emotions to himself. He’s not sure why Zarkon wouldn’t be.

“If Haggar can’t find a way to break this... connection or whatever it is, then what do we do?” Keith asks in an attempt to change the subject.

“Well, you could not leave without me finding you, so I would hope you would stay willingly. I believe you could be happy here,” Zarkon replies. Keith barks out a joyless laugh before he can stop himself.

“You’re treating me like a pet,” Keith points out, hoping he’s not crossing a line.

“I would not let a pet in my bed,” Zarkon counters. Keith doesn’t have an immediate reply to that, and the blush creeping on his face doesn’t help.

“A prisoner then.” Keith bites the insides of his cheeks, thinking he shouldn’t continue this line of conversation. Zarkon could get bored at any second and throw him back in a cell.

“I would not let a prisoner in my quarters,” Zarkon replies. “You are my guest. Perhaps, if you stop trying to escape and earn my trust, we could be friends.”

“I don’t know,” Keith mutters. He doesn’t want to cozy up with Zarkon, but his other options seem bleak in comparison.

“You can always go back to a cell if that is what you prefer,” Zarkon says.

Keith curls in on himself in response. His head knocks against Zarkon’s face, catching him off guard. He tries to jerk back, but Zarkon stops him with a hand on the back of his head. Keith stills, unsure of what to do as Zarkon presses their foreheads together. Their breaths mingle and Keith closes his eyes. He tries to ignore the small part of him that enjoys the closeness.

Some part of Keith — the part that usually makes him lash out — stills and calms at the gentle contact. It’s not just the warmth seeping from Zarkon, but something else, like Keith has found the eye of calmness in the middle of an endless storm.

“Can I get some sleep now?” Zarkon asks eventually. Keith nods in response and tries not to miss Zarkon’s touch when he pulls away. His mind remains annoyingly calm.

“Do not wake me up again,” Zarkon says before settling back down.

Keith remains frozen still until Zarkon’s breath slows down again. He doesn’t know how long he stays where he is, but eventually he drifts into a fitful sleep.
Zarkon sleeps past morning. It gives Keith a chance to sit down and take his time with his breakfast. He takes a chance and drinks the tea set down for Zarkon before it goes cold, telling himself there’s more of it in the teapot. If Zarkon wants to punish him for it Keith will live with it.

Eventually Keith wanders back to Zarkon. He wants a last chance of the warmth and comfort of a bed before being forced back to his cushion.

Zarkon stirs when he climbs into the bed, and though he lets Keith pull the covers over himself he makes no move to get up. Keith hides his amused smile in a pillow and closes his eyes. His limbs feel heavy and time becomes meaningless.

Zarkon shifts and drapes his arm over Keith in his sleep.

In Keith’s sluggish mind the idea of spending the rest of his days in such a comfortable place doesn’t seem so bad, but the still sharp part of his mind tells him not to fall for the obvious trap. Still, Keith doesn’t see any harm in enjoying himself for a little while.

The comfortable bubble breaks when Haggar enters the room. Keith feels Zarkon stir, but since he doesn’t make a move to get up Keith settles more comfortably under the covers and pretends he’s not awake, but knowing it will fool no one.

“The council is waiting for you, my Lord,” Haggar says as a greeting.

“They can wait a little longer,” Zarkon replies, his voice heavy from sleep. Keith would give Zarkon an unimpressed look if he had the energy for it.

“They’ve waited for half a quarter,” Haggar says. “They grow tired of my excuses.”

“They will wait for me.” Keith stifles a snort into a pillow. Zarkon presses his hand against Keith harder.

“They have the information you requested,” Haggar replies.

Zarkon sighs. “Naare?”

“Of course, my Lord,” Haggar replies. Keith listens to her leave the room.

When the door to the quarters closes Zarkon stretches his limbs and sits up. Keith remains in his warm spot, and Zarkon doesn’t tell him to get up as he leaves the bed and the room.

Keith takes the chance to spread out on the bed. He listens to Zarkon move around the other room, only paying the minimum amount of attention to him. Keith’s thoughts drift to the Red Lion, and he focuses on their bond. He can still feel it pulsing softly in the back of his mind, but accessing it has become a task he can’t seem to accomplish. Keith tries a little harder, focusing on nothing but the connection.

A hand grabs Keith’s shoulder, and he’s back in the cell with something monstrous moving in the shadows. He bolts away from the touch, his lungs seizing up like something is squeezing the air out of him and not letting it back in. The bed disappears from under him and he falls face first to the ground.
Zarkon is there by his side in an instant, grasping his face and running a comforting thumb over his cheek. It helps Keith regain his equilibrium again, and though his face throbs with pain he doesn’t think he’s getting more than a bruise out of it.

“It was not my intention to frighten you,” Zarkon says. “Bad dream?”

Keith shakes his head, but he’s not sure how to explain his reaction. He doesn’t want to admit he’s still affected by his hallucinations, it would give Zarkon too much power over him.

“Tell me what is wrong,” Zarkon demands, and Keith wants to laugh.

“It’s nothing. I just didn’t hear you come in and you caught me off guard,” Keith tries to brush it off. Zarkon’s hold on Keith’s face tightens in warning, and Keith sighs. “I thought something was in the cell with me.”

“It might have been a wraith,” Zarkon replies.

“A what?”

“A wraith,” Zarkon repeats and runs a hand through Keith’s messy hair. “Energy released at death. Sometimes they pass through.”

“Like a ghost or something?” Keith asks, his voice incredulous. Zarkon lets go of Keith’s face.

“Every living thing has energy within them, a life force of sorts, that gets released upon their death. If the energy is strong enough it might manifest as a wraith, traveling through the space,” Zarkon explains as he stands and guides Keith back on the bed.

“Like quintessence?” Keith guesses.

“That is one form of the energy, yes,” Zarkon replies. “You drank my tea,” he continues, catching Keith off guard with the sudden change in the subject.

“It was getting cold,” Keith says.

Zarkon hums. The silence that follows isn’t uncomfortable, but there’s something in the air that makes Keith jittery. He’s becoming increasingly aware of Zarkon sitting by his side. He wishes he could see the look on Zarkon’s face, and he starts when Zarkon pushes the hair out of Keith’s eyes.

For a moment nothing happens, then Zarkon presses his forehead to Keith’s, the warmth of him sweeping straight into Keith’s mind. Keith wonders if Zarkon feels it too.

He wonders if Zarkon can feel the calmness the contact brings him.

“I should be going,” Zarkon says, his voice strangely gentle, but makes no move to leave. Keith finds he doesn’t mind it as much as he should.

“Go to the bathroom,” Zarkon orders, finally pulling away from Keith.

Keith nods, mostly to clear his head, and leans away from Zarkon. He has to take a moment to get his bearings again, but he pulls himself together and climbs over the bed to get to the door, and makes his way to the bathroom, bumping at the door frame as he exits the bedroom.

When Keith returns from the bathroom Zarkon orders him to his spot. He’s barely got his fingers on the cushion before Zarkon is out of the door.
Haggar has Keith brought to her lab the next day. Keith isn’t sure what he should expect, and he tries not to think about the possibilities. He does get a pair of pants and a shirt for the walk there, and he does his best to trust the druid walking him down the hallways. They’re somewhat considerate of his inability to see, but despite that Keith keeps expecting to bump into someone or something. The few whispers he hears from the Galra they pass do nothing to ease his mind.

The floor of Haggar’s laboratory is cold under his bare feet, and the examination table Keith gets seated on is even colder. Keith’s escort leaves him in the care of their fellow druids, who strap him down and leave his side without a word. Keith tries not to let his nerves get the better of him as he lies there, not able to feel anything but the chill of the air and the table he’s strapped on.

“I assume you’ve slept well,” Haggar says as a greeting. Keith doesn’t miss the hint of wryness in her voice.

“I have a nice cushion,” Keith replies with a tense smile, trying to lighten his mood a little. If it works, Haggar doesn’t let him know it.

“The Emperor has instructed me to inform you of what I intend to do with you,” Haggar says, the edge in her words obvious though Keith can’t be sure why it’s there.

“I’m going to study your brain today.”

Keith swallows, telling himself Haggar won’t be opening his skull without Zarkon’s permission. He remains still while Haggar attaches her instruments to his head and gives instructions to the druids working with her. Keith hears three voices that aren’t hers.

Haggar comes to Keith’s side, adjusting one of the electrodes attached to his forehead. “This will be a different experiment from last time. I’m going to ask you some questions and monitor the way your brain responds.”

Keith nods his understanding.

“How are your eyes?” Haggar asks. Keith frowns, but considers his answer carefully.

“They’re a little dry, but otherwise fine,” he says. “I’d like to see something soon,” he adds.

“Do you sleep well?” Haggar asks, ignoring Keith’s remark as he suspected she would.

“More or less.” Keith doesn’t mention the occasional nightmare he has, or the amount of time he spends asleep.

“Does your head hurt?”

Keith takes a moment to consider. “Not besides the occasional tension headaches.”

Haggar taps on a pad while Keith waits for the next question, the sound loud in the otherwise quiet room. She asks one of the druids to adjust some setting before resuming her writing.

“How would you describe your current emotional state?”

Keith frowns, unsure of how to answer. Haggar doesn’t hurry him.
Keith thinks about his days, but the only thing he comes up to describe his emotional state is numb. He doesn’t think that would be a good answer, so he considers his current mood instead.

“Um, stressed and mildly annoyed?” Keith grimaces at his own tone.

“Don’t get smart,” Haggar warns.

“I don’t know what my current emotional state is,” Keith replies, hoping the truth will be enough.

Haggar lets out a thoughtful hum. Keith doesn’t know what it means, and he doesn’t ask.

“Can you reach the Red Lion?” Haggar asks. Keith freezes. He doesn’t want to answer her, but he’d promised Zarkon he’d cooperate. The fact that he can’t see the look on Haggar’s face only adds to his discomfort.

“Why would I tell you that?” He counters. Maybe it isn’t smart to challenge Haggar when he’s tied to a table, unable to see, but he has to keep Red safe before himself.

“Because I need to establish what is your own mind, what is your bond with the Red Lion, and what is your bond with the Emperor,” Haggar replies. Keith gets the feeling she had expected his reluctance to answer.

Keith huffs and lets his shoulders slump. “Not when I’m awake,” he admits quietly.

Haggar doesn’t say anything for a long moment, and Keith wonders if his admission wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“You can still reach the Lion in your sleep though?” Haggar asks, her voice catching Keith off guard.

“Sometimes. Not so often anymore,” Keith says. He figures the truth will get him freed from Zarkon the fastest.

Haggar taps on her pad again, ignoring Keith for a solid minute. Keith takes the time to take a few deep breaths and calm his mind. The shuffling of the druid’s clothes as they move is starting to get on his nerves.

“How do you feel about your current situation?” Haggar asks, changing the subject, though Keith isn’t sure if it’s for the better. Keith almost asks if Haggar means him being strapped to a table, but he knows better.

“I’m a glorified pet. Beats being in a cell,” Keith answers, his voice blunt.

“You are hardly a pet,” Haggar says. Keith raises an eyebrow and tries to direct his disbelieving look towards her, hoping she sees it.


Keith throws a dirty glare in her direction. He opens his mouth to tell her he wishes Zarkon would drop dead, but stops. It doesn’t feel right, and since Haggar went so far as to tell him to be honest Keith suspects it’s an important question.

Keith tries to figure out the mess of emotions rising in him when he thinks of Zarkon. The anger is easy to identify, but the rest of it is harder. Zarkon’s keeping him from the cell, and he’s not bad
company, even if Keith wouldn’t go so far as to say he enjoys it. The thing that bothers him the most is that he can’t find it in him to say he hates Zarkon, at least not in the same way he did in the beginning.

“I don’t know,” Keith sighs. “Probably got Stockholm syndrome by now anyways,” he continues quietly.

“What?” Haggar sounds genuinely curious. It takes Keith a moment to realize what she’s referring to.

“Capture bonding?” Keith gets no response. “You form a bond with your captor as a survival tactic.”

“That is smart, but it might not be that simple,” Haggar says. Keith wishes it’s not Stockholm syndrome, but he’s not sure what the alternative could be. That he’s genuinely growing to like Zarkon? He scoffs at the idea, and if Haggar reacts to it somehow Keith doesn’t know about it.

“Could you focus your thoughts on him for a moment?” Haggar requests. Keith doesn’t understand what she’s getting at, but he does as she asks and focuses his thoughts on Zarkon.

Keith thinks of the first time he had a conversation with Zarkon. He thinks of the first time he stayed in Zarkon’s bed. He thinks of the morning and the cup of tea they had shared. He thinks of the way Zarkon had pressed his forehead to Keith’s, and the calmness it had brought Keith. He thinks of the strange warmth of his touch.

“Now focus on the Red Lion,” Haggar orders. Keith hesitates before doing as he’s told. Anything to help Haggar get rid of the thing that binds him to Zarkon.

Keith tries to tap into their connection, but gets no response. He goes through everything from the first time he’d seen Red to saying a quick goodbye to her before he left. His heart feels heavy in his chest as he swallows around the lump in his throat.

“That’s enough,” Haggar says. She starts undoing Keith’s restraints with a cursory dismissal to the druids. “Does your head hurt now?” She asks.

“No.” Keith stretches his arms. “Can I go now?”

“Yes,” Haggar replies and finishes freeing Keith from the table.

Keith drops to the ground and runs a hand through his hair. He’s aware of a presence other than Haggar in the room, but he can’t pinpoint who it is. He suspects it’s one of the druids, ready to escort Keith back to Zarkon’s quarters.

“So what does my brain tell you?” Keith asks as casually as he can.

“We’ll see,” Haggar replies. Keith rolls his eyes.

The druid grabs Keith arm and pulls him away. Keith follows them, but a part of him wishes he’d had a chance to question Haggar further. He wants to know more about the bond he shares with Zarkon.

He wants to not be alone all day.

Keith gets escorted back to his cushion, and he’s ordered to relinquish his clothing. Keith swallows the need to refuse, and strips. Once he’s done he pulls his knees to his chest and waits for the druid
to leave him alone.

Chapter End Notes

Well this was a bit of an info dump, but I hope it didn't feel like it. Next chapter will be up after season 4.

Hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

So... Season 4. What did you think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Try these,” Zarkon says as he hands Keith a pair of headphones that might have been small by Galra standards.

Keith raises a curious eyebrow as he runs his hands across them before placing them on his ears, and adjusting them a little before turning his attention in Zarkon’s direction.

“They’re fine,” he says.

“I will be caught up with work for a while so I selected a book for you to listen to while you wait for my return,” Zarkon explains, and Keith smiles a little, happy and slightly confused.

Keith would ask what he did to earn a book, but he fears questioning it will take this new privilege away. He pulls the headphones off and fiddles with them, wondering what book he’s going to be hearing. He’ll be happy with almost anything, as long as he has something to do while Zarkon is away.

“Haggar will see you again once she has analyzed her data. She said you did well,” Zarkon says, and maybe it’s an explanation as to why Keith is getting a book all of the sudden. Maybe it’s a motivator for him to continue behaving as he has thus far.

Zarkon leaves Keith on his cushion, and while Keith keeps an ear on him his attention is focused on the headphones. They cover Keith’s ears completely without feeling like an entirely good fit, but then again they’re made for Galra ears so it doesn’t surprise him. Keith places the headphones by his cushion, arranging them carefully until he’s sure they’re safely out of the way but within his reach.

“Come eat,” Zarkon orders, and Keith crawls to the table, avoiding any obstacles easily since he’d learned the layout of the room by now. His knees have grown sore from the floor, but the one time he’d asked to walk around he’d tripped on the carpet that Zarkon had moved a few inches to the left, probably just to get back at Keith. He has stayed on the ground since then.

Keith takes a moment to settle comfortably by Zarkon’s feet before facing him, waiting for his meal. Zarkon feeds him bread dipped in thick soup, and offers Keith a glass of water. Keith eats everything he’s offered, not only because he’s hungry but because he doesn’t want to disappoint Zarkon by refusing.

Keith can’t get rid of that fear of doing something wrong and being sent away. He tries, every day, but the memory of the cell filled with darkness and silence keeps him trapped. Even if he’d want to tell Zarkon off for some reason, there’s a voice in the back of his mind whispering what if.

What if Keith says the wrong thing? What if he does the wrong thing? What if he doesn’t do something he’s ordered to do and gets punished for it?
So Keith eats even after he feels full, and when Zarkon offers him the last of his tea Keith accepts it with a soft thank you and finishes the cup before handing it back to Zarkon.

When Zarkon moves to sit on the couch with another cup of tea and a bowl of sweets Keith can already taste on his tongue Keith follows him without needing to be prompted. He’s not sure if he can stomach any of the sweets, but he’d like to try. He curls by Zarkon’s feet and leans on the couch, his legs brushing against Zarkon’s as he settles in his chosen spot. He listens to the familiar tapping of Zarkon working on his pad, and closes his eyes and lets his mind drift.

“You have not told me how you and your friends came to pilot Voltron,” Zarkon’s voice breaks through the haze of Keith’s thoughts, and Keith takes in a sharp breath as he consider his answer. He doesn’t want to tell Zarkon about it. He doesn’t want to give Zarkon something that he can use against his friends.

He doesn’t want to go back to the cell.

“I found the Blue Lion in the desert but I couldn’t get to it until Lance activated it, and then it flew us to the Castleship on autopilot,” Keith blurts before biting his tongue. He hates himself for not keeping his mouth shut, and he tries to tell himself he didn’t reveal anything important.

The tapping stops, and Keith feels Zarkon’s eyes zero in on him.

“You found the Lion?” Zarkon’s voice is thick with poorly concealed curiosity, but Keith can’t see anything good coming from not telling him more.

“I could sense it in the desert. Lance was the one who actually got to it,” Keith replies. He waits with baited breath while Zarkon considers his words.

“You might have a natural sensitivity to the frequency the Lion’s communicate on. You should mention it to Haggar, it might explain why you got tangled in my bond with the Black Lion,” Zarkon says eventually.

Keith nods and makes a mental note to follow his instructions. On hindsight it might be good he talked, and he takes some comfort in that. Zarkon offers the bowl of sweets to him, nudging his side with it to get his attention, and Keith picks two of the tiny cubes that leave his mouth feeling cold and tasting like a mix between raspberries and mint. Zarkon pets his hair, and Keith leans into the touch despite his better judgement.

Eventually Zarkon orders Keith to his cushion with a promise to give him the book in the morning. He leaves the room with a quick explanation about needing to see to something before going to bed. Keith doesn’t mind. He settles down on his cushion, his hand reaching for his headphones as he closes his eyes.

He smiles, excited about the morning for a change, and tries to get some sleep.

The book Keith gets tells a story of a ragtag crew on a mission to return a kidnapped princess home. Keith lies on his cushion with a bright grin on his face as he listens to the story unfold. He’ll have to ask Zarkon when it was originally written because the presence of Alteans alone seems strange for a recently written book.
Keith loves it nonetheless.

It takes him a few days to get through the whole story, mostly because he takes breaks between chapters to keep the story from ending on the first day. He doesn’t know how long Zarkon has to work, and he doesn’t want to run out of entertainment too soon. When he gets to the end of the book where the princess gets home safely, and the captain has confessed her love to her, the silence in the room seems heavier all of the sudden.

Keith starts the book from the beginning. He gets halfway through before someone touches his shoulder, making him jump in surprise as he scrambles to remove the headphones, his heart trying to hammer it’s way out of his chest.

“I have time to test the new pair of lenses now,” Haggar says.

It takes Keith a moment to realize what she’s talking about, but when her words click in his brain he grows excited and sits up straighter. Haggar hands him clothes, and Keith dresses in a hurry before stumbling after her.

He has to cling to Haggar’s arm so he doesn’t trip or bump into anything, but he doesn’t think about it too much.

Haggar takes Keith to her laboratory and shows him to an examination table. She studies his eyes for a long moment before guiding him to lie down, and though she tells Keith she’ll be sedating him Keith still has a moment of panic when the drug begins to take effect.

When Keith wakes up his eyes hurt and he fears to open them. He doesn’t want to know if he’s been permanently blinded. As his senses return to him he realizes his eyes are covered with a bandage, and he reaches for it tentatively.

“Your eyes are going to hurt for a while, but the lenses are a good fit. I will come see you tomorrow and take the bandage off,” Haggar says as she comes to stand by Keith, adjusting the instruments somewhere to Keith’s left.

Keith nods as he pushes himself up. “Zarkon told me to tell you I could sense the Blue Lion before we found it. Apparently I’m sensitive to their frequency or something?”

Keith hears Haggar stop. He waits for her to speak, his muscles tensing with every passing second.

“I will take that into consideration,” Haggar replies eventually.

Keith breathes a little easier. Haggar doesn’t lead Keith back to Zarkon’s quarters until she’s sure Keith knows not to take the bandage off until the morning. Keith promises multiple times to follow her instructions, even going as far as to say he doesn’t want to blind himself accidentally until Haggar believes him.

Haggar takes Keith back to his cushion and leaves him there, clothes and all. Keith almost calls after her to ask about it, but he doesn’t get a word out until the door closes and he’s left alone.

After a moment of hesitation Keith returns to his book, though most of his attention is on his eyes. He’s acutely aware of every sting and itch, and he wants to remove the bandage as soon as possible. He scrunches his eyes close and takes a deep breath that he lets out slowly, and tries to focus on the book. He knows he can’t take the bandage off yet, but he can’t wait for the chance to see again.

He falls asleep while listening to the book, and wakes up when Zarkon returns. Keith doesn’t pretend to be asleep, but he doesn’t acknowledge Zarkon either.
Zarkon walks around, setting something heavy down on the table before disappearing into the bedroom. Keith pauses the book and removes the headphones that have already fallen off of one of his ears. He doesn’t pay attention to Zarkon when he returns, instead he lets the heaviness in his body lull him further away from consciousness.

He’s drifting back to sleep when Zarkon picks him up. Keith lets out a startled sound and wraps his arms around Zarkon’s neck, shocked by the sudden change in his position and by being in Zarkon’s arms.

“You need a shower,” Zarkon explains, his voice amused. Keith bites his lip and lets his head fall on Zarkon’s shoulder.

“I’m not supposed to take the bandage off yet,” Keith says.

“You will not have to,” Zarkon assures him as he sets him down on the bathroom floor. “It is waterproof.”

Keith is going to take Zarkon’s word for it. He begins taking his clothes off, not caring about being naked in front of Zarkon anymore. He’s not sure how he feels about it, and at that moment he really doesn’t care.

“You may come sleep in my bed if you want,” Zarkon says. Keith stills, unsure of how to answer.

“It is not an order or a request. You can say no and sleep on your cushion, and we will leave it at that,” Zarkon continues when Keith doesn’t say anything. Keith nods and mumbles a quiet thank you. He feels Zarkon’s eyes studying him for a moment longer before he walks away.

Keith finishes undressing and gets into the shower, and though Zarkon had said the bandage covering his eyes is waterproof Keith still hesitates to get it wet. He leaves washing his hair and face last, and when he’s done he starts by drying his face and wrapping a towel around his head to soak up the water from his hair. He takes his time oiling his skin.

During the time Keith has spent in Zarkon’s quarters he’s gained some weight back, but he can still feel bones he shouldn’t feel, and he suspects it’s one of Zarkon’s ways of controlling him. He’s not sure he wants to see himself just yet, and suddenly he’s very happy that his eyesight is out of commission until the morning.

Keith hangs his towel to dry before leaving the bathroom, and he heads straight to his cushion. He doesn’t hesitate until he passes Zarkon’s bedroom, stopping only a step after passing it to think. He doesn’t want to sleep next to Zarkon, but the bed is calling to him and it’s hard to resist it. He wants to crawl under the covers and sink into that softness. He sighs and opens the door, giving in to the desire to be comfortable burning in him.

Zarkon is already in the bed, and he makes room for Keith when he climbs next to him. It takes Keith a moment to find a comfortable position, but eventually he settles by Zarkon’s side, close enough to feel the heat he radiates but not close enough to touch him.

He drifts off, and he dreams of floating through a starlit sky. In his dream Shiro calls for him, but his voice is faint, like a memory from long ago, and Keith can’t respond to him.
Keith’s head hurts when he wakes up, but his eyes feel fine. The bed is empty save for him, and he takes the chance to enjoy himself and stretch out on it.

It takes him a moment to pick up on the soft conversation floating in from the next room. Keith lies still, his attention zeroing in on the sounds coming through the door, and Keith absentlly wonders if his lack of sight has finally sharpened his hearing as he identifies Haggar’s voice. He debates with himself for a second, but he pushes himself up and tilts his head to hear the conversation a little better.

“It might not be possible,” Haggar says, her muffled voice carrying an apologetic edge.

“Then shift it. Go into his head and tear it out if you need to. I have to be able to reach my Lion,” Zarkon snaps in return.

Keith doesn’t have to think hard to realize he’s the topic of their conversation. He doesn’t want Haggar in his head, especially if Zarkon has a particularly strong need to remove the bond between them. Keith thinks that, if nothing else, he has to protect his friends, and if keeping Zarkon from reaching the Black Lion will help then Keith will do whatever he has to to keep himself linked to Zarkon.

“I doubt I can do that, not without severely damaging or killing him in the process,” Haggar says. Keith shakes his head. Zarkon can’t allow that to happen. Keith holds his breath while he waits for Zarkon’s reply, his heart beating so fast he thinks it might stop, and his mind going through all the things he could do or say to make Zarkon keep Haggar away from his mind.

“I will think about it,” Zarkon says eventually.

Keith lets out a relieved breath and falls back down on the bed. He doesn’t get up until Zarkon calls for him.

Keith sighs before pushing himself off the bed and heads to the door. He opens it and steps into the other room, but once he’s on the other side he hesitates. He’s not sure if he should drop on all fours or if he can walk, and he doesn’t want to make a mistake by assuming either option is true.

“Come on now, keep walking,” Zarkon says, taking the choice out of Keith’s hands.

Keith stumbles forward, heading to the direction of Zarkon’s voice. He underestimates his distance from the couch and ends up tripping on the armrest. He falls face first in Zarkon’s lap, his face turning red in shame. Zarkon stops him from tumbling to the ground with an arm wrapped around his middle, and his soft laugh makes Keith’s face heat up even worse.

“Let Haggar see your eyes,” Zarkon orders, his words softened by his amusement with Keith.

Keith pulls himself together and climbs from Zarkon’s arms to sit by his side. He doesn’t know where Haggar is, so he faces forward and tries to relax. Haggar moves so quietly Keith barely hears her approach, but he knows she’s there before her cool fingers touch his face.

“How are you?” Haggar asks, her tone politely curious.

“Good,” Keith replies, “my head hurts but my eyes are fine.”

“It’s most likely just muscle tension,” Haggar says before she starts undoing the bandage covering Keith’s eyes.
Keith gets a sudden urge to grab Zarkon’s hand. He almost laughs at it, but he’s tensing with anticipation and fear and he can’t make a sound. What if he can’t see? His line of thought is cut short when Zarkon’s hand touches his neck. Keith leans minutely into his touch, and relaxes a little when Zarkon rubs soothing circles into his skin.

The bandage comes off too soon, and Keith scrunches his eyes shut even harder. He still remembers the pain the lights caused him even through his eyelids. Haggar has to order him to relax so she can make sure everything is fine. Keith leans into Zarkon’s touch a little harder and does as he’s told.

The light doesn’t hurt him, and if he didn’t know better he’d say there aren’t any lights even on.

“You’ll have to open your eyes now,” Haggar orders, sounding a little impatient.


Keith takes his time readying for the pain he’s sure will come when he opens his eyes, and he takes comfort in Zarkon’s reassuring touch. With one last steadying breath he opens his eyes.

At first Keith isn’t sure if his eyes are somehow damaged. Everything is dim, like someone had left the lights at twenty percent at most, but Keith can see. He looks at Haggar and takes in her contemplative expression, and smiles. He moves his attention from Haggar to take in the familiar room. He barely registers Zarkon withdrawing his hand.

There is a new book on the table next to a tray of food, but otherwise everything is the same. Keith isn’t sure why, but it makes him a little sad. He turns his focus to Zarkon. The soft hint of a smile on his face makes Keith falter, but he still returns the smile.

He can see.

“Don’t over exert yourself. The instant your eyes start to feel tired or dry, I expect you to cover them. When they feel normal again wait a few naare and try again,” Haggar instructs as she hands Keith a band of thick, soft fabric.

“Okay,” Keith replies, not really paying attention to her anymore.

Haggar leaves with one last unreadable glance at Zarkon.

“I will program an alarm in your reader so you will know when you can take the band off,” Zarkon says.

“Okay,” Keith repeats, and shakes his head a little when he starts to feel stupid. “How long is a naare?” He asks to cover up his awkwardness.

Zarkon tilts his head. “A little more than a varga.” Keith nods, now having a sense of how long he’ll have to wait before taking the band off.

Keith never imagined he’d be happy to see Zarkon, but now that he can see again he can’t stop looking, even if his vision is nowhere near perfect. He’s expecting Zarkon to comment on his staring, but until that moment Keith is going to memorize his face and that soft, deceivingly gentle smile he’s offering Keith.

“Breakfast?” Zarkon asks, and Keith starts to nod before stopping. He knows Zarkon understands it, but Keith is feeling cheerier than he has in months. He inclines his head in the way he’s seen the Galra do countless times, and the way Zarkon’s smile brightens into something more genuine
makes Keith suppress a grin. There’s a limit to how much he’s willing to give Zarkon in one go.

Zarkon stands and walks to the table, motioning for Keith to follow him. Keith hops to his feet and hurries to the table before he remembers he’s not supposed to walk without permission, but Zarkon doesn’t scold him for it beyond briefly narrowing his eyes. Keith drops to his spot at Zarkon’s feet, and takes in the room from his new perspective.

Everything looks more or less like Keith imagined it would, and his eyes drift to his cushion in the far corner of the room. It’s strange seeing it, like it’s suddenly more real than it was before. Keith swallows and turns his eyes to the ground.

“Here.” Zarkon hands Keith a piece of fruit pie.

Keith takes it and nibbles at the dry edges. He’s more conscious of his lack of clothes now that he can see, and he tries to ignore it, he does, but it’s not easy. If Zarkon sees or senses his distress he doesn’t acknowledge it, and Keith isn’t sure if it’s a good or a bad thing.

Zarkon hands Keith the half cup of tea he’s learning to expect. The tea takes away some of the dryness of the pie, and Keith enjoys the fruity flavors that fills his mouth. He’d ask for more if he thought it was okay, but he doesn’t feel like pushing his luck.

“Get your reader,” Zarkon orders as he sets down his pad. Keith nods and places the tea cup on the edge of the table before standing up.

Keith realizes his mistake when his face slams to the ground.

Zarkon presses his foot to the small of Keith’s back to keep him down, and lets out a deep, warning growl. Keith would’ve stayed still even without all of it. He hadn’t seen Zarkon move to trip him, but it had happened and Keith’s arms hadn’t quite taken the fall.

Keith tastes the faint trace of blood from where his teeth hit his tongue.

“The fact that I allow you to have your sight back does not mean you can start doing what you want. If you cannot follow orders unless blinded I will have to consider removing your eyes.” Zarkon’s voice is dangerously calm, and his foot presses against Keith’s back a little harder.

He could probably snap Keith’s spine by stepping on it.

“I’m sorry,” Keith breathes against the floor.

Zarkon’s eyes burn holes to Keith’s skin for a few agonizing seconds before he lifts his foot and frees Keith from his hold. Keith lets out a relieved breath, but he doesn’t move. He doesn’t want to make another mistake, not when the punishment might not be just a cell, but ending up on Haggar’s table. Zarkon nudges his leg, and Keith pushes himself off the ground slowly. His body trembles, but he ignores it in favor of moving forward.

Keith takes a moment to collect himself when he reaches his cushion, but he makes sure he doesn’t stay there too long. He’s suddenly painfully aware of what he’s doing. He doesn’t have the safety of not seeing. He can’t pretend he’s not crawling on Zarkon’s floor for Zarkon’s amusement anymore.

Keith’s eyes burn, and it’s not because they are getting tired.

With one last steadying breath Keith returns to Zarkon, his gaze cast down as he hands him the reader. He tries to swallow down the shame heating up his face, but he can’t get over the
humiliation. He feels like throwing up.

“If you need to use the bathroom do it now, I will be gone for the whole day,” Zarkon says without sparing Keith a glance.

Keith takes the opportunity to get away from Zarkon, and moves to the bathroom as fast as fast as he can on his hands and feet. He can’t lock the door, but he still closes it before standing up. He relieves himself before moving to wash his face with cold water.

His eyes catch a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror and he stops, water still dripping from his face. His eyes widen as he looks at the reflection staring back at him.

I shouldn’t shock Keith to see how much he’s changed, but until that point it hadn’t been real. He tries to take in how long his hair has gotten and how thin he really is. He runs his hands across his face, and though he feels how hollow his cheeks are it doesn’t seem real. The face in the mirror has to belong to someone else. Keith traces the clear shape of his collarbones, but even as he sees his reflection do the same a part of him doesn’t want to believe it’s really him he’s seeing.

Keith grabs a handful of his tangled hair and pulls it down to see how long it really is, shocked when his bangs come down to his chin. He chokes back a sob. Keith doesn’t know why, but the hair is the worst part. He could deal with the weight loss and the ghastly paleness of his skin, but he can’t take the hair.

“You are taking too long,” Zarkon says from the doorway, his voice annoyed.

Keith pulls his hair to cover his teary eyes as he nods. He doesn’t get a chance to move from the mirror before Zarkon comes to stand two steps behind him.

“Is something wrong?” Zarkon asks, and Keith wishes his voice didn’t get that soft, almost concerned edge to it.

Keith can’t stop the sob that escapes his throat or the burning tears from falling. He presses his chin to his chest, refusing to let Zarkon see him cry. He does his best to get his bearings, but now that he started he can’t stop breaking down.

Zarkon gives Keith a moment before stepping closer and grasping his jaw, forcing him to lift his head. Keith fights him as much as he dares, but he’s quickly losing the will to care what happens. Zarkon forces Keith to face the mirror before pushing his hair away from his face. Keith doesn’t look at his reflection.

“I cannot help if you do not talk to me,” Zarkon says.

Keith tries to shake his head, but Zarkon’s hold on his jaw prevents it. Keith bites his lip to keep the sobs inside him. He blinks, trying to get the tears to stop, but he can’t get himself under control. Zarkon pulls him closer to himself until Keith is pressed against his front, and Keith shakes with silent sobs as warmth sweeps through his skin.

“I will not stay here just because you are upset. Either tell me what is wrong or go to your place.” Zarkon’s voice gets a hard edge to it that makes Keith’s breath seize in his throat.

“I—” Keith starts, but his sobs stop him from continuing. He forces himself to take a few shaky, steadying breaths as he closes his eyes. “My hair’s too long,” he manages to get out in one breath.

Zarkon runs a hand through Keith’s hair, his fingers catching on the knots. “I could not tell,” he replies eventually.
The last of Keith’s composure breaks, and he has to cling to Zarkon’s arm to stay standing. Zarkon lets Keith cry for a while before half walking, half carrying him out of the room and to his cushion. Keith collapses on it, his legs refusing to support his weight.

“Will you be alright here?” Zarkon kneels in front of Keith and lifts Keith’s chin so he can study his face with something resembling concern in his voice.

Keith doesn’t know if he’ll be alright, so he says nothing. Zarkon’s expression softens minutely. Keith doesn’t have a chance to process what’s happening until Zarkon moves closer to him and wraps his arms around him.

Keith freezes, his distress momentarily gone.

An agonizingly long second passes before the world moves again, and Keith throws his arms around Zarkon, trying to pull him closer and push him away at the same time. He cries, letting all the pent up emotion go, anchoring himself on Zarkon’s warmth and presence.

Keith clings to Zarkon like his life depends on their closeness, and maybe, in a way, it does. The familiar scent of Zarkon grounds him to reality, and slowly — painfully slowly — Keith begins to reclaim control of his breathing. He pulls at Zarkon’s cape until he’s covered in it, and buries his face in Zarkon’s shoulder.

“If you are done I will be going now. We can talk when I return,” Zarkon says. Keith clings to him a little harder until sighing and easing his hold. He sniffs when Zarkon pulls away from him, but he doesn’t break again.

“I’ll be fine,” Keith promises, wiping away the tears on his face.

Zarkon stops short of getting up, and Keith swears he hesitates before grabbing Keith by the back of his neck and pulling him closer until their foreheads bump. It lasts for a second, but the touch sends a jolt of soft heat through Keith’s body. Zarkon’s breath brushes against Keith’s skin, and Keith closes his eyes.

Zarkon leaves him without another word, and Keith waits until he hears the door close before falling face first on his cushion.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter should be up before the end of the week. I’ll probably get it done before Friday, but I make no promises.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

There are things I'd like to say about this chapter, but I don't wanna spoil the entire story so I'm just gonna keep my mouth shut for now. But things happen here. You've been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes nearly a week until Keith can spend more than few hours without covering his eyes. His living arrangements don’t change, and though Keith is painfully aware of his position he learns to adjust to it again.

Zarkon gives him a new book to listen to, and to Keith’s delight it’s a sequel to the first one. He spends two days immersing himself in the world of the story, the new adventure of the captain and her crew keeping Keith from getting bored. It also becomes apparent Zarkon gave him the book because he’s been absent for those two days, while a particularly grumpy druid brings Keith food and lets him use the bathroom a few times a day.

Keith almost asks the druid what bothers them so much that the set of their shoulders is tenser than Hunk’s experimental bread in his first days in the Altean kitchen. The only reason Keith keeps quiet is that he doesn’t want to make an enemy out of the person tasked with feeding him.

On the evening of the second day the druid brings Keith a pitcher of bitter, thick juice of some kind, and if they were any less moody Keith would ask about it.

By day three Keith begins to wonder where Zarkon is. He doesn’t miss him, not really, but the long absence makes Keith worry. He fears Zarkon has somehow found the Castle of Lions, and the next time Keith sees him he’ll be faced with the news of his friends being captured and Zarkon having Voltron. Keith doesn’t know what he would do if that were to happen.

By day four Keith starts to lose his appetite. A sense of dread creeps over him, and he grows anxious as the slow hours pass. He’d pace the room if he could. He feels caged, and the heat rising from his chest and spreading through his body doesn’t help.

He screams into his pillow to ease his mind, and when it doesn’t help he flings his glass across the room.

The silence that follows is almost static, and Keith’s breath comes in hard bursts as he stares at the remains of yellow juice splattered on the far wall. He doesn’t know what just happened. He has no idea where the sudden flash of rage came from, and it scares him.

It takes him a few minutes to get a grip of himself, and suddenly everything becomes clear. He’s not the one who’s angry, Zarkon is.

A hysterical bark of laughter escapes Keith’s lips before he breathes a little easier. If Zarkon is angry enough for Keith to feel it then he’s definitely not close to capturing Voltron. Keith reins in his excitement quickly. He doesn’t want Zarkon knowing he’s is getting impressions off of him, not when he’s enraged.
Keith lies down on his cushion and focuses on figuring out what in his head is actually him, and what is Zarkon. It’s slow and grueling process since Keith does everything in his power to be discreet in case Zarkon can sense him poking around, but eventually he thinks he isolates the source of the flash of anger.

Keith can’t make sense of it, but the emotions tangled in his mind are too dark and overpowering to be his own. They feel foreign in his mind, and the flashes of fire they sends coursing through his veins make him tremble. It’s like he’s tapping straight into that source of warmth Zarkon radiates, and it’s burning him alive.

Keith gasps and bolts up. He stands on the edge of his allowed space, the bracelets on his arms buzzing in warning.

He doesn’t want this.

It takes Keith a while to get himself under control again and he sits down, feeling exhausted all of the sudden. He stares at the darkening stain that’s slowly beginning to dry on the wall across the room and blinks away the dry burning of his eyes. He blames it on his eyes growing tired again, and buries his face in the cushion to rest them.

Keith wakes up when his cushion tilts sharply to the side. He yelps and covers his head with his arms to keep it from hitting the wall and floor. It does nothing to stop Keith from banging up the rest of his body, but at least he doesn’t get a concussion. The cushion falls on top of him with a soft thud, and Keith curls into a tight ball under it. He doesn’t dare to move.

A few seconds later a set of angry footsteps march away from him.

It would be a relief if Keith wasn’t worried for his life. He waits until Zarkon disappears into the bedroom before pushing the cushion off of him and slowly sitting up. Zarkon must have sensed Keith poking at their connection, he can’t think of any other reason for him to lash out on Keith.

Keith’s eyes land on the dark stain on the wall, and he swallows. He doesn’t think Zarkon appreciates Keith staining his walls.

As if on cue Zarkon returns to the room, his foul mood clear on his face. Keith lowers his eyes to the floor when Zarkon turns to study him, but he still catches the way Zarkon digs his claws into his palms for half a second and the unnatural stiffness of his pose. Keith feels more than sees Zarkon notice the abandoned glass and the stain, and he holds his breath, fearing for his punishment.

“That is new,” Zarkon says, his voice too casual. Keith flinches and stares at the floor more pointedly. “Explanation?”

Keith bites his lip and wonders if he should tell the truth or lie. “I don’t have one,” he replies eventually, his voice quiet.

“I find that hard to believe.” Zarkon takes a step closer to the stain.

Keith remains quiet. He doesn’t know how to explain what he’d done in a way that would satisfy Zarkon and keep him from punishing Keith in some imaginative way. Keith doesn’t look up until
Zarkon lets out a quiet, subdued sigh.

“\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I could feel you poking at my mind earlier,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Zarkon says, his attention returning to Keith.

Keith flinches at the words, wondering if he should apologize. His shoulders rise to his ears, and he tells himself it wasn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t his fault. He didn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t pry into Zarkon\textquotesingle s mind until Zarkon flooded him with his emotions. He could say as much, but Zarkon doesn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t seem to be in a mood for being blamed for a stain on his wall.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I am also aware of my shielding failing earlier,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Zarkon continues. Keith glances up, surprised by the admission. Some of the tension leaves Keith\textquotesingle s body and he lets out a shaky breath.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I didn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t mean to do that,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Keith says and motions at the glass lying on the ground. Zarkon stares Keith down for a few seconds longer before walking to the table and picking his pad up, tapping on it for a few seconds.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Clean it up,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle he orders and drops the pad back on the table. \textquotesingle\textquotesingle Someone will bring you the supplies. In the meantime I think I deserve a bath.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

Zarkon leaves Keith to wait for the cleaning supplies without another word. Keith waits until he disappears into the bathroom before looking up. He hurries to the glass and picks it up, more to busy himself than from any need to get started on the cleaning. He doesn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t want to think about Zarkon in his undoubtedly comfortable bath. The bath Keith isn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t allowed to go near. Keith frowns at the wall.

He\textquotesingle s not going to think about that.

The cleaning supplies arrive, and the druid bringing them to him doesn\textquotesingle\textquotesingle t linger for a second longer than they have to. They leave a tray of tea and snacks on the table, but Keith knows better than to touch that without permission.

Keith scrubs at the stain with more vigor than is strictly necessary, but he\textquotesingle s determined to get rid of it before Zarkon returns. He succeeds, and though he\textquotesingle s slightly out of breath and his face is covered by a thin sheen of sweat he\textquotesingle s still a little proud of himself. He stands and walks around the room in an attempt to get the stiffness from staying on the cushion for days off of his muscles.

The pad Zarkon had left on the table pings, but Keith is already familiar with the sound so he ignores it. The pad pings again, and Keith continues to circle the room. He\textquotesingle s almost certain Zarkon\textquotesingle s ears are picking the sound up, and if he couldn\textquotesingle t hear it he wouldn\textquotesingle t have left the pad on the table. Keith ignores the pinging up to the point the sound turns into a louder, continuous beeping.

Keith stops behind the couch and glares at the pad, willing it to quiet down to no avail. After a few long seconds he starts thinking he should make sure Zarkon actually hears the pad. It seems urgent, and he\textquotesingle d rather not be the reason Zarkon misses something important.

Keith bites his lip and decides he\textquotesingle ll just knock on the door and make sure Zarkon is aware of the pad. He doesn\textquotesingle t actually have to open the door. Still, Keith hesitates by the door before knocking on it softly.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle If it bothers you that much bring it here,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Zarkon calls through the door, confirming he\textquotesingle s aware of the pad demanding his attention.

Keith decides it\textquotesingle s not that important, and he resumes his walk around the room. The pad falls silent for a blessed moment before it lets out a single long, wailing sound. Keith stops and stares at the
pad until it falls silent again. He’s never heard that particular sound before.

“Keith!”

Keith sighs and hangs his head in defeat before trudging to the pad and picking it up. He doesn’t need to be told what Zarkon wants. Keith grinds his teeth together as he pushes the bathroom door open, and tries not to think about what he’s doing.

When Keith had first found out Zarkon had a bath he’d been tempted to ask if he could try it out, but he’d kept his mouth shut. He had asked about the sliding door though, and Zarkon had made a vague remark about dust. Keith had also asked about why Zarkon even had a bath, and that response had been briefly flattened ears and a comment about it being good for relaxing on a short notice.

He closes the distance between the door and Zarkon as fast as he dares, keeping his eyes fixed on a spot above Zarkon’s head. The hot steam limits Keith’s field of vision, and for once he doesn’t mind. He could do without the steam clinging to his skin, making him uncomfortably clammy, but it’s nothing he can’t deal with.

When Keith reaches Zarkon he stops at an arm’s length and offers the pad to him, trying to appear as at ease as he can. Zarkon takes the pad without a word and taps the screen with a bored expression while Keith turns around and heads back to the door. Keith is pleasantly surprised that the worst thing about the whole encounter is the steam clinging to his skin, and his ease becomes more genuine the closer he gets to the door.

“Come back here,” Zarkon orders when Keith reaches the door, and Keith winches a little before turning around and risking a glance at Zarkon. He has extended the pad to Keith, and Keith can feel his eyes roaming up and down Keith’s body. He pretends it doesn’t bother him.

He almost ignores Zarkon’s order, but he knows it wouldn’t be wise. With a suppressed sigh, Keith trudges back to Zarkon and accepts the offered pad without meeting Zarkon’s eyes. He wants to ignore the sweet smile Zarkon directs at him.

The heat of the water warms Keith’s skin, turning it a shade of pink that hides his blush.

“Put it on the bench,” Zarkon orders, and Keith does as he’s told. He tries to relax, but his movements remain stiff.

“Now come here.”

Keith squeezes his eyes shut and swallows before turning around and walking back to Zarkon. He doesn’t want to do this. Zarkon will be upset with him if he doesn’t.

He tells himself he’s not the only one he needs to concern himself with. If Zarkon gets tired of him he’ll kill him or let Haggar turn his brain to mush, and then he’ll be able to track the Black Lion and take Voltron. It makes sitting by the edge of the bath easier.

Zarkon grabs Keith’s arm and draws circles against his skin with his thumb. It leaves Keith’s skin burning, the heat traveling up his arm fast. Keith forces himself to let out a slow breath, and he closes his eyes, pretending the steam is making them itch.

“I do not want you poking around my head again,” Zarkon says, his voice casual, but Keith knows a threat when he hears one.

“I won’t,” he promises, and though a part of him wants to say he’s lying a bigger part of him
reminds him that his and his friends survival might very well depend on him keeping Zarkon happy.

“I doubt that,” Zarkon replies, and Keith risks a glance at him. Zarkon studies Keith closely while his touch sears through Keith’s skin and the water drops falling on Keith’s arm send shivers through his body. “But I am going to trust you anyways. Maybe you will surprise me,” Zarkon continues, much to Keith’s surprise.

Keith’s eyes snap to Zarkon, allowing himself to take in the weary tiredness of his expression. Keith knows Zarkon is old, but for the first time he can truly see it, even if it’s gone in a blink as Zarkon’s carefully constructed mask falls back in its place.

Keith’s brow furrows as he chews his lip, but in the end his curiosity wins and he turns to fully face Zarkon. “What happened today?” He asks, keeping his voice carefully neutral. Zarkon does the Galra equivalent of rolling his eyes and looks away. Keith doesn’t dare to push his luck by prying further, but he still frowns at Zarkon.

The sly smile that spreads on Zarkon’s face confuses Keith, and he’s completely unprepared when Zarkon wraps an arm around him and pulls him into the water. Keith yelps and swings his limbs in an attempt to get away from Zarkon and stay above the scalding water. Zarkon’s delighted laugh doesn’t help him at all.

Keith pulls himself to the far end of the bath and away from Zarkon, and stares at him with wide, shocked eyes.

“You smelled bad,” Zarkon says as an explanation. Keith lets his annoyance show on his face for a moment, and if he was less angry he might find the way Zarkon’s face scrunches up as he smiles and stifles his laughter at Keith’s expression almost endearing.

Keith kicks the water at Zarkon’s face, only managing on getting Zarkon’s grin to widen. He’s grateful for whatever substance Zarkon has added to the water that turns it a shimmery blue that Keith can’t see through. He sinks into it until his chin is touching the surface, even though he’s sure the water burns his skin to blisters.

“I’d like to go now,” Keith says, not expecting to be dismissed so easily.

“I would like you to deal with your unpleasant odor,” Zarkon counters. Keith sets his jaw and considers his options, and decides that a quick bath is better than ruining Zarkon’s seemingly good mood.

Keith reaches for the soap, careful to avoid any contact with Zarkon, and if the look on Zarkon’s face is any indicator it’s a source of great amusement to him. For a moment Keith entertains the idea of telling Zarkon he’s not acting Emperor-like, but it would probably just make Zarkon more amused.

Keith soaps himself up in brisk movements and lets the water wash the suds away. He’d be in a better mood if the water wasn’t doing wonders for his tense muscles, even if the heat of it is less than comfortable.

“I am curious, why do you care if my day was not exactly ideal?” Zarkon tilts his head, a tired sort of curiosity coloring his expression.

Keith’s shrug makes the water ripple. “It was new, I wondered why it happened, that’s all.”

If Keith didn’t know better he’d think the flash he sees on Zarkon’s eyes is dejection.
“Do not concern yourself with it,” Zarkon says in a voice that doesn’t ease Keith’s mind one bit. “You can go now. Make sure the tea is still hot,” Zarkon continues, and Keith is out of the water and drying himself faster than he thought possible before rushing out of the door without a glance back to Zarkon.

Keith drips water everywhere as he rushes to sit by the table and he pours himself a cup of tea with shaky hands. He’d be happy to forget everything that happened, but he knows he won’t. He wants to throw the cup across the room, and this time he knows it’s his own emotions compelling him to do so. He doesn’t do it, but the need remains until the moment Zarkon joins him at the table. Keith snatches a cookie from the plate and sinks to the floor where he knows Zarkon wants him.

They don’t talk. Zarkon focuses his attention on his pad while Keith wonders what has happened. Maybe Zarkon had come close to capturing Voltron. Keith hopes that’s not the case, but if it is he’s proud of his friends for escaping. He risks a glance at Zarkon and he’s not surprised to find that grim frown back on his face. Keith bites his tongue and fixes his eyes on the tea swirling in his cup.

Zarkon gets up and steps over Keith on his way to the bedroom door. Keith waits for an order, but Zarkon doesn’t give him one.

Keith is left on the floor, alone and unsure of what he’s supposed to do. He finishes his tea while he waits for Zarkon to remember he left Keith alone, but as the minutes pass with no Zarkon Keith has to accept that he’s not going to come back.

Keith groans and runs his hands through his still wet hair. He hopes his cushion is a safe place to go to.

Keith stares at the clothes Zarkon had dropped in his lap before he’d even properly woken up. “You want me to do what?”

“Accompany me for the day,” Zarkon repeats.

Keith blinks up at him. He can’t quite wrap his mind around what Zarkon is asking of him.

“Okay?” Keith throws one last suspicious glance at Zarkon before unfolding the clothes. He’s not sure what’s in store for him, but at least he’s getting to stretch his legs.

Unless Zarkon wants him to crawl around the ship.

Keith shudders at the thought, but he pulls the clothes on and goes to sit by Zarkon’s feet and enjoy his breakfast. He’s uncomfortable in the familiar outfit he’d worn during his stay in his original cell, but he tries not to show it, even though he almost expects Zarkon to personally show him back to a cell.

When Zarkon tells Keith they need to be going Keith starts to regret ever agreeing to leaving the room, but at least Zarkon gives him the permission to walk, even if he demands Keith stay exactly two steps behind him and on his left. Keith does as he’s told, and though he gets his fair share of curious glances from the Galra they pass they’re so brief and subtle he can ignore them.

Keith does his best to hide his surprise when their first stop is Haggar’s lab, though he’s not sure
what he was expecting the day to start with.

“She has use for you,” Zarkon explains without prompting. Keith doesn’t want to know if his face showed his confusion or if Zarkon is poking around his mind.

“What kind of use?” Keith asks, worried for his safety.

“I have a test I’d like to run,” Haggar replies before Zarkon, catching them both off guard. If Keith was ever going to respect Haggar for anything it would be for her ability to move quietly enough to surprise even Zarkon. That must be a rare talent even in the vastness of the universe.

Keith reminds himself he had agreed to do as he’s told, and moves when Haggar points him to sit at a chair. She sets the jar in her hands down, and whatever is inside it makes a series of clanging sounds against the black glass. Keith isn’t sure he wants to know what’s in the jar.

“I will return him to you when I’m done,” Haggar tells Zarkon, who inclines his head minutely in acknowledgment before leaving the room.

Keith keeps his eyes on him until he disappears out of the door before turning to Haggar, his curiosity taking over. She’s studying the fast moving text on her monitor screen with a crease on her brow, ignoring Keith at least for the moment. Keith almost asks her what she finds so interesting.

“You want to study my brain again?” Keith asks instead.

Haggar doesn’t remove her eyes from the screen. “It is an interesting subject to study.”

Keith isn’t sure if it’s a compliment.

Haggar moves her attention from the screen to Keith, and she studies him with a thoughtful look on her face. Keith stays still and quiet, having learned a while ago that Haggar will talk when she’s ready. Keith still raises an eyebrow to let Haggar know he doesn’t like the staring.

“I need an excessive scan of your brainwaves. This might take some time,” Haggar says as she moves further into the room.

Keith follows her to the examination table and hops on it without prompting. He knows this process well already, and he’d like to be done with it as soon as possible.

Haggar seems pleased with his unprompted cooperation. She places the familiar wires on Keith’s head and starts her scan, asking Keith some basic questions when she needs to. Keith answers her, but for the most part he lets his mind drift.

Haggar is done before Keith thought she would be, and he hops off the table as soon as she frees him from the wires and scanners. He expects a druid or a guard to show up and take him to wherever he’s supposed to go next, but instead Haggar points him to a chair.

“Wait and be quiet,” she orders, and Keith does as he’s told.

He wonders about how his day is going to go. Maybe he’s with Haggar now because Zarkon is dealing with the issues he doesn’t want Keith to know about. He suspects he’ll be paraded in front of Zarkon’s commanders, but as long as he doesn’t have to do anything too humiliating and he gets to keep his clothes on he can live with it.

A part of Keith wonders if he’s ever going to go home again, but he pushes the thought out of his
mind as soon as it enters. Of course he’s going home. The others are probably just working on how to rescue him and keep Zarkon from tracking him again, and they’re making sure their plan works, and that is the only reason they haven’t come yet.

“Follow me,” Haggar says, walking past Keith with a scowl on her face. Keith follows her at a safe distance.

Haggar takes Keith to a large control room filled with Zarkon’s commanders, and while Haggar receives carefully concealed glances Keith gets his share of openly confused stares and a minute head tilt of acknowledgement from Thace. Zarkon is the only one to ignore their arrival. Haggar pays no attention to the commanders as she guides Keith to stand by Zarkon’s left side while she takes his right.

Keith crosses his arms to keep himself from fidgeting. He’s not sure why Zarkon insisted on his presence, and he doesn’t want to ask with all the people around them. He makes himself as unnoticeable as he can while the commanders talk about shipments and fleet locations. Keith studies the screen discreetly while keeping an ear on what is being said. It seems to be a routine briefing, and though Keith can’t identify the planets and locations mentioned he tries to memorize them anyways.

“You can leave now,” Zarkon says abruptly, cutting one of his commanders off mid-sentence. The room falls silent, and though some of the commanders seem to want to argue they follow Zarkon’s command.

Zarkon waits until the door shuts before turning to face Haggar who shakes her head minutely. Zarkon narrows his eyes and Haggar lowers her head in silent apology. Keith wants to know what’s going on, but the dark look on Zarkon’s face keeps him silent. He almost asks Haggar to stay when she walks to the door and leaves him alone with Zarkon.

“I wanted to show you something.” Zarkon’s voice is clipped, like Keith has somehow offended him, and Keith doesn’t know what to do about it. He settles for nodding and gripping the material of his shirt tighter.

“I assume you are expecting your friends to rescue you,” Zarkon starts as he taps on the controls of the large monitor, and his words freeze Keith’s insides.

“They need me to form Voltron,” Keith insists quietly, talking more to himself than Zarkon.

“If you say so,” Zarkon replies. Keith feels nauseous when Zarkon pulls up a video feed.

“This was taken a while back. I was not sure if you should be made aware of this, but I have decided you deserve to know the truth.” Zarkon starts the video, moving to stand right out of Keith’s field of vision.

Keith steps closer to the screen. He steel's himself as the video starts, and he knows immediately it’s a security feed of a battle, and though the video is a little damaged Keith spots the familiar sight of Voltron immediately.

It’s like someone just threw ice water over Keith. He has no memory of the battle being fought before his eyes.

It must be a trick. The others wouldn’t have just replaced him, Allura promised they’d come for him. Keith shakes his head. It’s not right.

The video cuts off seconds later when an explosion takes out the camera.
Keith doesn’t care. Allura promised he’d be saved. Why would they replace him and continue fighting the Galra with a new team if they were going to come for him? They’d had enough time to come up with a rescue plan, and if they needed Voltron for it they’ve obviously figured out how to form it and make their new team work well enough to battle.

So where were they?

“As you can see you are no longer needed as a Paladin.” Zarkon’s voice cuts through his thoughts. Keith grinds his teeth together and lowers his eyes to the ground.

“They are not coming for you. It is time you accept that,” Zarkon continues, and Keith digs his nails into his palms. “They have no further use for you.”

“Shut up.” Keith throws a furious glare at Zarkon before returning to staring the floor.

“I am simply telling you the truth,” Zarkon replies, his voice annoyingly patient. Keith wants to hit him. “I know it is not easy to accept betrayal from your closest friends, but the sooner you accept it the sooner we can move past this.”

Keith swirls around and throws a punch at Zarkon’s chest. His anger builds even higher when Zarkon doesn’t even seem to register the impact while Keith’s hand flares with pain. He lets out a frustrated growl and hits Zarkon again.

“They didn’t abandon me!” Keith’s voice rings in the air like a gunshot. His eyes are wide as he stares at Zarkon, his breathing coming in short, fast huffs. “They haven’t abandoned me,” he repeats far more quietly, his shoulders slumping against his will.

“They have not made any move that would lead me or anyone under my command to believe they are even planning your rescue. They have replaced you. They are continuing to fight in the far edges of my empire. They are not, however, coming for you,” Zarkon says, his voice infuriatingly calm.

Keith blinks against the burning of his eyes. He tells himself he’s gone too long without resting them, and he should return to Zarkon’s quarters. He doesn’t want to believe a word coming out of Zarkon’s mouth, but there’s a treacherous voice in the back of his mind, telling him there might be some truth in Zarkon’s words.

If the others have found out a way to form Voltron why are they not coming for him? They rushed to save Allura without a moment of hesitation, so where are they now?

“They wouldn’t leave me here. Allura promised,” Keith insists. He has to believe he hasn’t been abandoned.

Zarkon sighs and looks away, and when his gaze returns to Keith he seems apologetic. “I do not believe you realize how long you have been here.”

Keith shakes his head and looks away. It doesn’t matter how long it has been, the others are coming for him. Shiro is coming for him.

Zarkon tilts his head and regards Keith with that apologetic look for a long second. “Several weeks ago two of your Paladin friends successfully broke into one of our facilities, and they managed to escape with some information, including some of the files Haggar has on you. Now, they did not gain knowledge of our connection, but I do not believe the Princess will allow you to return to the Castle.”
Keith knows he’s being baited and that he should ignore Zarkon, but his curiosity gets the better of him. “Why?”

Zarkon actually hesitates before answering. “The files they managed to steal held the information on your condition when you arrived, and the tests Haggard ran on you when you fell ill, including your complete genetic makeup.” He tilts his head. “You are part Galra. According to Haggard one of your parents was most likely one.”

“No.” Keith shakes his head as distress quickly takes over him. “I’m not one of you. I was born on Earth and no Galra has ever been there, right? So I can’t be Galra. You’re trying to screw with my head, and if my friends really found some file about me being anything but human you’ve tried to feed them false information.”

Keith refuses to believe a word Zarkon says, even if a part of him reminds him of his knife. It had the same symbol as Ulaz’s blade had, and he’d been Galra. There’s no logical reason a knife made on Earth would have that symbol.

“You had a Galra weapon with you when you were captured,” Zarkon says, as if reading Keith’s mind. “My specialists identified it as one of the weapons used by the Blade of Marmora. They do not strike me as the type to hand important weaponry away.”

Keith refuses to admit he’s always had the knife as he blinks away the tears threatening to fall. If he were part Galra there would be no way Allura would allow him back on board the Castleship. He’s not sure the others would want him there either.

“I cannot promise the Galra will welcome you as one of our own easily, but I am willing to help you make a home here,” Zarkon continues when Keith doesn’t say anything. “When you are settled among us you will find we can be quite hospitable and that we take care of those we consider our own.”

Keith’s brows knit together and he turns away from Zarkon to keep him from seeing the wetness of his eyes, but he can’t hide the slight tremble of his shoulders. Zarkon gives Keith a few seconds before walking up to him. Keith tenses when he feels the heat Zarkon radiates brush against him, but he stays still when Zarkon lays his hand on Keith’s neck and tangles his fingers in Keith’s too long hair.

Keith wants to run, but he’s frozen in place. The waves of comforting heat Zarkon’s touch sends through his body cements him to the floor, keeping him from drowning in the storm of conflicting emotions that rage inside his mind.

“I promise I will never abandon you like they did.” Zarkon pulls Keith closer. “You are welcome here. I will keep you safe, if you will let me.”

Keith shakes his head again, but he finds himself leaning against Zarkon as the tears finally fall from his eyes. He doesn’t want to believe Zarkon, but a small, traitorous part of him needs to do so anyways. Zarkon hides Keith under his cape as he wraps his arms around Keith, and Keith gives in to the comfort of his warmth.

He tells himself it’s only for a minute. It doesn’t mean anything if Keith doesn’t let it. He’s not going to let Zarkon scramble his mind and make him believe he’s been abandoned. Keith can’t believe that.

Shiro has to be coming for him.
So this chapter renders Chasing The Sun Across The Dark Wide Space spoiler free. Also, there's an actual backstory for Zarkon's bath, but I didn't figure out a way to add it here. I wish I did, but it just wasn't meant to be.

I'm planning a cursory read of everything I've already written and I'll probably be adding tags to this as I go, so the next chapter might take a few days longer than usual. I do have over a 130k to read, after all.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Zarkon doesn’t allow Keith to return to his quarters, but he calls Marzila to take him exercising.

She arrives a lot sooner than Keith expected, and if the way she tries to control her breathing is any indication she’d ran there as fast as she could. She executes a somewhat elegant, if too deep bow, and her hair tangles in her ears as she stands up straight. Keith stifles a snicker at her behavior, not wanting to give her a reason to maim him once they’re alone.

“I want him back before the next quarter,” Zarkon tells Marzila as he nudges Keith to leave with her.

“Of course, my Lord,” she replies and bows again. Keith grabs her arm and pulls her away before she can do something to actually embarrass herself.

Marzila’s eyes widen when Keith drags her across the room with a brief wave of his hand at Zarkon before exiting the door. She waits until they’re at a safe distance before shoving Keith against a wall and pinning him there with a glare.

“You can’t do that in front of the Emperor,” she says, sounding mortified by Keith’s behavior.

“I think he can handle it,” Keith replies. “Besides, you’re the one who embarrassed themselves in front of him.”

Marzila’s ears are pressed so flat against her head they seem to disappear and Keith thinks she’d blush if she could. “I’ve never met him in person before.”

Keith pushes himself off the wall, and Marzila stares him down for a second longer before huffing and grabbing Keith by the elbow. She walks him down the hallway and into an elevator, and soon Keith finds himself in the familiar sparring room. He wonders if Marzila has a standing reservation to it.

“You look a little withered. We should probably work on basic stuff. I don’t want you to damage yourself,” Marzila says. Keith nods, seeing her point and agreeing with it, especially considering his less than ideal eyesight, though he’s learned to manage with it quite well by now.

He’d be happy to get back to his former shape, but he doubts Zarkon will allow that to happen just yet.

Keith follows Marzila’s instructions through a series of stretches and light exercises. She has him
work on his form before guiding him through a series of workout routines that leave Keith sweaty and out of breath, but feeling better than he has in days.

Marzila offers him water before taking him to the showers, and she gets Keith clean clothes while he lets the hot water soothe his aching muscles. After a while Marzila knocks on the door and waits for Keith to allow her entrance before dropping the clothes on the counter.

“The Emperor wants you back soon,” she reminds Keith on her way out of the door.

Keith sighs. He’s not looking forward to this, especially after their previous conversation. He still gets out of the shower and puts on the new set of clothes that’s identical to his previous outfit. He takes a deep breath to calm his mind before joining Marzila in the hallway and following her back to Zarkon.

Marzila leaves Keith at the doors to Zarkon’s throne room with a tilt of her head and a soft smile. He’d return the sentiment if he could, but he’s not in the mood for smiling at the moment.

Keith still thinks the room is the single most pompous thing he’s ever seen, but he keeps his mouth shut, especially when he sees Zarkon by the window deep in conversation with Haggar. Keith clears his throat to let them know he’s there as he goes to sit by the dais. He gets as close to Haggar and Zarkon as he dares, but they keep their voices so low Keith can’t hear their conversation.

Haggar inclines her head briefly before leaving Zarkon’s side. She glances at Keith on her way out, and the look in her eyes seems like a silent warning. Keith waits until she’s out of the door before swallowing and sitting up a little straighter. He has a feeling he’s about to have to continue his earlier conversation with Zarkon, and he’d like to not be caught off guard this time around.

The chances of Keith leaving the Galra any time soon seem thin, and a part of Keith wants to stop fighting it. His life would be easier — he might even earn his room back — but the part of Keith that wants to see Shiro again revolts at the idea of letting Zarkon win.

Keith exhales slowly and joins Zarkon by the window when it becomes obvious Zarkon isn’t about to move anytime soon.

The view catches Keith’s attention for a moment, and not for the first time he marvels at the sheer size of the Central Command. He’s not sure he’ll ever get used to it. Zarkon studies Keith’s reflection with a frown marring his face.

“Are you going to keep fighting me?” Zarkon asks. Keith doesn’t miss the dark undertone of his voice, and it makes him consider his answer carefully.

“I don’t know,” he sighs eventually. “I miss my friends.”

“You can make new friends.”

Keith huffs and lowers his eyes. He doesn’t want to make new friends, he wants his old ones to be the people he thinks they are and come get him.

“Speaking of your friends, you could always check if they are interested in your return,” Zarkon says. Keith’s eyes snap to him, his mouth opening and closing in confusion before he bites his tongue. He’s not going to ask how he’s supposed to check on the others, and if the shift in Zarkon’s expression is anything to go by he knows it too.

Zarkon tilts his head and regards Keith with an almost pleased look in his eyes. “If they have merely replaced you on temporary grounds you should be able to reach the Red Lion.”
Keith looks away.

“You cannot do it, can you? It means the Red Lion does not consider you its Paladin anymore,” Zarkon says, his voice carefully sympathetic. Keith can still hear the pleased hint behind his words, but he doubts it’s there because of Keith’s resistance this time around.

Keith doesn’t want to talk about it. He doesn’t want to admit he hasn’t been able to reach Red in a while. He wishes he knew more about being a Paladin and his bond with his Lion, but all he has to go on is Zarkon’s word. Zarkon, who the Black Lion apparently still considers her Paladin if Zarkon is to be believed, and who could still connect with his Lion if it weren’t for Keith screwing their bond up.

Zarkon leaves Keith by the window and goes to sit on his throne, and Keith isn’t sure if it’s worse than him staying where he was.

Keith stares at Zarkon’s reflection in the window and frowns. There’s a chance Zarkon is wrong about his connection with Red, or he might be just lying. Keith doesn’t know what’s the truth is and he doesn’t want to be playing guessing games with something so important. He doesn’t even want to be thinking about it. Maybe it is best if Keith operates under the assumption that his bond with Red is severed for now.

He’ll find out if Zarkon is telling the truth later.

“Any chance the exercising could become a regular thing?” Keith asks, his voice casual as he observes Zarkon’s reflection.

Zarkon tilts his head as he turns his eyes to Keith, and Keith expects he’s about to be offered a bargain of some kind. “Why not,” Zarkon says, sounding almost indifferent.

Keith turns to face him properly, trying not to look surprised. He didn’t think it would be that easy to get his way. Zarkon motions for him get closer, and Keith walks up to him with only mild trepidation. Zarkon guides him to sit on the right arm of the throne, and he taps on his pad while Keith finds a somewhat comfortable position.

“My technicians have informed me they had salvaged some data from the ship from your home planet,” Zarkon starts. Keith’s eyes immediately snap to the pad, but Zarkon snatches it away from his view.

“If I give this to you and I allow you continue exercising I need you to promise you will stop living in a dream.” Zarkon smiles sweetly at Keith.

“What dream?” Keith asks, already not liking where this is going.

“The one where your friends come for you,” Zarkon replies. Keith scowls and looks away. “Haggar says your mind keeps drifting to them, and I would like you to live in the now. You are here, you have been here for a long time, I would like you to enjoy your stay with us and not make it needlessly difficult.”

“You’re going to trust Haggar to tell you what I’m thinking?” Keith doesn’t know what else to say, and he refuses to agree to Zarkon’s demands. There’s no way he’ll just give up on his friends.

“I hold her opinion in high value,” Zarkon replies.

“Why?” Keith asks, genuinely curious.
Zarkon narrows his eyes minutely before schooling his features into a perfect mask of neutrality. “We have been together for a long time.”

Keith’s brow furrows, feeling like there’s something behind Zarkon’s words he doesn’t want to give away. “You mean together as in...”

Zarkon tilts his head slowly before understanding dawns on his face, followed by a glint in his eyes that Keith dislikes already. “You wonder if we are romantically involved.”

“No,” Keith says, deciding denial is the best chance to keep his sanity intact and end the conversation there.

“Is that jealousy I hear?” Zarkon’s smirk betrays his amusement, but Keith is too busy blushing to realize what it means.

“No! That’s not — ”

“Because there is no need for it. Our relationship is purely intellectual. Though I should warn you, the last person who courted her has yet to be located.”

Keith’s expression goes from stunned to mortified as Zarkon speaks. He shakes his head as he tries to find his words. “No. That’s not what I meant.”

To Keith’s horror Zarkon’s expression turns from playful amusement to looking like he’s just been handed the greatest gift in the universe. “You must understand I have an empire to run. As you have learned it takes up a lot of my time, and quite frankly I doubt you would be worth the trouble.”

Keith’s eyes widen in horror as his face turns red. This is not happening. “I don’t... Not worth the trouble?” Keith doesn’t know why he’s insulted, but he is, and he hates it.

Zarkon leans away from Keith, not bothering to hide his delight at having Keith exactly where he wants him. “Do not misunderstand, you are pleasant company, I am not denying that.”

“Please stop talking.”

“I am sure you would be—”

“Shut up!” Keith slams his hand on Zarkon’s mouth to make sure he won’t say another word. Keith’s breaths come on shallow bursts and his face radiates with heat, and the pure horror he feels must show on his face. Zarkon smiles against Keith’s palm as he pulls further away from him.

Keith refuses to pull back and remove his hand from Zarkon’s mouth and risk him talking again, which leads him to leaning so far forward he almost loses his balance. He needs just a few more seconds to get his bearings, then Zarkon can continue with whatever it is he’s trying to accomplish.

Keith registers the door opening and closing, but he’s too busy glaring at Zarkon to fully realize what it means.

“Sire?” Thace’s unsure voice catches Keith off guard, and he pushes himself away from Zarkon in a hurry. If he’s lucky he’ll fall to the ground and crack his skull so he’ll never have to know embarrassment again.

Zarkon ignores Keith’s mortified state in favor of offering Thace a pleasant look. If the way Thace fidgets minutely is any indication pleasant looks from Zarkon aren’t very usual.
“We have discovered an issue in the computers. Fixing it will require shutting down several systems for at least four ticks, and then restarting them,” Thace says, his gaze flicking from Keith to Zarkon.

Zarkon’s pleasantness disappears in a blink of an eye. “Which systems?”

“According to our data we need to shut down the life support on the lower floors, the elevators, and two thirds of the weapons systems. We’ll also have to power down all of the security around communications,” Thace replies.

Zarkon frowns.

“We have run all calculations and the systems would be down for six ticks at most. I have the programmers creating a secondary security system, but it will not be quite as impenetrable. We also have a team ready to track all activity that might occur during the reboot,” Thace continues.

Keith tries not to get his hopes up. Maybe the issue is a program Pidge has created, and they’re finally coming to get Keith. He holds his breath while Zarkon regards Thace with a thoughtful look.

“I want a full report and analysis of the system before you do anything,” Zarkon says. Thace bows before leaving the room with one last subtle glance at Keith.

“So you’re having computer trouble and your solution is to turn it off and on again?” Keith turns his attention to Zarkon, wondering if he should laugh at the absurdity of it.

“It is part of the solution, yes,” Zarkon answers.

Keith lets out a quiet huff of laughter and shakes his head. It’s so simple and yet comfortingly familiar in its own way.

“If you return to the Castle you will put your friends in danger,” Zarkon says and waves the pad right at the edge of Keith’s field of vision. Keith turns to face him with a wary expression.

“You are home, if you want.” Zarkon offers the pad to Keith with a small smile.

Keith eyes the pad, wanting the connection to Earth and Shiro but treading the price he’d pay for it. The Command Center isn’t his home, it could never be his home. His gaze drifts to Zarkon and there, under the friendly warmth of his expression, Keith sees the familiar calculative coldness.

The pad holds a piece of his home, and Zarkon is offering him a new one. Keith tells himself he doesn’t need it, that he doesn’t want it, but he doesn’t know how long he can survive alone. Maybe, if he really is part Galra, it’s that part of him that longs for the idea of belonging. Maybe he’s just lost in a strange world.

Zarkon tilts the pad invitingly and offers Keith an encouraging smile. Keith’s hands shake when he accepts the pad, telling himself he’s only playing along to gain Zarkon’s trust.

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The data on the pad is mostly reports from the Kerberos mission as well as few personal logs. Keith reads it all and takes comfort in the familiarity of it. Zarkon lets him relocate to the steps of
the dais, but Keith feels his eyes on him and it’s almost worse than sitting by Zarkon’s side. He can’t know what expression Zarkon is wearing without turning, and he doesn’t want to let Zarkon know he’s bothered.

Keith’s problem solves itself when Zarkon’s commanders return. They don’t seem happy to have Keith there when they have to talk about important empire things, but no one says anything out loud. Keith still receives several subtle, displeased glares. Keith ignores them and focuses on the flight data in front of him, letting the talk of shipments and strategies become a background noise he can analyze later.

“Keith,” Zarkon’s voice cuts through the blurriness of sounds, and Keith swirls around to face him, worrying he’s missed something important by accident. “Would you get that?” Zarkon offers Keith a pleasant smile as he points at the pad in Thace’s hands.

Keith raises an eyebrow at Zarkon, but gets up and walks up to Thace without further prompting. He knows better than to argue with Zarkon in front of his commanders. Haggar, maybe, but not these people.

Thace’s face is a perfect unreadable mask. Keith grabs the pad from him without a word, but he offers Thace a small nod just to be polite. Thace’s ears twitch briefly which Keith decides to interpret as a you’re welcome. Keith ignores the other Galra and their flattened ears in favor of taking the pad to Zarkon as fast as he can.

Keith nearly drops the pad in Zarkon’s lap, but he reminds himself of their audience and Zarkon’s possible reactions to that, and thinks better of it. He returns to his original spot before Zarkon can tell him to stay, and pretends he doesn’t feel Zarkon’s eyes on his back.

The commanders return to their reporting, their words stiff now that they can’t quite pretend Keith isn’t there anymore. Keith is a bit surprised and rather impressed by their ability to keep their opinions to themselves. He can see their displeasure at his presence rising with every passing second. He would congratulate them on their self restraint if he thought he’d survive it in one piece.

It doesn’t take much longer for Zarkon to call the meeting to an end. Keith keeps his gaze glued to his pad, even though the light is beginning to sting his eyes. He should be resting them. Maybe he ought to say something to Zarkon.

“Opinion?” Zarkon’s carefully friendly voice breaks the silence, and Keith turns to face him with a confused expression. “On the rebellion in the Vokat system.”

Keith frowns. “I don’t think my opinion is something you want to hear.”

When Zarkon doesn’t say anything Keith returns his attention to the pad, but he doesn’t try to read the small print on it anymore. He’s not sure why Zarkon would even ask him about a rebellion when he must know Keith will wish for the rebellion to win.

“I would still like to know what you are thinking,” Zarkon says after a minute of silence.

Keith sighs and turns to face him. Zarkon is staring at Keith with a politely intrigued expression, and Keith’s shoulders slump a little as his resolve crumbles. If Zarkon wants to hear his opinion then Keith will give it to him.

“You could beat them easily, but if you kill them all you won’t know what their plans are or if they have allies. Besides, having Voltron around is probably making people realize they can fight back and not take your shit and you’d just be feeding into their anger.” Keith bites his lip and glances
back to his pad before focusing on Zarkon to make sure he’s not upset.

“I have considered that,” Zarkon says, and to Keith’s relief he doesn’t seem angry. “I want to know what you think of them and what you would do if the choice was yours.”

Keith gives Zarkon a flat look, but considers what had been said of the small rebellion trying to cause trouble in the Vokat system.

“They’re amateurs and without more experienced people in their ranks or better leadership they probably won’t grow to be anything but a minor nuance. I wouldn’t bother with them as long as they’re as disorganized as they are now. I’d keep an eye on them until they draw more skilled people into their ranks and deal with them then, when they don’t look like kids playing a game they can’t win. They do run a risk of inspiring people to rebel, but eliminating them now would bring unease at best and make martyrs out of them at worst, so I’d weigh all options carefully.”

Zarkon inclines his head. “That is a good point.”

Keith shouldn’t be doing this. He shouldn’t be helping Zarkon. He should’ve kept his mouth shut or said something that wouldn’t have been helpful. Still, Keith has missed the chance to use his brain and a part of him is a little pleased Zarkon has taken his words into consideration.

A part of him likes the approving smile Zarkon gives him.

“My eyes hurt,” Keith says, casting his gaze to the ground.

Zarkon extends his hand to Keith, and though going closer to Zarkon is the last thing Keith wants to do he stands and shuffles to him. Zarkon guides Keith to sit by his feet, and when Keith is comfortably pressed against his legs Zarkon throws his cape to cover him, plunging Keith into comforting darkness. Keith doesn’t want it to help but it does.

“Let me know when you feel better,” Zarkon says.

Keith can only nod in response.

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Keith doesn’t leave the quarters without either Zarkon or a druid accompanying him, but Zarkon allows him a few hours of exercise with Marzila a couple times a week. Haala joins them a few times too, but he’s there mostly to cheer Marzila on while she wrestles Keith to the ground.

Keith likes training with Marzila. She fights like he does, and though Zarkon’s comment about him fighting like a Galra soldier rings in the back of Keith’s mind he’s glad to face an opponent who shares his fighting style. He’s slowly regaining his strength, and while Keith is happy about it he doesn’t like the fact that it seems to be exactly what Zarkon wants.

On top of the training Keith spends a day a week with Zarkon while he conducts his business. Haggar sees Keith too when she has the time, and she’s growing frustrated with her lack of progress. Keith fears she has the power to sway Zarkon into eliminating him, and Haala and Marzila both seem to think it’s a possibility when Keith asks about it.

“It’s common if unspoken knowledge that the Witch has the Emperor’s ear,” Marzila says quietly, like she’s worried someone will hear them.
“She doesn’t control him, she’s just his most trusted advisor,” Haala hurries to add. His ears are flat against his head as his eyes scan the training room. Keith can’t see anyone else there, he can’t even spot any cameras or listening devices, but he wouldn’t be surprised if there were several of them around anyways.

Keith nods and waits until Haala is ready to take him to a shower and then to Zarkon. He looks away when Marzila nibs Haala’s jaw, but he catches Haala touching his forehead against hers from the corner of his eye. Keith has been wondering if it’s typical Galra behavior or if it’s something reserved for close friends and lovers. He doesn’t ask, not sure if he’s ready to hear the answer.

“Let’s go then,” Haala says as he springs to his feet, and kicks Keith’s side less than gently on his way to the doors. Keith pushes himself off the ground and waves Marzila goodbye as he hurries to follow Haala.

After Keith’s shower Haala takes him to the observation deck he had been to an eternity ago. The journey there is filled with subtle looks thrown his way, but Keith is growing used to them. He’s far more interested in their destination than the crew’s opinion on him.

Keith isn’t sure what he should be expecting when he pushes the doors open, so he tries to prepare for everything. He waves his hand absently at Zarkon on his way to the window, sparing a glance at him to make sure he’s not doing anything wrong. Zarkon doesn’t react to Keith’s entrance, but Keith knows he’s being watched even as Zarkon continues to work on his pad.

He’d missed the view.

“Did you have a pleasant day?” Zarkon asks after a minute of loaded silence.

Keith shrugs. “It was okay.”

Zarkon sets his pad down and pours them tea while Keith continues to stare at the ships flying past the window in careful formations. Keith waits until he hears the familiar clink the teapot makes when it’s returned to it’s coaster before walking up to the table. He hesitates by the couch, unsure if he’s allowed to sit on the furniture or if Zarkon wants him on the ground by his feet.

“You can sit wherever you would like,” Zarkon says, and it feels like a test.

Keith hesitates. He suspects Zarkon wants him to kneel on the ground, and it would be the safest thing for him to do. Keith wants to sit on the chair away from Zarkon, but it’s the likeliest option to anger Zarkon. Keith settles for a compromise and sits by Zarkon’s side on the couch, keeping as much distance between them as he dares. Zarkon seems pleased with his choice and Keith relaxes. He accepts the offered tea with a quiet thank you.

“Haggar has requested permission to look into your thoughts,” Zarkon starts. Keith frowns, unsure of what he means. “In simple terms she wishes to briefly connect her mind to yours as a way to locate the source of our bond. I thought it best to ask for your permission first.”

“So like a Vulcan mindmeld?” Keith’s lips quirk up a little at the thought, but the confusion on Zarkon’s face is what makes him smile.

“I do not know what that is,” Zarkon says, trying to sound dismissive, but Keith knows it bothers him.

“From this old television show — kinda like serialized cinema — where some people could link minds with others by touching certain point on their faces,” Keith explains, though he’s not entirely sure why. Maybe he just enjoys the chance to teach Zarkon of all people something new.
“The principle is similar,” Zarkon concedes.

Keith takes a moment to consider his options. He can say no, even if one of the conditions of his continued stay from his cell is that he agrees to all of Haggar’s experiments, and the thought of Haggar rummaging around his thoughts isn’t something he’s comfortable with.

“What happens if I don’t agree?” He asks just to be sure he won’t get in trouble if he says no.

“I will be disappointed,” Zarkon replies. It’s not exactly helpful, but Keith knows he’s better off agreeing to Zarkon’s wishes.

“As long as she focuses on the bond only,” Keith says.

“I will make sure she knows her limits,” Zarkon promises. Keith nods and sips his tea. He hopes Haggar will respect his wishes. He hopes Zarkon’s word will be enough for her.

“You two aren’t involved though, right?” Keith asks suddenly, frowning at Zarkon and hoping the answer will be no.

Zarkon’s lips twist into a knowing smile. “If it makes you feel better,” he says. It’s far from helpful, and Keith frowns at him.

“That is just disturbing,” he mutters, knowing full well Zarkon hears him. He’s not surprised by Zarkon’s amused huff.

“I am not bound to her any more than she is bound to me, but she has stood by my side before Altea’s destruction, and I by hers,” Zarkon says.

Keith stops at the mention of Altea. They haven’t exactly avoided the topic, but they haven’t discussed it either. “That’s why you trust her so much.”

Zarkon inclines his head. “She has earned it.”

It makes sense, when Keith thinks about it. If Haggar has been with Zarkon since day one then of course Zarkon would be inclined to take her advice over anyone else’s. Keith would trust someone like that too, and maybe in a way he already does. He values Shiro’s opinions over any other, though not only because he’s Keith’s oldest friend. Shiro has never given up on Keith, not like everyone else in his life.

Keith wonders if Shiro finally reached the point where even he decided Keith just isn’t worth being rescued.

“I value your opinions as well.” Zarkon sounds sincere enough, but Keith still lets out a disbelieving snort.

“If you say so.” The words taste bitter in Keith’s mouth. He gulps down a mouthful of tea, burning his tongue and throat in the process, and the pain that follows is a welcomed distraction.

A silence falls over them, and though it’s heavy at first it slowly morphs into something resembling companionable. Keith would hate it if it wasn’t so comforting. Zarkon returns his attention to his pad and Keith relaxes into his corner. A part of him wants to lean into Zarkon’s warmth, but he can’t bring himself to justify doing so. Keith pushes his hair out of his eyes and takes in a low breath.

“Can I ask about the Holts? The other humans you captured?” He asks, his voice hesitant.
“One of them escaped with a group of rebels that have probably eaten him by now, and the other one was moved to a secure prison once we discovered a member of their crew had joined Voltron. You cannot help either one of them,” Zarkon replies.

It’s more than Keith expected to get. He hopes Zarkon is wrong about the rebels eating people, but at least he’ll have something to tell Pidge in case he’ll ever see her again. Maybe they’ll be able to find at least one of the Holts alive.

“I have something for you,” Zarkon says suddenly. Keith sits up, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“Turn around.”

Despite his suspicions Keith does as he’s told, his muscles tensing when he hears Zarkon move closer to him. He jumps minutely when Zarkon runs his fingers through his hair a few times.

Keith bites his tongue. He doesn’t know what to do or think, and when Zarkon gathers his hair on the top of his head he freezes. Zarkon ties Keith’s hair into a loose ponytail with what Keith thinks is a ribbon, and runs his claws down the back of Keith’s neck, sending electric chills down Keith’s spine.

Without a warning Zarkon grasps Keith’s neck and leans forward until his breath brushes against Keith’s ear. Keith shudders, his skin feeling too tight and the air around him turning too hot. His heart hammers in his chest, the pressing need to escape and the low hum of excitement competing within him.

Keith closes his eyes.

“You said it was too long,” Zarkon says softly, his voice sending a new wave of shivers shooting through Keith’s body. Keith can barely manage a nod in response.

Zarkon squeezes Keith’s neck and breathes in his scent, and Keith’s brow knits together in confusion before he remembers the keen sense of smell the Galra possess. Keith squeezes his eyes shut tighter, and bites the insides of his cheeks until he tastes blood.

_It’s just their bond, nothing more._ Keith shivers and tries to focus on anything but the warmth seeping from Zarkon’s touch.

“What do you want?” Zarkon asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

Keith risks opening his eyes and turning his head slightly to see Zarkon. They’re so close their breaths mingle, and Keith swallows around the lump forming in his throat. He forces his eyes to meet Zarkon’s. He focuses on the strange glow of Zarkon’s eyes, and refuses to let his gaze wander. Keith sees the cold intelligence behind the mask of warm friendliness, and he wants to run.

“Stop doing that.” Keith springs to his feet, knocking his tea over in his hurry to put distance between them.

Zarkon lets him go, but Keith can sense his disappointment when Zarkon lets it seep through their bond. It feels like a punishment.

Keith pretends it doesn’t affect him.
Keith is floating in space. The stars around him are unfamiliar and the glow surrounding him doesn’t seem normal, but Keith doesn’t worry about it.

Someone is calling his name. It sounds like Shiro. Keith tries to turn his head but his body is too sluggish and heavy.

*I’m dreaming.*

Keith smiles and focuses on the stars around him.

The sound of Shiro’s voice grows distant. Keith tries to call it back, but he can’t make a sound. He’s suffocating. Of course he is, he’s floating in space. Keith tries to call for Red to come and get him, but he can’t reach her.

A darkness shifts somewhere behind Keith. He grows anxious. He doesn’t want to be there anymore. He tries to push away from the dark and get back to the light. He can’t move.

“Stay.”

*Zarkon.* Keith doesn’t want to stay. He can’t get away.

He tries to catch one last whisper Shiro’s voice as the darkness covers him.

**Chapter End Notes**

The bit about Zarkon and Haggar being together is something I wrote just to get the story moving again after days of staring at the screen, and I was going to rewrite it completely to something else. The funny thing is, the original bit started with Zarkon saying they're married, and then season 3 happened and that scene became too amusing to delete completely.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I probably would've gotten this up yesterday if I wasn't busy rescuing a very excited dog.

This chapter was one of the easiest and hardest to work with. Also, this might be the worst chapter for Keith, at least in all the 24 chapters I've already written if nothing else. Sorry not sorry, it's for important plot related purposes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Haggar’s consciousness rummaging around Keith’s mind is just as disturbing as he’d imagined. There’s a faintly familiar pressure building behind his eyes, and for a moment he wonders if Haggar has done this to him before.

Keith takes some comfort in her clinical approach of her task, and she respects the boundaries he set up, but she’s overwhelming in a way Zarkon isn’t. She’s a cold, sharp presence slithering through Keith’s mind with ease. It’s a sharp contrast to Zarkon’s warmth and forwardness that’s easy for Keith to deal with.

Keith decides he prefers Zarkon in his head, no matter how brief his glimpses to that are.

“Focus on the Black Lion,” Haggar instructs.

Keith does as he’s told, and visualizes the Black Lion in his mind. He remembers the first time they’d reunited the Lions. He remembers their attempts at bonding, and how Shiro had doubted himself even as he’d taken on the duty of the Black Paladin.

Haggar stops.

A surge of protective anger shoots through Keith as he curls around the memory of Shiro, shielding it from Haggar with everything he has. Haggar lingers for a second longer before moving forward. Keith can sense her cold smirk.

“The Lion, please,” Haggar reminds Keith patiently.

Keith shields the memory of Shiro for a moment longer before focusing on the Lion again. He thinks of the time they had fought Zarkon. He remembers his fear for Shiro’s safety, and the anger and hatred he’d felt when he’d seen Zarkon.

It feels strange now. He can’t find it in himself to hate Zarkon with so much intensity anymore. He tells himself it’s Stockholm syndrome, nothing more.

They’d fallen from the wormhole. Keith remembers trying to get to Shiro. He remembers the fear when he’d heard Shiro struggle against the beasts. He’d asked the Black Lion to help him save Shiro. He’d done everything in his power to be someone the Lion would find worthy to be her pilot, even for a few minutes.

He doesn’t know how he’d succeeded.
The Black Lion had smelled like Shiro.

Haggar freezes, then rips her mind from Keith’s in one swift motion. Keith hisses at the sharp jolt of pain the action sends through his mind and body. He stays still until he’s sure Haggar is at a safe distance, and that he won’t throw up from the wave of dizziness that hits him before slowly sitting up.

Haggar taps at her computer terminal, her movements short and stiff, and the tense set of her shoulders makes Keith worry. He hopes he didn’t do anything wrong.

“You may leave now,” Haggar says without turning to Keith, and Keith gets the impression it’s less of a permission to leave and more of an order to go away. Keith hops off the examination table and hurries across the room to the door and the druid waiting for him.

“Where should I go?” Keith asks, stopping halfway to the door and risking a glance at Haggar over his shoulder.

“The Emperor is holding a meeting. You can go to his quarters,” Haggar replies, and Keith is out of the door before she can say anything else, followed closely by the druid tasked with escorting him.

Keith hurries down the hallway and into the nearest elevator. For a moment he considers ditching his chaperone and going to Zarkon, but if Haggar’s mood has something to do with him, and she’s telling Zarkon about whatever he did wrong then he wants all the time he has to go through what happened and figure out what his response should be.

The druid leaves Keith after letting him into Zarkon’s quarters, and Keith slumps down on his cushion before he remembers Zarkon wants him to wear a different outfit in the privacy of his quarters. Keith thinks it’s stupid, but he doesn’t have the courage to argue over it with Zarkon. He bolts upright and strips his clothes off, and takes them to the small drawer at the bottom of the shelves that Zarkon had graciously cleared of the seven small discs inside it.

The clothes Keith is supposed to wear are a deep shade of red, though the fabric is so fine the clothes are practically see through. Keith resents it only a little as he pulls on the pants that hang loose on him everywhere except his ankles and his hips where the golden bands keep the pants on him. The only thing Keith likes about them is the simple golden embroidery making it seem like the bands at his ankles and hips an organic part of the red.

The shirt doesn’t quite reach Keith’s hips, and it hangs loose on his shoulders. It’s decorated with the same golden embroidery as his pants, and the bands holding the shirt on him are right above his elbows.

Keith thinks Zarkon makes him wear it to make him uncomfortable, but Keith is happy about the illusion of cover he gets, so he doesn’t care that much. He returns to his cushion and settles in for a long wait.

The flash of fire shooting through his mind an hour later doesn’t surprise Keith, and he appreciates the heads up of Zarkon’s anger. He’s prepared for it when Zarkon storms in a few hours later.

Keith never thought Zarkon might storm anywhere, and he’s not even doing it like most would, he just strides with more purpose than usual and with a scowl on his face. Keith still shrinks into himself at the sight.

“I am tired of your presence here. You are returning to your cell,” Zarkon states, his voice
dangerously calm. He doesn’t even glance at Keith as he strides across the room to fill himself a glass of wine from the bottle on the shelf that Keith has never seen him even glance at.

Keith stops breathing until he grows dizzy. He can’t go back to the cell. He doesn’t even know what he did wrong. He’s done everything Zarkon has asked and he doesn’t know what he did wrong. Keith trembles, his vision blurring. He blinks back the burning in his eyes.

Keith moves before he can think. He launches across the room and slams into Zarkon without meaning to, he just didn’t realize how fast he was moving. Zarkon glares at Keith, but he stays quiet.

“I don’t know what I did wrong,” Keith blurs. He’s clinging to Zarkon’s cape and pulls at it, refusing to let Zarkon ignore him. “I don’t know what I did wrong,” he repeats quietly.

Zarkon steps around Keith, forcing Keith to follow him to the couch or let go. “Then this will be a good time for you to figure it out.”

Keith stifles a sob. He can’t go back to a cell. He won’t survive it.

“Please.” He clings to Zarkon a little tighter, hoping it will be enough and knowing it won’t be.

“You are lucky I am not having you thrown into the Arena and publicly executed.” Zarkon tries to yank the cape from Keith’s hold, but it’s the only thing keeping Keith together and he’s not going to let go.

“But I don’t even know what I did wrong,” Keith insists despite the annoyance on Zarkon’s face growing more apparent at his every word.

Zarkon growls, and Keith sinks to the ground in hopes of pacifying him. It doesn’t do the trick, but Keith doesn’t stand up. He twists the cape still in his hands into knots and tries to find even a hint of softening in Zarkon’s features.

“You did not think to mention you piloted my Lion right after it was in contact not only with me but Haggar’s magic as well. Did you think there would be no consequences?” Zarkon leans forward until he can glare at Keith mere inches from his face.

Keith pulls his shoulders up and swallows repeatedly, trying to think of a good reply but coming up with nothing. He hadn’t purposefully kept it from Zarkon, and he definitely hadn’t thought it might be the cause of their bond.

“Shiro would’ve died. I piloted it for ten minutes at most, I didn’t think it mattered,” Keith says, hating how weak his voice sounds.

“It does,” Zarkon snaps, making Keith jump back. “You are going to a cell.”

Keith whimpers softly and pulls at Zarkon’s cape like it would be enough to save him. “I’m sorry.”

Zarkon’s hand twists, and for a second Keith expects to be hit. Zarkon certainly looks like he wants to tear Keith’s head off with his bare hands.

“You are going to go to a cell, and I will consider allowing you to return when I can bear the sight of you again. Unless you would rather die in the Arena or Haggar’s table,” Zarkon grits through his teeth.

Keith doesn’t want to go to a cell, but if he dies Zarkon will be able to reach the Black Lion again.
An eternity locked up is better than that. He just needs a minute to come to terms with it.

The knock on the door comes too soon, and Haggar enters without waiting to be summoned in. She has two sentries with her, and Keith spots a druid hovering just outside the door.

He panics. It’s too soon. He’s not ready to go anywhere.

Keith clings to Zarkon, curling at his feet, and pulls the cape over his body as if it could protect him from what’s to come. Zarkon steps around Keith and out of his reach while the sentries grab a hold of his arms, forcing him away from the safety of Zarkon.

Keith kicks the sentries and tries to free himself from their hold, putting everything he has to getting them to loosen their hold. Haggar barely glances at him as she steps between him and Zarkon, almost like she’s trying to protect Zarkon from Keith.

“Please,” Keith begs as the sentries yank him off the ground and drag him towards the door. “I’ll do anything you want just don’t lock me up again.”

If Zarkon cares he doesn’t show it, his attention focused solely on Haggar. His expression remains unreadable even when the sentries drag Keith through the doors.

Keith barely hears Zarkon and Haggar raising their voices at each other over his own screaming.

The druid in the hallway closes the door behind them before Keith can process what they are saying, and follows the sentries dragging Keith across the floor three steps behind them.

When Keith’s legs refuse to carry his weight the sentries lift him off the ground and carry him to the elevator while he tries in vain to kick and claw his way out of their hold. The druid taps at the control panel, and the elevator begins its descent.

Keith keeps screaming for Zarkon, hoping he’ll come rescue him even though he knows it won’t happen.

The elevator doors open, and the druid leads them to the cell block in complete silence. The few Galra they pass stare at them with wide eyes, but Keith barely notices them. He tries to pull himself free from the sentries hold, his attempts growing more desperate at every step.

The cell block is empty and deadly quiet when they enter, and it does nothing to help Keith calm down. He can’t breathe. He can’t go into a cell again, not after the last time.

Keith’s heart stops beating when the sentries throw him deep into the small, dark cell. He slides across the floor all the way to the back wall, and the door slams shut before Keith can bolt out again.

Keith slams against the door and bangs it until his knuckles bleed, calling for Zarkon to let him out of the darkness.

Keith screams for Zarkon to come and save him until he can’t get a sound out of his throat without tasting blood. His hands hurt only slightly more than his head, and Keith absently thinks he might have broken a finger or two.
He doesn’t get food or water. He doesn’t have any light. No one comes to make sure he’s alright.
Keith stays pressed against the door until he passes out from the stress.

Keith tells himself a human can survive without water or food for more than a few days, and if he is part Galra he might survive even longer. Zarkon isn’t going to let him die there.

He presses his ear against the door and listens to the faint sounds of the sentries walking by. He prays for one of them to stop at his door and take him out. No one comes for him, and eventually even the sounds of the sentries and guards turn into meaningless background noise for Keith’s despair.

Keith has time, so he thinks. He thinks of why he is in the cell, and slowly he comes to the conclusion that there was no scenario where he wouldn’t have ended up there.

If he had known how important it was for Zarkon to know he had piloted Black he would have kept it to himself just to protect his friends, and he’d be right where he is now. He takes some comfort in the fact that if he had purposefully withheld information Zarkon would have been angrier with him, and he might have ended up in the Arena, fighting for his life for Zarkon’s amusement.

Zarkon had said he should have ended up there already. So why hadn’t he? The only explanation that makes sense is that Zarkon has plans for him that require him to be alive.

When the darkness becomes too much Keith tells himself Zarkon keeps him alive because he cares. If Zarkon cares about him he’ll come and get Keith from the cell eventually.

Zarkon can’t not care. He left Keith alive so he has to care at least a little. He promised to keep Keith safe, he promised Keith could make a home here with the Galra. He has to care.

Zarkon can’t just leave him like everyone else has done.

Keith’s woozy. His whole body is weak from hunger and tiredness, and he can barely sit up. Crawling to the bowl is almost too much, but somehow he manages it. He doesn’t know how it got there and he doesn’t care.

He has no memory of the door opening.

He scoops the cold, slimy goo up and relishes every tasteless mouthful.

He feels marginally better after eating. He only wishes he’d gotten something to drink as well.
He isn’t awake when the bowl is removed.

Keith keeps waiting for Zarkon to come for him, but the door remains shut. Keith tells himself he’s lost his sense of time, so he might have been in the cell for a few days at most, even if it feels a lot longer. It’s all in his head.

Zarkon will calm down soon and Keith can return to his cushion and the comfort and light of Zarkon’s quarters.

Keith tries to reach the Red Lion, and when that fails for the hundredth time in a row he tries the Black Lion just to pass the time. He can’t reach Black either, but it doesn’t surprise him.

It feels like he’s been abandoned, but Keith tells himself Shiro would never leave him. Shiro had always been there when Keith had needed him, and though Keith has waited for the day Shiro would abandon him as a lost cause he can’t believe this is that moment.

But Shiro hadn’t promised to protect Keith like Zarkon had. Shiro has no promise to fulfill. Zarkon promised safety and protection. He’s going to get Keith out of there if Shiro won’t. Someone has to care enough to save him.

Keith screams into the darkness.

By the time the cell door opens again Keith is close to starving, and his mouth feels like sandpaper. His lips are cracked and his whole body feels withered. He can’t see anything in the sudden flood of light. Keith tries to shield his eyes with his arms when the guards he can’t recognize step into the cell and force him to his feet.

Keith fights the guards on instinct when they pull him out of the cell, and he receives a frustrated growl for his troubles before he’s hoisted off the ground. The huge Galra throws Keith over his shoulder like he weighs nothing, and maybe that’s true.

The guard carries Keith into an elevator that takes them up several floors. Keith is still blinking against the light when the elevator stops, but he’s stopped fighting the guards. Whatever is about to happen can’t be worse than the cell.

Their journey comes to a halt before Keith can fully regain his sight. The guards seem to hesitate for a second before opening the doors before them, and they drop Keith unceremoniously on the floor before retreating.

Keith’s shoulder bangs on the floor, sending flashes of pain through his body. He takes a moment to breathe through the pain and calm down. His eyes stop stinging eventually, but he remains cautious as he cracks them open to see where he is.

“I hope you have learned not to withhold information from me,” Zarkon’s voice cuts through the silence.
Keith scans what little of the room he can without blinding himself, and locates Zarkon’s feet by a table. It looks like they’re in the conference room, and Keith feels a little better in the familiar surroundings.

He swallows and nods. He’d speak if he could, but his throat is too sore, and he’s not sure what he would even say.

“Would you come here?”

Keith tries to push himself to his feet, but the hunger and thirst make him too woozy. He’d spent all his energy fighting the guards. He bites his lip, determined not to disappoint Zarkon again, and forgets about walking and risking injury to himself. He ends up slowly crawling across the floor, but he reaches Zarkon, and that’s what matters.

Keith slumps by his feet, short of breath and trembling from the exertion, but he made it. He did what he was told to do. Zarkon isn’t going to throw him back in the cell for that.

Keith presses himself against Zarkon’s legs and focuses on slowing his breathing.

Zarkon grabs Keith by his arms and pulls him up. Keith tries to tell him he can’t stand, but he can’t form words. Zarkon pulls Keith into his lap, and Keith freezes for a second before curling against Zarkon and focusing on his chest slowly rising and falling as he breathes, and Keith tries to match his own breathing to it.

“You are safe now,” Zarkon says, and if Keith could he might cry, but he doesn’t have any tears in him to shed. He closes his eyes lets himself believe Zarkon’s words.

Zarkon reaches over Keith and picks something up from the table, and soon the rim of a glass brushes against Keith’s lips. Keith cracks an eye open and reaches for the glass, and though he’d never admit it he’s glad Zarkon helps him support it as well as control the speed in which Keith downs the lukewarm, thick substance. It feels like a smoothie in his mouth, and it fills Keith’s stomach fast.

“You may return to my quarters if you want,” Zarkon says, and Keith nods again. He doesn’t trust himself to speak just yet.

“You will have another one of these in two varga, you will shower, and rest. Tomorrow you will allow Haggar to continue her studies. I will consider allowing you to return to your exercise regime if you behave well. Can you manage that?” Zarkon’s voice leaves no room for arguing.

Keith considers it. He doesn’t want to lie to Zarkon, and he needs to be sure he can do what Zarkon wants him to do before agreeing. He decides he’s up to it, and he offers Zarkon a determined nod in response.

Zarkon runs his hand through Keith’s tangled hair. “Good. Do you want to stay here for a while?”

Keith nods again and settles in Zarkon’s arms, enjoying the warmth he radiates and letting it lull him into comfortable calmness.

Another smoothie, a shower, and a lot of sleep help Keith feel marginally better. When Haggar’s
druids come to fetch him he’s able to shamble after them, but he needs to sit on the elevator floor, and the druids have to support him on the last stretch to Haggar’s lab.

“How are you?” Haggar asks when Keith climbs on the examination table.

Keith shrugs. “A little tired. My throat hurts,” he admits. His voice is hoarse and the cracks on his lips still bleed when he talks, but at least he can talk now.

“I’ll give you something for that once we’re done here,” Haggar promises. Keith nods and lies down.

“Just like last time. Relax and focus on the Black Lion,” Haggar instructs as she takes her place above Keith’s head.

Keith does as she says. The good thing about Haggar is that she more or less let’s Keith do things at his own pace. He takes his time relaxing and getting used to Haggar’s presence in his head again before focusing his thoughts on the Black Lion.

Keith visualizes the Lion in his mind. He doesn’t want to let Haggar see the bond, but he can’t keep it hidden either. Haggar guides Keith to see past the Lion, to the thread that links Keith to Zarkon. Keith tries to look away, but Haggar won’t let him. She grabs at the link and pulls with everything she has.

Keith screams.

The pain flashing through his mind is worse than anything he’s ever felt before. He scrambles away from Haggar and slams to the ground as he rolls off the examination table.

He throws up. His whole body shakes. His head throbs with pain and he sees blinding spots everywhere he looks. If he didn’t know better he’d say Haggar just tried to kill him.

Haggar reaches for Keith, but he lashes out at her before bolting away.

“Don’t touch me,” Keith growls when Haggar takes a step towards him. She stops and regards Keith with a thoughtful expression.

“I need to make sure you are well,” she says.

Keith doesn’t want her near him. He backs away from her slowly, wondering if he can bolt out of the door before she can use her magic on him.

Haggar takes a step closer with a frustrated scowl on his face. “Do not make me summon the Emperor.”

Keith stops. Zarkon wouldn’t be happy with him. Keith would end up back in a cell. He stays still while Haggar walks up to him. She helps him back to the examination table and runs her basic tests to see Keith isn’t dying before injecting him with a mild sedative. She even gives Keith mouthful of sour liquid for his throat.

“We’re done for the day,” she says, and waves the druid in the corner to take Keith back to Zarkon’s quarters. She’s heading for her monitor before Keith is back on his feet, no doubt informing Zarkon of what had happened.

Keith fears he’s done the wrong thing again.
The druid leaves Keith on the doorstep, and Keith strips out of his clothes and folds them away and puts on his other outfit before curling on his cushion, fearing for Zarkon’s return. He’ll send Keith back to the cell for this. Or to the Arena.

When Zarkon finally arrives Keith has worked himself into a mild panic attack. Zarkon spares him a quick glance as he walks past him, and Keith averts his eyes. He’s trying not to hyperventilate when Zarkon appears before him with a glass of water in his hand.

“You do not look well,” Zarkon says casually. Keith glances up at him, but he doesn’t know what to say.

Zarkon sighs and sits by Keith’s side, and hands him the glass of water. Keith leans away from Zarkon, even as he accepts the glass with a soft thanks. Zarkon remains quiet while Keith sips the water, his eyes studying Keith closely.

“Haggar informed me of what happened today,” Zarkon starts when Keith is finishing up his drink.

“I’m sorry,” Keith says softly.

“Why?” Zarkon asks, tilting his head and raising a curious eyebrow at Keith.

“I didn’t mean to cause trouble. She did something to me and it hurt. I wasn’t expecting it,” Keith explains hastily. He risks a glance at Zarkon before fixing his eyes to the floor.

“I noticed,” Zarkon replies. Keith glances at him again, this time noticing the hint of warmth in Zarkon’s eyes. “I have ordered her not to do that again.”

Keith turns towards Zarkon, feeling a little better. Zarkon regards Keith for a long moment before lifting his arm in silent invitation. Keith hesitates, then shuffles forward and presses himself against the warmth of Zarkon’s body. Zarkon holds Keith close and rubs soothing circles across his back.

“I will keep you safe,” he says softly. Keith presses his face into the soft fabric of his clothes.

“I will not abandon you.”

Keith looks at Zarkon, trying to see the lie in his eyes but not finding it. Zarkon presses his forehead against Keith’s almost tentatively, and Keith swallows around the lump in his throat. He doesn’t want this. He doesn’t.

Keith pushes against Zarkon anyways. He closes his eyes to avoid seeing Zarkon’s pleased smile.

Chapter End Notes

So this was nothing but pain but the next chapter will be better. I’m gonna get it up pretty soon, probably before next week.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I'm shamelessly ripping off my own original stories in this chapter. I'm gonna get into it more in the end notes. Stay tuned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marzila doesn’t complain about Keith’s stiffness, and if the set of her ears is anything to go by she’s aware of Keith’s stint in the cell a week earlier. She goes easy on Keith, but he still ends up panting on the floor with several throbbing spots on his body.

He feels good.

“You’re getting somewhere,” she says and nudges Keith’s knee with her toes.

Keith grins at her. “How’s your jaw?”

“You don’t hit that hard,” she laughs, but the way she inclines her head tells Keith she appreciates him caring. He pushes himself off the ground and waits for Marzila to do the same before starting towards the door.

“I’ve got permission to take you to the mess hall. They’re serving desserts and delicacies from our home planet,” Marzila says. Keith raises an eyebrow. “I thought you might enjoy a piece of our home. It’s not the same stuff you get every day. It’s been shipped all the way from our homeworld and it’ll spoil if we don’t eat it all soon,” she explains with a smile.

Keith’s smile turns into a frown and he stops in the hallway, ignoring the passing Galra and their less than pleased looks when they have to walk around him.

“I got the impression you don’t have a home planet,” he says, and it’s Marzila’s turn to look confused.

Keith shrugs. “Zarkon keeps talking about it in past tense.”

“Ah.” Marzila continues walking, and Keith has to hurry after her. “The Old Home was destroyed by the Alteans. It’s what started the war. The Emperor used to live there. Eventually we found a new planet to call home, and that’s where our delicious treats come from.”

Keith can’t believe the Alteans would have destroyed a planet, but he knows doesn’t have the whole story. He doubts anyone but Zarkon does anymore. He doesn’t bother Marzila with more questions, and though he’s curious he won’t be running to Zarkon either.

The version Keith would get from him would definitely not be true.

The mess hall they enter is more of a tiny restaurant, and it’s filled with officers. The room quiets down when Keith enters, but Marzila glares everyone down and guides Keith to a table by the wall that hides Keith from most of the curious eyes. Haala is already at the table, and to Keith’s surprise so is Kano.
They greet Keith and Marzila, and though Keith is happy to see Haala he’s having trouble meeting Kano’s gaze. He hasn’t considered the trouble his failed escape attempt might cause Kano, and he’s not sure if he wants to hear about it.

“Ready to enjoy some real food?” Haala asks, his voice unusually chipper as he moves to make Marzila and Keith room on his side of the table.

“He grew up in Vadazi — the oldest city on our planet — so he gets weird about this stuff,” Kano explains at Keith’s frown.

“What do you call your planet?” Keith asks.

“We call it Draizagal, but most of the universe calls it just Gal. Take you pick,” Marzila replies. “What about your planet?”

Keith picks a handful of dried fruit from the bowl in the middle of the table. “We call it Earth.”

“Earth? Like dirt?” Haala laughs and shakes his head. Marzila punches his arm even as she fights back a smile.

“Yeah. Sometimes we refer to it as Terra in science fiction stories. Apparently it sounds a little better from an intergalactic point of view,” Keith says. He feels strange repeating Pidge’s words, but he does his best not to show it.

“So. What’s going on with your eyes?” Kano asks, waving a pastry at Keith’s face. “Are you wearing protective lenses for fun or did something actually happen to you?”

Keith frowns, glancing down at his plate. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kano inclines his head. “Alright. It’s not noticeable or anything, you’ve just got this purple glint in your eyes. Took me a tick to realize why.”

Keith offers him a smile, wondering if he should let Kano know he’s not concerned about how he looks, he just doesn’t want to talk about his time in the isolation. He doesn’t reach a decision before Esta joins them with two trays of more desserts and delicacies than Keith thinks they can eat.

Haala grins and starts piling the food on his plate and Marzila follows suit while Kano makes room for Esta. She squints her eyes at Keith, but doesn’t say anything.

“What are we talking about?” Esta asks, and picks at the various desserts with a much more restraint than her friends.

“Planet names,” Kano replies as he stuffs a large pastry into his mouth.

Keith picks the last plate and eyes the table full of delicious smelling desserts ranging from simple if oddly colored pastries to blue pudding and what appear to be bright pink ice cubes that won’t melt. Marzila takes pity on him and fills his plate with little bit of everything.

Keith listens to the others chat about their days while he nibbles at the tasters on his plate. He grimaces when he bites into a soft, fluffy piece of pastry that turns out to taste like a mix of chili and salt. He leaves it to the side and decides not to get more of it.

Keith likes the ice cubes. They taste like peach and honey. Haala pushes them towards him when he finishes his first serving, and Keith fills his plate with his favorite desserts, not caring if he’ll
actually be able to eat it all.

“So how come you’re walking around after what you did?” Esta asks, his eyes focused solely on Keith. Kano flattens his ears at her, and Haala and Marzila both look at her like she’d just betrayed them.

“Ask Zarkon, he’s the one who decides what I get to do,” Keith replies, and the Galra around him tense at the mention of their Emperor’s name. Keith would feel bad if he didn’t find it so ridiculous.

“You’re staying in a cell though, right? They can’t just let you wander round,” Esta says.

Keith sighs. “Most of the time I’m confined to a specific location. Happy?”

Esta huffs, but doesn’t push it further. Keith is glad for it, he doesn’t want to tell her where exactly he’s been held in. He doubts it would go over well with her. Keith isn’t sure why she’s even angry with him in the first place, they used to get along just fine.

Maybe Keith had gotten her into trouble when he’d tried to escape.

“Let the kid be. He looks like a Nibda’s ass on a solstice. He’s not being treated like royalty.” Kano gives Esta a long suffering stare, and Esta lowers her ears while Haala chokes on a piece of cake in the background.

“That’s just rude,” Haala manages to choke out. “I’m trying to eat here!”

Marzila doubles over from laughter, and though Keith knows he’s just been horribly insulted he can’t help but smile a little.

Keith sits curled by Zarkon’s legs, enjoying a slice of dried bread and tea. He had to put the cover over his eyes again, and he does his best to not let the dark bother him, even if it reminds him of being in a cell. Zarkon has yet to speak with him, and Keith respects the silence, knowing Zarkon will break it when he feels like it.

“Did you enjoy your day?” Zarkon asks suddenly. Keith would look up if he could see, but with his current blind state he doesn’t bother.

“It was nice. I liked the desserts.” Keith bites his lip while he thinks. “Marzila says the Alteans destroyed your original home planet and that you had to find a new one.”

Zarkon remains quiet for a long while. “They did. I repaid them by destroying theirs,” he says eventually, his voice quiet. Keith turns towards him and rests his chin on his knee. Zarkon runs his fingers through Keith’s hair.

“Galra are not nomadic people. We needed a place to call home, so we found a planet in a system that was similar to our old one and made it ours. It was not easy but we settled there, and it is home to my people. They know no different,” he explains.

“How about you?” Keith asks, leaning into Zarkon’s touch.

“My home is gone. I have a place on the new planet but I have not been there in decafebes. The sky
looks strange there, it is too blue,” he replies, his voice oddly tender. Keith smothers the sudden urge to comfort him.

“They do make good desserts though.” Zarkon says, his voice turning lighter again.

“I liked the pink cubes,” Keith offers, hoping it will keep Zarkon happy.

“If you are good I will get you more of them.” Zarkon pushes a loose strand of hair off of Keith’s face before petting his cheek. Keith leans into the touch without thinking.

They fall into an easy silence, and though Keith returns to his tea Zarkon keeps playing with his hair. Keith spends a minute pretending he doesn’t enjoy it before giving up and admitting he doesn’t mind Zarkon twirling his hair lazily, his claws scratching against Keith’s scalp occasionally, sending shivers down Keith’s spine.

It’s definitely enjoyable.

Keith relaxes into Zarkon’s touch. He can’t exactly fight him, so he might as well take a little comfort in the touch. He blames his supposed Galra side for his need for contact.

Zarkon orders Keith into the shower after he finishes his tea. Keith obliges, and once he’s showered he lets Zarkon apply the moisturizing oil to his back. Afterwards Keith sits by Zarkon’s feet while Zarkon reads his reports, letting tiredness slowly take over him.

Almost an hour later Zarkon sends Keith to his cushion while he goes to check on Haggar’s latest project. Keith waves Zarkon goodbye as he heads out of the door, and settles down, hoping he’ll be asleep before Zarkon arrives.

Keith falls asleep faster than he thought possible.

Keith wakes up in stages. At first he’s not sure he was even asleep, but slowly the memory of Zarkon leaving comes to his mind, followed by Keith’s desire to not see his return.

He groans and rolls over to face the ceiling before opening his eyes.

Everything is black.

Keith bolts up, his chest constricting as he tries to see anything at all in the dark. There’s nothing there. He’s on his cushion, but everything is dark.

Maybe he’s back in a cell.

If he’s still in Zarkon’s quarters he’ll be zapped if he tries to move forward, be can’t make himself move and see if that’s the case. He’s going to have to wait until morning when the clock automatically turns on the dim lights. If he's in Zarkon’s quarters the light will eventually come on.

He needs the light on.

“Zarkon?” Keith’s voice is barely audible, and he licks his lips as he tries to take in a shaky breath.

He pulls his knees to his chest and tries to breathe. “Zarkon?”
This time his voice is a little louder, but there’s no answer. Keith strains his ears to pick up even the slightest of sounds, but all he hears is his own blood rushing through his veins, the sound of it deafening in his ears.

If he could just get enough air into his lungs—

“Zarkon!”

Keith’s heart is going to stop if it continues it beat so fast, and he’s going to die of a heart attack in the dark, not knowing where he is or even if his birthday has already passed. He won’t even know when he’ll be discovered.

The light switches on, and before Keith knows it Zarkon is standing in front of him. Slowly, Keith looks up, meeting Zarkon’s concerned gaze. His face feels hot, but at least his heart is slowing down and his lungs finally agree to work again.

Zarkon takes a deep breath through his nose before sitting by Keith’s side, reaching to run his hand across Keith’s cheeks. Keith is surprised by the wetness on his face, and it takes him a second to realize he’d been crying.

“What is it?” Zarkon asks, his voice gentle.

“I couldn’t see.” Keith stops to collect himself before turning to Zarkon, blinking the last of the tears from his eyes. “Don’t turn the light out again.”

Zarkon tilts his head.

“I need to see where I am. I can’t be in the dark.” Keith blinks up at Zarkon and shuffles closer to him, wanting the security of another living being and not caring if it comes from Zarkon.

Zarkon pulls Keith to his side and wraps his arms around him, holding Keith close until he stops shaking.

“What do you want to come to bed?”

Keith nods, and lets Zarkon get up to turn off the grid keeping Keith trapped. Keith waits until Zarkon comes back to him, and lets himself be pulled to his feet and walked to Zarkon’s bed.

Zarkon leaves the light on, keeping it just bright enough for Keith to be able to see around.

Keith keeps staring at his surroundings long after Zarkon’s breath has evened out. He keeps expecting the lights to turn themselves off. He turns to Zarkon and presses close to his warmth. If the light disappears he can still focus on Zarkon.

He can sleep as long as he knows Zarkon is there by his side.

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Keith likes waking up before Zarkon. It gives him the chance to start his day by watching Zarkon wake up and get out of bed, which is something he never thought he’d find entertaining. Most of the time Zarkon hates getting up, and Keith thinks it’s hilarious.

So Keith shuffles around until he’s facing Zarkon, and waits for him to stir. He can barely contain
a smile when Zarkon’s ear twitches, the first sign that he’s waking up. Zarkon’s face scrunches up before he buries it in a pillow and pulls the covers over his head.

Keith grins, barely resisting the urge to make fun of Zarkon. He knows he wouldn’t survive it.

“Do you have a meeting to attend?” Keith asks, making sure his voice is chipper. Zarkon can’t maim him for being chipper.

“I am the Emperor, they will wait for me,” Zarkon mutters into the pillow. “Besides, I can always make it illegal to wake up this early.”

Keith huffs. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Zarkon makes a grudgingly agreeing noise and quiets down for such a long time Keith thinks he might have fallen back to sleep. He wonders if he should poke Zarkon to make sure he’s still awake. Zarkon wouldn’t appreciate being late to running his empire, but he might appreciate being woken up even less.

Keith clears his throat, deciding it’s a safe compromise between letting Zarkon sleep and waking him up.

“I am awake,” Zarkon says, sounding disappointed by the fact.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” Keith asks.

Zarkon shrugs under the covers. “Go on,” he says when Keith makes no move to get up.

Keith pushes the covers aside and climbs off the bed, and spares one final glance at Zarkon before heading to the bathroom. He relieves himself, washes his face, and brushes his hair before tying it up.

He doesn’t look at the reflection in the mirror he can barely recognize as his.

There’s a tray on the table, but Keith heads to sit on the couch. He’s not in a mood to test if Zarkon will be okay with him showing initiative this morning, or if it’s one of the days where he expects Keith to do nothing but what he’s told. Keith takes a deep breath, his mouth watering at the smell of breakfast.

Zarkon appears a few minutes later, his face bordering on sour as he walks past Keith to the table, and picks up his cup of morning tea. Zarkon and his tea are like some people with coffee, and it makes Keith feel better and worse at the same time. He hates it when Zarkon does something so plainly normal.

“Come eat your breakfast,” Zarkon says without looking at Keith, and Keith crawls to his side like he’s supposed to do. Zarkon feed Keith pieces of bread and fruit, and hands him a glass of bitter juice to drink.

Before Zarkon leaves he orders Keith to his cushion. Keith isn’t sure if it bothers him or not, even as the memory of last night lurks in the back of his mind like black smoke. He watches Zarkon go and tries not to miss his presence. He wishes he’d been left with a book to listen to, but Zarkon doesn’t think he’s earned that back yet.

Keith groans and sprawls on the cushion, and lets his mind wander.

It’s not long before the door opens, snapping Keith out of his thoughts. He sits up, surprised to see
Haggar entered the room. Zarkon didn’t say anything about Haggar coming to see him. He hadn’t prepared for this. He presses his back against the wall and keeps his eyes on Haggar as she approaches him.

Haggar stops right at the edge of Keith’s invisible cage and regards him with a quiet, contemplative look.

“I would like to apologize for the other day,” she starts. Keith’s jaw drops in surprise. “What I did was out of line.”

Keith stares at her with wide eyes, unsure of what he’s supposed to say or do. He never thought he’d hear Haggar of all people apologize for anything. It must be a trick.

“We need to be able to have mutual trust if we are going to find a way to sever the bond you share with the Emperor,” she explains.

“Okay,” Keith says for the lack of a better answer. It’s enough for Haggar. She inclines her head and, to Keith’s shock, steps forward and kneels before him.

Keith pulls back when she reaches for his face.

Haggar stops, giving Keith a patient look, and sits back. “I’d like to examine your eyes,” she says, and waits for Keith to nod before reaching for him again.

Her touch is gentle as she tilts Keith’s head from side to side, observing his face with a focused frown on her face. She seems satisfied with whatever she sees, and Keith lets her see his curiosity on his face.

“I think we can remove the lenses in a few days,” she says, and gives Keith a brief smile.

“But my eyes still hurt sometimes.” Keith tries not to worry about being permanently blinded, but it’s hard.

“That’s because you were in a dark cell recently. You will still have a band to cover your eyes with if you need to,” Haggar replies, her voice patient.

“Is Zarkon okay with this?” Keith asks. He’s not trying to keep his vision dim, but he feels like that’s exactly what he’s doing.

“He has entrusted your health in my hands. He’ll allow this,” Haggar assures him. Keith feels better knowing it, and after thinking it over he nods.

Haggar inclines her head and stands up. “You’re free to call me if you need anything,” she says before walking out of the door, leaving Keith confused on his cushion.

He’s got no idea what just happened.

---

Haggar calls for Keith a few days later and removes the lenses from his eyes. She keeps him in her lab until he can open his eyes in the dim light she’d set just for his benefit, and then she spends good half an hour studying his eyes to make sure they have not been damaged. She nods to herself when she’s satisfied Keith will be fine.
“Thanks,” Keith says just because it feels like the right thing to do.

“It’s my duty to care for you,” Haggar reminds him.

Keith has no idea where her sudden niceness comes from, but he appreciates it nonetheless. He’d say she feels bad for what happened between them, but he doubts that’s it. Maybe Zarkon told her off for hurting him, or she’s just playing him.

“What can I ask something? About the bond?” Keith asks. If Haggar is being nice then maybe she’s willing to talk, and she seems less likely to get angry with Keith over a simple question than Zarkon.

Haggar finishes whatever she’s doing on her terminal before turning to Keith, giving him her full attention. “Go on.”

Keith swallows. “What happens to me if you break it?”

Haggar stares at him for a long moment before sighing and pulling a chair up. She comes to sit by Keith, her expression somber.

“We can’t be sure. The most likely outcome is that you won’t survive the separation, and even if you’d live you would suffer irreversible brain damage. When I attempted to manipulate the bond I wasn’t anticipating the pain it would cause you. It’s been in place for too long and it’s rooted too deep in your mind.” She looks despondent for a moment.

Keith mulls over her words. He had feared his life would be on the line, but not because the bond might actually kill him. He frowns, a thought suddenly dawning on him.

“What happens to Zarkon if the bond is severed?”

Haggar looks surprised for a moment, and then she smiles. “You’re very smart,” she sounds pleased. “We have considered the possibility that the separation might damage the Emperor, but we don’t think the risk to him is as great as to you. He will survive it,” she says, sounding sure of herself.

Keith wouldn’t be surprised if Zarkon survived the separation with sheer stubbornness. It’s what would most likely keep Keith alive too. Maybe they could try to will the bond away.

A brief smile flashes on Keith’s lips. They’re probably the only two people who might be able to pull something like that off.

“So why won’t you just kill me?” Keith asks. If the only thing Zarkon needs to do to reach the Black Lion is to get rid of Keith then he’s not sure why he’s still alive. He’s grateful for it, but he doesn’t quite understand it.

Haggar’s expression shifts into something darker for a second before she stand up and turns away from Keith. “He’s grown fond of your presence.”

Keith watches her walk back to her desk. The set of her shoulders is stiff enough to keep him quiet.

“You are in a particularly unusual position of being both a Paladin of Voltron as well as not having any respect for him. You are something new and exciting, and it’s making him not think clearly when it comes to you,” Haggar continues, her voice growing more bitter with every word, but when she turns to face Keith there’s no anger or hostility in her eyes. She seems almost resigned.
“You will remain as you are until he grows tired of you.” She smiles briefly before picking a glass from the table and offering it to Keith.

Keith doesn’t know what to make of her words, so he remains silent and accepts the glass, and sips the too sweet juice while he processes the new information. Haggar returns to her computer terminal and Keith relishes the moment of privacy.

If it was just him Keith wouldn’t care so much if he lived or died, but he has to think about his friends. They will be safe as long as Keith can hold Zarkon’s interest. He is the only thing standing between Zarkon and his ability to track the Black Lion across the universe. He has to keep Zarkon interested in him, no matter what.

He has to stay alive.

He has to protect his friends, no matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

So, as with all the non canon characters, I've taken the names Vadazi and Draizagal shamelessly from an original story of mine, because to me it was a lot easier than coming up with anything new and original. And I'm not gonna apologize.

Bit of trivia though, in my original story Vadazi is a large desert in the Draizagal continent, and it basically means 'a lot of sand', because why does every sf/f place have to have a Deep and Meaningful name? Draizagal more or less means new world because it was a new world when it was discovered. Original, I know.

And Zarkon not being a morning person stuck with me after I did a sketch in math class of him and Alfor where Alfor was all sunshine and happiness in the morning and Zarkon was a walking ball of murder. It was a shitty ten minute sketch but it stayed with me.

On a more important matter, I'm doing NaNo next month, so that's gonna be taking up a lot of my time. I'll still be updating this, but not as frequently.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

15k in on my NaNo project, and my brain is completely frozen.

Here there be casual murder and dubious advice. Have fun.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zarkon takes one look at Keith’s lens free eyes and walks out of the door.

Keith remains on his cushion, sitting stiffly against the wall until Zarkon returns what feels like an hour later. He frowns at Keith on his way to one of the rooms Keith isn’t allowed to enter. Keith has decided it’s an office, just because he needs to call the forbidden room something else than the forbidden room, and an office made the most sense.

The other door Keith isn’t allowed in is Zarkon’s ridiculously large walk-in closet. Keith suspects Zarkon has hoarded clothes from all the years he’s been alive, it’s the only explanation he has for the amount of space he needs for them. Maybe Zarkon and Coran used to tour shops before Zarkon decided to take over the universe.

Keith snorts at the idea, but it eases his mind.

He isn’t as tense when Zarkon marches past him to his bedroom, this time without sparing him a glance. Keith waits patiently until he returns, and he’s only mildly surprised to see Zarkon has changed out of his armor. Zarkon rarely leaves his quarters without it, and Keith had assumed he would still be heading out. Maybe his internal clock is wrong, and it’s later that Keith thinks.

“Next time Haggar wants to do something to you, let me know first,” Zarkon orders as he sits down by the table.

“Sorry,” Keith says just to cover all his bases. “She said she was in charge of my health so I thought it was okay.”

“I am not angry with you,” Zarkon assures him. “And she is in charge of your health. You were right to listen to her.”

Keith feels better and after a second of hesitation he reaches for the edge of his invisible prison, only to get zapped by it. He yanks his arm back with a pained hiss, and though Zarkon spares him a glance he doesn’t say anything. Keith falls back on his cushion and waits until Zarkon deigns to allow him to move further into the room.

Zarkon takes his time reading his pad, but eventually he waves for Keith to join him.

Keith tenses as he crosses the invisible line. He expects to feel the pain again, but nothing comes, and he continues on his way to Zarkon. He takes his place at Zarkon’s feet, and rests his cheek against Zarkon’s knee. It’s familiar and relaxing by now, and it gives him a chance to think.

“Haggar says you’re going to kill me,” he ends up saying, his voice soft and hesitant. It’s not a subject he actually wants to talk about, but he needs to hear Zarkon tell him it won’t happen.
“Why would she say something like that?” Zarkon counters without looking up from his pad.

“She said it’s the only way to break our bond.” Keith lifts his head until his chin is resting on Zarkon’s knee.

“At the moment, yes, but I am confident in her ability to find an alternative way that will leave you unharmed,” Zarkon says, and finally he looks at Keith. “I will not allow any harm come to you. I promise.”

Keith’s lips turn into an involuntary smile. He hates it, but he finds Zarkon’s protection comforting. He tries not to think of the price he has to pay for it, and he tells himself that in the end everything he has to do he does to keep his friends safe.

Zarkon reaches out and runs his knuckles down Keith’s cheek. Keith leans into the touch without meaning to. His eyes close when Zarkon cups his face and rubs his thumb along his cheek absently, the touch spreading warmth along Keith’s face and neck that spreads through his entire body. He’s getting used to it, his thoughts don’t cloud in the way it used to, even if his mind still buzzes pleasantly.

“Is that the bond?” Keith asks, assuming Zarkon knows what he’s talking about. He frowns when Zarkon stops stroking his face.

“What?”

Keith cracks his eye open. “The warmth. Is it the bond or are you just a walking furnace?”

“It is the bond,” Zarkon replies, and to Keith’s relief he starts running his thumb across Keith’s cheek again.

Keith nods, satisfied with getting an answer, and resumes enjoying the warmth turning his brain comfortably sluggish. He wonders if Zarkon feels it too. He realizes there’s nothing to stop him from asking, and he blurs the question out before he can think better of it.

Zarkon’s hand stills, and his expression turns unreadable. Keith regrets opening his mouth but he can’t take it back. He lifts his head from Zarkon’s knee, his expression turning apologetic. He didn’t want to upset Zarkon.

“I feel it,” Zarkon says, his voice telling Keith exactly how little he wants to admit it.

Keith sits back on his heels and regards Zarkon with renewed interest. He wonders if Zarkon’s mind grows cloudy from the warmth too. He sits up and reaches for Zarkon’s face without thinking.

Zarkon pulls away, but Keith is faster. He cradles Zarkon’s face in his hands, willing him to feel what Keith feels when they touch.

Zarkon grabs his wrists, but he doesn’t push Keith away. Keith has never seen him as uncomfortable as he is now.

Keith bites his lower lip and runs his thumb along Zarkon’s cheek, his touch tentative at first, then growing more insistent. Zarkon’s eyes grow hazy for half a second before he blinks it away. He frowns, his hold on Keith’s wrists tightening for a fraction of a second.

Keith keeps one hand tracing Zarkon’s scar while he slowly moves the other to trail along his brow. He still can’t quite wrap his mind around how smooth and soft and warm Zarkon’s skin is.
He looks so cold and hard and rough, and Keith can’t quite believe he’s not any of those things.

It’s unfair.

Zarkon leans into Keith’s touch, and after a moment of hesitation he closes his eyes. Keith marvels at the peaceful look that slowly falls on his face. He never thought he’d see something like it.

“When we were on Olkarion,” Keith starts, hesitating for a second before continuing, “Their king was watching a movie.”

Zarkon cracks his eyes open and raises an eyebrow. “And you want to see one?”

Keith smiles and nods. Zarkon exhales and closes his eyes again, but he seems to consider it. Keith waits as patiently as he can, and eventually Zarkon opens his eyes and gives Keith a look that’s both annoyed and amused.

“Just one. And do not think you can do this again,” he says, and pulls Keith’s hands off of his face.

“Do what?” Keith feigns innocence to the best of his abilities. It gets a soft laugh out of Zarkon, and to Keith that makes it a success.

Keith shuffles out of Zarkon’s way as he gets up. Zarkon picks his pad up and looks something up, and though Keith is curious about it he stays quiet and out of the way.

Eventually Zarkon looks up to Keith. “You can watch your movie on the observation deck. I will choose you something that was well received across the galaxy.”

Keith waits until Zarkon is done writing on his pad, and he starts crawling after him when he heads to the door.

“You can walk if you want,” Zarkon says, and Keith pushes himself to his feet and hurries after Zarkon without hesitation.

They cross the hallway in silence, and Zarkon holds the door to the observation deck open for Keith.

Zarkon shows Keith to the couch, and Keith settles on it while Zarkon sets the movie for him. Keith wants to ask if he could have snacks or at least something to drink, but it might be pushing his luck so he keeps quiet.

He forgets about the snacks as soon as Zarkon finishes with the screen.

Keith is so focused on the beginning shot of a white ocean that he almost misses Zarkon heading for the door. “You’re not staying?” Keith calls after him, surprised and a little disappointed.

Zarkon stops and turns to Keith. “I do not think I have watched one in years, and I have little interest in starting now.”

Keith bites his lip, his eyes darting between the screen and Zarkon. He should let Zarkon go do whatever it is that Zarkon wants to go do, but he doesn’t want to be alone. He looks at Zarkon, trying to keep his expression open.

“You could watch this one? Keep me company?”

Zarkon hesitates, but he walks back to Keith and sits down in the space Keith makes for him. Eventually Keith relaxes, and he stretches his legs until they press against Zarkon’s thighs. A few
moments later Zarkon pulls Keith’s feet to his lap and rests his arm on them.

Neither one of them say a word.

It takes time, but eventually Zarkon orders Keith to accompany him for the day again.

It comes as a surprise since Zarkon hadn’t mentioned anything about it before walking out of the door that morning, and Keith had assumed his only activity that day would be his regular training session with Marzila. He doesn’t mind though, the cushion isn’t a fun place to spend all his time, and trailing after Zarkon teaches him about the empire and how it works.

After their training session Marzila takes him to a large conference room — different from the one Keith has been to before — and leaves him by the door.

Zarkon’s commanders look annoyed and bewildered by his presence and Keith beelines to Zarkon without prompting, half expecting someone to order him out of the room if he lingers by the door for too long.

Zarkon doesn’t acknowledge him, but Keith didn’t expect him to. He settles for hovering by Zarkon’s side and crossing his arms to keep himself from fidgeting. The commanders remain silent for a second longer before one of them starts talking about a mining project a little too fast to be natural.

“We are confident we’ll—”

“Why is he here?”

A silence heavier than Keith has ever felt falls into the room, all eyes landing on the commander who had spoken up.

Keith has to look over the four people between him and the commander, and he’s a little surprised to see it’s Rekzo who had spoken up. He’d always taken him for the obedient and quiet type.

Nobody dares to speak or move, it’s almost like nobody is even breathing.

Zarkon stares at Rekzo, his expression unreadable. “I value his input.”

Keith is familiar enough with that particular tone to automatically tense. The commanders seem familiar with it too, as everyone is suddenly staring at the table with their ears flat against their heads. The ones sitting closest to Zarkon lean slightly away from him.

Rekzo opens and closes his mouth a few times. “I meant no offense. I just... He’s an enemy combatant and an outsider. I don’t see why he should be allowed to hear all this.”

Zarkon has to only narrow his eyes to shut Rekzo up. He reaches for Keith, his fingers brushing against his elbow. Keith’s heart stops for a beat. Zarkon pulls him closer, and Keith goes easily, knowing resistance would be the worst course of action.

When Keith is close enough Zarkon puts an arm around his waist and pulls him to sit on the arm of his chair.
The commanders look downright terrified. Keith isn’t sure what Zarkon has done to inspire such reactions, and he’s not sure he wants to know. He just wants the situation to be over.

Zarkon trails his claws across Keith’s side, sending shivers through Keith’s body.

“I have granted Keith a place among us,” Zarkon says. “He has my trust.”

Rekzo looks down, and for a moment he looks ready to run. Keith wouldn’t blame him if he did.

“In fact,” Zarkon starts and — to Keith’s shock — hands him a dagger. “I have full confidence in Keith’s ability to cut your throat before you can stop him if I were to request it.”

Keith’s eyes are glued to the dagger in his hand. He could kill Zarkon. He’s right there in front of Keith, and he’s not even looking in Keith’s direction, and Keith has a blade inches from Zarkon’s throat.

He could end it all there.

Sure, he’d die a horrible death himself, but Zarkon would be gone. He couldn’t track the Black Lion if he was dead, and if he was dead it wouldn’t matter if Keith was too.

Zarkon pushes Keith off the chair before he realizes what’s happening, and Keith stumbles for a few steps before regaining his balance. He focuses his gaze to Zarkon, who offers him a friendly smile and cocks his head towards Rekzo.

“Would you?”

Keith looks at Rekzo and the dismayed expression on his face. Keith’s eyes dart between him and Zarkon, and it takes him a second to remember Zarkon had said he could have Keith kill Rekzo.

Keith swallows, but he manages to keep his expression from showing his shock and fear beyond the widening of his eyes.

He looks at the dagger and then to Rekzo. He glances at Zarkon, and he knows he’d better do as he’s told. He doesn’t want to kill Rekzo. He doesn’t want to kill anyone. He stays still and wonders if saying no is worth it.

Keith’s eyes land on Thace. He inclines his head minutely, and though it’s not what Keith wants he gets the message, and in a way he even appreciates the encouragement.

Keith takes a deep breath and glances at Zarkon with dark eyes before taking a step towards Rekzo. Nobody but Zarkon looks at him. Even Rekzo has his eyes glued on Zarkon.

Keith doesn’t want to do this.

The room is still as Keith takes another step forward. He knows saying no to Zarkon in front of his commanders is the worst thing he could do. He wishes he could think Rekzo’s life was worth defying Zarkon, but he can’t quite convince himself of it.

The cell wouldn’t be the worst thing to happen to Keith if he said no now.

Keith fixes his eyes on Rekzo and grips the hilt of his dagger a little tighter, his every step weighing more than the previous one.

He can do this.
He reaches Rekzo who is still staring at Zarkon, and steels himself. Keith risks a glance at Zarkon, and as soon as he sees the excited shine of his eyes he regrets it.

Rekzo moves before Keith has a chance to react, and he grabs Keith by the throat. Keith briefly thinks it makes following Zarkon’s order easier before driving the dagger at Rekzo’s gut, but Rekzo grabs Keith’s wrist before the dagger pierces his skin. His grip on Keith’s throat tightens.

This isn’t how Keith will die. Zarkon wouldn’t allow it.

Keith won’t allow it.

He pulls against Rekzo’s hold on his hand and tries to get at least one good breath in before the darkness at the edge of his vision takes over. He tries to switch the dagger from one hand to another. Somewhere in the back of his mind he registers Rekzo’s claws breaking his skin.

Rekzo growls, lifting Keith from the ground. “Do you think I’d let a child best me?”

Keith isn’t going to die like this.

He kicks the air for a second before aiming a hard kick at Rekzo’s groin. He abandons his attempt to get the dagger and grabs Rekzo’s ear instead, sending a silent thanks to Marzila for informing him how sensitive Galra ears are.

Rekzo lets go of Keith hand with a pained huff, and goes to pry his ear free from his hold instead. Keith doesn’t let him have a chance to regroup before driving the dagger deep into Rekzo’s eye.

Time stops for an eternity before Keith pulls the dagger out and drives it back in until the hilt is stuck in Rekzo’s skull. Something warm hits Keith’s face and his feet hit the ground and he stumbles back, but he stays standing.

Rekzo falls to the ground.

The only thing Keith can hear is his own heart thrumming in his ears and his labored breathing. Slowly he becomes aware of other people in the room, and he turns his eyes to take in the shocked and surprised looks on the surviving commanders faces.

Some of them have stood up, and Thace has his hand on his weapon.

Keith turns around to see Zarkon. He breathes a little easier when he sees the hint of a proud smile on Zarkon’s lips. His heart skips a beat when he sees the bayard in Zarkon’s hands, hidden under the table from his commanders.

Zarkon wasn’t going to let anything happen to Keith.

Keith forces himself to give Zarkon a small nod as a thanks. Zarkon inclines his head briefly before the bayard disappears from Keith’s view and he turns his attention to his shaken commanders.

“Does anyone else object to Keith’s presence?” Zarkon’s eyes scan the table. Nobody dares to say anything.

“You are dismissed. Take that with you.” Zarkon waves at Rekzo’s body, and the two commanders closest to Keith hurry to drag the body out of the room.

The room clears in record time, leaving Keith standing there with a bloody dagger in his hands
while Zarkon studies him with curious eyes. Keith feels empty before a slowly building anger starts burning within him.

“Why would you do that to me?” Keith asks, his voice shakier than he’d like.

“They need to respect you. I saw an opportunity to make that happen,” Zarkon replies, not sounding at all sorry.

Keith frowns at him. “I could’ve died!”

“You were never in any danger. I was not going to allow any harm come to you,” Zarkon says almost dismissively.

Keith wants to call him out on a lie, but he’d seen the bayard in Zarkon’s hand.

Zarkon extends his hand to Keith, and he walks closer to him even though his feet feel like lead. He tries to leave some distance between them, but Zarkon grabs his wrist and pulls him closer.

Keith pulls his hand free once he’s standing by Zarkon’s side. He’s not going to let that warmth lull him out of his anger. He has the right to be angry, even if Zarkon was protecting him the whole time.

“You were safe the entire time,” Zarkon assures him, and Keith’s hand jerks on reflex.

Zarkon grabs Keith’s arm before he can even lift it properly, his eyes darkening when he takes in the bloody dagger in Keith’s hand.

“You want to kill me next?” Zarkon asks, eyeing Keith with an almost hurt look on his face.

“And if I do?” Keith tries to pull his arm free, but Zarkon refuses to let him go.

Zarkon’s face hardens and he frowns at Keith before yanking Keith’s arm forward. Keith stumbles. He has to grab the arm of the chair to steady himself, but he’s more focused on what Zarkon is doing than his near fall.

Zarkon meets Keith’s eyes as he places the dagger on his own neck and lets go of Keith’s arm. Keith stares at his too calm face before his eyes fall to the dagger resting against Zarkon’s skin.

“You have a small window where you might be able to get to the lower hangar and steal a ship. The last sighting of Voltron was three days ago near a small planetary system in the far edges of our space. A fighter cannot get you there, but you could stop somewhere to refuel, fill your air supply, and get things you need. Just remember that if you fail there will be nothing left of you after Haggar has extracted her punishment, but I would be dead and the Empire would be weakened.” Zarkon tilts his head back to give Keith better access to his neck, and regards him with a too calm look in his eyes.

All Keith has to do is press the blade into Zarkon’s throat and he would be gone.

Keith could do it. He could kill Zarkon right there, and his reign would be over. Keith could rid the universe of the greatest evil it has probably ever seen.

Zarkon wouldn’t even fight him.

Keith pulls the dagger away and turns from Zarkon.

He can’t do it.
“I would not kill you either,” Zarkon says, his voice pleased.

Keith closes his eyes and throws the dagger on the table.

The next day Keith gets his reader back, and it even has a new book in it. It’s a reward, but Keith wishes he’d gotten it for some other reason.

He feels like he’s somehow agreed to stay there, by Zarkon’s side, until the day he dies. A day that might be coming soon if Zarkon grows tired with him.

Keith tries to tell himself it was either him or Rekzo, but even as his vision was growing blurry from the lack of oxygen he’d known Zarkon wouldn’t let him die. He could’ve disappointed Zarkon by not successfully committing murder, but still have obeyed him by attempting it.

He shouldn’t have killed Rekzo.

Keith feels hollow. He’d killed someone who didn’t deserve to die on Zarkon’s orders. What does that make him?

Zarkon doesn’t pay attention to Keith’s new subdued demeanor, but Marzila picks up on it immediately, and she looks genuinely concerned when she asks Keith about it.

“I’m fine. Really. I’m just tired,” he assures her, but the words taste like ash in his mouth.

Marzila looks doubtful, but she doesn’t press it. Instead she hands Keith a short, wooden staff, and tells him they’re going to be honing his swordsmanship skills. Keith wishes he could be more excited about it even as he makes an effort to give Marzila his best performance.

She says he’s got skill and someday he could be one of the best swordsmen in the Empire.

Keith wishes she had kept it to herself.

Haggar also notices Keith’s new quiet demeanor, but unlike Marzila she doesn’t let Keith get away with it. She holds Keith’s eyesight as a hostage by blinding him with a bright light until Keith agrees to talk.

Keith would glare at her if he could, but he can’t see her from the bright spots dancing across his field of vision.

“I didn’t have to kill Rekzo,” he says, feeling defeated. He rubs his eyes, but the dots only grow larger and brighter.

“You think you had a choice?” Haggar asks, and pulls her chair closer to Keith so that she can sit in front of him.

Keith shrugs. “Zarkon wasn’t going to let me die, right? So I didn’t have to kill him.”
He blinks against the bright spots and tries to see the look in Haggar’s eyes, but it’s not easy. She
seems to be contemplating her answer.

“He might not have let you die, but he does not tolerate failure ether. Your choice was over the
kind of life you wanted to have, and the commander was dead either way,” Haggar say eventually,
her voice careful, like she’s unsure if she should be talking at all.

Keith appreciates her words either way, even if they don’t make him feel any better. He’s not sure
if killing someone was worth receiving marginally better treatment.

“The cell is not the worst thing the Emperor can do to you,” Haggar says, as if she knew exactly
what Keith was thinking. Keith had figured that out already, but he still doesn’t know if it was
worth it.

“He’s going to kill me,” Keith sighs. He’s beginning to accept his fate, even if he wants to keep
that day as far away as possible.

“That depends on what you are willing to do.” Haggar stands, but rather than leave she stops and
inclines her head. “You have to decide what your life is worth, and stick to it. Weakness is not
something we tolerate, but if you are willing to fight you might be able to survive.”

Keith looks up at her, his mind racing.

Haggar seems genuine, but Keith isn’t sure if he can trust her. She’s never given him a reason not
to, but she is Zarkon’s most trusted advisor. She has no reason to want him alive if it’s not what
Zarkon wants as well.

“Any advice on how to do that?” He still asks. Haggar regards him with a thoughtful look.

“At the moment he prefers you alive,” she says before half-shrugging. “Surprise him.”

Keith raises a skeptical eyebrow. He’s got no idea how he’s supposed to surprise Zarkon, but he
accepts the questionable advice anyways.

“Am I going blind?” Keith’s eyes still sting from the light attack, but he does his best not to rub
them anymore.

“No. You can go now,” Haggar replies.

Keith stands, but stops after taking a few steps. He’s not supported to walk around without an
escort after his escape attempt. He waits for someone to show him out, but no one comes.

“I’m not supposed to walk around alone,” he says and looks at Haggar with an unsure expression.

Haggar glances at him over her shoulder. “I’ll arrange you an escort when I have the time. Stay out
of the way until then.”

Keith nods and pulls a chair to the corner. Haggar doesn’t do anything of interest while Keith is
there, and after an hour or so a druid comes to take him back to Zarkon’s quarters.

Chapter End Notes
I needed to kill Rekzo in something. He's super annoying but I love him too much to kill him off in the main story. Thankfully he could fill a spot in here.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Guess who's almost done with NaNo? Me! How awesome is that? Just 10k more to go, or about three to four days at my writing speed, assuming I don't injure myself in the mean time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith continues to accompany Zarkon to his meetings, and nobody mentions his presence again. Nobody even acknowledges his existence unless Zarkon does so first. Keith doesn’t mind it, he’s happy to be invisible. It gives him a chance to observe without being observed.

The only person who seems to be aware of Keith is Thace, though he’s careful not to let Zarkon or anyone else see him glance at Keith every now and again.

But Keith sees it, and it’s starting to bother him. If he could get Thace alone he’d ask him about it, but with Keith’s current level of supervision that isn’t going to happen.

If Zarkon is aware of Thace’s interest in Keith he hides it well, but Keith is having trouble believing he doesn’t at least suspect something.

Keith stops worrying about Thace and his possible plans to brutally murder Keith when Marzila says barely a word to him during their training session. He doesn’t ask about it until Marzila nearly breaks his arm.

“Haala’s been transferred to the Void,” she replies, her voice as dark as her expression.

“The Void?” Keith asks.

“It’s what we call the far edge stations of the Empire. That’s where they send people they want to forget.” Marzila sighs, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t even know why he’s there. He was just gone without a word.”

Keith frowns. He has no idea why Haala would be transferred anywhere. He’d thought he was a good soldier, even if his personality left something to be desired.

“Sorry.” Keith doesn’t know what else he could say.

Marzila shrugs. “It’s fine. Better being in the Void than being in prison or the Witch’s table, right?” She tries to look nonchalant, but there’s desperation in her eyes.

“Yeah,” Keith agrees, mostly to make her feel better.

Marzila walks Keith to the showers before taking him to Haggar, and she leaves Keith right inside the door to Haggar’s labs.

Keith would stay there and watch her go if Haggar hadn’t spotted him. She points Keith to the nearest chair, and Keith goes quietly even though he’s burning with questions.
“What’s wrong with you this time?” Haggar asks when she comes to stand before Keith.

Keith lifts his arm. “Marzila twisted it a little too hard.”

Haggar doesn’t say anything else as she peels Keith’s sleeve back and examines the bruise beginning to form on his skin. She gets a jar from one of her many cabinets and applies cold gel on his arm, and tells him to let it dry before covering it.

“Why was Haala transferred?” Keith asks, even though he knows it’s probably a bad idea.

Haggar stops and turns to face Keith with an almost confused expression. “I know nothing about that. Sometimes the staff changes. It’s natural.”

Keith’s brow knits together, but he doesn’t say anything else. It’s not worth arguing with her over it. He’ll just have to take it up with Zarkon. Keith sighs and hopes Zarkon is in a good mood.

Zarkon stares at Keith with an unreadable expression, but Keith refuses to budge. He might be kneeling at Zarkon’s feet, but that doesn’t mean he can’t hold his ground if need be. Haala is as close to a friend Keith has among the Galra.

Keith narrows his eyes even though his heart hammers with the adrenaline rushing through his veins.

“I think I deserve an answer,” Keith says. His voice doesn’t waver like he expected it to.

Zarkon’s jaw sets in that way that usually means Keith should stop pushing him, but then he gives Keith the impression of shrugging without actually doing so. Keith wonders when he got so good at reading Zarkon.

“We have reason to believe he has ties to a rebel group. I want to see what he does when he is removed from the Central Command. He fought hard to get here, and he has done everything in his power to remain here. Did you know he used to be an engineer?” Zarkon sips his tea and raises an eyebrow at Keith.

Keith mulls over Zarkon’s words. He hadn’t noticed Haala acting particularly suspiciously or rebelly, but he figures that if someone wanted to play spy or rebel or whatever on the same ship as Zarkon, they’d have to be discreet.

“Is he coming back?”

Zarkon glances at Keith as he picks up his pad. “Perhaps some day, if we find no reason to believe he is working against the Empire.”

Keith sighs, but he doesn’t know what else to say so he keeps quiet. He hopes Zarkon is wrong about Haala. It has to be a misunderstanding.

“Wait, ties to a rebel group doesn’t mean you think he’s a part of a rebel group though, right? He’s just hanging out with the wrong people,” Keith says, trying not to get his hopes up.

“That is what we are trying to find out. He is related to one of my commanders and he does not fall into the type that would fall out of line easily. It is the only reason I did not let Haggar deal with
him,” Zarkon replies. “Now let it go or I will change my mind and hand him over to her.”

Keith bites his tongue to keep quiet, though he throws a dirty glare at Zarkon. He won’t be the reason Haggar tortures a friend of his. Because that’s what Haala is; a friend.

“I don’t suppose there’s anything I could do to help?” Keith asks, making sure to keep his voice light.

Zarkon stops, and slowly turns to fully face Keith, his face gravely serious. “I am not allowing you to snoop around the ship looking for a group that opposes the Empire. I cannot trust them not to harm you.”

Keith tires not to be touched by the protective edge in Zarkon’s voice. It’s not what he wants, and it shouldn’t make him feel warm inside. He doesn’t need Zarkon’s protection or concern. He doesn’t need it, but maybe, if he’s lucky, he can use it for his benefit. He smiles at Zarkon and hugs his leg tentatively. The curious look Zarkon gives him makes him a little more confident about his actions.

“I’m just not used to not doing anything. I don’t like feel useless,” he says, pressing his cheek on Zarkon’s knee.

Zarkon runs his fingers through Keith’s hair like Keith hoped he would.

“You are doing a good job as a pet,” he says almost jokingly, and Keith would roll his eyes if he wasn’t so busy frowning.

“I recall you saying you wouldn’t let a pet in your bed.”

Zarkon tilts his head. “Then what are you?”

Keith opens his mouth, but hesitates before he can say anything. What is he? He doesn’t think he’s a guest like Zarkon has insisted so many times. He doesn’t feel like a prisoner either. He knows doesn’t want to be a pet. So where does that leave him?

They’re not friends, that much is clear to Keith, but somehow Zarkon doesn’t feel like an enemy either.

“I don’t know,” he admits quietly. Zarkon regards him for a moment with an expression Keith can’t read before taking a slow, deep breath and focusing on his pad again. He offers Keith a cookie from the plate, and Keith takes two just so he’ll have something to do.

The first time Keith truly realizes Haala is gone is when a stranger takes him from Zarkon to Haggar. Keith eyes the guard he’s never seen before suspiciously, and for once he’s glad to see Haggar. The guard is stiff when he leaves Keith with her, and Keith hopes they’ll never meet again.

He misses Haala.

Haggar doesn’t have to tell Keith to sit down, he’s familiar enough with the process by now to know how things go. He tells her how his day has been going when she asks, and when she wants to poke at the bond he shares with Zarkon Keith agrees with only mild trepidation.
She doesn’t try to pull at the bond again.

“I’ll have someone escort you back to the Emperor. Wait quietly,” she orders when she’s done. Keith’s head thrums after her poking as he moves to the corner where he won’t be in Haggar’s way, and sits on the floor.

He closes his eyes and leans his head on the wall, and focuses on his breathing until his head feels normal again. The new set of footsteps catches him off guard, and he opens his eyes to see who the new person in the lab.

He wasn’t expecting to see Thace.

Keith keeps an eye on Thace and Haggar while they chat quietly. Thace’s eyes land on Keith, and after a second of stillness he points at him, and Keith knows he’s asking about his presence. Haggar glances at Keith before focusing on Thace again. They talk for a little longer before Thace offers Haggar a cursory bow and leaves her by her desk.

To Keith’s surprise Thace doesn’t head for the door, but to him.

Keith keeps a wary eye on Thace while he approaches and comes to a halt in front of him. Keith raises an eyebrow at him, wondering what one of Zarkon’s commanders would possibly want with him. Payback for Rekzo is the first thing that comes to his mind.

“I have offered to escort you to the operations center. The Emperor has decided to view the work there personally, and I am heading in that direction,” Thace says. Keith bites the insides of his cheeks before nodding and pushing himself to his feet.

Keith follows Thace out of the room and down the hallway, but when they walk past the elevators he frowns.

“I need to pick something up first,” Thace explains when Keith asks about it. “You’ll see the Emperor soon.”

“No rush,” Keith mutters under his breath, wishing he had pockets to stuff his hands in.

Thace glances at him. “You don’t enjoy his company?”

Keith curses the Galra hearing and sighs. “It’s not that simple.”

Thace hums, but remains otherwise silent, and Keith frowns at him briefly. He doesn’t know enough about Thace to have a conversation with him, and he’s not sure how to ask about Thace’s curiosity about him.

“You seem uncomfortable,” Thace observes.

“I’m used to having Haala take me around the ship,” Keith replies with a shrug. Thace stops by a door and turns to face Keith.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” he says, and the certainty in his voice surprises Keith.

“You think?” He asks, trying to sound nonchalant and failing. Thace offers him a smile.

“Haala’s mother was a colleague as well as family to me. She was stationed on a research ship exploring the far reaches of the Empire when she disappeared during an accident onboard the vessel. Haala was very young at the time and he remained with his father and other relatives in
Vadazi. I have taken care of him to the best of my abilities, and I consider him mine, in a sense. You can trust me when I say that he is loyal to the Empire.” A shadow passes over Thace’s expression, but Keith doesn’t know why and it doesn’t seem right to ask.

“He wouldn’t be alive if the Emperor didn’t thinks so too,” Thace adds, and that makes Keith feel a little better. He knows Zarkon well enough to know he would never leave a traitor alive.

Thace studies Keith for a second longer before opening the door and showing Keith inside.

Keith takes in the computer terminals and the officers immersed in their work. He wonders what they are doing, but the written text on their screens doesn’t make sense to him.

Thace lets Keith wander around while he walks up to one of the officers. Keith doesn’t pay much attention to Thace requesting a data transfer from the officer, but the way she laughs as she promises to give it to him immediately makes Keith think Thace has an admirer.

The officers glance at Keith as he passes them, but nobody says anything to him. Keith steals subtle glances at the screens, even if he doesn’t understand what he’s seeing.

Thace pulls him away far too soon. Keith would ask him what the officers are working on, but he doubts he’d get an answer.

Keith follows Thace through the hallways, his demeanor more subdued now that he’s heading to Zarkon. Thace spares him a sympathetic look. Keith doesn’t bother saying most of his trepidation comes from being in the same room with the other commanders more than being in the same room with Zarkon, since a part of him keeps expecting another possibly violent incident to occur.

The journey seems to take forever, and Keith grows more and more tense with each passing second.

“They understand why you killed Rekzo. They are avoiding you because they fear what the Emperor will do to them if they step out of line with you. They think it’s better to pretend you don’t exist than risk upsetting the Emperor over you again. The message of what he’ll do to those who question his decisions regarding you has been well received,” Thace says.

Keith opens his mouth a few times before deciding against speaking. Maybe his worries are obvious on his face or Thace is just really good at reading people. Keith decides that it doesn’t matter.

“You’re not avoiding me,” Keith points out.

Thace offers him a brief smile. “I have nothing against you.” His expression turns serious.

“How are you?” He asks, catching Keith off guard.

Keith frowns, unsure what the question is about, but something about Thace makes Keith less wary to answer. It’s similar to the feeling he got around Ulaz, and he had given his life to save Voltron.

“I’m fine. I’m not locked in a cell and Zarkon is occasionally tolerable company.” Keith forces himself to smile.

Thace regards him with a solemn expression, but he doesn’t pry further.
Zarkon doesn’t address Keith trailing Thace until they are alone in an elevator. Keith hadn’t missed the glance that had lingered just a fraction of a second too long that Zarkon had given Thace, and Keith hopes he didn’t cross a line by tagging along with him. Keith plays with the hem of his shirt, wondering if he should say something before Zarkon does.

“Did he want something from you?” Zarkon asks before Keith can reach a decision.

“No,” Keith replies, and shrugs. “Well, he told me he knew Haala and that you would’ve killed him if you thought he was a traitor.”

“As I have told you, he is more useful alive at the moment,” Zarkon says. He glances at Keith, his expression contemplative, and Keith looks away.

“He matters to you?”

Keith’s lips twist into a sardonic smirk for a second before he sighs. “Guess so.”

Zarkon falls silent, and the elevator doors open. He leads Keith through the hallways, and the Galra that cross their path hurry to move out of their way and bow at their Emperor.

Keith has to walk faster than usual to keep up with Zarkon, and for a moment he considers grabbing Zarkon’s cape to either slow him down or so he won’t lost him. Keith smiles at the idea, imagining what the Galra around them would think of it.

Keith follows Zarkon all the way to his throne room where he slumps on the dais while Zarkon takes his place on the throne.

Keith sighs quietly and closes his eyes for a moment, centering himself on the coolness seeping through his clothes. He can feel Zarkon observing him, but he’s learning to ignore it and eventually the feeling disappears.

Keith bites his lip, wondering if he should talk, and deciding it doesn’t hurt to try. “I’ve been thinking,” he starts, looking over his shoulder, and waits until Zarkon lifts his eyes from his pad. “That arrangement we had before I tried to run, were you ever going to tell me what’s going on?”

Zarkon regards him for a long moment. “I was not planning on it, no. I was aware we might have to inform you of the truth at some point, but at the time I merely wished for you to cooperate and interact with your own kind.”

“The Galra aren’t ‘my kind’, ” Keith snaps and looks away. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, regretting his inability to keep quiet.

“You opinion on the matter is irrelevant. You have Galra blood in you, that makes you a part of us,” Zarkon says, his voice patient.

Keith hangs his head. He doesn’t want to be a part of the Galra. He doesn’t want to belong with them. But, in a way, Keith fits in better with the Galra than he ever did with humans. Socializing with them is definitely easier.

Maybe it’s silly of Keith to keep fighting what Zarkon tells him.

“If you’ve tested me, and you’ve tested Shiro and the Holts, then you still have those test results,
right? You can show them to me. If I’m really half Galra then my DNA or genetic makeup, or whatever you call it, will be different,” Keith says as he turns to face Zarkon with a determined scowl on his face.

Zarkon stays silent for a long moment as he studies Keith. “I will inform Haggar you wish to see her files,” he says eventually.

“No.” Keith’s surprised by the strength of his own voice, and it even gets Zarkon to stop and take notice of him. Keith takes in a deep breath. “You’re taking me to her now, and you’re not letting her know we’re coming. I’m need to trust that what she shows me is real.”

Zarkon inclines his head slowly. “I understand.”

It takes Zarkon a moment, but he stands and waves Keith to follow him. Keith bites his lip as he pushes himself up. He hopes he’s about to catch Zarkon in a lie, but deep down he knows that won’t happen. He just needs the undeniable confirmation.

Zarkon leads Keith all the way to Haggar’s labs. Haggar seems surprised by their presence, but she recovers quickly and she stops poking at the glowing gel on the petri dish.

“Keith wishes to see your files on him and the humans you studied,” Zarkon states as a greeting.

Haggar seems hesitant for a moment. “I have not had a chance to get them for you. If you will grant me a moment I will see that they are ready—”

“Now would be better,” Zarkon cuts in. “Specifically the files you have on Keith’s genetics, compared to the others.”

Haggar seems reluctant to comply, but she moves to her terminal and pulls up the files Zarkon requested. She sets the files side by side, and Zarkon shows Keith to the screen.

Keith’s heart hammers in his throat as he takes in the words he can’t understand, and the lines of differently colored bars at the bottom of the files that are identical on Shiro’s and the Holts files, and different on Keith’s. It’s not definitive in any way, but it’s the only difference Keith can see on the files, and it’s enough.

Zarkon didn’t lie. Keith has Galra blood in him.

Keith turns around and walks to the door without a word and exits the laboratory. He heads down the hallway until he reaches the intersection, and he picks a direction at random and continues on his way. He doesn’t stop until he realizes he has no idea where he is, and that the Galra he passes are less than happy to see him. He’s a little surprised when the sentries walk past him without stopping to take him back to Zarkon.

Keith picks a quiet spot and slumps against the wall.

He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do now. He’s not supposed to be anything but human. Keith sighs and slides to the floor, and presses his head to his knees.

In a way explains a lot about his life, but it doesn’t mean he’s okay with it.

“The Emperor requests your presence.”

Keith looks up, coming face to face with one of the commanders. Keith has to think for a moment before he connects the face with a name. Cenzi — if Keith recalls correctly — is a quiet and
calculating presence in the background of the room, and his unassuming looks make him seem a strange addition to Zarkon’s commanders.

Haala had told Keith that Cenzi had somehow gathered the leaders of an entire planet together and then proceeded to poison them with an experimental drug. According to Marzila the only reason Zarkon hadn’t punished him for cowardice was that he had taken extensive notes of the slow deaths of his targets, and presented it all to Haggar. Apparently there had been pictures too. Keith guesses the data was somehow useful to Haggar since he got a promotion out of it.

Keith pushes himself off the floor and straightens his shirt. “Let’s go then.”

Cenzi inclines his head and heads back the way Keith had come while Keith follows at a safe distance. He wishes he’d had more time to think, but on hindsight he guesses he should have known Zarkon wasn’t going to give him that. He’s not even supposed to be on the hallways without an escort.

He’s screwed.

Zarkon is waiting for them outside Haggar’s laboratory, and he dismisses Cenzi the second they reach him, but his voice is somewhere bordering on polite niceness.

Cenzi bows and disappears around the closest corner while Zarkon’s eyes find Keith. He doesn’t say anything, and Keith doesn’t meet his gaze. Zarkon starts towards the elevators, and Keith follows without prompting. The elevator is already heading to its destination when Zarkon turns to Keith.

“I believe it is time for you to return to your cushion,” he says, but his voice isn’t hard like Keith expected it to be.

Keith risks a glance at him. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Yes, but I will allow it this one time. Do not go wandering off on your own again,” Zarkon replies. Keith nods.

Zarkon leaves Keith at the hallway to his quarters, trusting Keith to go where he’s expected to go.

Later, after Zarkon has joined Keith for the night, Keith wonders if allowing him to leave Haggar’s lab on his own was a calculated decision on Zarkon’s part. He studies Zarkon from the corner of his eye, taking in the content softness of his expression as he reads his book, and decides not to ask about it. He stretches his legs and settles back to doing nothing.

“I think we should get you some new clothes,” Zarkon says suddenly, making Keith start. He turns to fully face Zarkon, who takes his time closing his book before giving Keith his attention.

“Why do I need more clothes?” Keith asks. He won’t mind getting something less see through, but he’s not sure where this is all coming from.

Zarkon tilts his head. “I wish to treat you to something nice. Indulge me.”

Keith narrows his eyes, trying to figure out what the catch is, but nothing comes to his mind. He
pushes himself up and sits cross legged in front of Zarkon, giving him his full attention.

“You want to treat me to something nice?” Keith raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

Zarkon takes in a slow, deep breath, and settles the book better on his lap. Keith frowns, wondering what’s going on in Zarkon’s head to make him act in such a way.

“Are we friends?” Zarkon asks, and Keith has to take a second to process his words before he can answer.

“I wouldn’t describe what we have as any form of friendship,” Keith replies, his voice cautious. He hopes it doesn’t offend Zarkon.

Zarkon tilts his head and considers Keith with a thoughtful frown. “What are we to each other, then?”

Keith takes in a sharp breath and almost snaps at Zarkon before thinking better of it. He thinks this is important somehow, and he decides to think it through, even if any previous attempts to do so haven’t yielded him any results.

“I’m not your guest,” he says. “I’m a prisoner you decided to treat as a pet.” Keith can’t help the rueful smile gracing his lips.

“You are not a prisoner,” Zarkon says.

“I can’t leave. You confine me to a small space when you’re not around and when you are here you want me to crawl around and sit at your feet like a dog. Where I come from that’s considered pretty fucked up, but I have to do it because otherwise you’ll lock me in a cell or worse. What’s that called in your world?” Keith glares at Zarkon, his heart beating loud in his chest. He barely catches himself before he does or says something he’ll regret.

Zarkon looks at Keith, but he doesn’t give him a response. Keith glares at him a little harder.

“I am afraid I have no satisfactory answer for you,” Zarkon says eventually, and Keith doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Slavery ring a bell?” Keith regrets it almost immediately, but he can’t take it back. Zarkon narrows his eyes in warning.

“Do not insult me by thinking so little of me,” he says, his words slow and careful. Keith holds his breath for a moment before slowly releasing it.

Neither one of them says anything for a long moment, then Zarkon stands and returns the book to its rightful space on the shelf. He turns to Keith, studies him for a moment before he starts walking around the room.

“So, we are not friends, and we cannot agree if you are a guest, prisoner or a pet, as you so crudely put it. Any emotional ties we share are out of necessity brought on by a bond neither one of us desires.” Zarkon stops pacing and slowly tilts his head as he turns to look at Keith. “We are adrift, and experience tells that is not a good place to be for long.”

Keith looks down. He has done everything in his power not to try to put a name for what he and Zarkon have, a job made a lot easier by the fact that there seemed to be no word to describe their messed up situation. He laughs softly, but not out of amusement.
“Thousands of worlds and not a single one came up with a term for this thing,” he says, shaking his head as he raises his eyes to meet Zarkon’s.

Zarkon tilts his head. “I could consult our linguistics database.”

Keith sighs and plays with a loose strand of his hair. He should redo his ponytail, but he suspects he’s going to be ordered to sleep soon so he doesn’t bother.

“I am sure something ought to fit. The universe is a vast. I have heard over a hundred different ways to describe a captured lover of a defeated enemy or a sunrise for example. None of them were quite alike.” Zarkon returns to the couch and studies Keith with a thoughtful expression.

Keith nibbles his lip and frowns. “I’m not a sunrise or lover of a defeated enemy though.”

Zarkon shrugs. “Schematics. For example Voltron may at the moment be undefeated, but the person who you went to war for was not merely a friend to you.”

Keith’s eyes widen and he opens his mouth to argue, but Zarkon silences him with a single look.

“As I have already told you, I can feel your emotions when they are strong. And your emotions seem to come from your Galra side, which makes them more intense than in most species. I understand it, and I accept it,” Zarkon stops, almost like he’s hesitating.

Keith thinks he’s supposed to say something, but he can’t make a sound. He doesn’t think anyone has ever said they understood the intensity of Keith’s emotions, let alone accept it. The only thing he ever remembers hearing is he’s too much.

Even Shiro had told him to hold back.

“We can get possessive of those who are important to us. Sometimes violently so. I understand how you feel about this person of yours, but unless they feel the same way about you it will not end well.” Zarkon raises his hand to silence Keith. “The Galra in you is not in your control. You have it contained, but you lack the needed control to deal with the possible rejection. If I were you I would try to let go, if not for their sake then for your own.”

Keith glares at Zarkon, unable to say anything. He doesn’t want to see any truth in his words, but a treacherous voice in his mind reminds him of all the times he’d gotten in trouble because of how he felt about Shiro.

“I can’t just let go of Shiro. I can’t do that,” Keith says, more to himself than to Zarkon.

“You will have to,” Zarkon says, "you cannot return to him without bringing on his death.”

Keith scrunches his eyes close so tight he sees burning white stars. He doesn’t want to hear the truth in Zarkon’s words, but he knows going back to the others would just bring the Galra Empire at their doorstep. Zarkon is never going to let him leave, and Keith has no doubt he’ll personally slaughter Keith’s friends before his eyes just to make a point.

“Think about it,” Zarkon says, and Keith offers him a small nod just to get him to shut up. “In the meantime, I have grown tired of your clothes, and I intend to get you new ones.”

Keith can’t stop the soft laugh escaping his lips. He raises his eyes to meet Zarkon’s, letting himself pretend the fond warmth in Zarkon’s eyes is real.

“Do I get a say in this?” He asks, his voice quieter than he’d like.
“I will get you a selection and you may choose what you want from that. Is that acceptable?” Zarkon offers. Keith smiles despite himself and nods.

He could use some new clothes.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea about the next update, but since the next chapter was one of my favorites to write I don't imagine it'll be too long away.

I hope you enjoyed this!
I finished NaNo! Yay! Also getting back to editing this was a pain because different characters/story/just having written over 50k/graduating, so I'm behind in my original posting plan, but only by a chapter so I'm probably gonna be fine.

So this chapter was fun to write since this is mostly an excuse to put Keith in one of my MC's outfits, which is kinda a reference to a drawing I once did, has a very minor shift from the story perspective, and I wrote this in one sitting, and this was just super easy to work on in general, so I like it for that alone.

This chapter also lost about 1000 words in editing.

...It's six am here and I've been up all night so I'm rambling. Sorry.

Keith tries not to stare when a pair of druids drop more clothes than he thinks he has ever owned at his feet.

“Choose what you want from these,” Zarkon says, heading back out of the door. He stops before stepping out, and Keith raises his eyes from the sea of clothes before him.

“I am allowing you to move freely for today. Try to behave.” Zarkon leaves the room before Keith can reply.

Keith stares after him for a long minute before slowly turning his eyes to the clothes he’s supposed to go through. He sighs, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

It’s going to be a long day.

Keith doesn’t know where he’s supposed to start, and he wishes he had help. He picks up the nearest piece of clothing and studies it, feeling even more lost than before. Maybe he should wait for Zarkon to return.

Keith ends up organizing the clothes in neat piles. He's not sure what else he can do.

He knows that Zarkon expects him to make some kind of decisions before his return, but Keith is acutely aware of the fact that he’s supposed to pick clothes Zarkon will like seeing on him. Keith has never dressed himself with another person’s options in mind before, and he doesn’t feel like starting now.

The only bit of clothing Keith manages to pick for himself is a simple, deep green shirt that hangs on his body a little too loosely, but it’s thick enough to actually cover him so he doesn't mind.

Zarkon returns sooner than Keith expected, and he looks around the mess Keith has created with a displeased expression on his face.

“I’ve never had this many clothes to pick from,” Keith offers as an explanation.
Zarkon gives the room one more disapproving look before walking to the small, locked cabinet near the couch, and pulling a blue bottle from it. He grabs a glass as he heads to the table, and pours it full before leaning on the edge of the table, while Keith keeps a close eye on him.

“I have some time to spare if you need help,” Zarkon offers.

Keith nods, happy that he doesn’t have to deal with the clothes alone. Zarkon takes a long sip from his glass, his eyes studying Keith for a second too long before he puts the glass down and pushes himself off the table. He moves to kneel by the closest pile of clothes and starts picking through them.

Keith twists his hands on his lap as he waits with bated breath for Zarkon to be done selecting his next outfit.

Zarkon picks Keith a pair of soft pants to go with the shirt he’s already wearing, and Keith puts them on after hesitating for a few seconds. Zarkon is too busy arranging the clothes into neatly folded piles to pay attention to Keith changing his clothes behind him.

“Start with that,” Zarkon says once he’s done, and points at the pile on the couch. Keith nods, and picks the clothes up, and ducks into the bathroom before Zarkon can stop him.

Keith puts the shirt and pants on, and heads out to show them to Zarkon. He’s not sure how he feels about the outfit, it’s too loose and constricting at the same time, the light fabric wrapped around his body a little too tightly even if he can barely feel it. Keith hugs his arms around himself for a moment while Zarkon looks him up and down.

“I’m not sure about this,” Keith says.

Zarkon takes a sip from his glass and shrugs. “Then try something else.”

Keith nods and picks the next pile of clothes and returns to the bathroom.

After the third outfit Keith starts to relax and have fun with it. He keeps a close eye on Zarkon’s face while he tries on several different outfits, keeping his opinions in mind as well as his own when he picks his new clothes.

Keith questions Zarkon about some of the clothes as he picks up a beautifully glistening white garment that Keith tries not to classify as a dress.

“We have no records of the fashion on your home planet, and I did not want to make assumptions,” Zarkon replies, and tilts his head slightly. “The choices in clothes are as vast and varied as the people in the universe. There are worlds where wearing clothes is considered a taboo, and worlds where seeing even the slightest hint of skin can lead to an arrest. I want you to be comfortable, so I got you varied choices.”

Keith appreciates the consideration. “I like practicality,” he says, but he still tries the dress on and decides that the happy light in Zarkon’s eyes makes it worth it. If nothing else it reminds Keith of playing dress up with his foster siblings when he was young.

Zarkon fills his glass and offers to get Keith one too. Keith asks what’s in the bottle, and Zarkon tells him it’s wine, but that Keith should be able to stomach a glass or two without feeling any effects from it, as it had little to no effect on the Galra.

Keith declines. “Wines aren’t really my thing,” he offers as an explanation.
“This is hardly considered wine by our standards. It lacks the appropriate taste. You should try it,” Zarkon replies, and though Keith wants to disagree he sighs and accepts the glass.

With one last glance at Zarkon Keith takes a sip of the wine. It’s not as bad as he had expected. It has a sugary taste to it, but it’s not overpowering and Keith thinks he could get used to it. He tries a few more sips before handing the glass to Zarkon.

He still says no thank you when Zarkon offers to pour him his own glass. Zarkon accepts it with a tilt of his head, and points Keith to another set of clothes.

Keith keeps the coat, but discards the rest of the outfit.

“One more, then I have to leave you to your own devices,” Zarkon says when Keith moves to pick the next pile of clothes.

“Try those with it,” Zarkon points at the boots with a few inches of sturdy heels, and after a little hesitation Keith shrugs. One of his foster sisters had taught him to run on even higher heels, he doesn’t see the point in not trying the boots on. They look like Keith could learn to fight in them, and he’d at least reach a little higher in them.

He heads to the bathroom and spreads the clothes out, and takes a moment to figure them out before retying his hair up in a loose ponytail, ignoring his bangs falling out seconds later.

He pulls on the backless black shirt first, and fastens the clasp at his neck, securing the high collar snugly against his skin before making sure the light fabric sits properly on him. He tries to ignore how exposed his back is, unsure of how he feels about it.

Next he slips the leather like leggings on, before putting on the boots. He wobbles on the heels as he fastens the straps so the boots are securely tied to his legs. They’re heavier than they look, and Keith knows it will take him a moment to learn to walk on them.

Lastly he picks the wrap skirt from the ground. He doesn’t pay much attention to the way the different shades of red and gold at the hem look almost like flames before the colors shift into black, blending seamlessly into the color of the shirt.

As an afterthought Keith picks the red shawl up and wraps it around himself. The sheen fabric does very little to hide Keith’s back, but it offers a sense of protection that Keith can appreciate.

When Keith steps through the door he finds Zarkon leaning on the table, swirling his glass of wine in his hands slowly with a hint of a relaxed smile on his lips. Keith clears his throat to get his attention, and Zarkon takes his time lifting his eyes from the wine.

He tilts his head as he takes in Keith’s new appearance, clearly aware of Keith’s discomfort in the outfit and enjoying it.

“Walk around,” Zarkon orders. Keith throws him a dirty glare, but does as he’s told. His steps are unsure on the heels, and he does his best to not let it show. He bites his lip and focuses on the floor, pretending he needs to see where he’s going because of the clothes spread across the floor.

He circles the room a few times before glancing up, and faltering when he sees the look in Zarkon’s eyes. Keith swallows, taken aback by the intense focus directed at him.

Zarkon tilts his head and Keith looks away.

His skin feels too tight all of the sudden, and he’s acutely aware of Zarkon’s eyes on him. He tells
himself that the blush creeping on his face is just because he’s uncomfortable.

Keith stands a little taller, telling himself not to let Zarkon get under his skin, and resumes walking around the room. His heart hammers in his chest as he walks a bit more confidently. He doesn’t feel flattered, exactly, and he refuses to call the quickening of his pulse excitement.

It’s stupid and possibly dangerous, and Keith knows he should stop. He walks around Zarkon, biting his lip until he’s about to break his skin to distract himself from Zarkon’s gaze following his every move.

He feels like prey teasing a predator.

Keith glances at Zarkon, almost expecting him to get up at any moment. Keith doesn’t want to think about what would happen if he did just that.

If Zarkon were to stand and walk up to Keith. If he ordered Keith to go to him. If he’d touch Keith. It wouldn’t be like the familiar warmth, it would feel like—

“What’s next?” Keith doesn’t look at Zarkon. He can’t believe he almost went there. He should never have almost gone there.

Zarkon stands, and Keith wants to throw up when his heart beats a little faster. He walks up to Keith, his steps slow and calculated. Keith swallows as he back away until his back hits the wall. He’s trapped, and a small, traitorous part of him doesn’t hate it.

Zarkon stops inches from him, and takes a slow, deep breath.

Galra senses, Keith’s brain supplies, and Keith has to fight the urge to look away.

“I should be heading back to work,” Zarkon says, his voice infuriatingly casual. “Unless you would prefer me to stay.”

Keith looks down as his lips twist into a sardonic smirk. Of course Zarkon has to throw the decision making to him. The worst part is that Keith hesitates before answering.

“You should get back to your empire,” Keith mutters, doing his best to ignore the small part of his mind that hates him for not asking Zarkon to stay.

Keith risks a glance at Zarkon, expecting to see disappointment, not amusement. He’s not sure what he did to deserve that look, and he’s not sure he wants to know.

Zarkon offers Keith his glass of wine. “You look like you could use it,” he quips, and waits until Keith accepts the glass with slightly trembling hands before heading out of the room.

Keith stays pressed against the wall until he gets his breathing and pulse back under control. He looks down at the deep pink wine swirling in the glass, and downs it all in one go.

He shouldn’t want to know what would have happened if he’d asked Zarkon to stay, but there’s a part of him, a twisted, dark, consuming part, that is curious as to what might have happened.

Keith bolts from the wall and beelines to the wine bottle, hoping it’s more potent on him than Zarkon thought it would be.

Keith downs three more glasses of the wine before he feels the effects of the alcohol, and falls face first on the couch. It definitely affects him a lot more than Zarkon thought.
He welcomes the darkness clouding his thoughts, and lets himself drift to unconsciousness.

Zarkon is annoyingly amused by Keith’s hangover in the morning, and if Keith didn’t feel like he’s about to throw up every time he lifted his head from his cushion he’d say a few choice words to Zarkon.

Keith is still wearing the same outfit he had when he’d fallen asleep in on the couch, but he can’t remember moving.

“Did you carry me here?” He manages to ask, trying to ignore the different kind of nausea rising in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes,” Zarkon replies, and sighs at Keith’s suspicious expression. “I was concerned about your safety. You could have fallen to the floor and hurt yourself. I thought the cushion was a safer option.”

“You could’ve woken me up,” Keith points out.

“I saw no point in that.” Zarkon looks away from Keith, ending the conversation there.

Keith takes his time sitting up, and after a while he makes his way to the table. He knows he needs to drink something, and the closest source of water is on the table. He throws one last suspicious glance at Zarkon before taking a seat and pouring himself the much needed glass of water.

He feels violated, somehow. He doesn’t know if he was just asleep or completely unconscious. For all Keith knows Zarkon could have had Haggar open him up.

He’s never going to drink again.

Zarkon stands up and walks to the cabinet, and returns moments later with a small bottle. He pours a few drops of the blue liquid into Keith’s glass, and mixes it with water before handing it back to Keith.

“It will make you feel better,” he explains as he sits back down. Keith mutters a thanks and downs the cocktail in one go. It takes a few minutes, but he does start feeling marginally better, even if he’s not ready to eat anything yet.

“I’m going to assume you only moved me,” Keith starts, not really wanting an answer even though he needs the assurance that nothing was done to him.

Zarkon looks up to him, doing nothing to hide how offended he is. “You think that little of me?”

Keith glances down. “No. I’d just feel better with little reassurance that you didn’t let Haggar experiment on me or... anything.”

Zarkon looks less than impressed with Keith’s reasoning, and Keith bites his lip, considering his next words carefully.

“I was taught that you’re not supposed to pass out anywhere but home because you never knew what other people might do to you.” Keith tilts his head. “I mean, it was mostly done as rape scare by this foster family I lived with when I was really young but it stuck with me.” He offers Zarkon a
hesitant smile, and to his relief Zarkon’s expression softens a little.

They study each other for a long few seconds before Zarkon inhales slowly and leans back in his chair with a thoughtful look. “I have always found sexual abuse to be distasteful. It is a desperate attempt to exert power over someone to assure yourself of your own importance and strength.”

“You’ve literally enslaved entire nations,” Keith points out.

“That is not the same thing,” Zarkon replies.

Keith raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “They tend to go hand in hand.”

“I can see why someone would want to force themselves on another person, that does not mean I approve of it,” Zarkon says, tilting his head as he regards his cup of tea. “I prefer a willing partner.”

“Why?” Keith can’t help but ask.

Zarkon smiles at him. “It is more satisfying to have someone say yes without coercion. Especially if they were initially opposed to it at first. Forcing is such an easy and simple way to get what you want.”

“You’re weird,” Keith says. “But at least that’s a weird I can live with.”

Zarkon huffs and focuses on his tea while Keith goes back to staring at his water.

“So you’d never make me choose between saving my friends and having sex with you?” Keith blurts after a minute of silence. It takes him a moment to raise his eyes to meet Zarkon’s, and he hates he has to ask.

“No. If you and I are ever to have any kind of sexual relationship it will be because you initiated it,” Zarkon replies, his voice absolute.

Keith laughs. “That’ll never happen.”

“We shall see,” Zarkon says, and Keith wants to punch the teasing smirk from his face.

Keith hates him, but he’s not sure why. It should be a relief to hear Zarkon will never ask him for sex, and for the most part it is, but Keith can’t stop his mind from flashing back to last night, and the what ifs his drunken mind had cooked up.

It is a relief, but a small, traitorous, twisted part in the back of Keith’s mind is against it. It’s not attraction or lust, and it’s definitely not love, and Zarkon knows it’s there, and he won’t let Keith hide that need behind excuses. Keith will have to admit it’s there and act on it if he wants to know...

Keith looks at Zarkon, suddenly understanding why he wants a willing partner. It’s not about willingness, it’s about forcing someone to admit to wanting him.

It’s about breaking people.

Keith doesn’t want to break, but if there’s one thing he’s learned it’s that Zarkon is patient, and Keith is not. Zarkon won’t give him an excuse to hide behind. For a second Keith wonders if he could come up with one himself.

He almost chokes on his water at the thought.
Keith tells himself it’s natural curiosity, nothing more. People fantasize about weirdest things, so maybe Keith is just fantasizing about this because he’s suffering from an overexposure to Zarkons. He can ignore it. He can stick to his safe fantasies and flip Zarkon off when Shiro comes to get him.

“I’m gonna clear this mess up,” Keith says, waving at the clothes still spread across the room, and stands.

“Are you keeping that?” Zarkon asks, indicating the clothes Keith is still wearing. Keith looks down, and up at the poorly hidden amusement in Zarkon’s eyes.

“I don’t know yet,” Keith answers, and turns his back on Zarkon.

He’s not entirely comfortable in the outfit, but he doesn’t really want to give it up either. Maybe he can hide it in the back of his drawer and ignore its existence.

Keith is taken to see Haggar a few days later, and he puts on his new clothes for the trip. He feels comfortable in an outfit he got to choose for himself, and the weight of the clothes grounds him. He picked the pants, shirt, and shoes that most resembled his usual style, and though the material feels wrong against his skin he feels like himself.

It’s nice.

Haggar greets Keith with a raised eyebrow, and Keith waves at her in reply. “What are we doing today?”

“Sensory deprivation,” Haggar replies, and at Keith’s cautious and confused expression she adds, “I want to see how it will affect your ability to tap into your bond with the Emperor.”

“Zarkon has told me not to do that,” Keith says.

Haggar’s lips curl up. “I have explained to him why this is important, and he has agreed to allow you to attempt to reach him just today.”

Keith nods slowly. He’s not sure if it’s a good idea, but he strips out of his clothes and puts on the light, skin tight suit that reminds Keith of something a diver might wear. He follows a druid to a round tub that reaches his hip and looks big enough for him to comfortably fit in.

It’s filled with glittering water, and Haggar says it looks like that because of the substance that is going to keep him from sinking.

A druid helps Keith into the lukewarm water, and hands him an earpiece that will allow Haggar to instruct him during the experiment. Keith lays in the water, and lets himself float. The dread he feels when the druids close the lid on the tub isn’t as overwhelming as Keith thought it would be. As per Haggar’s instructions, he does his best to relax and let his mind drift.

It’s strangely comfortable despite the darkness, and Keith is reminded of dreaming.

“There is no need to rush, but try to reach the Emperor,” Haggar instructs Keith, and he nods even though she can’t see him, and lets his mind drift to Zarkon.
It shouldn’t be as easy as it is. Maybe Keith has just been trapped there for too long. For all the
knows he’s been there for a year, maybe even longer. He reminds himself that his hair would have
grown a lot more if it had been a whole year. Maybe Haggar has had the druids cut it while Keith
was unconscious.

Keith becomes aware of Zarkon in stages.

First he gets the sense he's not alone, but it’s not an uncomfortable feeling like it had been in the
cell. He doesn’t realize what’s happening until he gets a sense of curious confusion that’s not his
own. It takes him a second to realize it’s Zarkon’s reaction to his own amusement.

Keith doesn’t know how to express his thoughts like this, so he doesn’t bother. He was supposed to
reach Zarkon, not learn how to communicate telepathically with him.

Zarkon nudges him, and after a second of hesitation Keith tries to copy him. It’s not as easy as he
thought, and it takes Keith a few tries to get it right. Zarkon seems amused by it, and Keith rolls his
eyes.

It’s almost comfortable, and Keith stops paying so much attention to what he’s doing. He lets
Zarkon lead, copying whatever he does to varying degrees of success, and eventually Keith can’t
be sure where his mind ends and Zarkon’s begin.

They’re conjoined and Keith can’t find it in him to care.

Keith knows, instinctively, that Zarkon has to focus on concentrating, and Keith tries not to
broadcast his curiosity too loudly.

A smell of dry desert air and the beginnings of morning heat seems to fill Keith’s senses, and Keith
feels comfortably warm, like a sun is shining down on him. A ghost of a wind blowing through the
wide open planes of the desert seems to kick sand into Keith’s face, and though he knows it’s not
real his nose still tickles and he makes an effort not to rub his eyes. It’s a bittersweet memory that
feels like home, but it’s one that Keith can’t recognize.

_Zarkon’s home._

Keith smiles, and tries to project his appreciation of the sentiment. He’ll have to ask how Zarkon
did that later on.

The impression of the desert fades, and Keith misses it immediately. It hadn’t been exactly like his
little shack, but the familiarity of the desert air had been a comfort.

Keith can feel Zarkon focus his thoughts to one thing only. Keith tires to contain his excitement
and curiosity, and though it’s not easy he manages it.

A sense of something familiar —Keith can’t quite place what — fills him. It’s warm, like Zarkon’s
touch, but different at the same time. Another consciousness. No, more like an impression of
another consciousness. Keith knows it, but he can’t quite place it. Somehow it makes him think of
Shiro.

_The Black Lion._

The dejection that washes over Keith isn’t something he expects. He tries to ask Zarkon about it,
but the impression is already gone, and Zarkon pushes Keith towards a happier feeling.

Keith thinks about fighting it, but he doesn’t want an angry Zarkon in his brain, so he lets it go.
Maybe Zarkon just misses Black. Keith can certainly relate to it.

Zarkon lets Keith poke at his thoughts, guiding him from things he doesn’t want Keith to see to what he doesn’t mind Keith knowing. He doesn’t give Keith more impressions of things, and Keith chooses to believe it’s because it takes a lot out of him.

Zarkon seems to get distracted by something, and Keith hesitates for a moment before deciding there’s no harm in poking a little further. Zarkon can always stop him if he wants to.

Keith can’t quite make sense of the emotions in Zarkon’s mind, and he wishes they could share actual thoughts instead of vague impressions.

Keith prods at Zarkon’s mind, giving Zarkon a chance to stop him before dwelling deeper. Zarkon doesn’t react to him, and Keith acknowledges that he might be too busy with whatever distracted him to stop Keith, but Keith reasons he gives Zarkon a chance to react, and if he doesn’t take him then that’s not Keith’s problem.

Suddenly Keith feels cold.

He’s cold and... alone. He thinks he might get crushed under the weight of it all.

There’s a wall between Keith and everything else living, and he knows it won’t go away even if he’d rage against it with all he’s got. He’d need Red to even have a chance at getting through it, but Red’s not there, and he’s alone.

A flash of white hot anger shoots through Keith, and he can’t breathe.

His whole body spasms, and he breathes in the water. His mind is on fire and he can’t tell what’s him and what’s Zarkon. He wants to get away and shrink back into himself, away from Zarkon.

Zarkon, who is going to kill Keith.

A light blinds Keith and he’s pulled from the tub.

The druids pull Keith to the floor and shove something down his throat. Keith gags, trying to fight the strong arms pinning him to the ground. The druids pull the instrument out seconds before Keith coughs up the water he’d breathed in.

Someone orders Keith to take a deep breath through his mouth, and it takes Keith a few tries to do just that. They make Keith breathe through a thin tube, and the only thing that stops Keith from running are the druids keeping him immobilized on the ground.

“We need to get the water from your lungs,” Haggar says.

Keith tries to let it happen. He knows he can’t live with water in his lungs, but it hurts and he can’t breathe. The druid holding his head still tilts his head back slightly to open his airways a little more.

Eventually the druids pull the tube from Keith’s throat, and they let him cough up any excess water still in his systems before dragging him to an examination table. They check him over, but Keith can’t bring himself to pay attention to them. He can’t get rid of the panic digging its claws deeper and deeper into him.

He’s going to die. He crossed a line and Zarkon is going to kill him.
The sting of pain on Keith’s face brings him back to reality, and he looks up to Haggar’s concerned face. She schools her features into something more controlled the second she realizes Keith is paying attention to her. “Calm down.”

Keith tries, he does, but his lungs refuse to cooperate, and his vision is blurry at best.

Haggar leans closer to Keith and grips his face a little too hard, but it helps Keith ground himself on her touch. “No harm will come to you.”

Keith forces himself to believe her, and focuses on calming his breathing. Haggar doesn't let him look anywhere else but her.

Eventually Keith calms down a bit, and Haggar lets go of him. She leaves Keith there to get himself all the way down from his panic, and though Keith initially misses her anchoring presence he gets himself to a place where he can feel his body and process his surroundings on his own.

He’s shaking and covered in sweat and water, but he can breathe on his own, even if his chest hurts and he has to make an effort to keep his breathing under his control.

“Go take a shower,” Haggar says, appearing by Keith side without a warning.

Keith nods, and though it takes him a minute he gets himself into an upright position he stands up. His legs don’t feel steady, but he doesn’t dare to ask for help, especially when Haggar turns to frown at her druids. They make themselves scarce in a matter of seconds, and Keith heads to the shower doors as fast as he can.

It’s still not fast enough to miss Zarkon storm into the lab.

Keith freezes with his hand inches from the door, and he tries to look smaller than he is so that Zarkon won’t see him. It doesn’t work. Zarkon spots him immediately, and he lets some of his anger seep into Keith’s mind as he starts towards him.

Keith scrambles to open the door, the panic from before clawing at his insides again.

Haggar steps in front of Zarkon, and if Keith was any less busy panicking he might find the incredulous look on Zarkon’s face amusing. “Go take a shower,” Haggar tells Keith without taking her eyes off Zarkon, and Keith hurries to comply.

Keith doesn’t know how to lock the door, but he hopes Haggar is enough to keep Zarkon from murdering him in the shower. Keith lets out a shrill bark of laughter when the thought that it would be an ideal place to kill him from the clean up point of view crosses his mind.

Keith sheds his clothes on the floor and steps into the shower, and the hot water helps him calm back down. Haggar won’t let Zarkon kill him simply because she can’t be sure how Keith’s death would affect Zarkon, and she wants Zarkon alive and healthy.

Satisfied with his reasoning, Keith lets himself stop worrying.

By the time he steps out of the shower most of his panic has alleviated, and he feels exhausted. He picks up a towel and starts drying his hair, his eyes closing against his will. If he gets thrown into a cell he’ll sleep for a week and worry about getting out when he wakes up.

“I have promised Haggar to hear your explanation before deciding what I will do with you,” Zarkon’s voice breaks through the haze in Keith’s brain, and he starts, his hands stilling for a few seconds before he sighs and continues rubbing the towel against his hair.
“I couldn’t tell what was you and what was me,” Keith admits, and drops the towel to his shoulders so that he can face Zarkon. “I’m sorry.”

The corners of Zarkon’s mouth twitch down and his expression hardens. “That is not an excuse.”

“I’m kinda new to all this. I didn’t know what I was doing and you didn’t tell me to stop. I didn’t mean to pry, or whatever,” Keith replies, and starts rubbing the towel against his skin. He sees Zarkon narrow his eyes, but he remains silent, so Keith focuses on getting himself dry.

The silence grows uncomfortably heavy, and Keith bites his lip. “Is that why you want me in your quarters?” Keith feels Zarkon still before he lifts his eyes to meet his. “Because you’re lonely?”

“My reasons are none of your concern,” Zarkon replies, but everything about him is too tense.

Keith tilts his head and regards Zarkon, and he feels like he finally sees him. “You don’t want to come to an empty space after being alone all day.”

“I am rarely alone,” Zarkon says, but the stiffness in his body and voice betray him.

Keith gives him a sad smile and wraps the towel around his waist. “Just because you’re around people all day doesn’t mean you’re not alone. It just makes it worse.”

Keith walks up to Zarkon, keeping a close eye on the minute shifts in his expression. “Is that why you want the Black Lion back?”

“The Black Lion was made for me,” Zarkon replies, but Keith shakes his head as a thoughtful frown appears on his face.

After a second Keith’s frown turns sad, and he doesn’t miss the way Zarkon grinds his teeth together for a fraction of a second at the change.

Keith smiles, and it feels bittersweet at best. “If you lock me up you’re gonna be alone again.”

Nothing about Zarkon’s appearance changes, but Keith knows his resolve weakens.

“Kito,” Zarkon starts, stopping himself with an almost rueful quirk of a smile, and takes a deep breath before correcting himself. “Keith.”

Keith nods and waits, not daring to ask what Zarkon called him at first.

“I do not want you poking around in my head,” Zarkon continues.

“Likewise,” Keith says, and shrugs. “I could use some rest.”

The smile Zarkon offers him is barely visible, but for once it’s genuine, and Keith returns it almost without thinking. “I believe that might be beneficial for both of us at this time. Put your clothes on, unless you wish to walk through the hallways in nothing but a towel.”

Keith snorts and shakes his head, and goes to put his clothes on. He doesn’t tell Zarkon to give him privacy, but after a few moments of shuffling his clothes around Keith hears the door open and close.

He gives Haggar and Zarkon a moment to talk before joining them, and after Haggar makes sure Keith is healthy and his lungs are fluid free he follows Zarkon out of the laboratory.
Gotta say, the only thing I sort of regret cutting from this was the few lines about Zarkon's mother. Because that was there, but it was unnecessary, but it was fun. On another note, this chapter is probably the only one I really think would have benefited a lot from having multiple pov, but since I decided to write this from one pov alone I had to stick to it. I dunno, I could always do a deleted scenes post once I've finished this story and put it there?

Also, I'm gonna give a cookie to anyone who figures out what kito actually means.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

If last chapter was easy to write then this was easy to edit. And credit to my cats for being an inspiration for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zarkon ignores Keith for a few days, then he spends the rest of the week keeping Keith busy with books, Marzila, and Haggar’s tests.

Keith doesn’t bring it up. If Zarkon wants to pretend Keith isn’t there Keith prefers he do it without sending him into a cell.

Besides, Keith is happy to spend time with Marzila, even though she puts him through workouts that put the strict training regime of the Garrison to shame. They leave Keith exhausted and bruised, but he loves every second of it.

“You’re holding back,” Marzila says, disapproval coloring his voice.

“I’m not,” Keith insists and grips his staff a little tighter.

“Yes you are. I know you hit harder than that. I can’t train you if you don’t utilize your full potential.” Marzila grabs the staff from Keith and takes it back to the equipment room, leaving Keith to ponder over her words.

He’d always been told to hold back and control himself, to make sure he didn’t hurt anyone. He sighs, his shoulders slumping. Maybe he is holding back.

Marzila returns, and Keith offers her a stiff, apologetic smile. “I’ll do better next time,” he promises, and Marzila punches his shoulder a little too hard.

“You’d better.”

Keith rubs his shoulder as he follows Marzila out of the training room. She leads him to the showers and waits outside until Keith is done before taking him to the elevator.

“I wasn’t given clear instructions on where to take you so I can either take you to the druids, or if you want to tag along to my room you can. I’ll figure out where to take you after I’ve got clean clothes on.” Marzila glances at Keith for confirmation, and Keith nods, excited to see what Marzila’s room is like.

“You’re not gonna get in trouble for this though, right?” Keith asks when Marzila starts the elevator. She shrugs, but Keith doesn’t miss the way her shoulders tense.

“I don’t think so. My orders are to keep you under guard. You are under guard, and I’m going to figure out where you’re supposed to be so it’s not like I’m kidnapping you,” she says, sounding sure of herself.

Marzila leads Keith through the hallways, all the way to a quiet floor where the walls are lined
with marked doors. Keith tries to subtly take it all in. Marzila stops by a door and presses her hand to the control panel by it.

The door opens and she waves Keith in with a smile.

Keith takes the room in with curious eyes. There’s a small table with two chairs pushed haphazardly under it, and a desk with a computer terminal and a pad in the corner. There’s also shelves on the walls and a spacious looking closet.

The beds, similar to what Keith had but a lot comfier looking, are in a small alcove. There’s also a Galra there, lying on a bed and staring at Keith with wide eyes while Marzila kicks off her shoes behind him.

“That’s Valo and this is Keith,” Marzila says and waves between them. “Sit where ever you want,” she says to Keith.

Keith glances around, and takes a seat by the table. Valo pushes herself up to her knees, her sharp eyes locked on Keith and her fluffy ears pressed flat against her head.

“Why is he here?” Valo asks, her voice tense.

“I couldn’t leave him alone. He’s okay, don’t worry,” Marzila replies. “Try to be nice.”

Keith makes a point of not looking at Marzila while she changes her clothes, knowing she probably wouldn’t care but not quite able to ignore his own upbringing just yet.

Valo frowns at Keith, but she pushes herself off the bed and comes to sit by the table with him. “So you’re a Paladin of Voltron,” she starts, her tone politely conversational as she rests her elbows on the table and crosses her arms.

“I guess so,” Keith replies.

“You guess? So you don’t know or you don’t think you are?” Valo leans forward, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

Keith shrugs. “I piloted the Red Lion. I suppose that makes me a Paladin.”

“You don’t sound very sure,” Valo replies.

“Lay off the kid,” Marzila cuts in, tying her hair in a loose bun and slumping on the chair in front of the terminal.

Valo leans back, smiling as she studies Keith’s face. “I hear you met Haala.”

Keith nods. Marzila snorts in the background. “I know him.”

“I know him mostly through Marzi and his roommate. Cute guy. The roommate, not Haala,” Valo rambles happily, and Keith glances at Marzila, unsure of how he’s supposed to handle her.

“That’s nice,” he offers, and it seems to be enough for Valo.

“Leave the kid be Valo, seriously. He’s socially awkward,” Marzila groans, and throws a rolled up shirt at Valo’s head. She grabs it from the air and tosses it back to Marzila.

“Did they figure out who accessed his account?” Marzila asks, turning to face Valo.
“No. Sorry,” Valo replies, her ears drooping before she turns her attention back to Keith. “So what do you do all day?”

“What are you, a shrink?” Keith counters, receiving baffled looks from both women for his trouble.

“What’s that?” Valo asks.

“A mental health professional.”

Valo shakes her head. “No, I’m just curious.”

Keith wishes she wasn’t, but he doesn’t know how to say so without offending her.

“You didn’t answer me,” Valo points out.

“And he doesn’t have to.” Marzila offers Keith an encouraging smile and pulls out a small bowl. She removes the lid and offers Keith and Valo the dried berries. Valo takes a handful, while Keith picks only a few.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Keith says, unsure of how Zarkon would take it if he found out Keith had told his subordinates about his living arrangements.

“Okay,” Valo replies, sounding a little disappointed.

Marzila lets out an excited noise. “I know where you’re supposed to be now.” She turns to smile at Keith. “The Witch’s labs.”

“Let’s go, then,” Keith says and stands up. Marzila follows suit, and they head out after bidding Valo farewell.

"Something is bothering you,” Zarkon states. It’s the most direct invitation to conversation he’s offered Keith in days, and it throws him off for a second. Keith has counted nine days of awkward avoidance, so that makes it a week, not counting in standard days.

“Marzila says I need to stop holding back, but I’ve always been told I shouldn’t use my full strength in training. I’m trying to recondition myself,” Keith replies, wondering if Zarkon has disconnected Keith’s security barrier already.

He doesn’t test it.

Zarkon studies him, and Keith almost asks if they’re acknowledging each other again. It would be a nice change.

“You cannot learn combat if you do not utilize all your abilities when training,” Zarkon says.

Keith lifts an unimpressed eyebrow. “That’s what Marzila said. But humans are taught not to injure their sparring partners while training.”

“Would you benefit from a partner you would not mind hurting?” Zarkon asks, tilting his head as he regards Keith with mild curiosity.
Keith shakes his head, frowning at the suggestion. “I know she can take whatever I throw at her, it’s not that. It’s just the mindset I have to change.”

Zarkon studies him for a second longer before turning his attention to the pad in his hands. Keith hopes the matter has been dropped, and he’s weighing the pros and cons of asking Zarkon to let him move around when Zarkon waves him closer.

Keith relaxes, and pushes himself to his feet. He makes a quick detour to the table to get himself a snack before walking up to Zarkon and slumping on the ground near his feet, bumping his forehead against Zarkon’s knee.

“Are we talking again?” He asks, knowing it might not be wise but unable to resist the urge to fill the silence with something.

Zarkon doesn’t remove his eyes from his pad. “Not if you insist on bothering me while I work.”

“Sorry,” Keith mutters and focuses on the crunchy bits of dried fruit he’d picked as a snack.

It’s almost comfortable, but most of all it’s familiar, and Keith relaxes as the silence stretches into long minutes. He finishes his snack and lies on the floor for the lack of anything better to do, staring at the ceiling while he considers the absurdity of his life.

He gets to pondering Shiro’s disappearance when Zarkon drops his pad on the couch and stands, nudging Keith with his toes as he walks past him. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Keith asks as he hurries to follow Zarkon to the door.

“You will have to deal with your issues sooner or later, and I have nothing better to do at the moment,” Zarkon replies nonchalantly.

Keith stumbles. Excuses flash through his mind as he tries to decide on the one that will get Zarkon to abandon his idea. Nothing sticks for long enough for Keith to think worth voicing.

This is also the first time Keith sees Zarkon leave his private wing out of his armor, since he had changed into one of his many layered suits earlier, and he doesn’t know how to feel about that either.

Zarkon strides to the elevator, and Keith still has no idea how to tell him this isn’t a good idea.

“What are we going to do?” Keith asks.

“I want to see what you do wrong,” Zarkon replies.

Keith swallows, his throat dry, and stares at the wall intently. A nervous tremor runs through his body as the elevator comes to a stop, and Zarkon leads him to the familiar training room.

Keith waits in the middle of the room while Zarkon goes to get him a staff, his brain refusing to process the situation in a satisfactory way. Zarkon returns and offers the staff to Keith with a pleasant look on his face, and Keith accepts it after a second of hesitation. His gaze shifts slowly from the staff to Zarkon, unsure of what he’s supposed to do next.

“I want you to hit me,” Zarkon states.

Keith lets out a disbelieving bark of laughter. “You want me to do what?”

“Hit me,” Zarkon repeats. “You have tried to kill me once already so I assume I am not asking too
much of you.”

Keith blinks at him.

Zarkon lets Keith take a moment to process the situation, and after thinking it over Keith sighs and shrugs. If Zarkon wants Keith to hit him, then Keith is going to do just that. He nods and grips the staff a little tighter before taking a fast swing at Zarkon, aiming for his side.

Zarkon steps back, dodging Keith’s swing in one smooth motion. Keith narrows his eyes at him and takes a second to assess the situation before striking again.

Zarkon steps out of the way again, but Keith moves to strike him without losing momentum. Zarkon moves out of his way, stepping behind Keith, and trips him to the ground without a warning.

“You are not taking this seriously,” he says.

Keith pushes himself off the floor and throws a glare at Zarkon over his shoulder. “I’m trying, okay? You’ve got a few millennia more experience that I do.”

“Then stop trying and start doing. Nothing has ever been accomplished with that attitude,” Zarkon suggests with a sweet smile, and walks away from Keith.

Keith scoffs and pushes himself off the ground. He grips his staff, and approaches Zarkon with newfound determination.

It becomes a dance of sorts where Zarkon moves out of Keith’s reach with ease, and Keith chases after him. Every now and again Zarkon knocks Keith to the ground, always smiling to himself with his head held high, like getting Keith to fall is some kind of a great accomplishment.

Keith pushes himself off the ground, smirking as he charges at Zarkon again. He’s not surprised when Zarkon steps behind him and shoves him back to the ground.

Despite his initial hesitancy Keith quickly grows to enjoy the game. He becomes more bold, his strikes growing faster and more intent.

He aims for Zarkon’s ribs, expecting the sidestep but not seeing Zarkon grabbing the staff coming. Keith raises a questioning eyebrow and tries to yank the staff back, to no avail.

“You are still trying,” Zarkon remarks with an amused glint in his eyes.

“You could stay still for a second,” Keith counters, putting his entire weight behind pulling the staff from Zarkon’s grip.

Zarkon smirks and lets go of the staff.

Keith lands on the ground with a huff, and he watches Zarkon stroll across the room. His heart drums in his chest, more from excitement than anything, and he takes his time standing up. He circles the room, knowing full well Zarkon is keeping a close eye on him, and takes a moment to breathe while he rethinks his tactic.

“Are you tired?” Zarkon asks, seemingly kind.

“No,” Keith replies, pretending he’s not a little insulted.

“Will you admit defeat?” Zarkon asks.
Keith looks at him, and knows he can say yes without repercussions. Zarkon will be disappointed in him, but that’s it. Keith could end it there.

But there’s no way he’d ever let Zarkon win. The only way he’ll stop before landing a hit is if he dies or passes out. Zarkon gives him a curious head tilt and stops to observe him, standing exactly in the middle of the room.

Keith stops and turns to face Zarkon. “Over my dead body.”

The look Zarkon gives Keith is a mix of pride and fondness. Keith takes a second to bask in it before lunging at Zarkon, knowing he’ll miss but needing to get closer if he ever wants to land a hit.

As Keith expected Zarkon steps aside and behind Keith, close enough to touch if he wants, but rather than spin around Keith drives the staff at Zarkon from under his arm. He misses, but if the fast step to the side Zarkon takes is any indication he wasn’t expecting it.

Keith swirls around, but Zarkon grabs the staff before Keith can land a hit. Keith pulls and Zarkon lets go, sending Keith sprawling on the floor again.

It gives Keith an idea, and he has to bite back a smirk so he won’t let Zarkon in on it.

Keith lets Zarkon grab his staff and knock him over a few more times. It’s a delicate balance between keeping Zarkon amused and repeating the action so many times he grows tired of it. Keith has to put all of his skills at reading Zarkon to use.

On the fourth time Keith waits until Zarkon pulls on the staff, and uses the momentum to jump on him.

He grabs a hold of Zarkon’s collar and wraps his legs around him to steady himself. Keith doesn’t stop to enjoy the surprise evident in Zarkon’s face before headbutting him as hard as he can.

Keith’s brains bangs against his skull, and he groans at the flash of pain. He’d fall to the ground if Zarkon’s arms weren’t suddenly around him, holding him up and steady despite the dizziness taking over Keith.

Zarkon laughs, his eyes filled with amused fondness as he looks at Keith. “You are full of surprises.”

“And bad ideas. You’ve got a really hard skull,” Keith grumbles as he rubs his forehead, sure he feels a bump forming already.

Zarkon’s smile fades. “Are you alright?”

Keith nods and forces a brief smile. “Yeah. It’ll pass in a sec.”

Zarkon lowers Keith to the ground and waits until Keith gives him a nod before letting go. They put a little distance between them, and Keith starts planning his next attack.

Keith gets a rhythm going, and when he’s sure Zarkon is focused on the pattern he set up he hits the floor and tangles his legs with Zarkon’s, disrupting his balance. Keith has a second realize he didn’t think it through before Zarkon in on him, pinning him to the ground with a hand on his chest.

Galra reflexes.
Keith curses and drives the staff against Zarkon’s side with all the force he can muster. It doesn’t do much else than make Zarkon flatten his ears at Keith before he twists the staff from Keith’s hands and throws it across the room.

“You can stop squirming now,” Zarkon says. Keith doubles his efforts to shake Zarkon off, much to Zarkon’s amusement.

Zarkon gives Keith a few seconds to stop before he sighs, and traps Keith’s legs and arms against the floor in one swift motion. Keith stills, taken aback by the suddenness of it all, before he grits his teeth and tries to twist his wrists free from Zarkon’s hold.

“You cannot win,” Zarkon says, and the lightness of his voice just infuriates Keith further.

“Screw you!” Keith twists his wrist until it hurts, but Zarkon won’t let go.

Zarkon leans down until his face is inches from Keith, a delighted smile gracing his lips. “Galra.”

Keith freezes.

When he’s sure Keith won’t move Zarkon lets go of his left wrist, and runs his fingers across Keith’s sweaty forehead, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

Keith blinks, then he punches Zarkon’s face as hard as he can.

Zarkon pulls back and Keith gets his leg free. He kicks Zarkon’s chest, and though he thinks the only reason Zarkon gets off of him is indulgence Keith still charges after him and pushes him on the ground.

Keith straddles Zarkon’s chest, pushing his shoulders to the floor and knowing the only reason he can do it is because Zarkon allows it for his own amusement. Keith scowls, and pushes his weight against Zarkon more intently.

Zarkon licks the blood off his lip and peers up at Keith with curious eyes, and raises an expectant eyebrow. Keith hates it, he wants that look gone.

“Are you hoping I will submit?” Zarkon asks, the dark undertone of his voice sending a shiver down Keith’s spine. He hadn’t thought about it, but now that Zarkon has put the idea in his head he can’t shake it. He can tell Zarkon knows it too.

Zarkon breathes slowly as he considers Keith, and after a few seconds he does his almost shrug before relaxing against the floor. He turns his head to the side, baring his neck to Keith even though he doesn’t remove his gaze from Keith’s face.

“It is the Galra in you. Perhaps it would benefit you to follow that side for a change,” Zarkon says in a soft voice. His eyes are too sharp on Keith.

Keith swallows. He wants to get up but his body refuses to move. He has no idea what he’s supposed to do.

Zarkon tilts his head further. “I want you to follow that instinct. Consider it an order if you have to.”

Keith takes a shaky breath and licks his lips. He doesn’t know what he should do. His movements are hesitant when he slowly moves his hand from Zarkon’s shoulder to his throat.
Keith ignores the barely there flash of a victorious smile on Zarkon’s face and focuses on his hand on Zarkon’s throat instead. He doesn’t know if he’s doing the right thing, but Zarkon doesn’t tell him to stop.

Keith feels like a cub being taught how to be a real lion.

Zarkon swallows, and Keith tightens his hold on him minutely, marveling at the feel of Zarkon’s throat working under his hand.

Keith tightens his hold a little more, and after stopping for a second he pushes Zarkon’s head back, forcing him to expose his throat more. Zarkon tenses, and Keith almost lets go until Zarkon forces himself to relax under Keith’s hold.

“Take your time,” Zarkon says, but his words barely register in Keith’s mind.

Keith takes a steadying breath and glances at Zarkon, getting a reassuring smile in return. He can see the tenseness on Zarkon’s features, but he’s making an effort to stay still and relaxed for Keith’s sake, and it warms Keith’s heart. It can’t be easy for him.

Keith squeezes Zarkon’s throat, but not tightly enough to cut off his airflow. Just a warning they both know he won’t be able to follow through. Zarkon’s calm facade still breaks for a blink of a second, betraying his urge to fight and reverse their positions.

Zarkon’s claws brush against Keith’s thigh and Keith swats his hand away before quickly going back to pressing Zarkon’s shoulder to the floor. Zarkon relaxes, letting Keith pretend he has any control over the situation.

Keith presses his thumb against Zarkon’s skin right above his collar, feeling his steady pulse, and he’s filled with a sudden urge to bite that point. He can feel Zarkon’s eyes on him, and he knows Zarkon is fully aware of what he feels.

The need burns under Keith’s skin, filling him up until he feels like he’s going to burst. He leans down, just a little, without meaning to. Zarkon stills under him, his breathing slowing down even as his heart beats a little harder, beckoning Keith to come closer.

Zarkon had told Keith to follow his instincts. He’d made it an order.

The only thing Keith hears is his own heart hammering in his ears, and he squeezes his thighs against Zarkon a little harder to ground himself. It doesn’t feel as real as Zarkon’s pulse against his thumb.

“Keith,” Zarkon says, his voice quiet. Keith can’t tell if it’s a warning or an encouragement.

Keith leans down until his breath brushes against Zarkon’s skin. Zarkon doesn’t stop him, despite being as tense as a drawn bowstring.

Keith should stop. He shouldn’t follow through the overwhelming urge to bite down. It would be weird, and wrong, and Zarkon would never let him live it down.

Zarkon presses against Keith’s hand minutely, and Keith lets his head fall. He breathes in the familiar scent of Zarkon, like a breeze of an ancient desert storm. He shouldn’t try to bend it to his will.

“Let go.” Zarkon’s voice is barely above a whisper.
Keith stills.

He presses his face into the crook of Zarkon’s neck, not letting himself think of what he’s doing. He wants to tear into Zarkon. He wants to make sure Zarkon knows him, that he knows what they are.

The only time he’d felt anything like this was with Shiro.

Keith nips at Zarkon’s pulse point without thinking, only realizing what he’s doing when Zarkon stops breathing for a few beats. Emboldened, Keith takes a deep breath, tightens his hold on Zarkon’s throat, and bites him, not hard enough to leave a mark, but hard enough to be felt. Zarkon starts, like he’s about to attack Keith, before stilling and letting Keith do what he wants.

It lasts only for a few seconds.

Keith still shudders from the rush of power that settles low in his belly, simmering hot in a way Keith isn’t sure he can handle. He presses his face into the soft fabric of Zarkon’s clothes and lets his muscles grow lax, slumping on Zarkon without a word.

Zarkon presses his face into Keith’s hair. “Better?”

Keith gives him a small nod in return, suddenly too exhausted to talk. Zarkon runs his claws along Keith’s thighs and up his sides, sending shivers through Keith’s body. He buries one hand in Keith’s hair, and drapes the other one over his back, drawing lazy patterns against Keith’s side.

Keith relaxes against his will.

Zarkon flips them over without a warning and Keith can’t stop the alarmed yelp from escaping his lips. He stares up at Zarkon with wide eyes, his heart racing.

“What the hell?”

Zarkon responds by nipping Keith’s jaw before pushing himself up and walking away.

Keith stays on the floor, his mouth hanging open as he tries to process what just happened. He doesn’t dare to touch the spot on his jaw burning from the half second of contact. He has no idea what happened, but he’s grateful for his shock keeping him from reacting in a potentially bad way.

Keith sits up before he can start thinking what it all means. It’s only important if Keith lets it be. Zarkon returns to his side and Keith notices the staff has disappeared, presumably back to the equipment room.

“What Dinner?” Zarkon tilts his head, seemingly oblivious to Keith’s distress.

Keith nods and takes a deep breath before pushing himself up to shaky legs. He’ll have an easier time ignoring whatever passed between them if he’s busy. Zarkon flashes him a knowing smile as he walks past Keith to the door.

Keith fists his hands and digs his nails into his palms to distract himself as he follows at a safe distance.

He’ll figure things out when he’s alone.
Marzila is mildly impressed at Keith’s new, slightly more determined attitude, and it’s almost enough to make Keith’s one time training session with Zarkon worth it, but the knowing look in Zarkon’s eyes when his attention is on Keith makes him wish he’d never let Zarkon know what was troubling him in the first place.

The worst thing is that Zarkon doesn’t trap Keith on his cushion again.

Keith doesn’t know what to do with his new freedom, so he stays on the cushion unless he needs to use the bathroom or fill his glass of water. After a few days Keith gets angry at himself and moves to lie on the couch instead.

Five days into being able to move around Keith decides to take a long shower, not caring if Zarkon has something to say about it when he returns. The hot water relaxes him, and Keith lets his mind wander.

His thoughts drift from dinner to the battle strategies Zarkon’s commanders had talked about, to Shiro and the Castle of Lions. He hopes the others are doing okay. If they have managed to form Voltron without him then Keith isn’t too worried about their ability to continue their fight against the empire, but he’s not oblivious to the fact that if they can form Voltron, they don’t need him anymore.

Keith shakes his head and grabs the soap. There’s no point in getting sad over something he can’t change.

He rubs the soap into his skin in slow, relaxed movements. He should start operating on the basis that he’s never going to leave the Galra.

Even if he was somehow rescued he’d be putting his friends in danger. Zarkon would find him, and something tells Keith he’d be furious to see someone else have him.

The best thing for Keith is to face reality and accept it.

It wouldn’t be that bad. Sure, he’d have to live with the enemy, but if Keith were able to convince Zarkon that he has no intention of escaping or leaving, he could lead a better life. He could spar with Marzila and work with Kano and his team, and learn more about the empire whenever Zarkon wants him to accompany him on board meetings, maybe try to do some damage from the inside.

He could fit in with the Galra.

Zarkon could teach him about their ways and habits. He could teach Keith about himself.

Keith lets out a soft laugh. It might not be such a good idea — the memory of the way their sparring session had ended is still too clear in his mind. It had been strange how natural it had been, and though the whole thing makes Keith uncomfortable on hindsight, he can’t help but be somewhat grateful for Zarkon letting him follow his instincts for a change. He’d encouraged it, in fact.

No one else has ever done that.

If Keith focuses he can still taste Zarkon on his tongue. He can still remember what it felt like to pin Zarkon to the ground, even if he’d only been indulging Keith. In a way it had been more exciting to know Zarkon could have thrown him off at any moment he pleased.
Keith fights back the low heat pooling in the pit of his belly. He doesn’t have time for that, especially not in Zarkon’s shower. He’d probably smell it if Keith were to get himself off there, and even if Keith could somehow mask the smell Zarkon could definitely feel it through their connection.

Keith sighs and turns off the water. He’s got better ways to spend his time than worrying about not getting to jerk off in a shower because he’s psychically connected to Zarkon. He’d much rather spend his time coming up with a plan to convince Zarkon of his intention of not trying to escape again.

It won’t be easy, but Keith hopes he can do it.

Once he’s dried off and applied the oil that keeps his skin from turning into sandpaper Keith stops short of putting on his clothes. If he intends to get Zarkon to listen to him and believe him he’ll need to have everything from his looks to his words carefully chosen.

Keith discards the loose green shirt and pants, and goes to get the shirt with the open back Zarkon had liked, but rather than pairing it with the wrap skirt he puts on a pair of black pants and the boots with the two inch heels. After a little hesitation he picks up the shawl and wraps it around his shoulders.

He feels cheap dressing up for Zarkon, especially when he can’t be sure it will be to Zarkon’s liking, but he’s not going to leave anything to chance. When his hair dries he does it up on a ponytail, but it doesn’t take long for it to loosen up. The ribbon isn’t designed to hold human hair that’s softer and smoother than Galran hair is.

Keith curls on the couch and listens to the latest book Zarkon has given him until a druid brings a tray of tea along with his typical evening snack. Keith takes it to mean Zarkon is going to join him soon.

Keith finishes his bowl of what look like blue carrot sticks before busying himself with setting the tea in the way Zarkon likes it. He has a few minutes to himself and he ends up pacing around the room, trying to keep busy while he waits.

When Zarkon steps through the door Keith freezes on the middle of the room. Keith stares at him with wide eyes, feeling like he’s been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing. The door closes behind Zarkon while his eyes drift from Keith to the table where the tea is waiting, and then back to Keith.

“What do you want?”

Keith’s shoulders slump. “Nothing.”

Zarkon frowns, disbelieving and disappointed, and Keith shrugs as his eyes fall to the floor. “Just your attention,” he admits quietly.

“You have it. You need not to try so hard,” Zarkon replies before walking past Keith to the bedroom. Keith doesn’t move until Zarkon returns, having changed his armor into a suit.

Keith joins Zarkon at the table, and sips at his tea as he tries to think of the best way to convince Zarkon he’s decided to stay with the Galra. The tea holds no answers, but he doesn’t expect it to. Maybe he should ask Zarkon about his day first. It would be a good way to open a conversation.

“You have something on your mind,” Zarkon says, his tone mildly curious even though his eyes never leave his cup of tea.
Keith isn’t sure how to respond.

“Tell me what bothers you,” Zarkon says, setting his cup down and giving Keith his full attention. “Be blunt if it is easier.”

Keith relaxes. Being blunt is something he’s good at, and with one last sip of his tea he turns to face Zarkon, his back set straight.

“I’ve been thinking about this whole situation with us,” he starts, and waits until Zarkon inclines his head in acknowledgment. “If I were to escape you’d just track me again, right?”

“Obviously,” Zarkon replies, a small smile playing on his lips.

Keith presses his lips into a hard, disapproving line before he continues, “so there’s no point in me trying to escape. If I’d go back to the Castleship I’d just be leading you back to my friends and you’d kill them. If I go anywhere else I’d be putting other people in danger, and you’d be pissed at me.”

“That is a fair assumption,” Zarkon says.

Keith nods. “So I’ve decided I’m not going to leave.”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow.

“You said I could make a home here,” Keith blurts before he can think better of it. “If that’s still a possibility. I mean, I can’t leave, so I might as well face reality and settle in.”

Zarkon takes a deep breath and ponders over Keith’s words, making Keith more and more nervous with each passing second. Keith is sure his reasoning is solid, and there’s no reason for Zarkon to not believe him. Zarkon must know Keith wouldn’t willingly put his friends in any danger.

“What if your friends were to come for you? Would you go with them?” Zarkon asks. Keith knows better than to let the light tone of Zarkon’s voice fool him.

Keith takes a moment to consider his answer. What would he do if Shiro were to show up and offer Keith a chance to get back to the Castle? He’d want to go, there’s no doubt in Keith’s mind about that, but he also knows Zarkon would be following him.

“I’d tell them to leave me,” Keith says, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. “And if they still took me away I’d leave them as soon as I could. I couldn’t live with myself if I got them hurt.”

Keith turns to glare at Zarkon. “And I’ll never forgive you if you hurt them. I’ll hate you forever.”

“That implies you do not hate me now,” Zarkon says, almost dismissive.

Keith opens his mouth to argue, but stops. “I don’t know how I feel about you.” His lips quirk in amusement as he turns his eyes to Zarkon. “You’ve got a talent for pissing me off though.”

Zarkon smiles, much to Keith’s relief. “On some planets that would be interpreted as you being attracted to me,” he muses, placing his elbows on the table and resting his chin on his intertwined fingers.

A burning desire to punch Zarkon replaces Keith’s amusement. “There you go again.”

Zarkon grins, baring his sharp teeth, his eyes crinkling. Keith hates it almost as much as he hates the smile he can’t bite back.
“Keith?” Zarkon’s pleasant voice drags Keith’s attention to him.

Zarkon smiles. “Would you like to see a nebula?”

Chapter End Notes

You should've seen cats play when I got the kitten last summer. Because our older cat Nemi is 5kg and she's big and fluffy and completely unfazed by anything. And then this 500g kitten came and tried to beat her. It was hilarious especially since Nemi is used to playing with big dogs and she had to pretend like this little soot ball was a threat to her. So of course I had to write something like that here.

I also updated Chasing the Sun if you guys follow that.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I've got a thing I wanna mention but I leave it to the end notes.

As for this chapter... Well.. I almost posted the second chapter of Chasing the Sun after this one but I think this is better if you've read that before going into this, even if it's not in any way necessary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith doesn’t have time to process what happens.

Zarkon gives him a large satchel like bag made of dark leather, and orders him to pack his clothes. Keith barely has the sense to grab his reader as he shoves everything he thinks he might need into the bag.

Keith has barely finished packing when a druid comes to take their bags, but Zarkon doesn't wait to see if they follow him as he pulls Keith through the door.

Zarkon drags Keith down the hallway to the elevator without a word, and Keith has to concentrate so that he won’t stumble on the heels. He should have changed his shoes instead of just packing another pair in his hurry.

Keith would have put on different clothes if he'd had the chance. Rushing after Zarkon in the clothes he’s wearing is drawing too much attention to him, and he wraps the shawl tighter around his shoulders. The only thing keeping the officers from gawking at him more is their shock at seeing their Emperor march down the hallway out of his armor.

Zarkon leads Keith to an airlock where a shuttle and the druid with their bags wait for them, though Keith has no idea how they managed to get there before them. Zarkon doesn’t stop until he has guided Keith into the shuttle.

They have barely settled in when Marzila dashes through the still open airlock, her breathing labored. She bows to Zarkon, and drops her bag at her feet as she sits down. She offers Keith a quick smile before focusing on getting her breathing to slow down.

Keith doesn’t know how Zarkon arranged it all so fast, but when the shuttle starts his heart jumps into his throat and he presses himself against the wall, and he stops caring about it so much.

He never imagined leaving the Central Command would be such a big thing to him.

The shuttle ride takes less than a minute, and soon Keith is standing in the hallway of what he can only guess is a battle cruiser.

Keith resists the urge to spin in his spot to see everything in one go, even if the hallway looks just like the ones in the Command Ship. Zarkon instructs the druid to take their bags to his quarters while Keith turns to Marzila who has stayed at a respectful distance behind Zarkon, raising a questioning eyebrow but only receiving a shrug in return.
“I was not expecting to be graced by your presence.” The nigh hysterical voice of Cenzi pierces the air, and Keith spins to face him just in time to see him bow.

Zarkon doesn’t smile, but he adapts that dangerously pleasant expression that promises nothing good to anyone. “As you are currently not occupied with anything I thought you could take us for a small trip.”

Cenzi inclines his head. “We will be ready to leave at the start of the next quarter, once—”

“Now.” Zarkon’s voice leaves no room for arguing, and though Cenzi seems uncomfortable he does a remarkable job at pretending everything is fine.

“We are supposed to wait for Haggar. She wishes to participate in a test we intend to run,” he says.

“She will join us when she is ready. She will bring any equipment you might need with her, so there is no need for you to worry about loading the ship,” Zarkon replies.

Keith glances at Marzila, who offers him a minute shrug. She doesn’t know what’s going on either.

“In that case I see no reason why we can’t leave right away.” Cenzi glances at Keith and Marzila, but doesn’t say anything about their presence. “Do we have a particular heading?”

“I will tell you when I decide on it,” Zarkon says, and though it’s clearly not what Cenzi wants to hear he doesn’t ask further questions. His gaze flickers to Keith again, and his ears twitch before he can control his reactions.

“The lieutenant will be in charge of Keith when I am otherwise occupied,” Zarkon says, glancing at Marzila. It explains why Marzila is there, and a quick glance at her tells Keith she’s happy to know the reason for it too.

Cenzi seems relieved to not have to worry about Keith. “I will arrange quarters for her.”

Cenzi bows, and gives Marzila a look that tells her to follow him before he turns on his heels and marches down the hallway. Marzila hurries after him, only stopping to offer Zarkon a quick but respectful bow.

Once they have disappeared around the corner Keith clears his throat, and Zarkon turns to look at him. “Wanna tell me why we’re in such a hurry?” Keith asks.

“No.” Zarkon heads down the hallway without prompting Keith to follow.

Keith sighs, frustrated though not surprised, and follows Zarkon. Their pace is only marginally slower than before, and Keith wonders where they are going. The druid with their bags doesn’t come with them, so Keith assumes they are not heading to their quarters.

Zarkon takes Keith to a room with tables and comfy chairs arranged around them, and large windows on the far wall. Keith’s brow creases, but he doesn’t ask about it.

“The officers come here to spend their free time,” Zarkon explains, but Keith’s interest is already focused on the view of the Command Ship.

It looks so much bigger from the outside.

Keith swallows. It doesn’t feel real to be looking at the ship he’d spend so much time being a prisoner in from the outside. Zarkon pulls up a chair from the nearby table and joins Keith by the
window. He doesn’t share Keith’s fascination with the view, he’s much more interested in studying Keith.

It takes time — not as long as Keith expects, but still enough for him to notice — but eventually a soft tremble runs through the ship. Slowly they move away and the Central Command grows further from Keith’s view, and Keith’s heart beats a little faster with every passing second.

Even as he sees the Central Command falls behind them Keith has to convince himself he is no longer there.

“It is a rather impressive sight,” Zarkon muses. Keith doesn’t offer him anything in reply, even if he has to agree.

The ship jumps into hyper drive, and Keith can’t help but press his hands and face against the glass as he watches the space distort around the ship and fly by the window. It’s a sight like he’s never seen before, and he can’t find it in him to care about Zarkon’s eyes on him.

“I hope you will enjoy this trip,” Zarkon says, his pleasant voice holding an undertone Keith doesn’t want to examine too closely.

“Me too,” he still replies.

“Is there anything else you wish to see while we are traveling?” Zarkon asks.

Finally Keith removes his face from the glass and turns to Zarkon. “Can I go on a planet?”

Zarkon’s eyes narrow for a fraction of a second.

Keith sighs. “I already told you I won’t try to escape again. Send guards or come with me yourself. This isn’t gonna work if you don’t trust me.”

Zarkon leans back and regards Keith with a thoughtful look.

“You could take me to see your planet. I’d be surrounded by Galra, how would I run from there?” Keith crosses his arms, then drops them to his sides when he decides he doesn’t want to start an argument, even by accident.

“Last time I trusted someone my homeworld was destroyed,” Zarkon says, shutting Keith up without much effort.

Zarkon tilts his head. “We used to call people not of our race yeita vazays. It translates poorly, but roughly said it means people not of our world. Outworlders. Now, as you know, many call them yeita tsotyes. People not of our kind. Outsiders.” Zarkon offers Keith a mirthless smile that falls off his face too soon. “What I am trying to say is, our language is like us, based on emotion more than anything. The people I trusted last time took everything from me, and as much as I would like to trust you to return to me, I am afraid cannot do that.”

Keith chews his lip for a moment. “You’ve been telling me repeatedly to earn your trust, though.”

“And I do trust you. To an extent,” Zarkon replies, his expression turning sour. “Unfortunately I have grown fond of your presence and find myself unwilling to allow you the chance to leave.”

Keith’s jaw almost drops. “You like me and you don’t want to lose me?”

Zarkon inclines his head, though he does so reluctantly. “It is an inconvenience.”
Keith turns back to the window. Of course he’s an inconvenience. He shouldn’t have expected anything else.

“We can discuss you going planetside after dinner,” Zarkon offers with a sigh.

“Sure,” Keith says, but what little joy he had has left his voice. Zarkon notices it too, but he doesn’t say anything about it.

Keith isn’t sure if it’s a good thing or not.

They don’t reach a decision on Keith’s possible trip to a planet, and after dinner Zarkon leaves Keith alone in their quarters while he goes to talk about travel plans with Cenzi.

It gives Keith time to look around.

The space isn’t as large as Zarkon’s quarters back in the Command Ship. The connected bathroom is smaller, and the computer terminal Zarkon has in his office is located in a quiet corner of the main room. There’s still a seating arrangement, but it’s comprised of two chairs instead of three and a couch that’s smaller than Zarkon’s, and though Keith can stretch out on it, he doesn’t have as much space as he did on the couch in Zarkon’s quarters in the Central Command.

There’s still a separate bedroom, but it’s not as big as Zarkon’s.

Keith grows tired before Zarkon returns and he curls on the bed with his reader, waiting for Zarkon to come and tell him where he’s supposed to sleep.

Maybe he’ll get another cushion.

The book Keith is listening to is engaging enough to keep him from falling asleep, so he’s more or less awake when Zarkon joins him. Keith doesn’t open his eyes when Zarkon sits by his side, instead he waits until the next break in the book before pausing the recording and taking the headphones off.

“We will reach the Karziya Nebula tomorrow,” Zarkon says.

“Okay,” Keith replies and pushes himself up. “Where do I sleep?”

Zarkon smiles a little too sweetly to be sincere. “Here. Unless you would rather spend your nights on the floor.”

Keith isn’t sure he wants to spend his nights in bed with Zarkon, but he decides it’s preferable to having to sleep on a floor without a cushion. “I’m tired,” he says as he pushes himself off the bed.

Zarkon inclines his head, but he doesn’t follow Keith out of the room. Keith tries not to think too much into it while he makes a quick trip to the bathroom before picking a shirt from his bag and returning to the bedroom.

Zarkon is still there, and he’s pulled out his pad while he waited for Keith to return.

“I hope you’re not planning on staying there all night,” Keith says, going for joking, though he does have some genuine concerns.
“No,” Zarkon replies and tosses the pad on the bed.

Keith rolls his eyes, but strips out of his clothes and pulls the shirt he’d picked up on. It was the closest thing Keith could find for a t-shirt, and he’s much more comfortable sleeping in the same bed with Zarkon wearing it. He crawls under the covers and turns his back on Zarkon, deciding ignorance might get him to leave him alone.

But Zarkon doesn’t leave.

“When I said my fondness for you is inconvenient I did not mean you are an inconvenience.”

Keith groans. He had hoped to forget about that particular chat, but of course Zarkon has to bring it up when Keith wants to sleep. “Can’t this wait until morning?”

“No. You have been visibly upset since we left the recreation room, and I do not want to wake up to you trying to suffocate me in the dead of night.” The seriousness of Zarkon’s voice gets a laugh out of Keith.

“I’m not gonna suffocate you in your sleep,” Keith chuckles as he turns to face Zarkon. “No matter how tempting it may be.”

Zarkon smiles. “Nevertheless. I would like for you to understand that you are wanted here.”

Keith bites his lip and frowns. He wants to believe Zarkon, but he doesn’t know what else he could have meant. How could Zarkon liking him be a problem if Keith himself isn’t the problem? How is that even—

“You can’t break our connection without losing me.” Keith smiles despite himself. He’s not the problem after all.

“It is rather unfortunate,” Zarkon agrees.

Keith doubts he should be feeling grateful. It’s not a protection against Zarkon killing him, but for once Keith himself isn’t the problem.

Before he can think better of it, Keith bolts up and throws his arms around Zarkon’s shoulders. Zarkon freezes, and Keith is a little proud of himself for catching him off guard, even if he’s starting to doubt his actions. It takes Zarkon a few seconds to tentatively wrap his arms around Keith, and Keith tightens his hold and buries his face in the crook of Zarkon’s neck for just a moment.

Zarkon huffs, soft and amused. “Get some sleep. You will need to be well rested tomorrow.”

Keith nods, but takes a few seconds to pull away. “Good night,” he says as he closes his eyes, hoping Zarkon takes the hint and leaves him to sleep.

Zarkon’s pad beeps repeatedly in the background, and Keith glances over his shoulder at Zarkon, surprised to see him look like he’d just won something.

Zarkon runs his hand through Keith’s hair with a satisfied smile gracing his lips. “Sleep well.”

Keith doesn’t know what the message said to make Zarkon so happy, and Zarkon leaves before he can ask.
Keith spends the next morning with Marzila since Zarkon had been too busy with something he said wasn’t anything Keith should concern himself with.

Marzila takes Keith to the mess hall, and they sample the breakfast options at their own pace, chatting about whatever comes to their mind.

“Do you know any of them?” Keith asks, nudging his head towards the other patrons of the mess hall.

Marzila shakes her head. “I haven’t had the time to fraternize with them yet.”

Keith picks at his dried meat strips and bread. “I didn’t know Zarkon would drag you here too.”

“It’s fine. I’d been cooped on the Command Ship for long enough,” Marzila replies. “Besides, I get to spend time with you.”

Keith returns her smile. He’s glad she’s there, she’s good company, and it’s nice to have someone other than Zarkon he knows on the ship.

They decide to take a tour of the ship after breakfast, and though Keith receives an annoying amount of stares they have become easier to ignore as Keith has grown used to them over time.

Marzila explains that the ship they are on is primarily used for research. It explains why Haggar wanted to come onboard. Keith just hopes Zarkon didn’t hijack the ship just to take him to see a nebula. He tells Marzila about it, and the sound she lets out is a strange cross between amused laughter and alarmed cry.

“He wouldn’t do that,” she says, her voice colored by a nervous giggle.

Keith frowns at her as they stop in an intersection. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just that I find it hard to believe he’d do that for you,” Marzila says, almost apologetic. “You don’t take enemy combatants to see a nebula. No one has ever done that.”

Keith raises an unimpressed eyebrow at her. Marzila makes a face. “I mean you gotta admit it sounds a bit...” She bites her lip, and fidgets, her expression somewhere between uncomfortable and amused.

Keith’s eyebrow raises higher as he tries to decipher the meaning behind Marzila’s pained expression. When he realizes what she means his confusion turns to mortification.

“He’s not flirting with me!”

“That’s why there has to be some other reason for us being here,” Marzila replies immediately. “Of course he’s not interested in you.”

Keith crosses his arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Marzila waves vaguely at him. “You’re all pink and round eared.”

Keith’s eyes widen. “What is it with aliens and ear shape?” He stands straighter and points at Marzila. “And just so you know, you’re not exactly attractive by human standards either.”
Marzila stares at Keith with an incredulous expression. “Well I’m glad we agree on this.”

“So am I,” Keith snaps.

They stare at each other, expressions offended and angry, until Keith’s lip quirks and Marzila’s ears twist. They burst into laughter so loud they startle the officer walking past them. Keith has to lean on Marzila when he topples over. The tears in his eyes blind him, and his stomach hurts already. He hasn’t felt as good in months.

They end up sitting on the ground, trying to form words through their laughter and failing. Keith leans on Marzila’s shoulder and she wraps her arm around him, and presses her cheek into his hair.

“I assume there is a reasonable explanation for this,” Zarkon’s voice cuts through their laughter, shutting Marzila up in a heartbeat, but Keith keeps chuckling.

Keith looks up to Zarkon with a bright grin on his face while Marzila sits up straighter and lets go of Keith. Zarkon, to his credit, doesn’t seem surprised to find them on the floor, only curious as to why.

“Do you think I’m attractive?” Keith asks just to annoy Marzila a little further, barely keeping himself from laughing.

Marzila lets out a strangled noise that she barely manages to muffle with her hands, but Keith is too focused on the way Zarkon’s eyes widen just a fraction, too little for anyone who hasn’t spent months studying his expressions to notice.

Zarkon stands a little taller, prompting Marzila to scramble to her feet while Keith remains lounging against the wall.

Keith’s grin falters. That’s not a no.

“I am not interested in indulging you in your childish games,” Zarkon states. Marzila stands stiffer, all traces of amusement drained from her.

Keith sighs and pushes himself off the ground. He’d rather forget all about this particular exchange. “I assume you wanted something?”

“We are nearing your nebula. The best place to observe it is down the hall,” Zarkon replies, plastering a polite smile on his face. “She may join us,” he adds, nodding towards Marzila.

Keith glances at her, raising an inquiring eyebrow. Marzila mutters something about a call waiting for her with an apologetic smile.

Zarkon inclines his head, accepting her excuse, and leads Keith to the same rec room as before.

Keith hurries to the window. He doesn’t mean to get excited, but the idea of a nebula is suddenly more appealing than he ever thought it would be. He can see it in the distance, and he smiles at the sight.

Zarkon takes his seat by Keith’s side, his expression flashing with amusement, but Keith ignores him.

The nebula is like Keith imagined it would be, and nothing even close to it. The images he’d seen of them in the Garrison were more or less accurate, but they did nothing to prepare Keith to actually seeing a nebula up close. It’s bigger than Keith imagined, and the colors are so much
brighter and more alive than in pictures.

Keith wants to touch it.

“What did you call it again?” Keith tilts his head towards Zarkon without taking his eyes from the nebula.

“Karziya Nebula,” Zarkon answers.

Keith nods, focusing on the sight before him again. It’s captivating and he doesn’t want to miss a second of seeing it.

“Would you like to go through it?” Zarkon asks, and Keith can only nod enthusiastically in return. He hears Zarkon tap on his pad, and slowly the ship turns and takes them in.

The nebula is even more breathtaking from within. Keith’s jaw drops, and he presses his face on the window to see the sight before him better. He wishes for a glass dome from which he could observe the sight.

“You seemed to enjoy yourself with the lieutenant,” Zarkon says, breaking the long silence.

Keith shrugs. “She said you bringing me here sounds like flirtation and then we got into an argument over whether or not we’re attractive.” He glances at Zarkon. “What would you have said if she wasn’t there?”

Zarkon takes a deep breath and leans back in his seat. “I have not given it much thought.”

“So you don’t think I’m attractive?” Keith smiles despite himself. He shouldn’t tease Zarkon, especially not like this.

Zarkon tilts his head. “Your ears could be a different shape, but overall you are not displeasing to look at.”

Keith turns to look at Zarkon, an amused if disbelieving smile tugging at his lips. “What is it with you people and ears? Allura was the same.”

“Races that possess touch sensitive ears tend to focus on them as an aesthetic aspect,” Zarkon replies. It makes Keith pause.

“Your ears are erogenous?”

“If touched correctly,” Zarkon says. “Though our ears are not quite as sensitive as the Altean’s are.”

“And that’s why you got an ear obsession,” Keith concludes with a small smile.

Keith focuses on the nebula, deciding ignore Zarkon’s comments about his appearance for now. Of course Zarkon can’t let him have it.

“You should not look the way you do.”

Keith sighs, and lets his forehead bump against the window before facing Zarkon. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your Galra heritage should be visible.” Zarkon stops, almost hesitant, and glances at the window. “Do not worry about it now, enjoy the view.”
Keith bites his lip, his brow creasing, but he doesn’t press the matter and focuses his attention back on the sight before him.

Zarkon doesn’t approach the subject of Keith’s appearance again, and Keith doesn’t bring it up.

When Zarkon decides to go to bed Keith follows him and curls by his side without prompting. He doesn’t think of how he fits in Zarkon’s arms, or how he doesn’t mind being there.

Zarkon’s breath is warm in Keith’s hair. Keith blinks, studying the wall in the dim light Zarkon has left on for his benefit as he absently runs his fingers along Zarkon’s arm wrapped around his middle. He’s too comfortable.

Keith twists around, careful not to wake Zarkon who still shifts and tightens his hold on Keith, though Keith isn’t sure if it’s a warning or an attempt to keep him close.

Either way he has no intention of going anywhere.

Zarkon looks peaceful in his sleep. It’s almost like looking at another person.

Keith swallows. It would be so easy for him to lean forward and press his forehead to Zarkon’s. He could say it was just an accident, that he didn’t want the soothing calm it would bring him. He could do it. Zarkon is fast asleep and all Keith has to do is move the tiniest bit forward.

Keith inches closer until his forehead touches Zarkon’s. It takes a second, but even in his sleep Zarkon presses into the contact. Their noses bump, and Keith’s breath hitches.

If he shifted just right he could kiss Zarkon.

The shock of his realization keeps Keith frozen in place. The nervous excitement bubbling in him pushes him to move forward.

He doesn’t want to do it. It’s just a silly urge that will pass, like standing on an edge of a long fall and thinking what it would be like to jump. It will pass and Keith will laugh about it later. He doesn’t want to kiss Zarkon.

He doesn’t.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm doing fic prompts this Christmas, and I'm giving you guys a head start because why not. So if there's anything you wanna see from me just drop me an ask on tumblr.

Anything on this 'verse like prequels, scenes from other pov, or other stuff you just wanna see is fine. It doesn't have to be this 'verse though, so if you wanna see something else or other ships that's fine too. Basically anything goes this time around.

And I will be posting all the fills here too so you don't have to keep an eye on the blog.
Next update this weekend, maybe?

Hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little shorter than the last ones, but it should have enough going on to be interesting. And hey, I'm caught up on my posting schedule! How cool is that?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith spends the next day in their quarters listening to the book Zarkon gave him. His mind isn’t in it, though. He can’t stop thinking about Zarkon’s latest comment about his heritage. It had been something Keith had thought about, but he would have preferred it if no one ever brought the topic up.

Halfway through the book Keith stops the recording with a groan and pushes himself up to his feet from the couch he’s been lounging on. He heads to the bathroom and stares at the mirror, trying to imagine himself looking more like a Galra. He can’t see it, he can’t imagine himself with the yellow eyes and the purple fur. He doubts he could handle the ears either.

He sighs. Zarkon probably wanted him to be conflicted about his appearance. Keith will have to talk about this with him. He’ll have to make sure Zarkon knows he’s not affected by his comments. He is not going to make Keith doubt who he is.

When Zarkon returns with a druid bringing their dinner in tow, Keith is ready for him.

Zarkon raises an eyebrow at Keith’s hard expression and crossed arms, but he joins him at the table without a word and waves the druid away the second they are done setting the table. “Something is bothering you,” he observes, his attention on the food before him.

“Why should I look different?” Keith bites his tongue, wishing he’d thought his opening line out before speaking. “I look fine the way I am, even if you don’t think so. And your opinion on my looks doesn’t matter to me.”

Zarkon inclines his head indulgently. “There is nothing wrong with your appearance. I merely meant that Galra genes are often a dominant trait, and you show no sign of being part of our people. Everyone of the other half-breeds we have encountered have shown obvious signs of having Galra blood.”

Zarkon meets Keith’s skeptical eyes. “The ears and eyes are usually the most obvious sign, though most inherit our complexion and height as well. You show none of these signs. In fact, Haggar had to do extensive blood work on you to find out about your genetics.” He tilts his head, looking thoughtful for a moment. “She believes your genes have been purposefully changed.”

“How’s that possible?” Keith asks, trying not to be genuinely curious.

“Your mother must have been skilled in genetics, and had the necessary tools to manipulate your genetics. Haggar says it is easier to do to an unborn child.” Zarkon would look sympathetic if his eyes weren’t so keenly observing Keith’s reactions to his words.

Keith pulls his plate closer and picks at the salty meat, letting his bangs fall to his face to hide his
expression from Zarkon.

“Haggar is sure she can reverse the damage done to you,” Zarkon continues.

Keith’s angry eyes snap to him. “There’s no damage been done to me. So my mother wanted me to fit in with humans, so what? Better that than leaving me there looking like an alien.”

“She could have brought you to us if she was so concerned for your safety. Obviously she was capable of leaving that planet, since you never knew her,” Zarkon replies, annoyingly calm.

“Maybe she thought it was better for me to stay on Earth rather than grow up in your empire,” Keith counters.

Zarkon shakes his head. “No respectable Galra would ever abandon their child. It is not our way. Even if we do not approve of mating with other species we have never turned down a child of one of our own. You would have been perfectly safe among us.”

“‘Mating with other species’?” Keith raises an eyebrow.

Zarkon tilts his head. “It is an old tradition dating back before we began expanding our Empire. Members of other species rarely integrate well into our society, and since we began our expansion such relations have proven to be... Compromising.”

Keith snorts. “You mean getting involved with members of other species makes your loyal subjects sympathize with people you want to enslave?”

Zarkon smiles pleasantly, much to Keith’s annoyance. He’d hoped for some kind of a reaction, not that mask of polite, empty kindness.

“Disloyalty can be dealt with,” Zarkon says, taking his glass in his hands and observing the liquid in it with mild curiosity.

Keith frowns. “You kill your people for falling in love?”

“Not unless we have to,” Zarkon replies, setting his glass down and turning his attention to Keith. “Our first priority is to relocate the new family unit to a safer, neutral location. If it fails we estimate the level of danger posed and consider our options. Sometimes imprisonment is enough. We try to avoid orphaning our children or separating them from their family whenever possible.”

Keith doesn’t have an answer to Zarkon. He focuses on his food to busy himself as he thinks of a way to continue the conversation. “So my mother was most likely a scientist since she could manipulate my genes, who abandoned me on a strange planet with my father despite it being bad Galra form. You know anyone like that?”

“Unfortunately no,” Zarkon replies, and under the humor of his voice Keith hears something akin to genuine apology.

Keith sighs. “Well, I don’t want anyone poking at my genes.”

“Alright. But I expect you to consider it nonetheless,” Zarkon replies.

Keith resists the urge to roll his eyes and shoves a large piece of meat into his mouth. Zarkon is going to have to settle for him looking the way he does.
The ship returns to its normal schedule the next day.

During the few days they have been there Zarkon has taken up a habit of tormenting his subjects by hovering behind their backs while they work, claiming he’s only doing it to make sure their job performance is up to standards before Haggar’s arrival. Keith thinks he’s doing it because he enjoys the fear it causes to his subjects.

Still, since Zarkon is busy Keith is left with little to look forward to besides his time with Marzila.

When Keith leaves to meet Marzila he’s caught off guard by how the crew has changed their attitude towards him seemingly overnight from curiosity to poorly concealed hostility. Keith doesn’t understand why, and when he asks Marzila about it her expression turns grim. “It’s not something you should be talking about with me.”

“Why not?” Keith asks, frowning at her in confusion.

“It’s not my place to decide what information you should be given,” Marzila replies.

Keith doesn’t know what to make of it, but he knows Marzila chose her words carefully. There is something he should know about, and it’s important enough that she doesn’t feel comfortable divulging it. He’ll have to make Zarkon tell him what’s going on, and that’s exactly what he’s going to do as soon as he returns to their quarters.

An officer walks past their table, giving Keith his seventh sneer since he sat down an hour ago, and Keith decides that Zarkon can spare him a few minutes of his time. He shoots to his feet and marches across the mess hall, earning bared teeth and flattened ears for his trouble.

“Where are you going?” Marzila rushes after him. Keith is out of the door by the time she catches up to him.

“If you can’t tell me why everyone suddenly hates me I’m going to find someone who can.” Keith doesn’t slow down as he marches to the nearest elevator.

To Keith’s relief it’s empty, and he orders it to take him to the bridge despite Marzila’s protestations. “I’m not going to cause a scene, I’m just gonna ask to talk to Zarkon.”

Marzila doesn’t look convinced, and she debates stopping the elevator up to the point the doors open and Keith rushes out of them. There’s no rule telling Keith not to go see Zarkon if he needs to.

“I don’t want to get in trouble because of you,” Marzila says as a final effort short of physically stopping Keith from opening the bridge doors.

“You won’t, Zarkon told me I could talk to him whenever I need to.” It’s not a lie, but Keith knows this isn’t what Zarkon had meant either.

Keith nearly runs the last few meters to the bridge doors, fearing Marzila is about to get physical with him. Keith may have gotten quite skilled at fighting against a Galra opponent, but he’s aware of Marzila’s skills and he’d rather not challenge her when she’s not training him.

“We are not doing this,” Marzila declares a second before the bridge doors open. Keith cocks an eyebrow at her and steps through the doors before Marzila can grab him.
Keith dodges her and rushes in, catching the bridge crew by surprise. The surprise vanishes quickly though, and it’s replaced by curiosity and displeasure.

Cenzi turns from the commander he’d been talking with to glare at Keith. “You are not permitted to enter the bridge.”

“I wanna talk to Zarkon,” Keith counters, taking a second to enjoy the collective look of shock and dismay he receives. “I thought he might be here.”

Cenzi looks around the bridge. “The Emperor is not here.”

Keith makes a face at him. “Can you call him here or tell me where he is, then?”

The commander by Cenzi’s side raises her eyebrow and steps back as Cenzi’s expression darkens just for a second before he schools a more calm expression on his face.

“You are not in a position to ask us to do anything,” Cenzi says, tilting his head and regarding Keith with unconcealed distain.

Keith can feel his blood pressure rising. He’s had enough of the Galra and their attitude towards him. The anger rising within him lasts only for a second before a calm Keith knows isn’t safe takes its place. He saunters a few steps forward with a condescending smile mirroring the one Cenzi is wearing on his face.

“I want to talk to Zarkon, and the way I see it you’re the best person to get him here,” Keith says, staring Cenzi down despite having to crane his neck up to do so.

Cenzi doesn’t frown, but Keith can see his desire to do so in his eyes. “You should leave now.”

Marzila makes an urgent sound somewhere by the door, but Keith refuses to budge. No Galra is going to walk over him.

Keith takes the final step into Cenzi’s personal space, crossing his arms. “As far as I’m concerned you can take that upstuck attitude of yours and shove it up your ass, but you’re not telling me what I should do.”

The commander by Cenzi’s side hides her bark of surprised laughter behind her hand, and someone by the consoles lets out a strangled noise. Cenzi’s ears twitch.

Keith will regret it later, but at that moment he doesn’t care. “I don’t give a fuck about your opinions. I don’t care if you’re the most important person in the universe, that doesn’t mean I have to respect you.”

The commander, still stifling her laughter, moves past Keith towards the doors. Keith doesn’t remove his eyes from Cenzi. He thinks he sees a vein begin to throb on his temple, and he doesn’t bother stopping a satisfied smirk from grazing his face.

They stare at each other in static silence. Keith’s heart beats loudly in his ears, and he vibrates with the urge to do something, but the cold fury in Cenzi’s eyes keeps him from moving, more from a desire to not lose than anything else.

The tension becomes almost too much to bear, but neither Cenzi nor Keith refuse to budge. One wrong shift of the air could set them at each other's throats, tearing at each other until one of them is dead. Keith is ready for it. Cenzi isn’t a fighter, and Keith is full of anger, he has the advantage.
“Do be careful commander, unlike you that one fights like a well trained Galra soldier.”

Keith almost swirls around at Zarkon’s amused voice. Cenzi tenses, but he doesn’t remove his gaze from Keith. Zarkon stays behind them, his eyes on the back of Keith’s head making Keith shiver.

It lasts for a long second during which no one breathes, then Cenzi looks up to Zarkon. “He barged in and demanded your presence in a most disrespectful way.”

“Respect must be earned,” Zarkon counters.

Cenzi’s jaw clenches, but he stays silent, and offers Zarkon a brief, courteous bow.

“Keith?”

Keith turns to face Zarkon, trying to appear at ease even though turning his back to Cenzi makes him tense in dread and anticipation. Zarkon steps back and tilts his head towards the door. Keith takes the hint and follows him out of the bridge and down the quiet hallway.

Marzila doesn’t follow them beyond leaving the bridge.

“Challenging Cenzi is not wise, especially not when you are on board his ship,” Zarkon muses as they near the elevator.

Keith shrugs. “He was pissing me off.”

Zarkon hums, but doesn’t say anything until they are in the elevator and the doors close behind them. “You made an enemy of him.” Zarkon glances at Keith. “You also impressed everyone else on the bridge.”

Keith shrugs again. He doesn’t care about impressing the Galra, not when he’s in such a foul mood.

“What do you want?” Zarkon asks, his tone getting a harsher edge to it.

“Everyone’s been glaring at me like I killed their favorite pet, and Marzi said I’d have to ask you about it. I got tired of the looks so I figured I’d find out what’s going on,” Keith replies.

Zarkon doesn’t reply the unasked question and Keith doesn’t press it. He follows Zarkon out of the elevator when the doors open, and Zarkon leads him into a small conference room. He orders Keith to sit down, and though Keith does as he’s told he feels cold despite the heat of the ship.

Keith tries to relax, but it’s proving increasingly hard. Zarkon sitting on the edge of the table by his side does nothing to ease his mind.

Zarkon hands Keith a pad with a long list of some kind, and though they both know Keith can’t understand a word he still scrolls through it dutifully. “What’s this?”

“Casualty reports,” Zarkon replies. Keith raises a questioning eyebrow at him. To his surprise Zarkon adopts a somewhat sympathetic if solemn look. “A quarter after we left the Central Command it came under attack by the joint forces of a rebel group and Voltron.”

Keith sits up, his eyes widening in shock and excitement. They had come for him. They had finally come for him. Keith’s excitement vanishes in an instant, his gaze dropping to the table and the pad on it.

They had just missed him.
If he had just said no when Zarkon asked him to leave the Command Ship he could have seen Shiro again.

“They knew you were not there. An unauthorized transmission was sent from our system not a varga after we left. If they had wished to rescue you surely this was their best chance to do so, as you are under less protection than before at the moment. They simply wished to attack the Central Command when it was not at full strength.” Zarkon sounds almost apologetic.

Keith throws him a withering glare. He doesn’t believe a word Zarkon is saying. There’s no way his friends would have left him behind on purpose. If they had known he wasn’t in the Central Command they would have come after him.

“We have a record of the transmission, if you wish to see it,” Zarkon offers.

Of course there is a record. It’s probably not real, but there’s always the chance that it is. Maybe they had attempted to weaken Zarkon in order to keep him from coming after them once they come and rescue Keith.

That has to be it. He suffocates the hint of doubt creeping into his mind, refusing to believe in anything but the possibility of being rescued.

“That’s why everyone suddenly hates me.” Keith’s smile is bitter, and he shakes his head.

“You are a Paladin. They place blame on you because you are here, and the other Paladins are not,” Zarkon says.

Keith gets the anger, even if he had nothing to do with the attack. He could stay hidden in their quarters for a day or two until the situation calms down again. Zarkon takes in a deep breath, but Keith doesn’t look up until he feels a hint of unease in his mind that’s not his own.

“I am left in the unfortunate position of having to do something about this situation,” Zarkon says.

Keith clenches his jaw, knowing what Zarkon means and hating it. “I doubt you’ll find them. But I get why you’d have to look.”

Zarkon turns visibly uncomfortable. “I could find them now if I chose.”

A confused frown falls on Keith’s face as he looks up to Zarkon, not understanding why he seems so uncomfortable, almost pained. The realization hits Keith before he’s ready. His face falls and time seems to stop for a small eternity before starting up again way too fast.

He returns his attention to the table, grateful when his hair falls to cover his face.

All Zarkon has to do is break their bond and he can find the Black Lion, and hunt it until Allura grows too tired to move the Castleship or it breaks down again. Zarkon can send fleets after the Castleship while they are alone out there with no one to help them.

“Why haven’t you broken our bond yet?” Keith asks. It’s easier than asking why Zarkon hasn’t killed him yet, even if they both know it’s what he means.

Zarkon laughs, soft and sardonic. “As I have told you, my affection for you is inconvenient.” He offers Keith a brief, forced smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

Keith’s own smile is more of a grimace, and he drops it after a second. Zarkon’s admittance should make him feel something else than hollow sadness.
“Haggar will arrive in two days. I will decide what to do by then,” Zarkon continues as he stands up. He straightens his cape and turns to face Keith. His expression softens as he reaches to cup Keith’s face, running his thumb across Keith’s cheek.

“All you need to concern yourself with is the knowledge that, no matter what, I will make sure that you are taken care of and comfortable, right here by my side. I will not abandon you.”

Keith nods, not knowing what else he’s supposed to do.

“I will have your friend come get you. It is not wise for you to walk around alone right now,” Zarkon says, and lets his hand drop from Keith’s face before turning away and walking out of the room.

Keith slams his fists on the table and blinks against the burning of his eyes.

Marzila comes to get Keith, and he tells her to take him back to his quarters. Zarkon’s quarters. Their quarters, at least until Haggar arrives.

“Just let me know if you need anything,” Marzila says when she leaves Keith in the empty hallway where his destination is. Keith offers her an absent minded nod and walks away from her.

He’s going to die, he knows it.

It won’t matter if he’ll physically survive the separation from Zarkon, taking the bond out will destroy his mind. Zarkon not casting him out the second it happens is a small and bitter comfort when he knows his friends are going to be hunted down.

Keith takes a hot shower, hoping it will relax him and help him think. It doesn't, but at least he’s clean.

He tries to think of ways to make Zarkon keep their bond intact, but he can’t come up with anything worthwhile. Maybe he should agree to let Haggar make him more Galran looking. It would be a small price to pay for keeping the Black Lion out of Zarkon’s reach.

Maybe he could use Zarkon’s affection for him against him. It wouldn’t be easy, especially in two days, but Keith isn’t about to give up without a fight. He suspects Zarkon would be disappointed if he did.

Despite the grim situation, Keith smiles. He wouldn’t want to disappoint Zarkon like that. He’s not sure if he can play the mind games the way Zarkon does, but he’ll have to try.

Zarkon doesn’t return to their quarters all evening, and though Keith wants to stay up and wait for him, he decides the best course of action is to pretend everything is fine and get some rest. He’ll need all the energy he can get if he intends to take on Zarkon on his own game.

The bed is strangely cold without Zarkon, and Keith tosses and turns until burying his face in the pillow that smells faintly of Zarkon. It’s not much of a comfort, but eventually Keith drifts asleep.

He barely stirs when Zarkon joins him and wraps him in his arms a little more urgently than usual.
Chapter End Notes

This is going to be a ride, so bear with me. Next chapter should be up on the 20th.

I hope you enjoyed this!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

This is sort of an interesting chapter because this is actually the original ending of the previous chapter and the original beginning of the next chapter put together.

And reworked and edited about a gazillion times.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Zarkon doesn’t stay with Keith for long enough for Keith to even begin to start influencing his decision making. He orders Keith to stay in their quarters for his own safety, unless he’s with Zarkon or escorted by Marzila or a druid. Keith doesn’t argue with him on that. It’s not like he has a chance to say anything before Zarkon has walked out of the door.

Keith can’t decide if it’s worse than having him stay.

A sense of hollowness takes over Keith. Everything around him seems to be faraway, like there’s a layer of cotton between him and the rest of the world.

Maybe it’s his seemingly inevitable death just a few days away.

Keith has never put too much thought to his death, always assuming it was something that would happen far away in his future. Even when he had become a Paladin of Voltron he hadn’t thought he would be dying. He’d accepted the possibility, and decided he’d give his life willingly if it meant protecting the universe, but even then it hadn’t been real. Not in any way that mattered.

It’s real now, and Keith doesn’t know how to feel about it.

One day before Haggar’s arrival Keith grows angry with himself. He’s not the type to just roll over and accept death. He’s not going to let Zarkon just kill him and toss him aside.

It’s not an option.

While Zarkon joins his commanders on the bridge, Keith remains in their quarters, trying to think of a way to make Zarkon keep him alive and connected to him.

Survival is the only option he has, if not for his own sake then for the sake of Shiro and the others.

Keith sits cross-legged on the couch, a deep frown marring his face. He could reason with Zarkon, but even Keith can see that from Zarkon’s perspective getting rid of their bond is the best decision if he wants to find Voltron fast. There’s nothing Keith can do about that, and he can’t offer Zarkon an acceptable alternative way of tracking Voltron, so he movies to another option quickly.

Maybe he can convince Zarkon he’s more valuable as he is, as opposed to dead or brain damaged.
beyond repair. He doubts it, but it’s more likely to work than reasoning logically for his continued existence over finding Voltron. He’s not sure how he’d go about it though. He can’t offer Zarkon anything of value without putting his friends in danger, and he is not about to share information on them.

He decides to leave it as plan B.

Keith groans, unable to decide what he should do. He should have done this yesterday, when he still had more time. He shouldn’t have let his emotions get the better of him.

He pulls his legs up and presses his forehead to his knees.

There has to be a way out of this mess. There has to be something that will make Zarkon want to keep their bond intact. There has to be something, but Keith can’t see how he could possibly compete with a ten thousand year old obsession.

Zarkon’s interest in the Black Lion isn’t based purely on wanting a weapon. If it was, Keith is sure Zarkon could have build something to match the power Voltron has a long time ago. No, Zarkon wants the Lion because of the bond they share. He wants it because the Lion matters to him. Zarkon has an emotional connection to the Lion, and he wants it back.

Keith’s head snaps up.

Zarkon wants the Lion back because of an emotional connection, but Keith has somehow, by some miracle, managed to form an emotional bond of his own with Zarkon. He had said he liked Keith, after all. There’s no way someone like Zarkon just admits to liking someone.

That’s his in.

As Zarkon had told him, the Galra are an emotional race, and Keith can use that to his advantage. No matter how controlled Zarkon is, no matter how well he hides his emotions and feelings, they are there. And Keith knows Zarkon is lonely. Deeply, profoundly lonely, and at that moment Keith is the only thing easing that loneliness.

Keith doesn’t know if he can compete with the bond Zarkon has with the Black Lion. He’d had the Red Lion only for a little while, and the bond they had formed is something he misses deeply. Zarkon had spent decades deepening his bond with the Black Lion.

How could Keith possibly compete with that?

But maybe it’s not about him competing with the Lion. Maybe Keith can offer a different kind of a bond. No matter how deep the connection Zarkon has to the Black Lion, it’s not flesh and blood that Zarkon can have a conversation with and hold in his arms and do things like sparring and dinners and go on borderline dates to a nebula.

It might be the only thing Keith has going for him.

Keith wraps his arms around his legs and rests his chin on his knees. He’s not good at manipulation. He prefers straightforwardness and he can’t lie well, especially not to Zarkon who can more or less read his thoughts, so that’s out of the question.

He’ll have to stick to the truth, or at least close to it.

It’s the best option Keith can come up with in such a short time, but he’s not sure he can commit to whatever appealing to Zarkon’s affection might bring him.
Keith chews his lip, wondering about the lines he had sworn he’d never cross. If the others aren’t coming for him, are they worth of Keith giving himself up to Zarkon?

Keith shakes his head. Of course they are. There’s no question about it. And besides, Keith has to keep Zarkon from the Black Lion for the sake of the universe as well.

The question that most troubles him is whether or not he’ll be willing to form a deep enough bond with Zarkon to keep himself as the preferable option for the Black Lion.

Keith sighs, wishing the answer would be easily available to him.

Dinner that evening is eaten in tense silence. Zarkon has been in a foul mood ever since their little conference room chat, and though he hides it exceptionally well Keith can feel the sourness seeping through their bond.

It makes Keith hesitant to speak, but he knows he must if he wants to live through the next day.

They are halfway through dinner when Keith clears his throat. “Haggar is coming tomorrow?”

“Yes. I will brief her on the situation when she arrives,” Zarkon replies, setting his utensils down. “If you require something at this time, I am willing to give it to you.”

“Leave our bond alone,” Keith replies without hesitation.

Zarkon sighs quietly before facing Keith, his expression bordering on sympathetic. “I do not see how that would be possible. I must find the Black Lion and do something about Voltron’s attacks against the Empire, and I have run out of excuses to keep our bond intact.”

Keith slams his fork down on the table. This isn’t going the way he wanted. He takes a deep breath, finding some sense of equilibrium, and faces Zarkon with a more calm demeanor. He has to stay in control of himself if he intends to convince Zarkon to keep him around.

“You’ve got other ways of finding Voltron,” Keith starts before rethinking his approach. “And I understand what the Black Lion means to you, but it can’t give you this” — Keith motions between them — “you’re going to be alone again.”

“I will not be alone, I will have my Lion,” Zarkon counters.

“But you can’t have dinner with the Lion. You can’t have the Lion in your quarters or in your bed,” Keith argues, hoping his plan will work.

Zarkon shakes his head, an almost forlorn smile on his face. “Haggar has no intention of killing you. I will still have you here.”

Keith starts before sitting back down and taking another calming breath. “But she’ll destroy everything that makes me me.”

“And unfortunate side effect. If it is any consolation you will most likely retain some of your basic traits.” Zarkon doesn’t sound like it’s something he’s waiting for, and it gives Keith hope.

“But I won’t be me anymore.” Keith leans forward. “Are you going to teach me to do tricks or
something? Make me the pet you’ve always wanted me to be?”

Zarkon frowns. “I have no desire to have you as a pet.”

“Well I’m not going to be good for much else, am I?”

Zarkon’s frown deepens, but he doesn’t reply. Keith isn’t sure if it’s a good thing or not, and he takes a moment to consider his next move.

Zarkon stands before Keith can decide on his next words. “If you can present me with a reason other than your desire to continue existing as you are, I will, of course, reconsider terminating our bond.”

With a final bow of his head, Zarkon retreats into the bedroom, leaving Keith alone and at a loss.

Keith groans and runs his hands across his face. That didn’t go well at all.

He stops, frowning at the table. Zarkon wants him to give him a reason not to break their bond. It’s more than Keith hoped for, but he also knows Zarkon will go through with the termination unless Keith convinces him otherwise.

It’s easier said than done.

Keith abandons his half eaten dinner and relocates on the couch where he stays until he falls asleep, trying to come up with a good enough reason for Zarkon to keep him alive.

Keith is dragged awake when Zarkon picks him up from the couch where he’d slumped uncomfortably in his sleep. “You will come to bed now,” Zarkon says softly, holding Keith close as he walks to the bedroom.

Keith closes his eyes and rests his head on Zarkon’s shoulder. The couch has left him stiff, but when Zarkon lays him on the bed the softness around him seems to melt the worst of it away.

Zarkon curling around him is just an added bonus, and soon Keith falls back to sleep.

Zarkon stays with Keith in the morning, saying there isn’t much for him to do before Haggar’s arrival. Keith appreciates not being left alone on what is starting to look like his last day alive, or at least as himself.

They don’t talk much. There’s nothing to be said anymore.

Keith can’t come up with a reason to keep their bond intact that would satisfy Zarkon, and he wants to keep at least a shred of his dignity intact before lying down on Haggar’s table and not waking up.

Or worse, waking up as something unrecognizable.
The worst thing is, Zarkon keeps giving Keith looks, like he expects him to come up with magical reason for him to not break their bond. He hides it, of course, but Keith knows him well enough by now to see what’s under that carefully constructed mask.

Keith wishes he could give Zarkon what he wants. He wishes he could come up with a reason for Zarkon to choose him over the Lion.

“I wanted to see your home planet,” Keith says, his words cutting through the heavy silence of the room.

Zarkon smiles briefly, but it has no real joy behind it. “I believe you would enjoy it. The planet itself is rather unforgiving, but the cities we have built are a magnificent sight. We built our new home from the stone and sand of the desert. The market place in the middle of the Capitol is something of an attraction, people come there from all over the universe just to see the first market of the month.”

Keith’s answering smile is more genuine. “I assume that by people you mean Galra.”

“Mostly yes, but there are some people who have earned our trust and are therefore allowed entrance to our home,” Zarkon replies.

Keith sighs and goes to sit by Zarkon’s side, and he leans against Zarkon to feel the warmth he radiates. Zarkon pulls him on his lap and holds him close, running his knuckles along Keith’s spine absently as he buries his other hand in Keith’s hair. Keith holds onto Zarkon’s clothes and presses his face into his chest, breathing in the familiar and strangely comforting scent of him.

He’ll miss this.

Keith closes his eyes and smiles ruefully. He’s about to die or have his brain turned to mush, he’s not going to miss anything.

“Are you going to miss me?”

Zarkon rests his chin on Keith’s head, holding him a little tighter for a second, but he doesn’t reply.

“Why are you doing this if it’s hurting you so much?” Keith looks up, and his nose bumps against Zarkon’s jaw.

“This can be replicated,” Zarkon says eventually.

Keith snorts. “No. You might be able to get a cheap imitation of this, but us? Our bond? You’re never gonna get those back.”

Zarkon leans away and regards Keith with a closed off expression. “Perhaps, but the universe is a vast place, and if I want a friend or a relationship I am sure I can find someone who will be open to it, and who will most likely be a lot easier to deal with than you.”

“But they wouldn’t be me.” Keith hates the almost sad edge of his voice.

Zarkon sighs and pushes Keith off his lap, and stands up. Keith bites his lip to keep his annoyed comments to himself, but he turns to Zarkon with his feelings written on his face.

Zarkon barely glances at him on his way to the door.

“Are you actually running away?” He bites his tongue and wishes he’d done better job at keeping
his mouth shut.

Zarkon stops and turns to face Keith, looking almost insulted at the notion that he might run away from anything. “No. I must go to the bridge before Haggar arrives, and if I go now I will still have almost a quarter to spend with you.”

Keith frowns, but he let’s Zarkon go. He doesn’t want to fight on his last day as himself. He doesn’t want to go out with a sour mood.

He waits until Zarkon is out of the door before pushing himself off the couch with a frustrated huff. Keith paces the room, hoping it will get rid of the bubble inside him, growing until he feels like he’s going to explode. It might be better if he did. Zarkon could come back and find him splattered across the walls, and then he’d have to wait until some unlucky soul washed Keith off. He wouldn’t get that last quarter with Keith that way.

Anything would be better than waiting for the seconds to pass, taking him closer to his unavoidable fate.

Keith stops, frowning at the floor as he chews his lip.

*My affection for you is inconvenient.*

Apparently not inconvenient enough to keep Keith alive.

He kicks a chair, sending it to the floor, and for a second the pain flaring in his foot makes him feel better. Then he feels worse. The chair lying toppled over on the ground seems to be mocking him, and Keith kicks it again.

He feels better, then worse.

It’s not the answer to his troubles. The chair hasn’t done anything to him, and kicking it will only hurt him. Keith sighs and pulls the chair back up, and sits on it, resting his elbows on the table and his face on his hands.

*My affection for you is inconvenient.*

Not inconvenient enough to save him, but inconvenient enough to toy with him and break him and be almost flirtatious with him. Enough to promise him safety and a home, and friendship. Enough to—

Zarkon hadn’t flirted with him as much as tried to seduce him. A trip to nebula is not a kindness when coming from Zarkon, there had to be something more there.

Keith’s face twitches, and he thinks he might be smiling. That could be what Keith has been missing. He could...

It’s stupid. Keith isn’t going to do that to himself. It’s not worth his life.

Except it’s not just his life he needs to worry about, it’s his friends as well. They may have given up on Keith and left him like everyone else, but that doesn’t mean Keith is done protecting them.

He also has to consider the larger consequences of Zarkon getting his hands on Voltron. There would be nothing to stop him from taking over the rest of the universe.

Maybe... It’s not like Keith has to jump into Zarkon’s arms and declare his undying love for him on
the spot. He just needs to convince Zarkon he’s open to the idea of a different kind of a relationship. Make him think it’s not an unwelcome idea, which shouldn’t be too hard since Zarkon has already gotten Keith to think about what it would be like.

He doesn’t have to go all the way immediately. Just show mild reciprocation.

And eventually go through with it.

Keith takes a deep, sharp breath and leans back, letting his gaze drift to the ceiling. He stays still, listening to the sound of his own breathing just for a second before pushing himself to his feet.

Would it be worth it? Could he even do it?

There’s always the chance that Shiro and the others are going to save him before he’d have to do anything too drastic. Not that Keith could go with them. Not that the others would ever allow him to return if he got involved with Zarkon in anyway.

Keith paces the room to alleviate his nerves. He could change his clothes, but decides against it. Zarkon had told him off for trying too hard once, and he doesn’t need a repeat of that. He doesn’t want to look like he’s trying at all.

He’d have to appear like he’s acting spontaneously so Zarkon wouldn’t immediately decide Keith is trying to play him and dismiss him out of hand.

The problem is, Keith can’t lie. At least not well enough to fool Zarkon. He’d have to come up with something that’s more or less close to the truth. He can’t say he wants a relationship with Zarkon, or that he really wants him at all.

It makes him stop and cross his arms.

So maybe he should convince Zarkon to seduce him instead.

Keith laughs and shakes his head. It’s a stupid idea that would never work. He can’t even be sure Zarkon would want a relationship with him. For all Keith knows all of Zarkon’s flirtations with him had been just some elaborate, sadistic way for Zarkon to amuse himself.

Maybe he doesn’t even care about Keith.

Keith trudges to the couch and slumps on it, not knowing how he’ll survive to the end of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter on the 24th.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Consider this a Christmas present. Or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Zarkon returns Keith has pulled his legs to his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees again. He stares ahead without seeing the wall before him, and he doesn’t bother acknowledging Zarkon’s return.

Zarkon sighs. “I would prefer it if you did not sulk.”

Keith rolls his eyes, but he lets go of his legs and looks up at Zarkon.

Maybe he should do it. He won’t lose anything except his dignity if he fails, and he’d be gone by the next quarter so Zarkon wouldn’t be able to hold it against him. On the other hand, if he succeeds, he’ll be stuck with that for who knows how long.

Eventually he’d have to follow through.

Could he do it?

Their relationship is strange enough that adding a few kisses to the mix wouldn’t make much of a difference. Kissing is easy, it doesn’t require that much effort or thought. It’s everything else Keith is worried about. Zarkon will know if he’s not sincere. He’ll know if Keith isn’t attracted to him.

He’ll know, and he won’t appreciate it.

Keith looks at Zarkon, really looks at him, and tries to see a future with him. Keith doubts they’d ever love each other, but maybe they wouldn’t have to. People have been building relationships on other things for centuries. It would be a sort of marriage of convenience.

A very strange, twisted marriage of convenience.

Zarkon steps closer to Keith, his expression turning puzzled. Keith doesn’t bother explaining his thoughts.

Slowly, Zarkon comes to stand by the couch, regarding Keith with something like concern in his eyes. Keith holds his gaze, licking his lips unconsciously.

He could do it.

Zarkon tilts his head, and Keith pushes himself up to his knees before hesitating and looking down.

He can’t do this. But he has to. He can’t let Zarkon find the Black Lion.

Zarkon’s curiosity keeps him from moving away when Keith turns to face him with a determined expression. Keith’s heartbeat sounds deafening in his ears, and he’s sure Zarkon doesn’t miss the rabid thrumming either.
He has to do this.

“Something bothers you,” Zarkon says as he sits on the arm of the couch, his curiosity turning to mild concern.

Keith opens his mouth, but he doesn’t know what to say. He feels frozen. He needs to do something. He has to make sure their bond stays intact.

Zarkon frowns. “I do hope you understand I have no desire to see your life end. I assure you I will —”

Keith grabs Zarkon’s face to keep him from pulling away and swallows the shocked sound from his lips.

This isn’t so bad, he’s had worse kisses. He even got Zarkon by surprise.

Except Zarkon isn’t kissing him back. He’s still — too still — and Keith worries he’s done the wrong thing. Maybe Galra don’t even kiss and Zarkon has no idea what Keith is doing.

Keith pulls away, taking in the wide eyed shock on Zarkon’s face. Under normal circumstances Keith would be proud to have put that expression on Zarkon’s face, but there’s too much in line for him to spare a thought to that.

Zarkon blinks. “What are you doing?”

“It’s called kissing,” Keith replies, his voice hesitant, and snatches his hands from Zarkon’s face.

“I know what kissing is,” Zarkon says, regaining some of the usual strength in his voice back. “Why?”

Keith frowns, unsure of how to proceed. This isn’t what he expected at all. “Because I wanted to?”

Zarkon narrows his eyes, then shakes his head minutely. “I do not think you did. I think you do not want Haggar to break out bond.”

Keith slumps back with a huff. That didn’t go the way he thought it would.

“I have told you I have no desire for an unwilling partner,” Zarkon says after a moment.

“It’s not like you asked me to kiss you,” Keith grumbles in response, barely resisting the urge to cross his arms.

Zarkon frowns. “Would you have done that if you were not facing death or brain damage?”

Keith shrugs before thinking about his response. He wouldn’t have kissed Zarkon if he wasn’t under the pressure he is now, he’s not going to deny that, but maybe it’s time he admits he wasn’t exactly lying when he said he wanted to kiss Zarkon. He’d thought about it on occasion, though never as anything he might actually do.

A fantasy, nothing more.

Keith sighs. “I wouldn’t have kissed you if I wasn’t possibly going to die.” He looks up, facing Zarkon with an open expression. “But I have thought about it before.”

Zarkon tilts his head. “Is that so?”
Keith nods as he sits up, trying not to shake from the tension in his body. “So I thought I’d go for it, since it’s my last chance and all.”

The twitch of Zarkon’s ears is reward enough for Keith, and he has to bite his lip to keep from smiling. He might be getting somewhere. He might actually be getting somewhere.

But then Zarkon stands and walks to the other end of the couch. He takes his time sitting down and turning to face Keith with a contemplative look. Keith shuffles in his spot until he can rest his arm on the back of the couch, and faces Zarkon with an open expression.

They regard each other in silence for a long minute.

Keith swallows and starts towards Zarkon, his heart beating loudly in his chest. He’s not sure it’s a good idea, but he presses himself against Zarkon’s side and and does his best not to let his hesitation seep through their bond or show on his face.

“I’m not expecting anything from you,” Keith says, and though it’s a lie he wraps his arms around Zarkon’s neck and pulls him into another kiss before he can see it on Keith’s face, holding him in place with a gentle but insistent hand on the back of his neck.

After a few seconds Keith pulls away, a hint of a hesitant smile playing on his lips. “You’re supposed to kiss me back.”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Keith leans back a little further. “You do know how kissing works, right? Or is that something Galra don’t do?”

“We have a less... wet way of showing affection. Kissing is not unheard of, but it is usually done by people in a more serious relationship.” Zarkon smiles at Keith’s curious expression.

“Okay, now I’m genuinely curious. How do you guys show affection?” Keith sits a little straighter, forgetting about his plan to make Zarkon keep him alive for the moment.

Zarkon smiles, but it looks forced. “I am not going to show that you just because you wish to keep our bond intact.”

Keith takes a slow breath, considering his words before speaking. “Then show me because you’re about to fry my brain and I want my last moments as me to not be completely miserable.”

Zarkon regards Keith with a quiet sort of contemplation, and it lasts so long Keith becomes sure Zarkon is about to order him to move away and let the matter be. Keith waits, holding Zarkon’s gaze until he has to blink, but never lowering his eyes. If Zarkon is looking for something then Keith hopes he’ll find it sooner rather than later.

“I do not think that is a good idea,” Zarkon says eventually.

“Why?”

“You are attempting to get me to change my mind, and I do not think this is a good way for you to go about it.” Zarkon tilts his head and runs his knuckles briefly across Keith’s cheek. “Why would I wish to subject you to a life of pretense, especially when we would both know that is what it would be?”

Keith glances down, pressing his lips into a tight line before meeting Zarkon’s eyes. “It wouldn’t
have to be pretense."

Zarkon gives Keith a flat, skeptical look.

Keith reaches out, hesitating for a second before touching Zarkon’s cheek. It takes a second more for Zarkon to relax into the touch.

“I don’t hate you,” Keith starts, and waits until he’s sure he has Zarkon’s attention before continuing. “I’m not sure I like you either, but I know I don’t hate you. If you’ll work for it a little I wouldn’t have to pretend.”

Zarkon smiles. “So now you want me to seduce you?”

“Yeah,” Keith replies with a nod, glad he didn’t have to voice it out loud.

Zarkon laughs, and Keith smiles in response. It might be a silly idea, but if it will keep Zarkon from severing their bond Keith will gladly let himself be drawn so deep in to the dark hole that’s their relationship that he’ll never find a way out.

“I bought you clothes,” Zarkon reminds Keith, and it’s Keith’s turn to laugh.

“You’re gonna have to do more than that.”

Zarkon frowns, but his eyes sparkle with amusement. “You are hard work.”

Keith nods again. “You’ll have to bring me breakfast in bed and take me to places, and bring me gifts.”

“And what would that lead to?” Zarkon asks.

“I don’t know.” Keith shrugs, and chews his lip for a moment before continuing, “you could always not kill me and see what would happen. But since you’re so fixed on having your Lion back you’ll just have to imagine what we could’ve been like if you weren’t so keen on being alone.”

Zarkon narrows his eyes, but the flash that crosses them isn’t anger.

Keith doesn’t want to remain still, but he hesitates to act. He takes a deep breath, reminding himself that he’s going to die if he doesn’t do something, and puts his arms around Zarkon’s shoulders, burying his face in the crook of Zarkon’s neck.

Keith waits until he’s sure Zarkon is okay with what he’s doing before gently biting at the spot below Zarkon’s ear. Zarkon tenses, but he doesn’t tell Keith to stop.

Emboldened, Keith moves to nip at Zarkon’s jaw. When he still receives no implication that he should stop Keith risks placing a close mouthed kiss on Zarkon’s lips.

Zarkon sighs, and presses his forehead against Keith’s for a second before pulling away, fighting a smile. “You are infuriating.”

“Just think how bored you will be without me,” Keith replies and tries to smile, but he doesn’t quite manage it.

Keith stops to think. He needs to say the exact right thing to make Zarkon seriously consider keeping their bond intact. And it would have to be true as well.

Se Keith considers all the things he knows about Zarkon, and all their past interactions, and tries to
figure out what to say.

“I don’t want to leave you.” The words come out softer than Keith intended, but if the flash of sadness passing over Zarkon’s face is any indication it’s not a bad thing.

After a second of loaded silence Zarkon pulls Keith to straddle his lap. Keith raises a curious eyebrow, but he doesn’t ask about it. He figures it’s best to let Zarkon be the one in charge for now.

Zarkon studies Keith for a moment, pushing his hair from his face, and places his hands on the back of Keith neck to keep him still. Keith wouldn’t have moved anyway. Keith remains relaxed when Zarkon touches their foreheads together, enjoying the warmth filling his mind.

He takes a slow breath when Zarkon presses his temple to Keith’s.

Keith’s brain buzzes with warm electricity that begins to spread through him. He leans against Zarkon, hoping it’s the right thing to do.

Slowly, Zarkon turns his head until his nose is pressed against Keith’s cheek. Keith closes his eyes and sighs. It’s familiar, something he had sometimes done with—

Keith suppresses the thought before it fully forms. He can’t get distracted now.

He feels more than hears the low purr Zarkon makes that seems to reverberate through Keith. If Keith could he’d mimic it.

Zarkon holds Keith a little tighter, his breath hot against his skin, and a shiver runs through Keith. Keith has to stop himself from fighting the heat sparking in his belly. He’s supposed to prove to Zarkon this is something they could have.

Keith pulls Zarkon closer and tilts his head back, feeling it’s the right thing to do. Zarkon takes the unspoken invitation. He nips Keith’s jaw, his teeth sharp against Keith’s skin.

It shouldn’t make Keith’s heart skip a beat.

Zarkon trails his claws down Keith’s spine, and Keith focuses on that, letting the shivers it sends running through him make him feel just a little bit less focused. He barely registers Zarkon’s lips on his pulse point until he bites down on Keith’s neck so hard Keith is sure he’s breaking skin.

It lasts for a second or two, then Zarkon pulls away and bumps his nose to Keith’s briefly before rearranging Keith’s limbs so that he’s sitting on Zarkon’s lap.

Keith touches the pulsing spot on his neck, but his hand comes away clean. At least he’s not bleeding. Keith rests his head against Zarkon’s chest and closes his eyes while Zarkon plays with his hair almost absentmindedly.

He’s done everything he can.

They don’t talk much.
Zarkon keeps playing with Keith’s hair while Keith toys with the seam of Zarkon’s coat. It would be nice if not for the heavy cloud hanging over them.

The worst part is, Keith doesn’t want to give it up. He might not want a relationship with Zarkon, but he thinks he could grow into it one day. He almost wishes he’d figured it out when he wasn’t about to die. If he had maybe he wouldn’t be in the situation he is in now.

The darkness seeping through the cracks of Zarkon’s shielding tells Keith all he needs to know about his current situation.

Keith buries his face in Zarkon’s chest and clings to him a little tighter.

When Zarkon leaves Keith to go greet Haggar, Keith remains on the couch for full five minutes before springing to his feet and kicking the same chair as before.

It still doesn’t make him feel better.

Keith groans and pushes his hair out of his eyes. He should have tied it up. He looks better with it tied up, and it might have helped him.

He stomps to the bathroom to get the ribbon and his brush, and then he stomps back to pick the kicked over chair back up. Just in case he’ll want to kick it again.

He falls on the couch with a huff and starts brushing his hair in aggressive strokes. Zarkon will return soon and take him to Haggar, and then he’ll never wake up, at least not as himself.

Everything Keith is will be gone.

Eventually Keith can’t justify brushing his hair anymore, and he spends several long minutes undoing and redoing his ponytail, until his scalp hurts from the constant tugging.

He settles for tying his hair so that it falls on his shoulder, rubbing against the stinging bite mark Zarkon left on his neck. Having his hair tied feels as bad as having it undone, but the irritation and pain is making him feel a little less like the air around him is crushing him, so he lets it be.

Keith heads to the door, but it doesn’t open. He didn’t expect it to. Of course Zarkon had locked him in.

Perhaps Keith could try to run when Zarkon returns. It would be pointless since he’d have no place to go.

He could stab Zarkon if he had anything to stab him with, but Zarkon has made sure there are no weapons for Keith to use. Keith groans and circles the room, too anxious to sit down again.

Zarkon returns before Keith is ready for it, and he halts in the middle of the room, staring at Zarkon with wide eyes.

Zarkon smiles at him, seeming happy for some reason. “You have become useful again.”

Keith frowns, trying to figure out what Zarkon means and coming up with nothing. He keeps an eye on Zarkon as he walks towards the table with leisurely steps.
“An officer of mine has made an interesting observation,” Zarkon starts when he reaches the table and sets his pad down on it.

“Which is?” Keith asks when Zarkon doesn’t continue.

Zarkon offers Keith another pleasant smile. “It would seem that your Paladin friends have formed an alliance with the Blade of Marmora, and we have reason to believe they have agents in our ranks.”

“Great job at vetting your soldiers,” Keith injects before he can stop himself.

Zarkon’s expression darkens in warning for a second before the smile returns to his lips. “If they are indeed working with the Paladins, it would be reasonable to assume they wish to contact with you.”

Keith crosses his arms, taking a second to think before speaking again. “You want me to bait them.”

Zarkon inclines his head. “Exactly.”

Keith frowns, a thought he doesn’t want to be having crossing his mind. “Did you know Voltron was coming?”

Zarkon doesn’t react. “Does that truly matter?”

Keith shrugs, deciding it’s a fight for another day, and takes a leisurely step towards Zarkon. He’s not sure if he wants to help Zarkon take out an ally, but he knows he doesn’t want to end up on Haggar’s table either.

And the fact that Zarkon might have known Voltron was coming is something Keith can’t just brush off. There’s a chance that Shiro had come for Keith, and Keith just hadn’t been there.

Keith stops a few steps from Zarkon, frowning at the floor. Maybe it’s better that way. It’s not like he could have gone with Shiro anyways, not without putting the entire team at risk and delivering Voltron to Zarkon.

At least this way he didn’t have to face that temptation.

Keith looks up again. “What would you need me to do?”

Zarkon motions for Keith to come closer, and Keith walks to him without hesitation. If sacrificing a few Blade agents will keep Zarkon from severing their bond then that’s an acceptable price to pay.

“I want you to be available,” Zarkon replies.

Keith raises an eyebrow. “Available?”

Zarkon isn’t listening to him anymore. His attention is focused on Keith’s neck. Specifically, his attention is focused on the dully throbbing spot he had bitten earlier.

Keith has no idea why it’s so fascinating.

Zarkon tilts Keith’s chin up with one hand and pushes his hair from his neck with the other before pressing his fingers against the bite mark. Keith hisses before he can stop himself, and Zarkon eases the pressure.
“I did not realize you would bruise so easily.”

Keith snorts. “You can see my veins through my skin but you didn’t think I’d bruise easily?”

Zarkon inclines his head. “I apologize. I will get you something for that.”

“It’s fine. It’s just a little sore, it’ll pass,” Keith says. “How am I supposed to be available?”

Zarkon takes a deep breath and lets go of Keith, taking a step away from him. “You will move around the ship. Be alone when possible. If anyone approaches you, you will report it to either me or Haggar, and we will investigate if they have ties to the Blade of Marmora.”

Keith nods, seeing where Zarkon is going with his idea. “If they work with Shiro and the others they’ll want to check on me, which they’re more likely to do if I’m alone.”

“Precisely,” Zarkon says with an approving smile.

Keith shouldn’t agree to it. He should take this chance to get a message to Shiro and get an ally from a Blade agent. But he can’t go back to the Castle, and the only message he can think of sending to Shiro is that he should leave Keith where he is and move on.

“Is you needing my help the only reason why you’re not breaking our bond?” Keith asks, not sure what he wants the answer to be.

Zarkon chooses that moment to sit down. “Yes. I cannot allow my personal desires to affect my decisions concerning the Empire. You must understand that.” Zarkon regards Keith for a long moment before smiling slightly. “But I am glad you will remain here with me.”

Keith grinds his teeth, then sighs. “I get it, doesn't mean I like it.”

Zarkon inclines his head in understanding, and Keith smiles ruefully as he glances around the room, considering his options. He shouldn’t agree to it. He shouldn’t work against an ally.

But Zarkon isn’t going to keep him around if he doesn’t.

With a steadying breath, Keith steels himself and meets Zarkon’s gaze. “Okay. I’ll help you.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm gonna upload one more chapter this year, but I'm not entirely sure on the date since I'm gonna be spending Christmas with my family.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hope you've all had a good time during the holidays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith is unsure if he should thank Jadri for inadvertently saving his life or not.

She’s shorter than most of the Galra, closer to Keith’s height though still a head or so taller, and she’s got the look of someone who has learned to protect themselves at any cost, and while Keith understands what that’s like he doesn’t trust her. There’s something in the way she carries herself that makes him uncomfortable.

If the sharpness of Zarkon’s eyes is anything to go by he doesn’t trust her either, but Zarkon trusts few people, so Keith can’t rely on him to be an accurate indicator of how he should feel about Jadri.

“And you know about the Blade of Marmora because...” Keith raises an eyebrow.

“That’s irrelevant,” Jadri replies, unfazed by Keith’s curiosity. “What matters is that I know they are here.”

For a moment Keith wonders if she’s just paranoid, but he decides to keep that to himself. Besides, Zarkon has chosen to believe her, and that’s what saved Keith. Paranoia or not, it’s best not to question it.

“Keith is allowed to be curious,” Zarkon says, though he directs a look at Keith that tells him to shut up for now. “As long as he understands what is expected of him.”

“I know what I’m supposed to do,” Keith injects with one last glance at Jadri. According to Zarkon she had wanted to see him personally to go over what Keith needed to do to draw out the Blade agent. Keith wonders why it’s so important to her, but he doesn’t ask. Maybe she’s just that loyal to Zarkon.

“Go see if Haggar requires your presence,” Zarkon tells Jadri before she can say anything, giving her a look that leaves no room for argument. She throws a glance at Keith, but bows and walks out of the conference room without another word.

Keith sighs and slumps into his chair. “I don’t like her.”

“She has valuable information she is willing to share. You do not have to like her to listen to her,” Zarkon replies.

Keith shrugs.

Zarkon regards him for a moment longer before looking away. “If you have understood what you are expected to do and you have nothing more to say then you may leave.”

Though it doesn’t sound like an order Keith knows it is one, and he hurries to the door without
further prompting. He runs into Thace not three steps out of the room, and the force of the impact makes him stumble back. Thace’s hand on his arm stops him from falling to the ground, and Keith apologizes for the collision on instinct.

“It’s alright,” Thace assures him while he regains his footing. “I trust you are well.”

Keith frowns. “Why?”

Thace gives him a small, almost secretive smile, and nods towards the conference room door. “If you are well then the chances that our Emperor is in an agreeable mood are higher. I’m merely trying to ascertain what I’m in for.” He keeps his voice quiet, and Keith feels like they’re sharing a secret.

“I’m fine,” he says eventually, his voice as quiet and conspiratorial as Thace’s. It feels wrong, somehow, but Keith pushes that feeling far back in his mind and ignores it.

Thace inclines his head and steps around Keith, heading for the door without another word, though he spares Keith one last look before stepping into the room.

Keith continues on his way to the mess hall, hoping to get a late lunch before he has to decide what to do with the rest of the day.

Having the freedom to move around unescorted is new, and Keith finds himself hesitant to take full advantage of it and explore the vessel. He gets strange looks in the mess hall when he’s alone, even though he’s been there nearly every day since he came on board. The officers must have gotten as used to seeing him with Marzila as Keith is used to walking around with her.

Still, nobody bothers Keith while he sits in the corner table and eats his salty fish salad.

Keith wonders where Marzila is. Maybe she has friends on the ship that she has been spending time with when Keith isn’t around. Maybe Keith could go find her and ask her if they can go explore the ship together.

But Keith is supposed to draw out someone who should be a friend to him, and turn them over to Zarkon. He can’t rely on having Marzila around all the time, no matter how much he’d like to have her there to discourage any possible Blade agents from approaching him.

So after lunch Keith hurries out of the mess hall and turns left, not caring where his feet take him as long as he can find his way to Zarkon’s quarters come evening.

The ship is larger than Keith thought, and eventually he finds himself standing in an eerily quiet hallway. He doesn’t have to think hard to figure out he’s found Haggar’s personal wing where she and her druids can do as they please. He backs away quietly, and decides to reorient himself by finding the observation deck.

He finds a small library on his way, and he memorizes its location even though he knows he won’t be able to read the books there. Maybe there is a section for audio books for him to listen to.

Eventually his searching takes him to the observation deck, and he stays there until Marzila comes find him to take him back to Zarkon.

The next day Keith locates the library with little effort, and he spends his morning going through the audio books there. He’d had to ask Zarkon for the code to unlock the audio library on the computer, and he refuses to admit he was surprised by how easily he got it.
He doesn’t want to think him kissing Zarkon had something to do with it.

He doesn’t want to think about kissing Zarkon period.

It hadn’t even been a proper kiss, so it didn’t warrant any thought.

But it still bothered Keith that Zarkon had done nothing to acknowledge the kiss, or the Galran make out thing Zarkon showed him that really — on hindsight — should not have been as pleasant as it had been.

Keith bites his lip and tries to refocus on the summary he’s hearing through the headphones. He might have to start the recording from the beginning.

“Hey!”

Keith jumps, scrambling to get the headphones off while Marzila snickers in the background. He throws a glare at her, but it only serves to make her laugh louder.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” she says and comes to stand by Keith. “Good book?”

“No really. Why?” Keith hopes he sounds more at ease than he feels.

Marzila shrugs, studying Keith with a little too much amusement sparkling in her eyes. “You had a look on your face.”

It’s not much of an explanation, but Keith still frowns and glances away from her, pretending he has no idea what she’s talking about. He sets the headphones down and wonders if he can get away without telling Marzila what he had been thinking.

Before Keith can reach a conclusion Marzila lets out a small, surprised noise and grabs Keith’s jaw in a strong grip. Keith protests to the rough treatment when Marzila bends his head a little too far to the side.

“That would explain the look,” Marzila muses, her voice somewhere between amused and distressed. She lets go of Keith’s head. “You might want to keep that covered though.”

Keith glares at her as his hand instinctively rises to rub the bite mark Zarkon had left on his neck. Marzila’s ears twist.

“I didn’t know I was supposed to hide it,” he says, fearing he has broken some unspoken rule by not wearing something with a collar.

Marzila gives him a half-shrug. “You don’t have to, it’s just not polite to flaunt that on everyone’s face. It’d be fine around civilians, but this is a military ship, and it’s just not fitting in this environment.”

“I didn’t mean to flaunt anything,” Keith says as he pulls his hair from the loose ponytail and redoes it so that it covers the bruise. “Nobody has really explained the Galra customs to me.”

Marzila’s eyes turn understanding, but there’s no pity in them, and it’s the only reason Keith doesn’t feel uncomfortable. “Common sense goes far. But just for future reference, we might be pretty open about things, but we’re stuck in space on a ship, so as a general rule we keep our sex lives to ourselves unless talking to a friend.”

All color drains from Keith’s face, but Marzila doesn’t seem to notice it. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m
glad you found someone. You could’ve told me about it though. And does the Emperor know about this?”

“I assume he does since he’s the one who bit me,” Keith deadpans.

If he was any less shocked Keith would find the way Marzila’s face falls amusing, but as it is they end up staring at each other with wide, shocked eyes in stunned silence for an uncomfortably long minute.

Marzila is the first to regain her composure, and she pulls Keith to a quiet corner despite the fact that they are alone in the library.

“You did not have sex with the Emperor!”

Keith balks. “What? No! What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? You’re the one who got bitey with the Emperor!” Marzila glances around, her voice hushed.

Keith almost tells her the truth, but decides against it.

Marzila’s wide eyed shock turns from stunned understanding to something almost sad. She sighs, her shoulders slumping. Keith hopes she’ll stay quiet.

“I wish you understood you can talk to me.”

Keith looks away. She means well, he knows it, but letting himself get that close to anyone has never ended well and it won’t end well now. Especially when he and Marzila are technically on different sides of a war.

He smiles at her, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. The smile he gets in return mirrors his own.

There’s a look in Haggar’s eyes when she and Keith next meet that he can’t decipher.

“Does it bother you that your fellow Paladins did not rescue you?” She asks.

Keith doesn’t know what she’s getting at, but he still answers truthfully. “Not really. It’s not like I could’ve gone with them without putting them in danger anyways.”

Haggar studies him intensely for a few seconds longer before turning her eyes to her pad. “That is a good way of thinking about it.”

“It’s the truth,” Keith says, but Haggar doesn’t acknowledge him. “Will you break the bond Zarkon and I share after I find the Blade agent?”

Haggar looks up with a surprised expression. “What makes you think that will happen?”

“Zarkon said that if you didn’t need me to find the traitor you would’ve already broken the bond,” Keith replies, his voice betraying his confusion at Haggar’s question.

Haggar hums and focuses on her pad again. Keith frowns, but he knows better than to push her. If
she wants to tell her what she’s thinking she’s more likely to do so if Keith keeps his mouth shut.

Eventually Haggar lowers the pad and looks up, but she doesn’t turn to face Keith. “Are you good at keeping secrets?”

Keith frowns, having no idea what she means. “Yes.” It’s not a lie, exactly. He might be terrible at telling lies, but he can take a secret to his grave if need be.

Haggar turns to him, her expression serious. “I don’t think I can break your bond without severely harming both you and the Emperor in the process. You aren’t connected through the Black Lion anymore, so there would be nothing to anchor either one of you.”

She sighs, resigned, and drops her pad on the table.

Keith frowns. “What do you mean? How are we connected?”

It takes Haggar a long moment of careful thinking to pick her pad up again. She walks up to Keith, and sits on a chair by his side, turning the pad so that its screen faces Keith.

“Imagine this is you,” she says, drawing a small dot on the screen with her stylus. “And this is the Emperor.” Another dot on the same level as Keith’s, but a little distance away from it, and a glance at Keith who nods his understanding.

Haggar draws a third dot below the two first, placing it in the middle of them. “This is the Black Lion.”

Keith nods, staring intently at the dots on the screen.

“As you know, the Emperor shares a strong bond with the Black Lion,” Haggar starts, drawing a line from Zarkon’s dot to Black’s dot. “When you piloted the Lion, you formed your own bond with it.” The next line leads from Keith’s dot to the Lion’s.

“Now, this is mostly speculation, so on this occasion I welcome your input,” Haggar starts, and draws a circle around the Black Lion’s dot. “We are unsure of what happened, but we believe your bond with the Emperor formed when you piloted the Black Lion. We also believe it begun growing stronger when the Emperor attempted to track the Lion.”

Haggar draws a line from the line connecting Keith to the Lion to the line connecting Zarkon to it, placing it just above the circle she’d drawn earlier.

“At first, you could truly reach each other only through focusing on your bonds with the Black Lion.”

Keith remembers it. He remembers how Haggar had first had him seek his bond with Zarkon through the Black Lion. It made sense now. But...

“At first?”

Haggar idly sketches another line connecting Keith’s bond to the Black Lion with Zarkon’s this time closer to their dots. She erases the line connecting Keith to the Lion below the point where his line connects to Zarkon.

“Your connection to the Black Lion broke, which means there is nothing to stabilize you should your bond with the Emperor be severed.”
“Then why do you think Zarkon would suffer if you broke the bond?”

Haggar draws another line from Keith’s line to Zarkon’s. She does so again, and again, and each time the line draws a little closer to the dots. Eventually she brushes over the line connecting Zarkon to the Lion, leaving behind a smudged imprint of what was once there.

“I cannot be entirely sure, but I believe that the stronger your bond with the Emperor grows, the weaker his connection to the Lion becomes, until you are so entwined you cannot survive without one another,” Haggar says, her voice grim.

To demonstrate her point she draws one straight line from Keith’s dot to Zarkon’s dot.

Keith swallows.

Haggar puts the pad away, and levels Keith with a hard stare. “You’d be wise not to tell the Emperor you are aware of the severity of the situation.”

“Why’d you tell me all this if I wasn’t supposed to know about it?” Keith asks with a frown on his face.

“I believe you knowing what is going on benefits us all. The Emperor disagrees, but contrary to the general belief he is not always right,” Haggar replies. “It is my duty to correct his mistakes before anyone, sometimes even he, realizes he’s made them.”

“And now you’ve made me your co-conspirator,” Keith sighs.

Haggar smiles, but it doesn’t make Keith feel any better. “I am sure we’ll work well together.”

Keith hopes so too, mostly because he doesn’t think he’ll survive if they won’t.

Keith stares at the pad in his hands, wondering what the text on it means. He’d long since given up hope of understanding the written Galra language, and he suspects the only reason he still understands the spoken language is because of his bond with Zarkon.

As amusing as it should be, Keith can’t bring himself to smile at the idea of him using Zarkon as an unwitting universal translator.

“I think I should learn your language,” he starts, glancing at Zarkon before focusing his attention back on his pad. “It’d be a lot easier for me to become a part of your people if I could at least understand some of the language. Maybe basic alphabet or something for starters.”

“I would have to arrange a tutor for you,” Zarkon replies.

“I’d be really happy if you did.” Keith looks up, knowing he can’t overdo it if he wants Zarkon to agree.

He’d decided he would have to think carefully before trying to evoke Zarkon’s affection for him. It won’t serve him good if Zarkon thinks he’s being played with.

“I will consider it,” Zarkon says, and Keith decides it’s good enough for him.
Keith pushes himself off the ground and goes to sit with Zarkon on the couch, not as far from him as he used to, but not close enough to be in Zarkon’s immediate space either. He gets a brief look from Zarkon, but Keith tells himself it’s to be expected.

They’re still trying to find a new balance after their make out session.

Keith is just letting Zarkon know he’s open to a change in the most subtle way he can. But just to be sure, Keith rests his head on the back of the couch and lets Zarkon see the bite mark he’d left on Keith’s neck. It feels like something he should do, and Zarkon is always telling him to follow his instincts, after all.

The corner of Zarkon’s lips quirk up. “From the Galra point of view, you are either attempting to get me to bite you again or you wish for more but are unwilling to ask. Which is it?”

Keith stares at him for a beat before straightening up. Zarkon smirks and focuses on his book again. Keith gives him a minute before clearing his throat. “Are you ignoring me?”

“Yes.”

Keith narrows his eyes. “Why?”

Zarkon turns a page without glancing at Keith. “Because it frustrates you.”

Keith almost laughs, but he settles for rolling his eyes. Zarkon continues to ignore him, and after a moment of staring at Zarkon Keith shuffles closer to him. It doesn’t get a reaction from Zarkon, so Keith moves a bit closer to him.

Zarkon’s ears twist, but he doesn’t acknowledge Keith.

For a moment, Keith thinks of what he’s doing, but he doesn’t let himself think about his actions too hard. He can’t start hesitating.

Keith leans up and presses his nose against Zarkon’s cheek, wrapping his arm around Zarkon’s neck to keep him from pulling away.

Zarkon tenses. It’s not what Keith expected, and he considers pulling away before deciding against it. After a few seconds Zarkon eases into the contact, and tilts his head minutely towards Keith.

“What are you doing?” He asks.

Keith frowns and pulls away just enough to be able to meet Zarkon’s gaze. “I thought we were...” He’s not sure what they were, but this wasn’t it.

Understanding dawns on Zarkon’s face. “I assumed you were offering yourself to me in order to keep our bond intact.”

Keith could take the escape Zarkon is offering and say that’s exactly what he had done. It’s not that far from the truth either.

But Keith stops and thinks it through. He’s surprised to find he’s more or less numb when he thinks of his options. He could tell Zarkon he was just trying to save himself. Or he could say he had meant it when he’d said they could be more.

Keith almost scoffs. He doesn’t want Zarkon, but to his dismay he’s not entirely opposed to the idea either. He doesn’t feel anything but numbness when he thinks about the possibility.
He could do it. Just in case Haggar is wrong and the bond is breakable.

“I kinda like this,” Keith says, hoping he’s doing the right thing.

Zarkon smiles at him. “Good. I would not want to make you do something you were not comfortable with.”

Keith presses his forehead to Zarkon’s, and closes his eyes. “Just... Let’s not rush things.”

Zarkon hums and brushes his knuckles against Keith’s cheek “I think that would be wise.”

Keith nods. He can do this if they take their time. He’ll ease into this and it will be fine.

“If you get your headphones I can download our alphabet on to your pad. It will not teach you our language but it is a start,” Zarkon says.

Keith pulls away from him, staring at him with hopeful eyes for a second before nodding and standing up and hurrying to get the headphones from the bedroom where he had left them.

When he returns Zarkon has already set his pad up. Keith stops, thinking he should thank Zarkon but not knowing how to go about it. Zarkon sees his hesitation, and he motions for Keith to get closer. He bumps his nose to Keith’s before pressing their foreheads together for a few seconds.

“You are welcome.” He says with a soft smile that Keith doesn’t know how to deal with.

Keith settles on the couch, his feet pressed against Zarkon’s thigh. He spends the entire evening listening to the alphabet, slowly learning the sounds that go with each letter.

He catches Zarkon glancing at him from the corner of his eye more than once.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter comes after I get my computer fixed. It’s running a little too slow to be usable at the moment. Thankfully I got video games for Christmas so I won't be bored while I wait for the maintenance to be done. It's probably just dust and too little memory space anyways.

I hope you liked this!

And happy new year!!
Chapter 26

So my parents were kind enough to let me borrow their computer for a few hours. My computer is, at this moment, being held hostage by the repair shop and I don't see that changing any time soon. It's a long story. Good thing I have all my writing on an external hard drive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith wakes up to a sound of a tray being set down. He takes a moment before opening his eyes, surprised and a little touched to find Zarkon pouring him tea even as the sight causes him to frown in confusion.

“You said you wanted breakfast in bed,” Zarkon says as an explanation, a small smile playing on his lips.

Keith’s responding smile is lazy and sleepy. “I did. Thanks.” He makes room for Zarkon to sit by his side and accepts the tea and the fruit pie.

“I must confess I find the human custom of courting via food rather perplexing.” Zarkon tilts his head and studies Keith with open curiosity.

“We like a partner who can provide food,” Keith replies. He has to resist the urge to roll his eyes at the unimpressed look Zarkon gives him.

“Among our people the ability to provide food is expected before one attempts to find a mate.”

Keith snorts and takes a bite of his pie. “To be honest I’m not sure why we do so much of our courting over food. I guess it’s just easier for us to get to know others over a cup of coffee.” He looks up. “How do you usually go about dating?”

“We engage in conversation before anything else. It is important to find someone who will be able to engage you both intellectually as well as emotionally. As our language is based on emotion, and it is rather nuanced, conversation is the best way to assess if someone is a suitable partner. More often than not we also engage in sparring or competitive sports as well, as getting competitive can be quite a rush to us as well as an excellent way of getting to truly know someone,” Zarkon replies.

Keith nods slowly. He finishes his pie and picks up the bowl of fruit. “That makes sense.”

“I am aware of that,” Zarkon says, and Keith huffs before focusing on his breakfast again. “You have not informed me of the next step of this... custom.”

Keith glances at Zarkon’s surprisingly earnest face. “There is no next step,” he says. “The idea is that you do something nice and thoughtful.”

Zarkon frowns. “I see.”

Keith doubts it, but he doesn’t say anything. He appreciates the effort Zarkon is making, and the fact that he’s even trying is enough to warm something deep inside Keith. He doesn’t examine the
feeling too closely.

Zarkon stands and brushes an invisible wrinkle from his clothes. “Haggar has requested my presence.”

Keith nods. “I’ll go walk around when I get up, see if I can find your Blade agent.”

“Do be careful.” Zarkon says before walking out of the room, leaving Keith looking after him with a surprised expression.

Zarkon has never cautioned him to stay safe while he baited an agent of a faction that opposed the Empire. It shouldn’t be too dangerous for Keith, since he’s not on Zarkon’s side, but on the other hand now that Zarkon told Keith to be careful, Keith can’t help but wonder how he looks like to the possible Blade agent.

Does he seem like he’s switched sides? He hopes not, but he can’t be sure. Maybe the supposed agent will consider him a traitor and kill him.

Keith doubts they would do that. There’s no way Shiro and the others would allow it.

Keith shakes his head. He doesn’t want to think about Shiro. Not when he’s eating the breakfast Zarkon brought to him.

The breakfast that Keith had more or less told him to bring him as courtship. That Keith is actively encouraging. He groans and rubs his eyes, almost certain he’ll have a headache before he’s even gotten up for the day.

Keith finishes his breakfast and gets up, deciding he’ll worry about his romantic problems later. For now he’ll worry about getting through the day and trying to find the Blade agent. Maybe Keith can use them to send a message to the others at the Castle.

He wonders what he would say. He’d want his friends to know he’s alright, and that they should not come for him. It’s a heartbreaking idea, but Keith doesn’t want his friends needlessly risking their lives for him, not when it won’t do any of them any good. He’d rather stay where he is than see them hurt because of him.

Keith tries not to show his inner turmoil as he heads out to explore the ship, hoping to catch the attention of who might be his only real ally on the ship so that he can hand them over to Zarkon.

It’s not fair, especially when Keith knows Zarkon lied to get him to agree to do this, but Keith can’t just turn on his heels and tell Zarkon off for it. He’s not supposed to know what’s going on, and though he might be a bad liar, he does know how to keep a secret.

The day doesn’t bring him any results, unless he counts the officer ordering him out of a restricted area. It’s nothing worth telling Zarkon about, and he hopes that his lack of progress isn’t going to be a problem.

Two days later Zarkon stops Keith from walking out of the door for his stroll around the ship.

“I have ordered Thace to help you learn the basics of our language. He specializes in
communications and languages so he should be able to teach you. And he is useless on board this vessel, since it is under Cenzi’s command,” Zarkon says. “And if I have understood correctly, you two are already familiar with each other.”

Keith nods. “We get along.”

It will be nice to be around someone he knows already. It takes off the anxiety of getting to know a new person he may or may not get along with.

“Thank you,” Keith says as an afterthought.

Zarkon inclines his head. “It is what you asked for, and I do think that you would benefit from integrating more into our culture. Knowing how to introduce yourself will be a good start.”

Keith rolls his eyes, even if he agrees with Zarkon. “Will I ever get to see your planet and try my soon acquired language skills?”

The line of Zarkon’s mouth hardens minutely. “We shall see.”

Keith wants to push it, but he thinks better of it. Zarkon doesn’t seem to like the idea, and he won’t warm to it if Keith keeps insisting on it.

Keith just doesn’t want to spend the rest of his life on a spaceship.

“So I should forget about going around the ship today?” Keith asks.

“If that is what you want.”

It’s not exactly helpful. After a few seconds of hesitation Keith decides to abandon his plan to walk around the ship, mostly because it’s getting boring, and he hasn’t really spent any time with Zarkon in the last few days.

Not that he wants to spend time with Zarkon, he just thinks it’s wise of him to talk with him. He’s trying to build a relationship with Zarkon, after all.

Though on hindsight he thinks Zarkon might have tricked him into it. He did let Keith think the only reason he was alive was his sudden usefulness.

Zarkon spares him a curious glance when he joins him by the table and snatches the last cookie from the plate.

“So, what have you been up to?” Keith starts and cringes at his own words.

Zarkon looks amused for a second. “I have not done anything worth mentioning in a while.”

Keith nods and shoves the last of his cookie into his mouth.

After a moment Zarkon sighs and sets his tea cup down, and turns to Keith with an almost indulgent look on his face. “There is a certain amount of amusement to be found in observing Cenzi when he is stressed.”

Keith smiles. “I can believe that.”

Zarkon offers Keith a brief smile. “You could go find Thace. I am sure he has time to begin
tutoring you now.”

Keith nods, taking the hint to leave Zarkon alone, and goes off to find Thace.

It doesn’t take him too long to figure out where he is, and when he enters the communications lab he catches Thace’s eye almost immediately.

Thace says his goodbyes to his officers before making his way to Keith.

“You’re supposed to teach me?” Keith hates that it comes out as a question, but Thace isn’t bothered by it.

“Yes. Do you want to start now?”

Keith nods. “Zarkon told me to come find you.”

Thace inclines his head. “Then I believe we should head to the library. Teaching you will be easier if we have some material to use.”

Keith nods again, and lets Thace lead the way to the library.

Thace points Keith to a table, and Keith sits down while Thace pulls out a few books and downloads some files on two pads before joining Keith. He sets the books and one of the pads down, and hands the other one to Keith.

“I think we should start with the basics. Our alphabet can be——”

“Zarkon let me memorize that already,” Keith says.

Thace raises an eyebrow. “Oh. That’s good. That saves us some time.” He scrolls down his pad, a thoughtful frown marring his face. “I think we should start with some basic sentences then. You will learn the grammar as we go, so don’t worry about that.”

“Okay,” Keith says and sits a little straighter when Thace picks his pad up and taps on it a few times before handing it back to Keith.

“Let’s start with a polite but informal way of introducing yourself,” Thace says and taps at the first line of text on Keith’s pad with his stylus.

“How many ways are there?” Keith asks.

“Seven, but you only need to learn three, and most of our language doesn’t have the class connotations anymore and no one will look down on you if you don’t use them. You’ll learn these things as we go.” Thace smiles and taps the pad to get Keith to pay attention to the first line of text.

Keith focuses on the line, calling the alphabet to the front of his mind to make sense of the strange words. He can more or less understand the letters, but the words make no sense to him.

“The words are pronounced like they are written,” Thace says. “So for example, my name is Thace translates to za auti Thace te .”

Keith nods and frowns at the line in front of him, seeing and understanding the words now that Thace has told him what they mean.

“So I’d say za auti Keith te .”
Thace’s ears twitch, but he inclines his head encouragingly. “You may want to work on your pronunciation, but yes, you are correct.”

Keith smiles, apologetic, and hopes he didn’t hurt Thace’s ears too badly. If nothing else he has a new way of torturing Zarkon.

Keith writes notes and translations under the phrases as Thace teaches them to him. He learns a few basic phrases, including how to say hello and goodbye, and ask for someone’s wellbeing.

“I think I’m getting the hang of this,” Keith says, a little proud of himself, and turns the pad off.

“You are a fast learner,” Thace agrees. “And I expect you to keep practicing. I’ll send you an audio file you can listen to. Practice your pronunciation.”

“I’ll work on it,” Keith promises.

Thace inclines his head, and leaves Keith in the library to browse through the book before him. It’s not much of help without Thace translating the sentences, but Keith learns the rhythm of the text, and it helps him get used to the alphabet.

Keith decides that Thace is one of the better teachers he’s ever had. He doesn’t really teach Keith the grammar, but Keith realizes he still picks it up as he learns the words and sentences.

Thace also answers all the questions Keith throws his way, and he’s patient with Keith to the point Keith starts wondering if Zarkon has ordered him to not get frustrated with him.

Keith avoids testing his new language skills in front of Zarkon for now. He’s being more or less nice to Keith, and Keith doesn’t want to ruin it by causing him a migraine.

If Galra even gets migraines.

Marzila is another story though. She’s excited to hear Keith is learning her language, and she tries to get Keith to show off his new skills. Keith declines, overcome with what is definitely not stage fright.

“I’m sure you’re great,” Marzila says as she leads Keith to an elevator.

They don’t have a real heading, but wandering around the ship isn’t boring either, especially with company.

“Let me learn the pronunciation first, then we can try small talk,” Keith says while Marzila sets their destination at random.

The elevator starts downwards, and Keith leans against the wall.

“Haala’s not going to like the fact that he can’t insult you to your face anymore though,” Marzila muses.

Keith smirks. “We could always not tell him that I understand him.”

Marzila turns to grin at him. “That’s mean. I love it.”
Keith opens his mouth to reply, but the elevator shudders before coming to a stop. The lights blink before turning off completely, plunging them into darkness.

Marzila groans, like it’s a mild inconvenience that will pass soon, but Keith’s pulse jumps and for a second he forgets to breathe. He needs light.

He needs an anchor.

Keith reaches for Marzila, but she’s already moving to the control panel, muttering under her breath about poor maintenance work.

Keith is going to faint. He can’t be in the dark.

A soft, almost concerned warmth engulfs Keith’s mind. It stops his panicking, and Keith pushes against the warmth, welcoming the distraction. He closes his eyes to block the darkness and focuses on Zarkon.

The concern turns to comfort when Keith responds, and Keith senses a hint of exasperated amusement from Zarkon. It’s not because of Keith though, and after a few seconds Keith gets an impression that the blackout has something to do with Haggar.

Keith frowns, but Zarkon’s amusement tells him there’s no reason to worry.

No reason besides the darkness.

Keith swallows, his heart beating a little faster and his breath coming out a little shallower, and the concern returns to Zarkon’s consciousness. Keith presses himself against the wall and focuses on listening the sounds Marzila makes while she tries to get the panel to work.

“It’s not going to work,” Keith says, his voice trembling slightly.

Marzila stops what she’s doing. “How do you know that?”

Keith hesitates, unsure of how to explain things. He figures truth is the best thing he can go with. “I’m sort of psychically linked to Zarkon and from what I gather Haggar’s caused a ship wide blackout somehow.”

A silence falls into the darkness, which does nothing to ease Keith’s mind. He shuffles and hopes Marzila would come closer or say something.

“Well. That explains a few things,” she says slowly.

Keith smiles even though he knows she can’t see it.

Zarkon has retreated from his mind, but if Keith concentrates he can feel their connection in the back of his mind, an invitation for him to cling to Zarkon and an assurance that he is not alone at the same time.

Keith appreciates it, and though it does little to alleviate his bubbling anxiety he likes having Zarkon there, just within his reach. He projects his need to get out of the elevator to him, hoping Zarkon will come and get him but not expecting it to happen.

“Marzi?” Keith starts, and waits until Marzila hums in acknowledgment. “You wouldn’t happen to have any light with you?”

Marzila stops, and after a little shuffling the cold light of her pad illuminates her face.
“The panel’s dead,” she informs Keith, “and this needs loading, so we’re going to be in the dark soon.”

Keith manages a nod. He’s focused on the light, letting it chase away the terror bubbling inside of him.

“You okay?” Marzila asks, and Keith nods again before shaking his head minutely.

“I don’t like the dark,” he admits, his voice quieter than he intended.

Marzila moves closer to Keith, bringing the light with her. “I’m guessing it’s not just a mild dislike, going by your face.”

Keith laughs, hollow and unhappy. “Remember when I was in isolation?”

Marzila nods, her expression grim.

“Well, being in dark reminds me of that,” Keith says, shrugging to alleviate the tension in his shoulders. He ignores the sympathy in Marzila’s eyes to the best of his abilities.

Keith focuses on the light. It’s the only thing he can think of that will keep him in one piece at the moment.

Marzila chats about some guy who had tried to hit on her, filling the silence with a background noise Keith desperately needs. He pokes at his connection with Zarkon again, and gets a gentle nudge in return. It’s a reassurance, and Keith appreciates it. He just wishes he would have a proper light.

He could stay in the elevator for hours if he could just see.

Eventually the light dies, and Marzila pulls Keith into her arms. She holds him close and rubs soothing circles between his shoulders while she tells Keith about the first time she met Haala. Keith clings to her, anchoring himself on her steady presence.

After what feels like an eternity a loud bang silences Marzila, and they both look up to where the doors should be. The bang sounds again and Marzila lets go of Keith, but she stays close enough for Keith to feel more or less secure.

He counts to ten as he breathes, trying to not let the panic overwhelm him.

“I think we’re being rescued,” Marzila says, sounding happy and hopeful, but Keith can’t quite find it in him to relax at her words.

The banging turns to a slow, metallic dragging, and a purple light illuminates the elevator. Marzila lets out an excited whoop. Keith breathes a little easier.

The elevator has stopped between levels, leaving Keith and Marzila staring up at the gap near the roof of the cart where their freedom awaits.

“Would you like to get out of there now?” Zarkon asks, politely casual, and Keith has never been happier to see anyone in his life.

Keith rushes to the door, but he can’t quite reach the opening.

Taking pity on Keith, Marzila picks him up and lifts him until he can grab the ledge. The thought that a lot of people have lost their lives crawling out of elevators in movies flashes through Keith’s
mind, but there’s light in the hallway and Keith can’t be bothered to worry about it.

A member of the maintenance crew pulls Keith out of the elevator before focusing on getting Marzila out.

Keith’s attention zeroes in on Zarkon.

A beat that feels like forever passes before Keith launches himself into Zarkon’s arms, not knowing how else to thank him for getting him out of the darkness. Zarkon doesn’t react right away, but soon he wraps his arms around Keith and presses his face into Keith’s hair just for a second before disentangling himself from Keith.

“I assume you do not know where Cenzi is?” Zarkon asks.

“No, sorry,” Keith replies, trying to shake off the last of the dread still clinging to his mind.

The hallway is dark save for the emergency lights the maintenance crew had set up along the walls.

Zarkon looks mildly disappointed. “Then I suppose we should locate Haggar.”

He turns on his heels and heads down the hallway. Keith and Marzila share a glance before following him, the three members of the maintenance crew staying as far behind as they dare. They pick up the lights as they go, and the darkness falling behind them makes the hairs on the back of Keith’s neck stand up.

Keith hurries to catch up with Zarkon. “What happened?”

Zarkon spares him a glance. “There is a reason I do not allow Haggar to run all her more questionable experiments in the Central Command. Sometimes things do not go as planned. She has shut down most if not all of the ship functions, so restoring power is our main objective.”

Keith frowns and stops when Zarkon does, in the crossroad at the end of the hallway. “Not that I’m not happy for the rescue, but why did you come get me?”

Marzila stops at a respectful distance and pretends not to eavesdrop.

Zarkon’s expression is a little too happy for Keith’s liking. “You are small enough to comfortably fit in the ventilation shafts, so you are going to go and ask Haggar what she did wrong.”

Keith gives him a bland look and crosses his arms. Of course Zarkon didn’t come to get him because he needed to get out of the darkness. Zarkon’s expression shifts, but instead of saying anything he gives Keith’s mind a reassuring nudge.

Keith glances behind himself, at the maintenance team and Marzila, and knows that Zarkon would never admit to coming to get him just because Keith needed it in front of them. He’d come up with the best excuse he could to cover his bases.

The maintenance crew joins them, and Zarkon steps aside so that they can open the hatch to the ventilation system.

Keith glaces from them to Zarkon, unsure if this is a good idea. He steps further from the Galra, and beckons Zarkon to follow him. Zarkon tilts his head as he joins Keith a few feet away from the others.
Keith licks his lips and glances around. “It’s going to be really dark in there,” he starts, not meeting Zarkon’s eyes.

“You will have a light with you,” Zarkon assures him. “And I will be with you.” He brushes a strand of hair from Keith’s face, a soft smile playing on his lips.

Keith returns the smile. “I just worry I’ll get stuck.”

“Then we will have to open the wall,” Zarkon replies. “No one wants you dead in the ventilation systems. The smell would be awful.”

Keith snorts despite himself, and some of the tension coiled around his insides eases.

It doesn’t stop him from swallowing around the lump in his throat when Zarkon guides him back to the now uncovered opening to the ventilation shaft. One of the maintenance crew hands Keith a flashlight and a pocket pad with a map. The route he’s supposed to follow has been marked for him, and it eases Keith’s mind a little.

At least he doesn't have to try to find his way on his own.

“Be sure to let Haggar know we have limited air supply, so knowing what went wrong is crucial,” Zarkon says.

Keith throws a glare over his shoulder at him before crawling into the ventilation shaft. He catches the sight of Marzila’s concerned expression, but he tries not let it affect him.

There’s no point in him getting worked up.

As he makes his way to the first intersection, Keith finds that focusing on the task ahead of him is not as hard as he expected it to be. Zarkon is a comforting presence pressed against his consciousness and it keeps Keith grounded from the start.

The light is a blessing as well, and Keith refuses to look back at the darkness following him. Panicking deep in the ventilation system during a shipwide power out would be the worst thing he could do at that moment.

And hadn’t Zarkon said something about life support possibly failing?

Keith crawls a little faster.

When he reaches the hatch above Haggar’s lab Keith lets out a sigh of relief before forcing the hatch open, and he drops down to the floor, taken aback by the cold blue light illuminating everything. Upon closer inspection Keith realizes Haggar and her druids have lit up dozens of candles.

“What are you doing here?” Haggar’s voice asks from behind Keith.

Keith spins around. “Zarkon wants to know what happened, and he said we have limited air supply so I’m assuming the life support failed.”

Haggar frowns. “We experienced a power surge. We had calculated for the possibility of it happening, and it shouldn’t have caused the damage it did. We have some trouble figuring the issue out without our computers, but I am sure we will solve it soon.”

Keith nods.
“The communications have been severed,” Haggar says when Keith remains silent.

“That’s why I’m here,” Keith replies.

“Tell the Emperor we are attempting to correct the issue,” Haggar says as she motions for her druids to come and help Keith back to the ventilation system.

Keith crawls back to Zarkon as fast as he can, and Marzila is there to help him to the ground.

“Haggar says she’s working on the problem, and that she doesn’t know what went wrong. She said they knew the power surge was a possibility but that it shouldn’t have caused the damage it did.”

Zarkon frowns. “She will deal with that. In the meantime we will restore life support and whatever secondary systems we can from here.”

He heads down the hallway, and everyone else hurries after him. Keith catches up to Zarkon and matches his own speed to his to the best of his abilities, lighting the hallway ahead of them with the flashlight he won’t give back until the lights are back on.

“What happens if we run out of air?” Keith asks, unsure if he really wants an answer.

“That will not happen,” Zarkon assures him. “But in the worst case scenario you would accompany Haggar and I to a shuttle and we would leave. A maintenance crew would be in charge of restoring power, but we would be on another ship by then.”

Keith hopes it doesn’t come to that.

They make their way to the closest maintenance juncture where Zarkon leaves the maintenance crew to figure out what they need to do to get the life support back on. Marzila stays with them so that they have one more person to bounce ideas off.

Keith follows Zarkon further down the hallway. They don’t have much places to go with the doors sealed shut, but that doesn’t stop Zarkon from leading Keith as far from the others as possible. Keith doesn’t know what it’s about, and he doesn’t ask.

Eventually Zarkon stops at a dead end and turns to face Keith who has to be careful not to blind Zarkon with his flashlight.

Zarkon regards Keith with an unreadable expression, but Keith refuses to budge.

“I understand the darkness is not to your liking,” Zarkon starts, but he seems to hesitate.

Keith a little taken aback by the apparent concern in Zarkon’s voice. “I’m fine,” he says, raising the flashlight. “I’ve got light.”

Zarkon inclines his head. “I merely wished to make sure you are well now. It would not do any of us any good if you were suffering any ill effects.”

Keith isn’t sure if Zarkon is concerned about his wellbeing, or if he just wants to make sure Keith isn’t going to fall apart in what could turn into a life threatening situation. He decides to take it as Zarkon being genuinely concerned about him.

If it was Shiro making sure Keith was alright knowing what to do next would be easy. But it’s Zarkon, and Keith has to take a moment to think about his next move.

He sets the flashlight on the ground where it illuminates the closed door behind them, and takes a
hesitant step forward. Zarkon tilts his head, curious as to what Keith is doing, and though Keith has to stop for a second to gather himself, he takes the final step into Zarkon’s space and reaches to run his fingers along Zarkon’s jaw.

Zarkon’s expression shifts from curiosity to amusement, and he leans into Keith’s touch.

Keith should do more. He should push the limit a little further to let Zarkon know this is what he wants, even if it’s not.

So Keith grabs Zarkon’s collar and pulls him down until their foreheads touch. Keith stands on tiptoe to push against Zarkon, and wraps his arms around Zarkon’s shoulders to keep him still.

After a few long seconds Zarkon closes his eyes and cups Keith’s face in his hands.

Keith lets Zarkon take control and focuses on letting the warmth spread through his mind and dull his thoughts. He tilts his head back, his memory briefly reminding him of the meaning of his actions.

Zarkon stills before pulling away and leveling Keith with a speculative look. Keith meets his gaze.

Keith’s heart hammers in his ears as he pushes his hair from his neck and tilts his head further to bare the faded bite mark on his neck, hoping it’s the right thing to do. Zarkon runs his claws down the side of Keith’s neck, sending shivers down Keith’s spine, before pressing his thumb against the bite mark.

It doesn’t sting like it used to, and a part of Keith lights up with nervous excitement at the possibility of having that back.

Zarkon tilts his head, a faint frown on his face, and for a moment Keith thinks he’s done something wrong. Then Zarkon lifts him from the ground and presses him against a wall in one fast, fluid motion.

Keith has to bite back a yelp of surprise. He wraps his arms and legs around Zarkon to steady himself, and he can’t help but laugh softly when his surprise at his new position fades.

Zarkon nuzzles Keith’s neck and Keith takes the hint to tilt his head. When Zarkon bites down on the faded mark Keith lets his eyes fall shut, and he clings to Zarkon a little tighter. He hates that he likes it, and if it wasn’t for the fact that he needs this to happen to keep his friends safe he might push Zarkon away.

But Keith needs this to happen, so he pulls Zarkon closer until there’s nothing between them.

Zarkon moves to nib at Keith’s jaw, and Keith’s breath hitches. He shivers in anticipation and he’s sure Zarkon can hear his heart hammer rapidly.

A wave of self-loathing hits Keith out of nowhere, and he has to fight the urge to shove Zarkon away. He focuses on what matters, and does his best to relax and enjoy the feeling of Zarkon’s breath on his cheek.

Except that Zarkon has gone deadly still.

Keith swallows as he slowly opens his eyes to look at Zarkon, and he almost winces at the sight of the hard line of his mouth. It can’t be good, and Keith’s mind races with possible ways to fix the situation.
Without a warning Zarkon drops Keith to the ground and walks away, leaving Keith crumbled on the floor.

Keith groans and bangs his head against the wall. His fall to the floor left his body aching, but he pushes himself to his feet and hurries to his flashlight. He barely remembers to straighten his clothes and cover the new bite on his neck before he rushes after Zarkon.

He should have known Zarkon was tapping into his thoughts. He should have felt it. If he had known it, he could have prevented this. He wouldn’t have to deal with an upset Zarkon.

Keith’s breathing is close to labored by the time he rounds the corner and catches up to Zarkon, who is already engaged in a conversation with the maintenance crew. Keith takes the opportunity to calm down and ignore the curious glance Marzila throws his way.

“You will go down to maintenance and fix the life support system now,” Zarkon tells the maintenance crew. They bow and hurry off, but not before Zarkon orders Marzila to go with them in case they will need help.

It leaves Keith alone with Zarkon in the dark, empty hallway, and even the sound of his own breathing is too loud in the heavy silence.

“You will go and assist Haggar,” Zarkon says without turning to face Keith, the set of his shoulders tense.

“Okay,” Keith replies, his voice too loud in the surrounding silence.

After making sure he still has his map Keith lets Zarkon help him up the ventilation shaft, and he starts his journey to Haggar.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea when I have access to a working computer next, so I can't make any promises on the next chapter, but if I'm lucky the insurance company will make up their mind about whether or not my insurance covers my computer and I can have it back in a week or two.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I'm getting my laptop back next week. I would've gotten it sooner but puppies happened.

I'm borrowing my neighbors laptop to post this because next week is busy for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To everyone’s relief the maintenance crew gets the life support back online, along with some of the secondary systems. They still don’t have shipwide communications, and the lights are still acting up, but Haggar manages to contact both Zarkon to tell him that the druid’s comm system had come online, and Thace, who informs her that his staff is working on getting the comms back online.

Keith can’t do much to help Haggar, but he still remains in her lab. Zarkon had obviously wanted him gone from his company and there’s nowhere for Keith to go while the ship is still more or less in lockdown. Haggar doesn’t comment on his presence, though she tells Keith to stay out of the way.

It leaves Keith with too much time to think, and his thoughts drift to what happened between him and Zarkon.

If Keith is right Zarkon was keeping tabs on his thoughts. And if Zarkon was tapping into his thoughts then he knows the mix of conflicting emotions Keith feels about having Zarkon’s hands on him.

If Keith saw any reason for Zarkon to do so he might suspect Zarkon was the one mixing and confusing Keith’s emotions, but that wouldn’t make sense. There would be no point in Zarkon trying to make Keith not want him. It makes no sense to him.

Keith sighs. No matter the reason, he’ll have to figure out a way to fix things. Zarkon won’t like it if he believes Keith is playing him, and just because Haggar says Zarkon can’t break their bond doesn’t necessarily make it so. And even if the bond is unbreakable Keith doubts it will stop Zarkon from making Keith’s life hell.

Keith’s musings are cut short when Jadri walks through the doors. It isn’t strange in itself, but the way Haggar stops to keep an eye on her is unusual. Keith can’t blame her for it; there’s something about Jadri that sets people off.

“Do you require assistance?” Jadri asks, seemingly oblivious to the way Haggar is studying her.

“No,” Haggar says. "You may leave now."

Jadri cocks her head. “I’m afraid that’s not quite possible.”

Haggar narrows her eyes, and Keith considers leaving the room before things get ugly.

Haggar takes a step closer to Jadri. “Why?”
Keith gets ready to bolt even as he watches the scene before him with morbid kind of fascination. He’d rather not be there if Haggar decides to murder Jadri.

“The doors cannot be opened from this side,” Jadri replies. Keith has to resist the urge to laugh.

Haggar, to her credit, doesn’t react. “Then stay out of the way.”

Jadri inclines her head and goes to stand by the doors. Haggar glares at her for a second longer before turning around and heading back to her druids, but she catches a sight of Keith and slows down. Keith raises an eyebrow, trying to not be fazed by the sudden attention.

“Come with me,” Haggar orders and continues on her way without making sure Keith does what he’s told.

Keith trails after Haggar, sparing Jadri a glance over his shoulder as he goes. She’s not paying attention to Keith, which he appreciates more than he thought he would.

“What’s up with her?” Keith asks Haggar when he catches up to her.

Haggar spares Keith a glance before focusing on her pad again. “She approached us with valuable information. Her loyalties are not entirely clear to me though.”

Keith is surprised that Haggar would admit to it, even if he’s not surprised that she doesn’t trust Jadri.

“What does Zarkon think about her?”

Haggar’s lips quirk in an approving smile. “He has his doubts.”

Keith frowns. “But he lets her walk around freely.”

It gets a soft laugh out of Haggar. “You walk around freely. Do you think he trusts you?”

Keith has no satisfying answer to her. He could say Zarkon had told him he trusts Keith to an extent, but it seems pointless. He doesn’t even know what to an extent means in this context.

“You can assist Kiira,” Haggar says and nods towards a druid to her left. Keith nods and makes his way to the druid, already dreading having to explain why he is bothering them.

Kiira turns to face Keith when he clears his throat. “Haggar told me to help you,” he says, hoping he doesn’t sound as awkward as he thinks he does.

If Kiira reacts in any way, Keith doesn’t see it. The mask keeps their expression hidden and they do nothing to give Keith any indication to their thoughts.

Keith shifts, and Kiira returns their attention to the computer terminal before them. Keith wonders why they are staring at a dark screen, but he doesn’t ask about it.

Keith ends up standing there, feeling a little stupid, for several long seconds, and he starts in surprise when Kiira thrusts a pad at his face.

“You understand numbers, yes?”

Keith hesitates. “More or less.”

“Then keep record,” Kiira says before prying the panel to the computer’s wiring open.
Keith nods, quickly going through the numbers he’d spend days learning, hoping his memory is good enough so that he can be of some help. Keith writes down numbers as Kiira dictates to him, barely keeping up with their fast pace.

When Keith’s concentration breaks it’s because he spots Jadri studying him from the corner of his eye, her gaze just a little too sharp. Keith lifts his eyes from the pad to meet hers. Jadri tilts her head and smiles, and Keith narrows his eyes at her.

Kiira snaps their slender fingers in front of Keith’s face. “Ignore her,” they orders, their voice quiet, as if they’re trying not to let Jadri hear them.

It’s enough to get Keith to refocus on what he’s supposed to be doing, though he remains painfully aware of Jadri’s eyes on him.

The power returns to the ship almost a quarter later, and Haggar and her druids take full advantage of having all of their systems running. It leaves Keith with nothing to do, though Kiira still pulls him to stand between them and another druid.

To Keith it seems like the druids have unanimously decided to shield him from Jadri, and the only reason Keith can come up for it is that the druids are either picking up on Haggar’s dislike of her, or that Haggar has downright ordered them to act as Keith’s personal guard.

Keith wouldn’t mind it so much if the druids were any less creepy to be around.

As the tension in the lab eases exhaustion takes over Keith, and he has to resist the urge to slump on the ground.

It takes almost an hour for Haggar to dismiss him. To Keith’s disappointment Jadri is still there, and she steps forward to intercept him as he heads to the door.

“I can show you out,” she offers.

“That is not necessary.” Haggar cuts in, appearing by Keith’s side. Keith is glad she’s there to turn Jadri down on his behalf.

Jadri cocks her head and narrows her eyes at Haggar for just a fraction of a second.

Haggar steps closer to Keith. “Kiira is free so she will take him. Your assistance is not required.”

Keith almost expects them to start a fight right there, but after a few tense seconds Jadri backs down. Haggar waves Kiira to come over and orders her to show Keith to Zarkon’s quarters.

Kiira remains by Keith’s side as they head out of the door, leaving Jadri looking after them with an unreadable expression.

They’re rounding the third corner when Keith finally breaks the silence. “I don’t mean to be offensive, but no one’s explained the pronouns you guys use to me. Or anything else either, really.”

Kiira continues walking like Keith hadn’t said anything, and Keith expects not to get an answer. It’s a shame, he would have liked to know more about the druids.
“You will have to ask everyone for their personal preferences,” Kiira says eventually.

Keith nods and chews his lip while he considers his next question. “Do you always wear that mask or can you take it off around other people?”

Kiira turns towards him for a second before focusing on the hallway ahead of her. “It is not allowed, unless in company of family or close, trusted friends.”

Keith tries not to be disappointed.

They take the elevator up to the floor where Zarkon’s quarters are. Keith steals discreet glances at Kiira while in the elevator, trying to imagine what she looks like under the mask. She’s not much taller than Keith, and if her hands are anything to go by she doesn’t have fur.

“How do all Galra have the potential to use the quintessence magic?” Keith asks when they step out of the elevator.

“No Galra has that potential,” Kiira replies.

Keith stops, falling a few steps behind Kiira before hurrying after her. “You’re not Galra?”

It’s not a revelation Keith was expecting to ever hear.

Kiira turns her head towards him and slows down. “No. Some of us have slightly different ancestry, and thus are closer to Galra, but are not so dissimilar from either as to be considered truly separate.”

Keith frowns as he ponders over her words. “So the druids are like a sub-race or something?”

“Yes. Except for those who are not.”

It’s probably the most coherent answer Keith will get out of Kiira, and he decides it’s as good place as any to end a conversation, even if it leaves him with more questions than answers.

Soon they reach the door to Keith and Zarkon’s quarters, and Keith bids Kiira goodnight. He gets no reply from her, but he doesn’t take it personally.

Zarkon isn’t there yet, and Keith thinks it’s better that way. He takes a quick trip to the bathroom before crawling in bed. He intends to sleep well into the next day, and not having Zarkon there will let him get to sleep a lot easier. Going by their last interaction Keith doubts an evening together would have been pleasant.

Keith hasn’t been asleep for long when he gets a rude awakening in the form of his backside slamming on the floor.

“What the hell?” Keith blinks the sleep from his eyes, frowning at Zarkon standing over him.

Zarkon, who does not look happy at all. “I do not want you here tonight.”

Keith frowns. “Why?”

“Because I do not appreciate being toyed with. The only reason I am not throwing you into a cell is because of what the ship has just gone through.” Zarkon crosses his arms, staring at Keith expectantly.

Keith blinks back at him, not quite believing what he’s hearing, but unsure of how to explain to
Zarkon he wasn’t trying to play him. He just got confused for a moment.

Still, when it becomes obvious Zarkon isn’t going to let Keith stay, Keith pushes himself to his feet and leaves the room without another word. It’s better if they both get some rest before they start an argument.

Keith curls on the couch and tries not to feel lonely.

“You are not focusing no the task at hand,” Thace scolds Keith.

Keith sighs. ”Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Oh?” Thace’s expression shifts to polite curiosity, and Keith is tempted to tell him about his latest fight with Zarkon. It would be good to have a second opinion from someone who understood how Galra behaved better than Keith did.

But Zarkon wouldn’t like it if Keith spread his personal problems among his subjects.

“It’s nothing important,” Keith says and focuses his attention on the words before him, trying to make sense of them.

Thace looks skeptical, but to Keith’s relief he doesn’t push the matter further.

“Teiru vasai de,” Thace repeats, tapping the pad.

Keith repeats the words, and then does so again when Thace corrects his pronunciation.

Keith’s mind isn’t in it, though.

“Now this,” Thace says, pointing at another line of text. “Ga—.”

“How do Galra relationships work? I get friendships but nothing else doesn’t seem to work like things do on Earth.”

Thace stops, dumbfounded, and he has to take a second to collect himself. “Why do you ask?”

Keith shrugs, already regretting not controlling himself better, but there’s nothing to be done about it now. “Just curious. I’d ask Zarkon but he’d take it the wrong way or just not tell me the truth, and I don’t want Marzila to start overthinking it.”

Thace regards him for a few long seconds before sighing and leaning back in his chair. “We have fairly loose definition when it comes to relationships, and it’s not unusual for one person to have multiple partners at the same time, but the dynamics of it all are complicated and usually hard for outsiders to understand. Eventually we choose a mate to spend our life with, even if we might continue our other relationships.”

“I got the impression you’re too possessive to be polyamorous,” Keith says.

Thace raises an eyebrow. “Where did you get such an idea?”

Keith gives him a flat look. “I spend almost all my time with Zarkon. What do you think?”
Thace’s lips quirk in an amused smile that he hides by checking his pad. “It is true that some of us have a slightly more possessive personality.”

“I think ‘slightly’ is an underestimation,” Keith laughs.

Thace tilts his head. “You should not speak ill of the Emperor.”

“He’s not my Emperor,” Keith replies, then sighs, his shoulders slumping. “He thinks I should look more like Galran.”

It’s not a topic Keith thinks he should approach with anyone but Zarkon or Haggar, but there’s something about Thace that makes Keith think he can be trusted, at least to an extent. Zarkon must thinks so too, since he’s allowing Thace teach Keith.

And it’s not like his heritage is a secret. It’s just that there aren’t any people besides Marzila on board the ship Keith is comfortable discussing such matters.

Thace shifts, his ears twitching. “Why is that?”

Keith’s eyes are glued to his pad, but he can’t quite see the words on it. “Apparently my biological mother was a Galra and she changed me somehow, and left me on a strange planet. So Zarkon says I don’t look like I was supposed to look. And he implied that I have a bad mother since she left me behind.”

Thace remains quiet for such a long time Keith starts to think he should just have kept his mouth shut. “Considering the situation, I think it could be argued that your mother did the best she could under extremely difficult circumstances. Perhaps she chose to leave you because she couldn’t be sure you would survive leaving the planet.”

Keith looks up in surprise. Then, slowly, a grateful smile spreads on his lips. “Thanks.”

“May we resume your studies now?” Thace asks, raising a pointed eyebrow.

Keith sighs before nodding, and focuses on the words before him.

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Keith is enjoying a quiet evening with Marzila in the mostly empty mess hall when Haggar comes to find him, a deep frown marring her face. Keith has a moment to hope she is not there for him before their eyes meet and she marches across the floor.

What little murmur of conversation had filled the air before her appearance seems to have been sucked out of the room, replaced with barely breathable air.

She comes to a halt before Keith, her frown deepening. “I need a moment alone with you.”

She doesn’t wait to see if Keith follows her, and Keith shares a look with Marzila before going after her, setting his shoulders and refusing to appear as worried as he feels.

It’s the first time Keith receives nothing but sympathetic looks from the Galra around him, and he hates it.

Haggar shows Keith to an empty room that’s not quite a conference room, but not a rec room
either, and Keith frowns as he takes the seat he’s pointed to by a small hexagon table.

Haggar doesn’t sit down.

“Why is Zarkon being so testy?”

Keith raises an eyebrow at the question and at her use of Zarkon’s name rather than his title. He’s not sure how he should answer. If Zarkon hasn’t told her about their relationship, then Keith probably shouldn’t either.

Haggar’s frown deepens. “If you don’t trust me and tell me what I need to know I cannot help you.”

Keith sighs. She’s going to find out anyways, and Keith would rather keep her on his side. “Before you came here, Zarkon told me that he’d have to kill me to find Voltron, so I might have... kissed him.”

The look on Haggar’s face is worth telling her the truth. “You did what?”

Keith has a hard time not smiling at her expression. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Haggar looks like she’s suppressing the urge to groan. “That does not explain the current situation.”

Keith makes a face. “I might have kissed him again.”

Haggar crosses her arms, and Keith does his best not to fidget.

“It might have gotten slightly out of hand and I might have had a second of hesitation over it. Which Zarkon could sense through the bond.” Keith continues.

Haggar sighs and sits down. “He does not appreciate being played with.”

“I wasn’t playing with him. I just...” Keith slumps back in his chair with a frustrated groan. “I just hesitated for a moment. I never expected to be making out with an alien emperor in a dark hallway. It was all just a little too much for me.”

“Then why not tell him so?” Haggar asks.

Keith spreads his arms and laughs humorlessly. “Have you met him? It’s not like he’s in a listening mood. The way I understand it is that I’m lucky not to be locked in a cell right now.”

Haggar tilts her head. “I could advise him to talk with you.”

Keith isn’t sure if it would be good or not, but he doesn’t want to keep fighting with Zarkon. It’s exhausting, and trying to figure out what he can and can’t do to keep from making Zarkon angrier is stressing him out a little too much.

“That might be a good idea,” he says, and Haggar inclines her head.

“I expect you to fix this mess. His mood is affecting everyone on this ship, and we cannot afford it at the moment,” she says before getting up and walking out of the door.

Keith groans. He’s not looking forward to talking with Zarkon, but he knows it must be done. It’s not like he can keep avoiding it forever.
Keith doesn’t see Zarkon until late in the evening.

When Zarkon does return to their quarters he has an expression of someone who has had a less than stellar day. Haggar must have already talked to him, and by the looks of it Zarkon didn’t want to have that particular conversation any more than he wants to talk with Keith.

So Keith lets him drink his tea without joining him, and waits until Zarkon is willing to talk to him.

When Zarkon does turn to face Keith he’s wearing a carefully constructed mask of neutral disdain. It does nothing to assure Keith that this is going to go well, but he has to do something if he doesn’t want to live under the stress he is in now.

“You told Haggar of our... situation,” Zarkon starts.

Keith manages not to flinch. “She’s scary when she’s angry.”

The admission does nothing to garner sympathy from Zarkon, who narrows his eyes at Keith, his ears flattening minutely. Keith swallows even as he sits up straighter. Zarkon isn’t going to hurt him.

He can’t.

“If I want her to know something I will tell her about it myself,” Zarkon says, his voice dangerously calm.

Keith refuses to be scared by it. “If you’d listen to me I wouldn’t have had to tell her anything.”

Zarkon’s ears flatten further, but he shifts and regards Keith with an expectant look.

Keith takes a deep, slow breath. “I wasn’t playing you. I just got overwhelmed. I’m still getting used to this.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you were to get your own room.” Zarkon says, sounding like he’s being sincere.

Keith could agree to it. He could get his own room and limit the exposure he has to Zarkon. He could be more of his own person that way.

“If you do want your own room we will of course have to call this little experiment of a relationship to an end. I see no point in continuing it, considering your stance on it,” Zarkon adds.

It should be the final straw that sends Keith running out of the door and locating this new room of his, but Keith doesn’t move. It doesn’t seem real enough for him to do so. It’s a free out of the shaky relationship, as well as Zarkon’s constant presence.

He is going to get some of his independence back.

“Should I arrange for your room?” Zarkon asks, reaching for his pad.

Keith takes in a sharp breath, and Zarkon stills.
Keith frowns. He doesn't know why, but he doesn’t want Zarkon to order anyone to arrange for a room for him. He doesn’t want to stay where he is either, but the thought of getting his own room and not continuing with their relationship is making him hesitate.

Why is he hesitating?

“Keith?”

"I don’t—” Keith starts, then he clears his throat. “I don’t want to leave. I mean I do, but I also don’t.”

Keith slumps back on the couch. Zarkon lets the pad be and regards Keith with a curious expression. Keith fidgets under his sharp gaze, knowing Zarkon expects him to explain himself further, but Keith doesn’t know how he could possibly do so.

The silence stretches into long, uncomfortable minutes, and it becomes increasingly hard for Keith to meet Zarkon’s eyes. Eventually he sighs, deciding that telling Zarkon the truth might be his best choice.

“I don’t want to want you,” he admits, his voice quiet. He can’t bring himself to look up and face Zarkon.

Zarkon remains silent for so long Keith fears he’s done the wrong thing by admitting the truth.

Hesitantly, Keith looks up. He can’t read the look on Zarkon’s face, and Zarkon isn’t letting anything get through the bond either. Keith doesn’t know what to make of it, so he tries to convey his uncertainty through their bond.

Zarkon takes in a slow breath and frowns. “I see.”

Keith sighs. He doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know how he’s supposed to decide wants.

Without thinking, Keith pushes himself to his feet and trudges to Zarkon.

Zarkon’s expression shifts from a less than pleased frown to mild curiosity. It’s a minor victory that Keith doesn’t stop to revel in. He cups Zarkon’s face in his hands and places a tentative kiss on the corner of his mouth before slumping on the ground.

Keith lets out a shuddering breath as he presses his forehead against Zarkon’s knee.

It’s familiar and comforting, even if Keith knows it shouldn’t be.

After a tense few seconds Zarkon runs his claws through Keith’s hair. Keith relaxes almost on reflex, but he doesn’t look too deeply into it.

He just needs a minute or two of just being before he can start dealing with his problems again.

Chapter End Notes

Since I'm getting my beloved laptop back soon I'll be posting at least one more chapter this month. Maybe two if I have the time.
I hope you enjoyed this!
In Keith’s opinion, things are a little too weird between him and Zarkon.

Zarkon may have allowed Keith to return to sleeping in the bed, and he’s talking to Keith again, but there’s a distance between them that wasn’t there before.

Keith doesn’t know how to fix it.

“Tell me what’s wrong and we can solve it together.” Marzila pushes a book towards Keith. “You’re miserable company right now.”

Keith sighs and pulls the book closer. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked Marzila to help him with his studies. He could have waited until Thace had time for him.

“You can tell me anything, you know?” Marzila looks at Keith with nothing but sincerity on her face.

“It’s nothing, really. I’m just having a bad day,” Keith says. Marzila doesn’t look convinced, but she lets it go for now.

Keith cuts their study session short by claiming trouble concentrating, and he leaves Marzila in the library to go wander around the ship before she can stop him. He needs time and space to think, and having company won't help him do that.

If Keith was sure it would kill Zarkon as well as him he’d consider hurling himself out of the nearest airlock, but he can’t be sure Zarkon would die with him. Haggar merely suspects he would, and Keith can’t operate on maybes.

He has to go by the assumption that Zarkon wouldn’t be affected if their bond was severed. It’s his safest bet.

It’s also a relief, in a way, to have that particular maybe there. It’s easier for him to believe he'd be willing to die if it meant Zarkon would die as well when he can't do more than think about it. Because if Keith is honest, he doesn't want to kill himself any more than he wants to kill Zarkon.

He knows, deep down, that he wouldn't do it and he hates himself for it.

Keith rounds a corner without looking where he’s going so the arm stopping him dead in his tracks comes as a surprise, and he glares at the Galra who had so rudely stopped him.

Keith doesn’t know him, and he thinks he’d remember if he had seen him before. The nearly black shade of his short fur is kind of hard to miss. Keith assumes he works on a shift that doesn’t coincide with his own day rhythm. That, or he’s just come aboard.
“You should be more careful,” the Galra says, then frowns. “Are you even allowed to walk around without a guard?”

Keith takes a step back from him. “I wouldn’t be walking around alone if it wasn’t okay.”

The Galra inclines his head. “Of course.”

They eye each other for a long moment, unsure of what to make of one another. Keith is the first to take a step back, more from a desire to discontinue the situation than anything.

The Galra studies Keith for a second before stepping around him. Keith doesn’t turn to look after him, but he tenses, suddenly expecting something to happen. He is too aware of the retreating steps behind his back, and as soon as he feels it’s safe he hurries around the corner and into the nearest elevator to put as much distance between himself and the Galra.

Keith heads straight to the floor where Haggar’s labs are. He’s supposed to meet with her anyways, he might as well be there a little early. Maybe it’ll make a good impression on Haggar.

It doesn’t.

If anything Haggar is annoyed to have her routine disrupted by Keith’s unexpected arrival, even if Keith makes a point of sticking to the sidelines and drawing as little attention to himself as possible.

It takes almost an hour until Haggar leaves her station and waves Keith to join her in the adjacent room that looks like a mix of an office and a private working space. Keith scans the room quickly before sitting on the chair by a small desk Haggar points him to. He doesn’t know what Haggar wants and he doesn’t know what to expect.

Maybe she wants to resume her tests.

Maybe she wants to know how Keith is doing with finding the Blade agent.

“What were you working on?” Keith asks to break the silence.

“I am refreshing my knowledge of advanced genetics,” Haggar replies as she sits behind the desk.

Keith tries not to feel like he’s done something wrong. “Like what was done to me?” He asks.

Haggar inclines her head. "We are working on something that will benefit from such knowledge," she says before focusing her attention on her pad. Keith gives her the time she needs to be ready to talk to him.

Eventually she puts the pad back down and focuses on Keith, crossing her arms on the desk and regarding him with a slight tilt of her head. Keith does him best not to fidget under her sharp gaze.

“How is our Emperor?” Haggar asks.

It’s not what Keith expected, and it takes him a moment to form a reply. “He’s fine. I think he’s mad at me but I can’t figure out why so there’s nothing I can do about it. Why?”

Haggar doesn’t quite shrug, but it’s close. “If you and I are going to share secrets, it would be beneficial for both of us to be aware of certain things. The Emperor’s mood is one of those.”

Keith frowns. “I don’t know what secrets I can tell you.” He knows it’s a risk. He knows that, after Zarkon, Haggar might hold the most power in the Empire. He shouldn’t be telling her what she
“You are in a unique position,” Haggar replies. “You can not only observe Zarkon for longer periods of time than anyone else on this ship, you also have direct access to his emotional state. If you were to keep an eye on him, I would be grateful.”

“You want me to spy on him?” Keith doesn’t bother covering the incredulousness of his voice. “I think you know him a lot better than I do.”

“Perhaps, but I have a limited amount of time to spare each day, and you are sleeping in his bed. I assume that is all you are doing since I have yet to be called to fix you up.”

“What do you mean?” Keith almost hopes Haggar won’t answer.

Haggar smiles and raises an eyebrow. “You’re very small and rather frail by our standards. The chances that you would be damaged if you were to have sex with a Galra are rather high. Since you have decided to offer your affections to the Emperor, I would be the one who would have to deal with the aftermath.”

Keith stares at her for a long second before leaning forward and resting his arms on the desk. “Just so you know, when Zarkon asks why I’m never having sex with him, I’m gonna tell him it’s all your fault.”

“I could always tweak your physique to be more suited for a Galra partner,” Haggar offers.

It takes effort, but Keith doesn’t let his expression change, and he doesn’t lean back on his chair. It doesn’t stop Haggar from noticing the change in his mood.

“You cannot exist as you are and hope to convince Zarkon that you truly intend to stay here,” she says. “As long as you look like a human you give off the appearance of someone waiting to get away from us.”

Keith knows she’s right. He knows it, and he hates her for it just a little. He doesn’t want to look like a Galra. He wouldn’t be himself anymore.

And what if Shiro were to come for him, only to find him looking like the people who had kept him prisoner and tortured him and forced him to fight for their entertainment? He wouldn’t want anything to do with Keith. He wouldn’t want Keith back in the Castle ship.

So maybe it would be better if Keith let Haggar do what she wants and give him yet another reason to stop thinking about going back to the others.

“I’ve looked like this my whole life. I don’t know how I could change that,” Keith says, his voice quiet and his eyes glued to the table. “I don’t think I could adjust to that.”

“I did.”

Keith’s eyes snap up. He knows Haggar is different from the Galra around her, but so is Zarkon, so he’d just assumed it was because they were practically ancient. He hadn’t considered the possibility that she might not be Galra. He’d assumed she’s at least a part of the people Kiira said all the druids are.

“Can I ask?” Keith doesn’t want to assume it’s something Haggar wants to talk about.

“Maybe someday,” Haggar replies, and the hint of a strangely genuine smile on her lips is enough
to tell Keith she’s sincere. It matters to him more than he ever thought it would.

“So was there something you actually wanted from me?” Keith asks, leaning back on his chair.

Haggar sits up straighter. “We need to discuss your progress with the Blade agent.”

Keith nods. He had suspected this would happen sooner or later.

“I haven’t gone walking around every day to avoid looking suspicious, and I haven’t been approached by anyone yet,” Keith says before stopping to consider his next words. “Though while I was coming here I ran into this guy who gave me the creeps. He didn’t do or say anything strange or threatening, but something about him just put me on edge.”

“You didn’t happen to ask his name?” Haggar raises an eyebrow, and Keith scolds himself for not thinking of doing so as he shakes his head.

“He shouldn’t be too hard to find though,” Keith says. “His fur was almost black. I’ve never seen that on a Galra before.”

“I’ll look into it,” Haggar promises.

She gives Keith a few suggestions that might help him find the Blade agent before waving him off. Keith leaves her office, deciding to grab a quick snack in the mess hall before heading back to his and Zarkon’s quarters.

Keith chews his lip, trying not to think about what Haggar had said about his physique as he studies Zarkon’s profile.

He shouldn’t stare. Zarkon will react if he stares for too long. He should have stayed at the table and not finished his tea so fast. He’d be too uncomfortable to stare at Zarkon if he was still sitting at the table.

But he can’t help but think about it.

It’s not like he isn’t aware of the difference in strength and size between him and the Galra in general, let alone Zarkon. There’s also the matter of the sharp claws and teeth. Zarkon could maul Keith to death if he wanted.

“What are you thinking?” Zarkon glances Keith, a curious gleam in his eyes.

"Haggar might have ruined sex for me forever,” Keith replies before thinking better of it. He wishes he was sitting at the table so that he could bang his head against the hard surface of it.

Zarkon turns his attention from his tea and book to Keith, his eyes widening slightly. “How so?”

Keith makes a face. “She just said that she knows that we haven’t had sex because she hasn’t had to patch me up. I’m not sure I’ll ever want to be in that situation.”

Zarkon frowns, much to Keith’s surprise. “You think I would harm you?”

“No,” Keith replies without hesitation. “It’s just that... Haggar says I’m too fragile.”
Zarkon raises an eyebrow as he sets his book on the table. “There are ways to work around that.”

Keith sighs and falls back on the couch. “Haggar wants to ‘tweak my physique’ or something.”

After a minute of studying Keith with a contemplative look, Zarkon gets up and comes to stand before Keith. Whatever Keith expected him to do, kneeling on the floor before him wasn’t on the list. Zarkon reaches up, cupping Keith’s face in his hands almost tenderly. Keith is too dumbfounded to think about what’s happening.

Zarkon runs his thumb over Keith’s cheek. “I would never harm you. I would never do anything that might hurt you.”

Keith swallows around the lump in his throat and leans into Zarkon’s touch.

Zarkon smiles at him, soft and affectionate. “You know I would never ask you to do anything you were not comfortable with. Besides, if you want to, there are a lot of things we could do that would not cause you the damage Haggar fears she will have to deal with.”

Keith laughs and tries not to examine the relief he feels too closely.

Slowly, Zarkon trails his hands across Keith’s neck and down his chest, all the way down to his thighs, leaving Keith’s skin burning and feeling too tight. Zarkon smiles and tilts his head minutely when he grabs Keith’s hips and gently urges him to move closer.

Keith goes willingly.

He puts his arms around Zarkon’s shoulders and leans forward until his forehead touches Zarkon’s. It shouldn’t feel as natural as it does. Zarkon presses into the contact, running his claws lazily up and down Keith’s spine.

Keith tilts his head to the side, inviting Zarkon to bite down on the long since faded mark. Zarkon huffs before nuzzling Keith’s neck, and Keith closes his eyes in eager anticipation. He’s not examining the reasons for it, but he likes having the mark there.

But Zarkon doesn’t bite him. He doesn’t even give him a gentle nibble. Instead he pulls away and stands, leaving Keith confused and a little miffed.

“I have work to do,” Zarkon says. “I trust you can entertain yourself.”

Keith blinks at Zarkon, a frown forming on his face. “That’s it?”

Zarkon cocks his head like he doesn’t understand what Keith is talking about. Keith stares at him with an expression that makes it clear he’s not going to play Zarkon’s games.

“You wanted to take things slowly,” Zarkon reminds Keith. “This is slow, as you cannot be certain you can handle anything more without growing uncomfortable.”

Keith stares after Zarkon when he walks out of the door, not quite believing what just happened.

Marzila has made new friends. From the looks of it, she’s befriended the entire ship’s population, and though Keith has never been one to want a large group of friends, just for a second he’s hit
with a bang of jealousy of how easily she gets along with everyone. It passes as quickly as it comes, and Keith chalks it up to missing his own friends and his difficulties with making new ones.

Still, he doesn’t feel like he has the right to ask her to leave her new friends so that Keith can have company while Zarkon is not available.

So Keith only stops to say hi to her and her large group of friends, and makes excuses of not needing the company before leaving her in favor of wandering around the ship.

He doesn’t fit in there. No matter what Zarkon says about him being part of the Galra, or how much Keith tries to learn their language or culture, he doesn’t fit in.

He sticks out just by looking like he does.

It’s strange. He might be accepted as he is more easily among the Galra than humans, but in a way he’s more out of place there than he was on Earth. At least he blended in with humans.

Maybe he should let Haggar change him. Just a little. Keith is sure she could do something that wouldn’t result in him changing too much, but would allow him to not look so out of place.

Keith sighs and stops to slump against a wall in a quiet hallway. He doesn't want to be stuck as an outsider because of his looks anymore than he wanted to be an outsider because of his personality on Earth, and he doesn’t want to look different from how he does.

“Is something wrong?” Thace’s voice drags Keith from his thoughts, and he looks around until he spots him coming down the hallway.


“You seem troubled.” Thace stops in front of Keith and tilts his head, a thoughtful look on his face. Keith expects him to leave. There’s no reason for Thace to concern himself with Keith’s wellbeing, and Keith doesn’t think they’re friendly enough with each other for Thace to really care. It’s much more likely that he’s just being polite.

Thace frowns and starts, almost like he’s about to leave Keith where he is before thinking better of it. Keith raises an eyebrow and Thace sighs, his shoulders slumping slightly, as if he’s just lost an argument with himself.

“Would you like to accompany me to the mess hall?” Thace asks, catching Keith off guard.

He opens and closes his mouth before shrugging. “Sure.”

Keith isn’t sure if it’s a good idea, but he has nothing better to do, and Thace has never been anything but nice to him.

They make their way through the hallways in more or less companionable silence. Keith lets Thace lead the way, and to his surprise Thace doesn’t take him to the mess hall he’s always been to. Instead Thace leads him to a smaller mess hall on a different floor that’s decorated with slightly more stylish furniture and smaller tables.

There aren’t many people there, but the ones that are there stop talking the second they see Keith, confusion and surprise evident on their faces. Thace shows Keith to a table without sparing his coworkers even a glance.
“What would you like to have?” Thace asks, nodding towards the counter.

Keith shrugs. “I don’t know. Whatever’s good, I guess.”

Thace inclines his head and goes to order them something to eat. Keith makes himself as invisible as he can while he’s away. He feels out of place, but not only because of his looks, and the stares he receives do nothing to change that.

Thace returns moments later. “They will bring our food soon.”

Keith nods, not knowing what else he can do. He wants to ask if it’s okay for him to be there, but he doesn’t want Thace to decide Keith should leave. He still glances around.

“You can always say I wanted to talk about your studies if someone asks,” Thace says.

Keith smiles despite himself. “I’m more worried of what Zarkon will think when he hears about this.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind,” Thace says, but a flash of hesitation crosses his eyes. Keith knows that if Zarkon doesn’t like having Keith among the more high ranking officers, Thace is going to be the one in trouble. Thace must know it too.

Their food arrives soon, and Thace explains Keith what the dark meat is. Keith doesn’t recognize the name of the animal it’s from, but Thace says it’s from a type of a farm animal and that’s enough for him.

The food is good and Thace isn’t bad company. He’s different from Marzila, but Keith appreciates his calmness. It’s reassuring, and slowly Keith stops worrying about what anyone else thinks of him being there.

Thace tests Keith’s knowledge of food related words, saying they can always use it as an excuse for Keith being there.

Still, as the other officers leave one by one, Keith’s thoughts return to his earlier dilemma. He’d ask Thace about it, but he thinks he’s bothered Thace enough with his personal problems. He shouldn’t have brought up his heritage and what Zarkon had said about it up with Thace, and he definitely shouldn’t ask him if he should let Haggar tamper with his genes.

But there is something Thace might be able to help Keith with.

“Theoretically,” Keith starts, “if someone wanted to send an unauthorized transmission or a secret message off the ship, how would they go about it?”

Thace regards Keith with a guarded expression, and Keith meets his gaze without hesitation.

“That is not possible on a ship of this importance, especially when both the Emperor and Haggar are on board,” Thace replies eventually, his words slow and calculated.

Keith sighs and slumps back in his seat. “That’s not helpful.”

“I’m not going to help you do something that could get us both killed,” Thace says, his voice quiet and hard.

“I don’t want to send anything. I’m asking if someone, lets say a spy, wanted to send out a message they don’t want anyone else to know about, how would they do it?” Keith tries not to get
frustrated. He gets why Thace wouldn’t want to help him, but Keith needs to do something to find even a hint of the Blade agent before Zarkon starts to think he’s not taking his mission seriously.

“Why do you think there would be a spy here?” There’s something in Thace’s voice that Keith can’t quite identify, and the barely concealed urgency in his eyes surprises him.

“I don’t,” Keith lies, hoping it doesn’t show on his face. “It’s just an example.”

Thace regards Keith with doubtful eyes for a moment longer before glancing around the mostly empty mess hall. He crosses his arms on the table and leans forward, and Keith copies him without thinking.

“You would have to make sure no one knows a message is being sent. It is extremely difficult, as all transmissions are being recorded and stored, and there are several different checkpoints a message will go through before reaching its intended target. Depending on the sender and the receiver, the message will go through several algorithms that look for everything and anything out of place. If the algorithms tag something, then an officer will check the message. The process is repeated at every checkpoint.” Thace tilts his head, a rueful smile on his lips.

“So you can’t send a message without it being detected?” Keith can’t quite believe it. If there are Blade agents on the ship, surely they have a means of communication with their base.

Thace looks uncomfortable for a second. “Theoretically, if you had the means of creating a subroutine in the comm systems and using that to hide messages in the transmissions, you could send and receive messages without it being detected.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard,” Keith says.

“It is,” Thace assures him. “The security measures in our systems are the best in the universe, and we are constantly updating them.”

“So how would someone put a subroutine in place?”

Thace frowns as he considers his answer. “They would have to do it in a way that would not be detected. The easiest way to do it would be to add a memory chip into the main computer system itself when the systems are powered down. Which does not happen unless there is an extremely pressing reason for it.”

Keith frowns, chewing his lip and staring at the table as his mind goes over the new information.

“Like a shipwide blackout?”

Thace freezes. Keith glaces up, taking in the shocked look on his face, his heart beating just a little bit faster.

“We ran all standard checks. There were no unauthorized subroutines in place,” Thace says. “I should mention that the chances of successfully adding any coding into our systems is extremely low. It has not been done in years.”

Keith raises an eyebrow. “Haggar said the blackout was never supposed to happen. Let’s assume someone knows how to mess her project up, wouldn’t it stand to reason that they would know how to put a subroutine in place that wouldn’t be detected by the standard inspections?”

Thace’s ears twitch down, his expression growing uncomfortable. “I suppose so.”
Keith stares at him for a second before bolting up. “Thanks for the lunch,” he calls over his shoulder as he rushes to the door, getting disapproving looks from the few remaining patrons.

Keith ignores them, and as soon as he’s out in the hallway he bolts in the direction he thinks Zarkon will be in.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be taking a few days just to write a few new chapters for this, because I haven't actually worked on this beyond editing the chapters I had on my phone for a month.

Next update sometime around next week maybe?

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I'll be posting the fic prompts here soon, probably during the weekend so keep an eye out for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Keith rushes through the doors of the bridge he’s out of breath, and his eyes are wide with excitement.

The officers shift to get a better look at Keith while he catches his breath and Cenzi flattens his ears and frowns, not bothering to hide his disapproval. Zarkon doesn't react, but he lets some of his curiosity drip through their bond.

“I got something,” Keith says, knowing it’s enough to get him Zarkon’s undivided attention.

Cenzi starts to speak when Zarkon abandons him in favor of guiding Keith out of the bridge, but the words die in his mouth, leaving him standing there with a disbelieving expression on his face. If the Galra could turn red Keith imagines Cenzi would be doing just that.

Zarkon doesn’t say anything until he has Keith in a small, empty room, and the door is securely closed behind them. “What is it?”

Keith swallows, only now realizing what he has to say might not be that important. “I was talking with Thace about sending unauthorized transmissions and how that works. I just got thinking, Haggar said that the blackout should’ve never happened, and Thace says that if someone wants to put a secret subroutine in place the best way to do it would be when the computers are off.”

Zarkon inclines his head, encouraging Keith to continue.

“Well, what if someone caused the blackout to get access to the computers when they were off. I don’t know how they could’ve added programming or anything, but what if someone did?” Keith bites his lip, feeling stupid all of the sudden.

Why had he expected this is something Zarkon hadn’t already considered?

“We ran several diagnostics on the systems,” Zarkon says, but neither his expression nor his voice give any indication that he’s not welcoming Keith to challenge him.

Keith takes a deep breath and stands a little taller. “Assuming someone on board is good enough to mess Haggar’s experiments without her noticing, wouldn’t it stand to reason that they are good enough to hide a subroutine from the diagnostics?”

Zarkon paces the room while he considers Keith’s words, and Keith keeps a close eye on him. It’s exciting, in a way. He wants to get that approving look from Zarkon. He wants to hear he’s done a good job, but not because he wants to please Zarkon. And maybe, if Keith is right, things will go back to normal between them.

Zarkon stops and turns to Keith. “I believe you are making an interesting point.” He offers Keith
that rare, approving smile. “I will have someone look into it.”

Keith’s heart beats a little faster when Zarkon walks to him. They are going to be fine. Keith can feel it.

Zarkon stops to regard Keith with a fond look that Keith pretends he didn’t miss. He cups Keith’s face in his hand, running his thumb across Keith’s cheek. Keith wishes he didn’t have his gloves on. He’d much rather have the full effect of the warmth Zarkon radiates than the dull imitation he gets.

“I am proud of you,” Zarkon says.

It shouldn’t fill Keith with as much joy and pride as it does, but those words are rare from Zarkon, and he’s got them.

Before Zarkon can pull his hand away, Keith grabs it and presses it against his cheek a little harder, not wanting to lose the contact just yet. They haven’t had such a normal moment in a long time.

Zarkon huffs, a hint of a smile playing on his lips, but he lets Keith keep his hand hostage for a minute longer before pulling away. “I must get back to work now.”

Keith nods, the stops. ‘Don’t get mad at Thace.’

Zarkon tilts his head. “Why would I get mad at him?”

“He got me lunch,” Keith replies. “I wasn’t in a good mood and he took the time to cheer me up. And I was the one who started talking about how the comm systems work.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Zarkon promises before he leaves Keith alone in the room.

Keith waits until he’s sure Zarkon has gone before leaving the room and heading towards their quarters. He needs time to think.

Zarkon had been proud of him. That’s more than Keith expected when he rushed to find him. He had just wanted to give Zarkon something to prove he was working on his little task, hopefully show Zarkon he was serious about being there with him, and get him to stop keeping Keith at a distance.

Once in the safety of their quarters, Keith slumps on the couch with a heavy sigh and lets his mind drift.

Zarkon doesn’t join Keith all day, and eventually Keith grows tired of waiting for him.

He crawls into bed and buries his face in Zarkon’s pillow, enjoying the familiar scent filling his senses. It has become a habit of his when Zarkon isn’t there, and he does his best not to examine it.

Keith is fast asleep when the bed dips, and he cracks his eye open to see Zarkon looming over him, already out of his armor to Keith’s surprise. Keith rubs his eyes and yawns, a lazy smile spreading on his lips.

“We located your subroutine,” Zarkon says, offering Keith a small smile.
It wakes Keith up. He pushes himself up, forcing Zarkon to back off as he sits. “Do you know who put it there?”

Zarkon shakes his head. “We only know it was there, and we have terminated it. Haggar is taking charge of tracking the origins of the subroutine. Thace will be assisting her so he will not have as much time to tutor you.”

It’s disappointing, but Keith understands that his studies aren’t as important as the security of the Empire.

The shift in Zarkon’s smile barely registers as a warning. “I could teach you, if you want.”

“Don’t you have an empire to run?”

Zarkon tilts his head. “I can make the time for you.”

Keith should say no. Nothing good could come out of having Zarkon teach him.

“Sure.”

Zarkon lets the warmness of his smile and the relaxed tilt of his ears show his happiness with Keith’s decision. Keith likes seeing him like that. It makes him seem softer than he is. More approachable.

Kinder.

Keith pulls Zarkon closer until their foreheads touch. Keith closes his eyes and shifts until he can press his nose against Zarkon’s cheek as he rests his brow against Zarkon’s temple.

It’s natural. Keith doesn’t know why, but it feels natural.

Zarkon cups Keith’s face and holds him close for a moment before pulling away and nipping Keith’s ear. Keith laughs as he reaches to rub his ear, and though Zarkon smiles there’s a hint of disappointment in his eyes.

“You should let Haggar change your ears. You would enjoy it,” Zarkon says, giving Keith’s ears a disapproving once over.

Keith snorts. “You just want me to look more like a Galra.”

“I do not mind you looking the way you do.” Zarkon brushes Keith’s hair out of his eyes, and there’s enough sincerity in his voice for Keith to not argue with him.

Instead, Keith moves forward and takes the tip of Zarkon’s ear in his mouth, worrying it between his teeth. Zarkon freezes before shifting to give Keith a better angle and wrapping his arms around Keith’s middle.

The not quite a purr that Keith feels as he presses against Zarkon encourages him to keep going for a few seconds longer.

When he pulls away Zarkon pushes him on the bed and pins him there, catching Keith by surprise. His surprise turns to excitement when Zarkon nuzzles his neck and grabs his jaw, encouraging Keith to tilt his head back.

Keith complies immediately.
He holds his breath until Zarkon bites the faded mark on his neck, not hard enough to leave a proper mark, but hard enough for Keith to feel it.

Soon Zarkon pulls away and lies down by Keith’s side without a word, running his claws absently along Keith's side. Keith is content leaving things there. It’s enough for now.

They’re taking things slow.

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Keith hadn’t expected Zarkon to keep his promise of teaching him. At least not right away.

Yet Keith finds himself being seated by the table and having a book dropped in front of him. He looks from the book to Zarkon with wide eyes.

Zarkon merely smiles at him in that overly sweet way that never brings anything good to Keith. “This is considered one of the best books for beginners to read,” he explains.

“I don’t think my vocabulary is big enough for me to be reading just yet,” Keith says.

Zarkon sits by Keith side. “Then it is a good thing I do not want you to translate it. I want you to read it out loud.”

Keith balks. “I’d give you a headache. My pronunciation isn’t good enough for that.”

“You have been giving me headaches since the day we met, I can handle one more,” Zarkon replies, receiving a flat look from Keith for his trouble.

Zarkon stares at Keith for a moment longer before frowning. “You will not learn to speak our language unless you practice, and if you do not learn the pronunciation you might end up insulting someone you do not want to insult.”

Keith knows it. Thace has given him the speech often enough already.

“Fine,” he sighs before opening the book and eyeing the first page of text.

He glances at Zarkon’s encouraging expression before swallowing down the sense of dread and anxiety. He starts from the first word, and though he’s overly conscious of his poor pronunciation, he doesn’t let it stop him.

Zarkon corrects Keith every time he makes a mistake, and Keith does his best to listen to his advice.

Zarkon sits by Keith’s side while he reads, his expression somewhere between relaxed and amused, and it puts Keith at ease. He stops worrying so much, and it makes his task easier.

Keith gets through one chapter before Zarkon’s pad beeps, demanding his attention. Keith stops reading while Zarkon checks the message, and the frown that appears on his face tells Keith their study session is over.

"I must attend to something," Zarkon says as apologetically as he gets, and Keith nods his understanding before Zarkon walks out of the door.
It leaves Keith with little to do, and in the end he decides he might as well take a shower now in case Zarkon wants to have him read again when he returns.

Keith unties his hair as he walks to the bathroom, his mind drifting from thought to thought with no real cohesion.

It isn't until he walks past the mirror that Keith stops. He keeps getting surprised by how long his hair has gotten. It's well past his shoulder blades by now, and he's lost his bangs somewhere along the way.

He misses his bangs. He misses having a reason not to tie all of his hair up.

Without giving himself time to think, Keith strides to the bedroom where he knows Zarkon has a razor sharp knife. Keith will just borrow it. There's no rule against him taking care of his appearance.

Keith finds the knife easily in the bottom drawer, and though he's more or less sure Zarkon won't mind him borrowing the knife for this, he still memorizes its exact position in the drawer. Not that it will help since Zarkon will see what Keith has done the second he walks through the door.

Once he returns to the bathroom, Keith stands in front of the mirror with a solemn expression on his face. His heart beats fast in his chest, but his hands don't shake when he separates what used to be his bangs from the rest of his hair. He hesitates only for a second before coming to a decision on the length he wants his bangs to be, and he starts by unceremoniously cutting off a little less of what he wants the length to be.

It almost makes him flinch.

The strands of hair fall on the floor, and Keith doesn't let himself look down in fear of changing his mind halfway through.

Keith takes a moment to remember what one of his foster brothers had taught him about cutting his bangs with a razor before pulling his bangs and slowly, almost too gently, he starts shaving off strands of hair, making sure he doesn't get too much or too little.

When he's done he lets go off his hair and runs his fingers through his new bangs to see what it looks like.

Keith's rather proud of himself for not completely messing his hair up. It's been a while since he's last cut his own hair, but he wasn't going for anything too short so the mistakes he'd made aren't so visible. He's fine with his bangs being chin length, any shorter and it might look weird with the current length of his hair.

Keith sets the knife down and collects the cut hair from the floor, and dumps it all in the bin before stripping off his clothes and stepping into the shower. He turns the water as hot as he can stand and enjoys the way his muscles relax in the heat.

After the shower Keith takes the knife back to where he found it and curls on the couch with his study materials, going through all the words he already knows, and learning a few new ones from the list Thace had made for him.

He's tense until the moment Zarkon walks through the door hours later. Keith stares at his pad without seeing the text on it until Zarkon stops, having noticed Keith's changed appearance.

"What did you do to your hair?"
Keith ignores the way his heart hammers in his ears as he looks up from his pad. "I cut it."

"I can see that," Zarkon replies, frowning disapprovingly. "I want to know why."

Keith shrugs. "I wanted to. I've always had bangs and they were too long."

Zarkon narrows his eyes and studies Keith's new hairstyle. "Next time tell me you wish to change your appearance. I will have a professional do that for you."

Keith hadn't thought that was a possibility, but maybe he should have. It's not like the Galra don't have hair as well as fur. He nods, letting Zarkon know his order has been received, but he doesn't admit to doing anything wrong.

"What did you cut your hair with?" Zarkon asks.

Keith hesitates, unsure if he should tell Zarkon the truth. But the chances that Zarkon would be angry with him if he doesn't answer are a lot higher than if he does, and Keith doesn't want to go back to them fighting.

"I borrowed the knife you keep in the bottom drawer," Keith replies, waving in the general direction of the bedroom. "I didn't think about stabbing you even once."

Zarkon blinks, his expression turning unreadable, and Keith bites his lip as he waits for Zarkon to decide what he thinks.

"Alfor gave me that knife," Zarkon says, his voice almost casual.

Keith opens his mouth to say something, but he's not sure how to reply to that. He’s not sure there’s anything he can say to that. "Do you still want me to read?" He asks instead.

Zarkon tilts his head, considering it. "If you are not too tired," he says eventually.

Keith gets the book while Zarkon changes out of his armor and settles on the couch, and Keith sits by his side and starts where he left off.

He thinks can do one more chapter.

Keith can't wait to show his new bangs to Marzila. He expects her to be surprised at first, but maybe, if Keith is lucky, she'll insist on fixing any obvious damage Keith had done. It's not the most important thing in the world, but it would be nice if his bangs looked just a little better than they do now.

Or maybe Haggar would be willing to fix it.

Keith snorts. That'd be something worth telling Shiro and the others. If he could ever see them, that is.

Keith stops when he sees Jadri coming down the hallway towards him, the uneasiness he always feels around her coming back at full force. Jadri spots him and aligns her steps so that she runs straight into Keith.
It forces Keith to stop before bumping into her, and he glares at her for getting in his way. There should be no reason for her to do so.

Jadri seems unbothered by Keith being bothered. "Whose side are you on?"

"What?"

Jadri tilts her head at Keith's confusion. "You are a Paladin yet you walk around like you belong here. Whose side are you on?"

Keith's frown deepens, and he's about to reply to her when the words die in his mouth.

Whose side is he on?

"I don't know," he answers. "Guess we'll see when the time comes."

Jadri regards him with a curious look in her eyes. "Do you know who you are? Do you even know what you are?"

"What do you want?" Keith counters, crossing his arms and taking a small step back.

"You're not human nor Galra, you're not a Paladin but you're not a part of the Empire either. Am I wrong?" Jadri raises an eyebrow.

Keith shrugs, not really wanting to give her an answer.

"So what are you?" Jadri regards Keith with a curious expression, like she's trying to see the answer on Keith's face.

Keith grits his teeth and takes another small step back. "I'm just me."

Jadri moves after him, and for a second Keith considers turning around and running. "I'm just trying to figure out where you fit," she says, as if to pacify him.

Keith stops his slow retreat, but keeps a cautious eye on her. She seems to hesitate, and Keith forces himself to relax. If she wants to say something he's curious to hear what it is, even if he's unsure of how safe he is at that moment.

After a tense moment, Jadri leans forward. "Have you wondered why Zarkon is alive?"

Keith's eyebrows rise, and he blinks at Jadri. "Not really?"

"Perhaps you should," she says. "The average lifespan of a male Galra who does not suffer from illness or injury is 384 years. He shouldn't be alive, so why is he?"

Keith shakes his head minutely and shrugs again. "I haven't thought about it. Maybe Haggar's keeping him alive somehow."

"She shouldn't be alive either," Jadri points out, her eyes widening just a fraction, and leans closer to Keith.

Keith stares at her, trying to figure out what she's getting at and failing. He has to resist the urge to take another step back, or at least lean away from her.

"Did you know they opened a portal of some kind?" Jadri asks before Keith can politely excuse himself from the conversation. "A long time ago. They opened a portal and they haven't died
Keith frowns. "How do you know that?"

"I'm good at collecting information," Jadri replies, her voice oddly urgent. "I know things. I know the Blade of Marmora are here, I know you're neither human nor Galra, and that there are facts that the public doesn't know of the past."

"I don't see how that affects me in anyway." Keith wants to leave. He doesn't want to see this conversation through. It can't lead to anywhere good.

Jadri worries her lip between her teeth and frowns at Keith. "It affects us all. What if, when they opened the portal, something came through? Maybe the Emperor isn't the Emperor. Maybe your Lions aren't actually the Lions. Maybe our reality isn't ours. It's important knowledge."

Keith doesn't know if he should laugh or run away to safety. "You want to talk about conspiracy theories?"

"They're not conspiracy theories." Jadri's voice mirrors her frustrated expression. "It's important that you know these things, because it will be important in the future."

She stops, standing as tall as she can, and scans the empty hallway. When she's sure there's no one there, she leans close to Keith, and the urgency in her eyes keeps Keith from moving back. "It's important you know that the Blade of Marmora is not the only thing you need to concern yourself with. Sometimes things escape the Emperor's notice. The Blade has done so for thousands of years, even if they didn't always have such good luck. There are other, more dangerous groups out there that will not care if you're a part of the Empire or not."

"Maybe you should talk to Zarkon about that," Keith suggests.

Jadri shakes her head. "He doesn't want to hear about things that he hasn't noticed. The Blade has existed since the Empire begun it's expansion. Depending on who you believe the reasons for its creation are different. In the beginning, the Emperor was aware of them and stuck them down. It is a miracle they survived. But there are others he doesn't know about, and if he doesn't know about them he might not believe they are real."

"So, what? You want me to convince him that there's an invisible monster in the dark?"

"Could you do it?"

Keith doubts it. He doesn't even buy what Jadri is saying, how could he possibly convince Zarkon that he'd missed a group of people wanting to overthrow him?

"Look," Jadri starts, taking a step back to give Keith some of his personal space back. "All you need to do is—"

Something warm hits Keith's face, forcing him to blink and rub his eyes.

The heavy thud makes him to open his eyes again.

He frowns. Jadri's lying at his feet, dark blood pooling around her and a strangely glowing knife embedded in her neck. It's almost like Zarkon's bayard. It doesn't make sense.

"She was going to kill you."
Keith's eyes snap to the familiar dark furred Galra standing at the end of the hallway. Keith stares at him, refusing to look away even as the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

He needs to get away from there. He's unarmed and alone. He needs to get somewhere safe.

Uncertain if it will work, Keith tries to project his need for safety to Zarkon. He can't outrun a Galra, he's going to need someone to be there to reach him halfway.

"I don't... She wasn't going to hurt me." Keith takes a tentative step back. He knows he's right.

The Galra shakes his head. "She was going to kill you. I saved you."

Keith stops. "If you want to manipulate me you've gotta do a lot better than that."

The Galra frowns, and Keith spins around and bolts down the hallway, hoping Zarkon is coming for him.

A sharp pain shoots through Keith's leg and he trips though he doesn't fall, hissing as he touches his thigh. His hand comes away bloody, but he can't see what hit him.

Before Keith can get moving again he's slammed against the wall, his head hurting from the force of it. He grabs the knife aimed at his gut, but he's not strong enough to fight off a Galra even when his vision isn't blurring from the impact to the wall, he has no chance of fighting one off now.

It hurts, and hot blood wets Keith’s clothes.

"Stay calm. You'll make a mess if you fight," the Galra says, lifting Keith from the ground by his throat.

Keith grits his teeth and struggles against the hold cutting off his oxygen. It seems like a more important thing than the knife in his gut. He can’t fight if he’s unconscious—

"The human species isn't fit to survive, is it?" The words are spoken in a casually observant way that makes what's left of Keith's blood boil.

Keith bares his teeth before kicking and clawing at the Galra with all the strength he has to get him off, aiming for his attacker’s eyes as best he can.

Keith falls to the ground, but he doesn't have the strength to get back up. He doesn't even have the strength to push himself up and see what the sudden commotion is about. The floor around him is sticky and warm, and it takes him a couple of seconds to realize he's slumped in his own blood.

He feels light. The pain is becoming distant and Keith wonders if someone turned off the gravity controls. He's not sure which way he should be turning his head to see what the noise is all about.

Someone calls his name, but Keith can't answer. That someone moves him until he comes face to face with Thace.

Keith wants to ask why he looks so worried, almost scared. It's not like he didn't win, right? Keith fought his assailant off. He won.

Thace is saying something, but even though Keith can see his mouth moving he can't make out the words.

He's tired. He tries to say as much, but he can't get his mouth to cooperate.
He tries to reach Zarkon instead, letting his eyes fall shut. He tells himself it's because he needs to concentrate and not because of the darkness taking over him.

Chapter End Notes

I'll get the next chapter to you by the end of the next week.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

This is officially the longest chapter in this fic. I think. I'd say something witty and/or meaningful if I wasn't so tired. I'm never editing past midnight ever again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith becomes aware of things in stages, and it takes him a moment to figure out where he is without opening his eyes.

The cold, clinical smell of the medical bay seems stronger than before. Maybe they've just cleaned. The lights are set dim, but the sound of the monitors seems louder than it should be. The only reason Keith can think for it is that the druids aren't there to monitor him personally.

His memory is hazy at best, but he's more or less sure he got stabbed. Haggar was there too, but that might be because he's in the medical bay. Of course he'd remember Haggar in that case.

She had talked to him.

Maybe she'd asked him something, Keith isn't sure.

She had fixed him after he'd been hurt and that's what's important, though it doesn't explain why his whole body is aching.

It's the dull, distant kind of ache that comes when the painkillers don't quite manage to do their job, and Keith dreads to find out how bad his injuries are if the Galra medicine can't take all of the pain away.

His mind feels groggy and his body feels distant.

The soft steps approaching him drag Keith from his dilemma. He listens since opening his eyes seems like too much work. He thinks he recognizes the steps before they come to a halt by his side, but he knows the warmth that spreads from his hand through his arm when it's gently lifted from the bed.

Zarkon.

Keith tries to open his eyes, and failing that he tries to speak. His throat feels like sandpaper and all he can manage is a pitiful whimper.

Zarkon sits on the bed by Keith's side and pushes the hair off of his face. "You have been given sedatives and muscle relaxants. Do not try to fight it."

Keith lets out one last disagreeing whimper before accepting his fate, and he lets himself enjoy the gentle circles Zarkon rubs on the back of his hand. He doesn't pay attention to the feeling that something is off.

It's probably just the drugs.
"Try to get some sleep," Zarkon says.

It's solid advice, and Keith tries to nod before he lets the drugs lull him back to unconsciousness.

The next time Keith wakes up, the first thing he knows is that Zarkon is still there. Zarkon notices Keith waking up too, and he brushes his knuckles against Keith's cheek.

Slowly, Keith cracks his eyes open. Zarkon smiles at him, but there's curiosity in the way he studies Keith that shouldn't be there.

Had Keith injured his face? He can't recall.

Keith reaches for his face with the hand Zarkon isn't holding hostage, wanting to know if his face was injured like his gut had been. But he stills before he can touch his face. His eyes widen and he forgets what he was doing.

His hand doesn't look right. He's not even sure it's his. Because the last time Keith checked, his hands didn't look distinctively Galran. Now he has claws, and his skin has turned into a shade of light purple that makes Keith think of light shade of warm lavender or lilac for some reason.

The tightness around Keith's chest makes him gasp for breath, and if it wasn't for Zarkon taking hold of his face and forcing him to look into his eyes Keith is sure he would hyperventilate himself into unconsciousness.

Zarkon frowns, his eyes flashing with concern. "You need to stay calm."

Keith tries to tell Zarkon he doesn't understand what happened to him, but he can't manage more than a dry cough. Zarkon lets go of his face to reach over to the desk by the bed. Soon he straightens up and presses a mug against Keith's lips, and helps Keith lift his head so he can drink the thick juice easier.

"You would have died," Zarkon says as he helps Keith lie back down. "Haggar assured me she asked your permission."

The faint memory of Haggar comes to Keith's mind, and maybe she did ask his permission, and maybe — if it was a matter of life and death — Keith had allowed Haggar to do as she pleased, but he can't remember it.

He still follows Zarkon’s advice and does his best to calm down. Zarkon is usually right, and calming down seems like a smart thing to do.

Once he gets over the initial panic, Keith runs his tongue across his now sharp teeth. He'll have to be careful not to hurt himself with them, and he's not sure if it's the still lingering shock or the warmth of Zarkon's mind pressed against his that keeps him from panicking again.

Zarkon moves Keith's bangs aside and offers him a gentle smile. "You look beautiful."

Keith appreciates the sentiment, even if he doubts he'd agree with it if he saw himself. It still makes him feel just a little bit better.

"Would you like a mirror?" Zarkon asks. Keith shakes his head.
Before Zarkon can say anything else, Haggar strides up to them and starts studying the monitors hooked to Keith. Zarkon gives her the space she needs to make sure Keith is doing fine, glancing at her pad over her shoulder as he moves further away from the bed.

Keith's focus is on Haggar, so he almost misses Zarkon slipping out of the room. He would call after him if he could, but he can't form the words.

"Your blood pressure is a little high," Haggar informs Keith.

Keith wonders if he can still roll his eyes. What if his eyes are nothing but yellow now? No one would know where he was looking.

His friends might not even recognize him anymore.

"You need to stay calm and let yourself heal," Haggar says before grabbing Keith's jaw and shining a bright light at his eyes.

Keith grimaces and swats her hands away, but he ends up scratching her.

Haggar observes the thin gashes and the droplets of blood on the back of her hand with a mildly bored expression while Keith curls in on himself.

"You will also need to learn not to injure people," Haggar says, but her voice holds no accusation.

"Sorry," Keith manages to say, but it sounds slurred to his ears, like he'd just come out of the dentists and the anesthetic hasn't worn out yet.

"Try not to do that again." Haggar regards Keith with a contemplative look. "And try not to hurt yourself."

Keith bites his lip before remembering his new teeth, and Haggar sighs when blood trickles down his jaw. She leaves Keith's side, and Keith assumes he's been left to his own devices.

But Haggar returns a few minutes later, cutting thin stripes of the see through sheet of something in her hands. "We'll put this in your mouth for now, to act as a buffer so you won't hurt yourself again."

She lets Keith touch one strip, and it feels a little like gel, if gel came in paper thin strips. She cuts the strips to pieces that will fit Keith's mouth, and orders him to open his mouth.

Keith does his best not to bite her when she fits the strips over his teeth. "You won't be able to eat anything solid with these on, but we have planned you a diet that doesn't require much chewing anyways. We'll change that once you learn not to bite yourself."

Keith would thank Haggar if she wasn't holding his front teeth hostage.

Once she lets go, Keith runs his tongue across his teeth. The buffers don't taste like anything, but they feel soft. He'll just have to get used to it.

Haggar picks up her pad. "I need you to answer a few questions."

Keith nods his understanding.

"Do all your senses work?"

Keith nods again. "The monitor's loud."
"That's because your senses are sharper than before. It will take you some time to get used to it," Haggar explains while she writes on her pad. "What about the temperature and the lights?"

Keith considers it. "It's a bit chilly. The lights are fine though."

"We'll adjust the temperature." Haggar focuses on her pad for a minute before turning to study Keith. "How do you feel?"

"Weird," Keith replies. "Everything's off."

"You did tell me it was alright for us to change you instead of allowing you to die." Haggar sets her pad down and gives Keith her full attention. "We've kept you in a coma for almost two weeks so you wouldn't have to go through the pain of your body adjusting to the changes. You lost most of your blood, and we had trouble fixing your insides. We still did the best we could to keep the changes to the minimum. So you don't have fur but you're taller than before. You also have a tail but you shouldn't worry about that now."

Keith can only stare at her with wide eyes while she studies him with a thoughtful frown, almost like she wants to say something. If she did, she thinks better of it.

"Try to get some rest. Someone will bring you dinner later, and we'll teach you to walk when the drugs have cleared your system," Haggar says before she picks her pad up and walks out of the room.

It turns out walking is out of the question for now. Keith tried, he really did, but his head is too high and his legs aren't built right.

Not to mention the tail. It keeps flicking from side to side without Keith's permission, and every time he thinks he might be getting a hang of simply standing it throws him off balance again. He'd cut it off if he could.

He says he's too stressed to deal with it all right now, and the druids agree to let him take his time with the walking.

But it's not just the walking or the tail that bothers him.

While Keith was unconscious, someone removed the bracelets he'd been equipped with what must be months ago. He'd gotten so used to them he forgot they were there, but now that they are gone he can't help but notice their absence and miss the comforting reminder of his imprisonment.

There's nothing he can do about it, so Keith curls on the bed and doesn't bother not feeling bad for himself.

On the sixth day Marzila knocks on the door frame before entering Keith's empty and a little too large room. "You mind if I come in?"
Keith welcomes her in, but pulls the thin covers over his shoulders. Marzila meanders to him, her ears drooping, and she chews her lip as she takes in Keith's new appearance.

"Are you okay?" She asks.

Keith nods, but the sniffle he can't suppress gives away his distress. He does his best to ignore the way his ears move down.

Marzila's ears twitch and she rushes to Keith, and crawls in bed with him. Keith lets her pull him into her arms and hold him. It's comforting.

It makes Keith feel a little less like he's not himself anymore.

"You look fine," Marzila assures him. "We're all here for you."

Keith clings to her a little tighter, his tail wrapping around her hip without his permission. She doesn't mention it.

"I was going to come sooner but the druids wouldn't let me through the door," Marzila starts, "I had to go and ask the Emperor to order them to let me here."

Keith lifts his head to stare at her. "You saw Zarkon?"

A proud grin spreads on Marzila's lips. "Yes I did."

"He hasn't been here since I woke up." Keith slumps back on the bed.

"He's busy with the purge so he probably just doesn't have time, but he seemed pleased to have someone check up on you," Marzila replies, running her hand through Keith's tangled hair.

"What purge?"

Marzila shifts. "Well, after what happened to you he's been going through every member of the crew and finding those that aren't loyal to the Empire. Thus far we've had two deaths and one imprisonment."

"What?" Keith sits up, staring at Marzila with wide eyes.

Marzila pushes herself up as well. "It's the best way to weed out any traitors or accomplices. It's a bit extreme, but it's also really rare. And it's perfectly safe for those who haven't done anything wrong."

Keith stares at her in stunned silence.

"Good news though," Marzila says and grins. "Haala's back."

"Really?" Keith almost smiles at the news.

Marzila inclines her head, her smile turning more genuine. "The guy who tried to gut you had used Haala's codes to get rid of him. From what I've gathered he wanted to replace Haala."

It's one problem solved, and though Keith is pleased to hear Haala is back, he can't shake the uncomfortable feeling creeping in the back of his mind.

"Do you know if he was working alone or was he a part of a group?"
He wants the answer to be that his assailant had been just some lone individual, and not a member of a group, especially not the Blade of Marmora. They were supposed to be working with Voltron. They wouldn't be trying to murder Keith.

Marzila tilts her head. "I don't know. I think you have to ask the Emperor about that."

Keith supposes he'll have to do just that. He sighs and lies back down, and snuggles against Marzila’s side.

"Have you seen yourself yet?" She asks.

Keith shakes his head. "I don't want to. Not yet."

"Okay." Marzila runs her claws along Keith's spine. "Do you want me to tell you about my week?"

Keith nods and presses a little closer to her.

So Marzila chats about what she's been up to now that Haala is back. Keith lets her voice become a pleasant background noise as his eyes fall close, and lets himself drift to sleep.

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Keith misses Zarkon.

He's been absent for over a week now, and though Marzila's visit was a distraction, now that Keith has been left alone for hours on end with nothing to do in the too big room he misses Zarkon.

He tells himself it's because he's used to seeing Zarkon every day, and doesn't let his mind linger on any other possibilities.

When the day draws closer to the evening Keith tries to send his need for company through the bond, but he gets no response.

Logically he knows Zarkon is busy weeding out any traitors that might reside on the ship, but there's a part of Keith that's just a little bit bitter that Zarkon can't be bothered to even nudge Keith through their bond every now and again.

Maybe Zarkon lied and he doesn't like the way Keith looks now after all.

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Keith's food consist of soups and smoothies. Kiira has been charged with bringing him his meals, and Keith suspects she's been ordered to pester him about walking as well.

"I'll get to it," Keith promises as he picks up his smoothie cup.

Keith can't see Kiira's expression, but the set of her shoulders make it seem like she's fighting the urge to cross her arms and frown at Keith.

"What have you been up to?" Keith asks to distract her.
Kiira, to Keith's surprise, relaxes at the question. "I have been working on my child."

Keith almost chokes on his smoothie. "I'm sorry, what?"

"My mate and I want a child, but she wants our first child to be genetically ours and not adopted or from a donor parent. So I am making one for us," Kiira explains.

Keith raises an eyebrow. "Congrats on the kid."

Kiira bows her head. "Thank you."

For a moment they're quiet, but Keith has to ask. "How are you making a child if you're both... I mean, I don't want to assume you two can't... Um."

"Genetic manipulation," Kiira says, seeming unfazed by Keith's inability to form a question. "It is a complicated process that we didn't perfect until recently."

Keith nods slowly before focusing on his smoothie. It seems like the safest option.

"You must walk," Kiira says after a minute of silence.

Keith sighs and sets his smoothie down. "Look, I've just had my entire life turned upside down. I need a little time to accept the fact that I have to learn to do everything again. I don't remember a time I couldn't walk, how hard do you think it is for me to accept that not only do I look different, have all my senses messed up and, I also have to relearn stuff I've always taken for granted?"

"But you must," Kiira replies. "You can't stay in that bed forever."

Keith glares at her, but he doesn't have a good rebuttal for her so he stays quiet.

Eventually Kiira leaves, but Keith can't shake the troubled feeling inside of him.

"Try not to injure yourself," Haggar orders as she removes the last bit of protective covering from Keith's teeth.

Keith nods and runs his tongue across his teeth, careful not to cut himself. He almost bites his tongue when Zarkon strides through the door.

Keith smiles and sits up, his ears perking and his tail flicking under the covers, and though he sees Haggar raise an eyebrow he ignores her in favor of focusing on Zarkon.

"How is he?" Zarkon asks Haggar, not paying any attention to Keith.

"Trying to learn how not to bite himself," Haggar replies. Zarkon hums and studies Keith while Haggar clears her things and moves the smoothie on the bedside table closer to Keith.

Keith doesn't care about the smoothie. Zarkon came to see him, and that's more important than his late lunch.

Without a warning, Zarkon pulls the covers from Keith and picks him up by his waist. Keith lets out an alarmed noise.
Even Haggar looks confused. She steps after Zarkon when he carries Keith away from the bed. "What are you doing?"

Instead of replying Zarkon drops Keith on the floor, far from the bed and anything he could reach.

Keith hits the cold ground with a pained grunt, and he scrambles to sit up while Zarkon heads back to the door, his tail smacking against the floor as it snaps from side to side. "What the fuck?"

Zarkon stops and turns to face Keith, his expression hard. Keith glares at him, doing his best to seem bigger than he is even if he's on the ground.

Nobody moves for a loaded moment.

Haggar is the first to take a step forward, and though she spares Zarkon a glance she walks up to Keith and offers him her hand.

"Stop."

Haggar snatches her hand back and turns to Zarkon. "Excuse me?"

"Stop coddling him. If he wants to move he can do it on his own." Zarkon spares Keith a pointed look, and Keith can do nothing but stare at him with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open.

Haggar remains by Keith's side for the few long seconds it takes her to decide to follow Zarkon's order. She walks past Zarkon like Keith isn't even there anymore, barely stopping to pick up her pad on her way out of the room.

Zarkon glances at Keith one last time before following Haggar.

Keith pushes himself to his knees. "You can't just leave me here."

Zarkon turns to face Keith again. "And why is that?"

"Wh— what if I need to use the bathroom?" Keith almost bites his tongue before remembering he would hurt himself.

"The door is right there. I am sure you can figure something out," Zarkon replies.

Keith gives him an incredulous look. "I can't walk!"

"Of course you can. I have been informed there is nothing wrong with you physically, and I am tired of your self-pity seeping into my thoughts. From now on you will manage on your own."

Zarkon turns and leaves the room before Keith can form a coherent argument.

Keith stays on his spot until he's sure Zarkon isn't returning. He frowns at the room, unsure of how he's supposed to get back to the bed or into the bathroom when he'll need to. He's not fond of the idea of crawling, but it's starting to seem like the best choice he has at the moment.

He bangs his fist on the floor, but it does nothing to help his mood. If anything the flash of pain traveling up his arm makes him feel worse.

As time passes, Keith accepts the fact that no one is going to come and help him. It leaves him with the unavoidable task of figuring out how to move around when his legs refuse to cooperate.

Keith starts by crawling to the closest wall and leaning against it as he struggles to stand up.
His lips quirk up when he's standing. His legs might be wobbly and his tail might might be swinging from side to side, but he's standing. He takes a deep breath and steps forward without tripping. He grins, and takes another step forward.

The fall comes as a surprise.

Keith's teeth clash together and he tastes blood. His hands hurt from stopping his fall, and his ankle throbs from being twisted. It will swell and hurt to move soon.

Still, the fact that Keith has to use the bathroom sooner or later can't be avoided, and he grinds his teeth together before accepting the fact that he can't walk, especially not when he's injured his ankle.

He has to settle for crawling.

After the tiring trip to the bathroom, Keith slumps on the ground by the door and pulls his legs to his chest.

He hopes Zarkon feels his misery. He deserves it.

The smoothie is becoming more and more alluring. Keith sighs as he considers getting it, but it doesn't seem worth the trouble. It's been sitting on the table for a few hours now so it's probably warm and the texture has turned weird. And besides, someone will replace it with soup soon.

Keith rests his forehead on his knees and sighs. He might as well rest while he waits.

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Keith wakes up when his ankle flares with pain.

He hisses and pulls his legs closer, and glares at Zarkon who has changed out of his armor and into his favorite nigh black suit with the annoyingly high collared coat Keith decides doesn't look good on Zarkon despite the probably tailored cut — going by the exceptionally good fit.

"What the hell?" Keith rubs his ankle and grimaces at the throbbing pain that takes too slow to dull.

"You are injured," Zarkon states, a hint of surprise in his voice.

Keith rolls his eyes. "And you just made it worse. Thanks."

Instead of sparing Zarkon even a glance, Keith focuses on his swollen ankle and hopes Zarkon will leave. But after a moment of tense silence Zarkon sits down in front of Keith, and grasps Keith's wrist in his hand.

Keith lashes out, trying to slap Zarkon but ending up almost clawing his eye out. The only thing that saves Zarkon are his quick reflexes, though it doesn't stop Keith from scratching his face.

Keith refuses to feel bad for it.

Zarkon's expression doesn't shift from the practiced indifference even when he runs his hand across the long if shallow gashes on his cheek. "You need to be more careful," he says as he inspects the blood on his fingers.
Keith doesn't get a chance to tell Zarkon he doesn't want to be more careful before Zarkon is on his feet and heading to the door.

It's just as well. Keith would rather be alone anyways.

But Zarkon returns minutes later, the wounds on his face now little more than faint scars that will fade into nothingness in a few days. He must have put quintessence on them. He sit before Keith again, and they eye each other in silence for a brief moment.

"You are angry," Zarkon says.

"And you've got a habit of stating the obvious," Keith retorts.

Zarkon inclines his head, some of the hardness dissipating from his expression. "If I have upset you somehow I assure you it was not my intention."

"I don't care," Keith snaps, anger flaring inside of him. "You didn't come see me for days and when you do you drop me on the floor and leave me here, and then you kick me? Do you think that's okay?"

"I was not aware you had injured yourself," Zarkon replies, and the anger in Keith coils tighter around his chest until he feels like he can't breathe. "And I have been busy making sure there is no one on board who will harm you. I have not had the time to see you."

Zarkon takes a moment to study Keith before tilting his head. "I admit I have not been in the best of moods lately, and perhaps it was not wise of me to address your issues with the same approach I address my commanders."

Keith grinds his teeth together. "That's not an apology."

"I do not see any reason to apologize," Zarkon replies.

Keith stares at him. "You don't see a reason to apologize?" He laughs and glances around the room before focusing on Zarkon again. "I got gutted, then I woke up and I'd been changed into one of you, and I can't remember agreeing to that. Everything's too loud and too bright, and the food tastes weird, and everyone keeps telling me I need to just get up when I can't do that. I can't find my center, and my arms and legs are too long and I have a tail, and you can't just drop me on the ground and expect me to walk. And then you come and kick me for good measure!"

Keith pauses to draw in a sharp, shallow breath, offering Zarkon a chance to say something. He doesn't take it.

It breaks Keith's heart and enrages him at the same time. He growls and lunges forward as fast as he can, and takes some small satisfaction when Zarkon moves out of his reach in surprise.

"You don't get to take your bad mood out on me. You don't do that. Not to someone you say you care about." Keith glares at Zarkon, but his face falls after a second. "But you don't care, do you? No, you just want to screw with me."

Zarkon opens his mouth to argue, but Keith takes another lunge at him. "You keep lying to me and pushing me and messing with my head. Do you get something out of it?" Keith takes another swing at Zarkon when he opens his mouth again.

They shouldn't have given him claws if they didn't want him fighting back.
"Did you have fun screwing with my head? What were you hoping to gain? Did you want me to side with you? Did you want me to like you? Or did you just want me in your bed? Because if all you wanted was to fuck me you can go ahead and get it out of your system now and leave me alone. Got my full consent and all!"

The burning tears in Keith's eyes comes as a surprise, and he trembles from the rage that has been building in him for months. "Just get it over with and stop screwing with me."

Zarkon stares at him with wide eyes. Keith lunges at him again, and though he's stunned into silence Zarkon still moves out of the way.

"Fuck you!" Keith bites back a sob. He doesn't want to cry. Not now.

Zarkon looks down, his ears lowered, but not in anger. Keith would throw something at him if he could.

A moment passes, and Keith slumps back. He feels drained all of the sudden.

Zarkon laughs, soft and humorless, and looks back to Keith. "You continue to be full of surprises."

Keith narrows his eyes, tears staining his burning cheeks. Zarkon regards him for a second longer before sighing and looking away. "It has not been my intention to cause you harm."

"Look me in the eye and say that again," Keith retorts. Zarkon's eyes find his in an instant. "Tell me you haven't twisted and manipulated me into what you want me to be."

"I required your cooperation," Zarkon replies without hesitation, and though Keith appreciates not being lied to it still hurts. Zarkon sighs and lets his pose become more subdued. "But I assure you, I have no desire to cause you harm."

Keith studies Zarkon, trying to find the lie in his eyes and failing. It should be a relief.

"And I do not derive any pleasure from your misery," Zarkon continues, still meeting Keith's eyes without blinking. "Quite the contrary, in fact. I would prefer to see you as nothing but happy."

"You've got a really messed up way of going about that," Keith points out.

Zarkon tilts his head. "You told me you did not want to want me. I have no such qualms when it comes to you." Keith snorts, earning himself a brief smile from Zarkon. "I do however, recall telling you that my affection for you is inconvenient. That is not only because the problems it poses should it be in conflict with the decisions I must make, but because I have no desire to hold any affection on you. To borrow your own sentiment, I do not want to care for you."

Keith sniffles and wipes the tears from his cheek, careful not to scratch himself. Zarkon scoots closer to Keith, his movements slow so he can put distance between them if he needs to. He reaches for Keith's face, but stops to give Keith the chance to say no.

It's tempting, but Keith lets Zarkon brush his knuckles against Keith's cheek and wipe the tears away. "I do care for you though, and that is something that infuriates me to no end." Zarkon grasps Keith's chin and lifts his face up. "I apologize if I have mistreated you because of my frustration."

For a moment Keith is too dumbfounded to do anything but blink at Zarkon. "You're gonna have to make up for it."

"If you say so," Zarkon replies, a genuine smile on his lips for once.
"Don't play with my head," Keith adds, his tone serious. "You've got no reason to do that anymore."

Zarkon's smile fades. "If your friends were to come you would go with them." Keith shakes his head, but Zarkon presses his thumb against his lip. "You will choose them, and I do not know what to do to change that. It makes you a danger to the Empire."

Zarkon doesn't show the hurt he feels, but Keith feels it trickling through the cracks of Zarkon's mental defenses. It pains Keith, especially when he knows Zarkon is right. If he had the choice he'd go back to Shiro.

But Keith doesn't have a choice. "I'm not going to leave you. Don't worry about that. You're stuck with me until one of us dies."

The smile Zarkon gives Keith isn't exactly happy, but it's not forced either. "I should be so lucky."

Keith does his best to look reassuring, and some of the worst tension does leave Zarkon's expression. "Is that why you don't want to care for me? You're worried I'll leave?"

"We can discuss that at a later date. You must be starving," Zarkon replies.

Keith knows it's a deflection, but now that Zarkon has mentioned it Keith realizes how hungry he is.

"I will get you something to eat. Try not to injure yourself further in the meantime," Zarkon says before standing up.

It makes Keith smile and roll his eyes, and some of the heaviness lifts from his chest.

As minutes pass and the last of Keith's anger dissipates, he grows tired and a little impressed with himself for going off on Zarkon. Maybe it was for the best, though. Maybe Keith telling Zarkon exactly what he thought will bring some good with it.

Or maybe Zarkon will have Haggar torture him after he has lulled Keith into a false sense of security.

It doesn't take long for Zarkon to return with a deep plate and a glass, and a brace for Keith’s ankle tucked under his arm. He sets the food down by the bed before turning to Keith with an expectant look.

"I still can't walk," Keith reminds him.

Zarkon inclines his head and walks up to Keith. He shows Keith the brace and points at his leg. "Haggar will fix it in the morning. This will keep you from injuring yourself further in the meantime."

Keith nods and lets Zarkon set the brace on his ankle. Once it's in place Keith tries to move his ankle, but the brace keeps it still. At least he won't hurt himself in his sleep.

Zarkon offers Keith his hand. "Come on then."

Keith sighs and stares at Zarkon with a raised eyebrow. "I can't walk."

"I will assist you," Zarkon replies. Keith hesitates, but he takes Zarkon's hand and lets him pull him up.
He wobbles, but Zarkon keeps him from falling. Keith clings to Zarkon's arm as he takes his first step forward. When he doesn't fall, he takes another step.

It's slow going, but Zarkon doesn't rush Keith, and Keith can't help the elation he feels at walking again.

"You are too tense. If you relax it will be easier for you to move. You are built to survive in a desert environment, that means you have a natural inclination to have fluidity in your gait. Do not fight it," Zarkon says.

Keith takes a slow, deep breath, and nods. Relaxing isn't easy, but he manages it, at least to an extent.

Zarkon was right. As soon as Keith stops fighting his own body so hard, his balance becomes easier to maintain. It puts a sway to his hips that will take time to get used to, but Keith will learn to adjust to it.

They reach the bed, Keith's movements still tense and jerky, and though he tripped a few times during the journey he never fell. It's because of Zarkon, he knows it, but he still walked all the way to the bed.

It's a start.

Keith settles back on the familiar and safe bed before picking up the plate and slurping down the soup while Zarkon sits on the edge of the bed observing him. Keith finishes his dinner in record time, and he gulps down the water as soon as he put the plate away.

"I hope you will be returning to our quarters soon," Zarkon says.

It's a reminder that Zarkon expects Keith to walk soon. "Me too," Keith still replies, meaning it.

He hesitates, but he senses the dispirited mood clouding Zarkon's mind, and he doesn't like it.

Zarkon is too lost in thought to see Keith move closer. Keith takes the opportunity to press a quick kiss to the corner of Zarkon's mouth, earning himself a surprised if quiet sound and a smile. Keith returns the smile and slumps back on the bed.

"Perhaps I should explain to you why that might not be the wisest thing for you to do," Zarkon says.

Keith frowns. "We're together, right? Isn't that enough?"

Zarkon looks bothered, and it piques Keith's interest. "When I told you that kissing among our people was something done between people in a more committed relationship, I might have downplayed it slightly so you would not be uncomfortable in your actions."

"Oh?"

Zarkon's smile is almost sheepish. "Kissing is generally reserved for mated couples. While it has become more acceptable among non-mated couples in the last century or so, you must forgive me for being old fashioned."

"So, mating is like a marriage?" Keith asks.

Zarkon tilts his head. "Yes and no. We can talk about it in detail some other time."
Keith laughs. "Where I'm from, we usually start relationships with kissing."

"So you have said," Zarkon replies, then sighs. "If it is important to you—"

"It's not," Keith cuts it. "I mean, it is, but not that important. I don't want you to do anything that you're not comfortable with." Keith almost smiles. He's not supposed to concern himself with what Zarkon is comfortable with.

Zarkon cocks his head and offers Keith a small smile. "It is nothing more than an old custom, and since I have hurt you so deeply I can set my customs aside for a moment."

Keith blinks, a smile tugging at his lips. "You're offering to kiss me?"

"Once," Zarkon replies. Keith surges up, but Zarkon puts a hand up. "Do try to not go overboard."

Keith rolls his eyes, but he inclines his head in agreement. He's much calmer when he puts his arms around Zarkon's neck.

Keith bumps his nose to Zarkon's, giving him a chance to back down before pressing a soft kiss on his lips. Zarkon is still for half a second before kissing him back.

It's brief and chaste, but when Zarkon pulls away Keith chases him and steals another kiss from him. Zarkon chuckles, but he allows Keith to have what he wants.

Keith makes it a little deeper — a little more heated.

Zarkon lets Keith take control.

It's easy for Keith to cup Zarkon's face and close his eyes and deepen the kiss. It's easy for Keith to coax Zarkon until he lets Keith slip his tongue into his mouth, and taste the sweet tea Zarkon loves to drink every evening. It's better than Keith expected and he holds Zarkon tighter to keep him from pulling away too soon.

Zarkon touches Keith's hip, almost tentative, and Keith's breath hitches. Such a simple thing shouldn't send sparks through Keith's body.

After a second Zarkon pulls away despite Keith's protestations, and he looks at Keith like he's seeing something new. Keith licks his lips and meets Zarkon's eyes. He's not sure why he is so fascinating all of the sudden, but he likes having Zarkon's attention.

Without a warning, Zarkon pushes Keith back down and climbs on the bed with him. He lies by Keith's side and leans over him, cupping his face in his hands before Keith can question what's happening.

Keith offers Zarkon a hesitant smile, unsure of what he's doing but not wanting him to stop either. Zarkon brushes a lock of hair out of Keith's eyes before pressing his forehead to Keith's.

It doesn't take long for Keith to steal another kiss from Zarkon. It's heated and urgent, and Keith refuses to let Zarkon move away. He almost died and he's tired of pretending he doesn't want this.

He needs to feel alive.

Maybe some of Keith's need seeps through the bond, maybe Keith is just that desperate, but Zarkon allows him to take what he needs. He presses Keith to the bed with his weight, and gives him everything he wants.
Keith lets out a small, desperate sound, and pulls Zarkon closer still, wrapping his legs and tail around him to get rid of the last space between them. He barely remembers not to claw at Zarkon's back.

Zarkon chuckles into the kiss, but Keith doesn't care. He's getting hard and Zarkon is a solid, warm weight for him to grind against. Zarkon pulls away just enough to bury his face in Keith's neck and bite him.

Keith moans before he can stop himself.

Zarkon worries the skin of Keith's neck for a few seconds longer before pressing a kiss on his lip, and Keith takes the opportunity to nip at his lip. He draws blood without meaning to, and the taste of it fills his mouth. It's hot and metallic, but not quite like the coppery taste of human blood. Keith likes it better.

It's all too much and not enough. Keith's senses are on overdrive, and he had trouble to deal with their heightened state to begin with. Keith presses his face into Zarkon's shoulder to get more of the intoxicating scent of him, hoping it will ground him.

Zarkon trails his claws down Keith's side until he reaches Keith's hip. "Do you need help with that?" He pulls away enough to smile down at Keith as he drags his fingers along the seam of Keith's pants.

It makes Keith's breath catch in his throat and his face heat up, and he barely manages a nod. "Yeah. Yes. Please."

Zarkon bumps his nose to Keith's before pulling away. Keith misses his warmth and he lets out a soft whine of complaint, but Zarkon shushes him as he pulls Keith's shirt up. "Remember to say no if you need to."

Keith nods even as he lifts hips to help Zarkon pull his pants down.

It's exciting and terrifying, and Keith swallows down his nervousness when Zarkon leans down to nuzzle his cheek. He can hear nothing but his own heart hammering in his chest while Zarkon drags his claws across his stomach in lazy circles.

"Are you sure about this?" Zarkon asks.

While Keith appreciates the concern for his consent, he slaps Zarkon's shoulder and pushes his hips into his touch. "Yes I'm sure."

Time stops for the agonizingly long moment it takes Zarkon to wrap his fingers around Keith's length. Keith lets his eyes fall close as he moans. The heat of Zarkon's touch sets him on edge and for a moment he fears he'll explode.

It's better than he ever thought it would be.

Zarkon grabs Keith's jaw in hard but painless grip. "Look at me."

Keith struggles to comply, but he opens his eyes and meets Zarkon's gaze. The intensity of it makes him moan again, and he grabs a hold of Zarkon's shoulders to ground himself as he thrusts into the tight hold of Zarkon's fist.

It doesn't take long for Keith to come. His body seizes and he cries out, his eyes rolling back. Zarkon's sharp gaze never leaves his face.
Zarkon works Keith through his orgasm until Keith slumps back on the bed and lets his hold on Zarkon's shoulders loosen until his arms fall on the bed with a dull thump. He hadn't realized how much he needed the release.

If Keith could he'd tell Zarkon he usually lasts a lot longer, but he hasn't had the time to get himself off since he was captured.

Keith is barely coherent enough to notice Zarkon climb off the bed. He watches Zarkon pick up the glass from the bedside table before he notices Keith's staring. He smiles, and Keith does his best to smile back. "I will get you some water."

Keith nods. Zarkon's smile deepens. He turns to leave and lifts his hand that’s still covered in Keith's come, observing it with mild disinterest. Keith swallows, wondering if he should apologize for not giving Zarkon a warning.

All thoughts of apologizes die when Zarkon licks the come from his fingers with a thoughtful look on his face. A strangled noise escapes Keith's lips, and the mischievous glimmer in Zarkon's eyes tells Keith he didn't miss it.

Keith groans and thumps his head against his pillow. His stomach is sticky and his muscles ache in a pleasant way.

He feels alive.

He feels like he's living in his own body for the first time since he woke up after his near death experience.

Zarkon returns with the glass of water and a damp piece of cloth, and Keith lets Zarkon clean him up while he drinks the water. It's kind of sweet of Zarkon to take care of him, but Keith keeps that thought to himself.

"I expect you to follow Haggar's orders tomorrow," Zarkon says. "I do not want to hear another word of your self-pity keeping you confined in this bed."

Keith might have said something about Zarkon's comment if he had the energy, but as it is he merely narrows his eyes. "I will, don't worry."

Zarkon pulls Keith's shirt back down. "Good." He gets up, but Keith grabs his hand before he can leave.

"Stay?" Keith looks at Zarkon with wide eyes, not expecting to get his wish.

Zarkon sighs before inclining his head, and Keith lets go of him in favor of making space on the bed. Zarkon sits down and pulls Keith into his arms, and Keith's tail wraps around his thigh.

He smiles and pets Keith's hair until Keith drifts to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Who of us hasn't waited for Keith to turn Galra?

Next chapter some time next week?
I hope you liked this!
Chapter 31

For the first time ever, I edited a chapter in a single day. This could revolutionize my fic writing process.

Or this could be horrible in which case please tell me to slow down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith grinds his teeth together and lets Kiira help him up again.

He's starting to get the hang of walking, but it's his fourth day of trying and Keith keeps getting distracted, or he tenses up and disrupts his balance on his own, or his tail flicks in a way that makes Keith try to compensate for it even if he shouldn't.

Still, he's making progress, and Haggar promised him he could leave the medical bay as soon as he could walk across the room without any support. So that's what Keith will do as soon as possible. The only problem is that without someone to steady him, or a wall to lean on, Keith can't quite manage on his own just yet.

"I must return to my duties soon," Kiira says. "I can help you to the bathroom so you can get cleaned up."

Keith sighs and nods. His feet are getting tired, so he might as well stop before he gets himself injured again. Overexerting himself isn't going to get him out of the medical bay any faster, quite the contrary.

The bathroom isn't big, so Keith doesn't have much trouble getting from the door to the bathtub on his own. It's avoiding the mirror that's the problem.

Keith lets his hair cover his face as he fills the circular tub with hot water. He discovered he prefers it at nearly boiling temperatures instead of borderline hot these days, just like how he finds himself liking the Galran food far more now than he did before; it's richer somehow, like he can finally taste all the spices the Galra use.

He stays in the bath until the water grows chilled, and afterwards he sits on the edge of the tub drying himself while the water drains away.

As the last of the water drains from the tub, Keith stops drying his hair and lets the towel fall on the ground with a quiet thud.

It's stupid of him to avoid the mirror. He can't keep it up forever, so he might as well face the fact that he looks different now and see what his new face is like. He has avoided looking at himself or his reflection, and he's been ignoring his ears to the point of not even touching them, and pretending he isn't purple all over.

The tail is impossible to ignore though, and Keith has glared at it enough to be familiar with how the fur on it grows longer the closer to the tip it gets until it all blends into a fluffy long fur at the end.
He doesn’t like the tail, and he’s fairly certain it doesn’t like him either.

With a steadying breath, Keith pushes himself up. He has to lean on the wall as he makes his way to the mirror at the other end of the room, but he manages it on his own. He trembles with nervous energy when he stops before the mirror, his eyes firmly shut, and it takes him a second to steel himself for what he’s about to see.

When Keith is ready, he opens his eyes, and he’s shocked and relieved to see they haven’t undergone the unrecognizable changes he had feared. Sure, the sclera has turned yellow, and his irises might be larger and brighter, his pupils almost catlike, and the skin around his lashes might be nearly black, but they’re still undoubtedly his eyes.

The rest of his face remains mostly the same, save for his sharp teeth and the small scars they have caused on his lips, as well as the thin lines traveling along his cheekbones, just a few shades darker than the rest of his skin.

The biggest difference are the ears, and once Keith allows himself to acknowledge them he can’t stop looking. They’re long and big, covered in a layer of soft, short fur. He’ll have to ask Haggar why that is, since the rest of him is blessedly furless save for the hairs of his neck now traveling a little further down in a narrow line. There’s also a few inches of fur along his spine — that for some reason is now considerably darker than the rest of his skin — where his tail starts, but that doesn’t bother Keith that much.

But the ears. They keep moving and twitching, alert to every sound and constantly exposing Keith’s moods, and he doesn’t know how to stop it. Maybe it’s a learned skill that he can master. Or maybe it’s something only learned as a child and Keith is doomed to a life with unruly ears to go along with his never stilling tail.

Zarkon would have a field day with that.

All in all, it’s not as bad as Keith feared. It still makes his transformation feel final, but he can still recognize himself when he looks at his face.

Since he’s there, Keith takes in the rest of himself as well. There’s a thin, long scar on his stomach where the knife had cut him, and now that he finally truly sees it, he understands why Haggar couldn’t just put him back together. He’d been carved open, the scar twisting across his skin as a brutal reminder of that. It’s almost as if someone had tried to make a Halloween pumpkin out of him.

Keith runs his hand across the rough edges of the scar before letting his arm fall to his sides and tearing his eyes away to take in the rest of him.

He’s built more like a Galra now, albeit a rather slim one. It will take him time to get used to his new proportions. There’s also a faint mark on his neck from where Zarkon had bit him again, and Keith is glad he can still bruise, as it’s one more thing that hasn’t changed.

Now that he can, Keith takes a better look at the markings on his arms and legs; they’re the same color as the marks on his cheeks but thicker, like upside down crescent moons that have smaller crescents inside them, the markings growing smaller as they travel down his arm to his elbow where the crescent is nothing more than a small curved line with a dot above it. It’s the same on the side of his thighs where the markings end on his knees.

There are also faint crescent like lines that grow smaller the closer to his tail they get running across his spine.
With a heavy sigh, Keith drops his eyes to the ground and heads back to the bathtub and the clothing waiting for him there.

At least Zarkon likes the way he looks now.

Once he's dressed, Keith makes his way to the door, leaning on the wall as he goes and concentrating on not falling on his face with each and every step. He's supposed to call for a druid to come and help him, but he wants to manage this on his own.

Keith doesn't run into trouble until he's out of the bathroom. He has no support to help him get to the bed, unless he wants to walk along the wall and circle the entire room. Keith might have to call a druid to help him after all.

"Need a hand?" Marzila's voice calls from the door.

Keith's eyes snap up, an easy smile falling on his lips. "Yeah, thanks."

Marzila skips to him, and the look on her face tells Keith she's dying to tell him something.

"What?" Keith asks, mostly to indulge her.

Marzila grins and comes to a halt in front of him, but she doesn't tell him what's on her mind. Instead, she takes Keith's arm and pulls him from the wall. Keith is about to explain to her that he doesn't need to be dragged around, just offered a little support, when a groan from the door catches his attention.

Keith's surprise melts into an excited grin, and he can feel his ears perk up.

Haala's ears flatten in return. "First off," he starts, lifting a finger. "I did not miss you."

Keith's grin brightens, and he takes a step towards Haala with Marzila keeping him from tripping.

"Secondly," Haala continues, "you were supposed to be the nanny lottery victory! How could you not go a few months without me covering your ass? Or did you get gutted just to drag me back from my quiet, calm, blessedly Keith free new post?"

Keith doesn't let Haala's attitude stop him from throwing his arms around him and pulling him into a tight hug. Haala grumbles, but puts his arms around Keith anyway and pats his back awkwardly. He holds Keith just a little too long and a little too tight to dislike the hug as much as he pretends to.

"And did you have to turn into one of us?" Haala grabs Keith's shoulders and pushes him away to get a better look at him. "Purple isn't your color. You look horrible."

Keith laughs. "I missed you too."

Haala scoffs and pushes Marzila away from Keith's side. "You got him nearly killed, so you're off babysitting duty."

"Whatever you say, yeisha," Marzila replies with a smile on her lips. Haala makes a face at her.

Keith lets Haala help him to the bed, and he settles in while a druid brings him a snack. Haala and Marzila look uncomfortable in their presence, but Keith has gotten too used to the druids to be bothered by them.

"What have you two been up to without me?" Keith asks once the druid is gone.
"Nothing much," Marzila replies, sharing a look with Haala.

"Please don't give me details about your sex life," Keith says as he fights back a smirk at Marzila's laugh and Haala's groan.

"At least we have a sex life," Haala retorts and hops on the bed, mindful to not land on Keith's tail.

Keith raises an eyebrow and smirks. "What makes you think I don't have one too?"

Marzila sits down and nudges Haala's side. "I caught him with a bite on his neck once." Haala looks downright horrified at the information. Keith and Marzila share a look before she leans closer to Haala. "He got it from the Emperor."

Haala turns to Keith in wide eyed betrayal, scanning him up and down as if trying to see some evidence of the horrors Marzila is describing to him. Keith almost pushes his hair from his neck to show Haala the newest mark, but it might be too much for Haala so soon after his return.

"You know what? This is punishment. Not the Void, this. I want to go back to my quiet station in the middle of nowhere where I don’t have to deal with either of you." Haala glares at Keith and Marzila, who try their best not to laugh at him.

They chat about menial stuff until Haggar herself comes to chase Haala and Marzila away, and Keith feels more normal than he has since he woke up in the room he has called his for a small eternity.

It takes Keith a week to be able to walk across the room on his own, but as soon as he does so Haggar declares him fit enough to return to Zarkon and his quarters.

"Can I ask you something?" Keith asks when she's done poking and prodding at him.

Haggar inclines her head in acknowledgment.

"Why do I have fur on my ears?" Keith would have asked sooner, but the darkness lurking behind Haggar’s eyes had kept him quiet.

"Your hair wanted to grow and spread," Haggar replies, waving at Keith's head. "If you weren't dying I might have prevented it. As it is, I allowed it to spread over your ears. Be grateful I recalled you saying you didn’t want fur, because I was tempted to give you just that."

"Thank you," Keith says, because it feels like the right thing to do.

Haggar waves him off. "Just go back to Zarkon. He'll be in a better mood once you are back in his bed."

Keith nods and slides off the bed, and after pulling on the coat Haggar had brought with her he wobbles to the door. He takes a steadying breath before stepping through it, and Kiira is there within seconds to escort him wherever he wants to go.

"Can I see your baby when it's bigger?" Keith asks while they wait for the elevator.

"I would be pleased if you did," Kiira replies.
She shows Keith all the way to the door to Zarkon and his quarters, explaining the complexities of creating a child, and though Keith doesn’t understand any of it, he listens to her almost excited chatter. Keith bids her goodbye at the door, and Kiira waits until he steps through it before walking away.

Zarkon isn't there to welcome Keith, but there are some of the pink ice cubes Keith likes waiting for him on the table by the couch. It's enough to warm Keith's heart, and he makes his way to the couch as fast as he dares. He falls onto the soft cushions before picking the bowl of pink cubes, curious to see how they taste now with his Galra senses.

To his relief they're even better now, and he finishes the bowl at a leisurely pace while he waits for Zarkon to join him.

While he waits, Keith ponders on how his relationship with Zarkon has changed. He hasn't seen Zarkon since after their fight and makeout-turned-handjob session. Will that be something they do now?

Will Zarkon expect Keith to reciprocate?

Keith knows Zarkon won't force him into anything, but the expectation might still be there. Though — if Keith recalls — Zarkon hadn't given any indication of wanting Keith to touch him. Maybe it was a Galra thing. It's not like Keith can compare the Galra to humans and expect them to behave the same way.

Things would be so much easier if someone would just give Keith a guide to Galra ways and culture that he could consult on everything.

Keith sighs and shoves another cube into his mouth.

When Zarkon joins Keith it's late in the evening, and Keith is curled on the couch, wrapped in towels from his brief shower, trying to get used to working a pad with his new claws.

In a way it's easier to use now, as Keith doesn't have to rely on a stylus all the time, but it's still weird, and his claws clash against the sturdy material of the pad — without scratching it to his relief.

"I had your clothes fitted," Zarkon says as a greeting. "Unless you prefer to walk around naked."

Keith huffs. "You'd like that."

The flat look Zarkon gives Keith is ruined by the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He strides into the bedroom to change his clothes before Keith can call him out on it, and Keith chuckles and shakes his head as he refocuses on his pad.

Keith doesn't look up when he hears Zarkon return to the room minutes later, but his ears twitch towards him without his say.

Zarkon joins him on the couch, sitting so close to Keith he can feel the heat radiating from him. "What are you doing?"
"Thace made me a word puzzle," Keith replies without taking his eyes off the pad.

"That was nice of him." Zarkon brushes his hand through Keith's damp hair. "You should put clothes on. Someone will bring us dinner soon."

Keith sighs before setting his pad down and heading to the bedroom.

His clothes don't look that different, but they don't quite look like his either.

Keith picks the loosest clothes he can find, mostly because he got used to the loose medical bay clothes. He'd tie his hair up if he could handle the ribbon with his new claws, but hair care has been low on his list of priorities and he hasn't gotten around mastering that yet.

Satisfied with his looks, Keith heads back to Zarkon. He's glad red still suits him, though he might have to update some of his other clothes. The idea makes him huff a quiet laugh. Zarkon's sense of fashion has rubbed off on him.

When Keith exits the bedroom, Zarkon takes in Keith's appearance with an approving look, his amusement of Keith's walking clear in the way the corners of his mouth tilt up. Keith sticks his tongue out, making Zarkon snort and look away.

It shouldn't make Keith feel lighter.

Keith sits by Zarkon's side, wondering if he should ask about how they will go forward from here. He runs his claws up Zarkon's thigh tentatively while he figures out what to say.

Or he tries to, before Zarkon snatches his hand away. "I would prefer it if you were to keep your hands to yourself until you have fully mastered the use of your claws."

Keith huffs, but draws his hand back. He gets Zarkon's point and he's happy to oblige. He's not ready for that yet, and at least he now has an excuse beyond not wanting.

"What have you been up to without me here?" Keith asks.

Zarkon cocks his head. "I had the entire bed to myself, for one, so I was able to sleep without you kicking me or getting up during the night."

"I don't kick," Keith protests, but Zarkon arches an eyebrow in a way that shuts Keith up.

"I don't kick," Keith protests, but Zarkon arches an eyebrow in a way that shuts Keith up.

"You do, though I will admit you do not kick very hard, and it is not a nightly event. There is a chance I will grow used to it over time."

Keith opens and closes his mouth. "You think you'll need to do that?"

Zarkon smiles, just for a second, before focusing on his pad again.

After a moment of staring at Zarkon's profile, Keith looks away, his tail thumping softly against the couch. He hopes the dinner will come soon so he doesn't have to sit in the silence he doesn't know how to fill much longer.

Perhaps it's his newly heightened senses, but Keith is acutely aware of Zarkon and the heat he radiates. Keith can't help but think back to lying on that medbay bed, with Zarkon on top of him, looking at him like —

"If you want me to pleasure you again, you could just ask." Zarkon turns to smirk at Keith. "Or learn proper shielding methods. The smell is something I can ignore."
Going by the way Zarkon's eyes shine with amusement, Keith can still blush.

He could ask Zarkon to get him off again, but he's not sure he's ready for it either. "Our dinner's gonna come soon," he says instead.

"Would you like me to postpone it?" Zarkon asks, tilting his head and looking at Keith with just a little too sincerity in his eyes to seem genuine.

"No," Keith replies, shaking his head. "All the walking is kinda making me hungry."

Zarkon inclines his head. "And after the dinner?"

Keith bites his lip and looks at Zarkon. A part of him wants to say yes, but the anxiousness keeps him quiet.

"We'll see," he manages to say. The knowing look in Zarkon's eyes is not what Keith wants to see.

"While you consider that, you should also know that Haggar has certain expectations for your progress that she will go over with you by the end of the week. Once you can walk properly, your friend — Marzila — has offered to start teaching you again."

Keith perks up. "That'll be fun."

"I would hope so," Zarkon replies.

Keith doesn't get a chance to reply before their dinner arrives, and maybe it's for the best.

Marzila doesn't wait even until the end of the week before dragging Keith into a training area that, to Keith's horror, is not entirely empty.

They receive a lot of confused and curious looks, but Haala and Marzila glare at the other group there until they look away.

"Maybe we should come back later," Keith suggests.

"No." Marzila crosses her arms and stares Keith down. "We're not doing anything worth their attention. They're going to lose interest soon."

Keith glances at Haala for support, but he shrugs and moves to sit by the wall. Keith sighs. He can't outrun Marzila, and she is not going to let him leave.

"Fine," he grumbles, his ears flattening, getting a snort from Marzila in response.

"Your ears are adorable," she says.

To Keith's dismay, he feels his ears flatten further, and his tail jerks from side to side. Marzila grins at him before showing Keith to the quietest corner in the room.

"We're just going to do simple stretches and balance exercises today," Marzila says, and Keith relaxes at that. At least he won't have to try to punch Marzila when there's an audience there to witness his failure.
It still doesn't prevent Haala from studying Keith with a critical eye while he follows Marzila's instructions.

To Keith's relief the other Galra in the room lose interest in them fast, at least until they start heading out. Half of the ten person group leaves the training room with nothing but a wave thrown in Marzila's direction, but the rest of them saunter up to her.

"Why are you with him?" One of them asks, nodding his head towards Keith.

"He's a friend," Marzila replies, stepping in front of Keith. Haala comes to stand by her side, his ears flat.

Keith isn't sure if it's a good thing or not. He doesn't want to see a fight, but maybe he should be the one to defend his own honor.

“He caused a purge. You think any of us liked having the druids go through every bit of our lives?”

Marzila snarls. “The groza that tried to kill him is the one who caused the purge, not Keith. He's one of us.”

"Looking like us doesn't make him one of us," the Galra counters, ignoring the murderous looks he's receiving from both Haala and Marzila.

Haala stands taller. "He was one of us before and he's one of us now."

Marzila inclines her head and crosses her arms. "Yeah, and if you have a problem with Keith you can take it up with the Emperor. He likes Keith. You think he's going to pick you over him?"

The group balks at the mention of Zarkon, and Keith has to admit he's a little impressed by Marzila's gall, though bringing up Zarkon might not be the smartest move. It's still enough to make the Galra group start back. They laugh, giving Keith one last displeased look before they leave without another word.

As soon as the door closes behind them Marzila and Haala spin around to face Keith, their expressions concerned.

"They're just angry over the purge and they need someone to blame for it. Don't mind them," Marzila says.

"Wasn't going to," Keith replies, ignoring the way his tail twitches.

Haala and Marzila share a look of disbelief, but neither one of them calls Keith out on his lie. Haala punches his shoulder instead. "I'm starving. Let's go grab something to eat," he says and heads for the door without seeing if the others follow.

Keith rubs his shoulder and goes after him, with Marzila by his side.

Their pace is slow enough for Keith to be comfortable with, even if he's more or less mastered walking already.

"Did you hear what happened to the guy who attacked me?" Keith asks when they're in an elevator.

The silence that follow is heavy and uncomfortable, and Keith regrets saying anything. He'd be better off asking about it from Haggar or Zarkon anyways since they have far more knowledge on it than Marzila or Haala could ever have.
Haala is the one to turn to Keith, his face pinched. "From what we heard, he was moved to safe holding on a prison ship. Apparently the Emperor wishes to interrogate him further." He shares a look with Marzila. "Though if the rumor is to be believed he's in a pretty bad shape."

It does nothing to alleviate Keith's shock from hearing his assailant is still alive.

The elevator comes to a stop, and though Haala and Marzila step out, Keith doesn't move.

"Well, come on." Haala frowns.

Keith shakes his head. "I'm not hungry."

The elevator doors close before Haala or Marzila can protest. Keith presses his palm to the control panel and commands the elevator to take him to the bridge where he knows Zarkon is, undoubtedly breathing down Cenzi's neck just to stress him out.

He shouldn't bother Zarkon with it. It's not important if his assailant is still alive. It's not like he expected Zarkon to kill him along with whatever traitors he weeded out during his purge. He just wants to know Zarkon's reasoning for it.

The looks Keith gets as he marches down the hallways range from shocked to curious to borderline offended. It's not the kind of reaction he expected, but maybe he shouldn't be surprised by it; the last time anyone of them saw him, Keith looked like a human after all.

It doesn't take him long to reach the bridge doors, and for once Keith takes the time to rap his knuckles against them before entering. The bridge falls silent at the sight of him. Keith's ears flatten down, and he considers grabbing them to hide them. He might have to step on his tail too to keep it still for ten seconds.

He can't get a word out before Zarkon is pulling him back through the doors and back towards the elevator a little too roughly.

"Hey!" Keith tries to twist himself free, but ends up stumbling and almost falling.

Zarkon pushes Keith into the elevator and orders it to take them to the floor where their quarters are. He doesn't turn to face Keith until the elevator is moving. "I told you to stay with your friends."

Keith groans and slumps against the wall. "They left me in the elevator. Well, I didn't exit the elevator with them."

Zarkon narrows his eyes. "Do tell me why."

"Haala said the guy who attacked me is still alive. I just thought I'd ask what you're doing with him." Keith bites his lip and avoids looking at Zarkon's expression.

"Would you prefer it if I had killed him?"

The question catches Keith off guard, and he glances at Zarkon before looking away. "I don't want you to kill anyone. I just thought you would've. I didn't think you'd keep him alive."

Zarkon doesn't say anything, and soon the elevator comes to a halt. He holds the doors open until Keith steps into the corridor, and he stays by Keith's side while they walk to their quarters.

"You do not go anywhere without a guard," Zarkon states as soon as the door to their quarters
closes behind him. "Why?"

Zarkon takes a step closer to him, but Keith refuses to back down. "If you are not capable of remaining in trusted company, you will stay here unless either I or Haggar is there to escort you."

Keith's face falls. "I'm not your prisoner. You are not locking me away again."

Zarkon bares his teeth for just a second. "This is not a negotiation."

Keith bridges the distance between them and shoves Zarkon as hard as he can. "You're not locking me in here!" He shoves Zarkon again for good measure.

Zarkon doesn't have the decency to take a step back, though Keith can feel him almost budge under his newfound strength.

Something good finally came out of his transformation.

Keith goes to shove Zarkon one last time, but Zarkon catches his wrists and stops him. Keith growls and tries to shake him off to no avail.

"Would you stop?" Zarkon lifts Keith's arm until he can either stop moving or lose his balance.

Keith bares his teeth at Zarkon, huffing in anger. "I'm not something for you to lock away when it's convenient."

Zarkon's grip on Keith's arm tightens, but a second later he lets go. Keith falls to the ground with a pained groan, and he glares at Zarkon as he sits up. "Screw you."

For a moment, anger flashes in Zarkon's eyes. Keith's frown deepens in response.

Zarkon sighs, almost defeated, and kneels by Keith's side. It takes Keith by surprise and he can't get a word out while Zarkon studies the ground, a contemplative frown on his face.

Finally Zarkon looks at Keith, and the bittersweet sadness in his eyes makes Keith swallow his anger down. Zarkon cups Keith's face in his hands, his touch too urgent to be tender. "I cannot worry for your safety while I run the Empire. I need you to be under guard until I can be sure you are safe."

Keith's resolve crumbles, and he presses his cheek into Zarkon's palm. "You could've just said so and not start threatening me."

Zarkon inclines his head. "Will you do this for me?"

Keith could agree to it. It wouldn't be the worst thing to do. It wouldn't have to be a permanent thing, just until Zarkon can be sure he's safe.

"Kito." The softness of Zarkon's voice catches Keith off guard. He bites his lip, knowing there's not much he can do to stop Zarkon from locking him in their quarters if he wants to.

"Promise this isn't a permanent thing first," Keith says, giving Zarkon an insistent look.

Zarkon frowns, but inclines his head. "Only until I am satisfied you can defend yourself."

Keith nods. It's a compromise and they both know it, but it's better for them both. Zarkon lets go of
Keith and stands, and offers Keith his hand to help him up. Keith accepts the help and lets Zarkon pull him off the floor and guide him to the couch.

"So, why did you let the guy who tried to gut me live? Who is he?" Keith asks as he sits down.

Zarkon doesn't look like he wants to talk about it, but Keith waits as patiently as he can for him to answer. Eventually Zarkon pulls a chair up and faces Keith with a solemn expression. "His name is Vazka, we do not know much else yet. He is rather resilient to our interrogation methods."

"You mean torture?" Keith raises a knowing eyebrow.

Zarkon gives Keith an unimpressed look. "That is irrelevant. What is relevant is that he has demanded that his sentence be carried out on the Arena."

Keith raises an eyebrow, unsure of what to say.

"His attack on you is punishable by death. He has demanded he be given the chance to lose his life in combat," Zarkon explains. "It is considered honorable."

Keith nods slowly. "So why won't you just say no?"

"He was smart enough to make his demand in the presence of my commanders." Keith smiles ruefully. "He forced you to agree?"

Zarkon sighs. "Unfortunately. I would have rather handed him to Haggar, but if I deny his request it would put me in bad light; denying Vazka's request is not something I can justify under the circumstances, no matter how I feel about it. At least not yet."

"Then why won't you have your best fighter slowly beat him to death in front of everyone?" Keith asks.

Zarkon's expression turns uncomfortable. "He has demanded you to be his challenger."

Chapter End Notes

I missed Haala. I know I created him but I still missed him. I'll be posting the next chapter next weekend.

I hope you liked this!
### Chapter 32

**Chapter Notes**

I think this constitutes as a filler chapter. But hopefully not a too boring one!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Keith stares out of the window, his tail swinging lazily from side to side, his ears twitching every now and again. The sight of the stars passing by does nothing to alleviate his mood.

Behind him, Kiira's pad beeps almost inaudibly. She had agreed to accompany Keith for the day, and unlike Marzila or Haala, she has no problem letting Keith wallow in his own thoughts when he feels like it. Keith knows it’s not because she doesn’t care; she merely doesn’t see the problem with his wallowing.

The rec room had been the only quiet place Keith had been able to find in the middle of the day that wasn't the couch in his and Zarkon's quarters or the library, and it's perfect for thinking in peace.

Keith still hasn't told Zarkon about Jardri's last words. At first it was because he didn't remember them, then because he didn't want to concern Zarkon about the possibility of there being more enemies of the Empire on the ship so soon after the purge, and now he just doesn’t know how to approach it anymore.

What is he supposed to say? That a shady woman had told him there's a secret group of people trying to overthrow Zarkon? That wouldn’t end well. Zarkon is already in an overprotective and vigilant mood, and Keith isn't jumping at the chance to add fuel to that particular fire.

Then there’s the matter of the portal Jadri had brought up. Could Keith ask Zarkon about it? Should he?

He's not even sure he believes what Jadri had told him.

And that's all on top of the fact that Vazka had demanded him as his challenger.

As Zarkon had explained it, Vazka had the right to demand who his final challenger would be, and it would be nearly impossible for Keith to deny him that right. He would have to be physically unable to fight, and as Zarkon had explained, being turned into a Galra doesn't fit those parameters. He'd have to get injured severely enough for even Haggar to not be able to fix him with her magic or prosthetics, and as Keith understands it, he'd have to be more or less brain dead for that to be the case.

Keith frowns at the window and bites his tongue. He doesn't want to fight Vazka; he has no chance of winning in his current state. It would take him months to get good enough at combat to fight someone to death in his new form.

He doesn't see a way out of the situation, and though Zarkon had promised Keith they would figure something out, Keith can't help but prepare for the worst.

Maybe they could drug Vazka so that he wouldn't be so much of a threat to Keith.
"My presence is required in the laboratory," Kiira says. "I'll take you back to the Emperor's quarters."

Keith sighs and nods before pushing himself off his chair. He can think in the quiet of their quarters as well as he can in the rec room.

"Marzila could train me," Keith says to Zarkon later that evening. "She could teach me to fight again so that I'll stand a chance against Vazka."

"She will train you in time, but you are not going to fight him. There is no amount of training that will make you efficient enough to survive against him," Zarkon replies, picking a book from the shelf before joining Keith on the couch.

Keith moves his legs out of his way. "We'll drug him or break his fingers or something."

Zarkon huffs. "That would be noticed."

A silence falls into the room, and Keith straightens the hem of his dark red shirt. Zarkon hadn't so much fitted Keith's clothes as replaced them all with new ones. The material of the shirt tells Keith that much. The light fabric had gotten softer with use, but now it's almost rough. If Keith had realized it he might have not picked so form fitting clothes after his shower.

"You could teach me," Keith suggests innocently.

With a sigh, Zarkon puts his book down and turns to face Keith. "I have no intention of seeing you in that Arena."

"And I'm not used to being protected," Keith shoots back, but there's no real heat behind his words. It's Zarkon. Keith can't stop him from doing what he wants, and if he wants to focus on keeping Keith safe then that's fine. Keith prefers it to Zarkon wanting to throw him into the Arena.

"But I get it," Keith amends, his tail twitching under his legs. "Sort of."

"I would hope so. I want you to be safe," Zarkon replies. He smiles, and Keith's lips quirk up in response without his permission. "But," Zarkon continues in that tone that always makes Keith perk up in anticipation. "If you want me to train you just for the fun of it I could arrange the time for it."

"Can I get my balance sorted out before I answer that?" Keith tries not to grimace at the surprised pitch of his voice.

Zarkon chuckles nevertheless, but that might be because Keith's ears twitch and his face heats up. "Do not be so bothered by your expressiveness. I find it to be one of your better attributes."

Keith's blush deepens. "I'm not used to it."

"It suits you quite well," Zarkon assures him.

Keith kicks him, but not too hard to hurt him. What he doesn't see coming is Zarkon grabbing his leg and pulling him across the couch until he's half lying on Zarkon's lap, half hanging off the
couch with Zarkon's arm around his waist keeping him from falling.

"What the hell?" The effect of Keith's glare is ruined by the grin threatening to break out.

But Zarkon doesn't smile at him. He studies Keith closely, his expression almost concerned, and Keith chews his lip gently while he waits for Zarkon to talk again.

"You were troubled by something earlier," Zarkon says after a moment.

Keith sighs. "You know I don't like it when you poke around my head."

"Then you need to learn to shield your thoughts better," Zarkon replies.

Keith pouts at him, but there's not much he can do to get Zarkon off his back but tell him what he's been pondering about. He's learned that the hard way.

"Jadri said something," he starts, waiting to see Zarkon's reaction, worried this isn't going to go well.

Zarkon inclines his head, his expression curious.

Keith huffs and settles more comfortably on Zarkon's lap, his tail wrapping around Zarkon’s leg.
"She said that there are other groups besides the Blade of Marmora that oppose you."

"And you are concerned for the Empire?" Zarkon raises an eyebrow. "Or are you worried for my safety?"

"She wanted me to tell you about it. She said they were worse than the Blade," Keith replies and pushes himself up and off Zarkon’s lap.

The urgency in his voice keeps Zarkon from dismissing him out of hand, and eventually he sighs.
"Would you feel better if I had someone look into it?" Zarkon asks, and some of the weight lifts from Keith's chest.

"Yes."

"Is there anything else?" Zarkon asks.

Keith regards him, his brow furrowing. He shouldn't ask about it, but ever since Jadri brought it up Keith hasn't been able to push it out of his mind, not completely. "She said you opened a portal and that something came through it."

Zarkon shuts down, it's the only way for Keith to describe it. He looks away and all emotion drains from his face. Even the bond feels cold.

"You don't have to answer," Keith starts, but Zarkon raises a finger that silences him.

"We did open a portal of sorts," Zarkon says, his voice slow and calculated. "More of a rift, really. And there is always the possibility that something came through it."

Keith holds his breath, waiting for Zarkon to continue.

"But that possibility is not something I wish to discuss with you," Zarkon finishes, much to Keith's disappointment.

"Well, could you tell me something else then? I want to know more about you." Keith tilts his
head and smiles, and some of the chill from the bond dissipates.

"What would you like to know?" Zarkon asks, but there's an edge to his voice that tells Keith he'd better choose his question carefully.

"Can you tell me why you and Alfor went from being friends to you killing him?"

Keith waits with bated breath while Zarkon decides if he will answer the question. It's risky, Keith knows it is, but he wants to know what went so wrong between them.

Zarkon sighs and sets his book on the table as he stands and gets himself a drink. Keith keeps his eyes glued to Zarkon as he comes back to the couch and sits down. He takes a sip of the wine and studies Keith, his demeanor going from guarded to resigned.

"Alfor and I met when we were young. He was very persistent in being my friend, despite my initial protestations. He had a talent for persuading people into doing what he wanted. We forged an alliance between our people — something that had not happened before. It was somewhat of a historical moment." Zarkon stops to drink the wine, his expression turning sour.

"I allowed Alfor to drag me into his war. He said it was to ensure peace across the universe. My people had no reason to fear the people the Alteans were fighting; they were barely more than a group of mildly irritating rebels to us, but a part of the alliance agreement was that we offer our assistance, as the Alteans were not a warlike race and as such they wished to end the conflict soon. It seemed like such an insignificant thing at the time and I did not see the harm in indulging him."

Zarkon stops to take a sip of his wine and consider his next words.

"Some years after we forged our alliance, there was unusual meteor activity across the known space. We were having a small get together in my home when a meteor struck ground. It was the first one we knew of that had done so." Zarkon smiles at Keith. "Alfor built the Lions from that meteorite. You have noticed they are not entirely machines, yes?"

Keith nods. "They’re… telepathic or something. They have a consciousness."

"That came from the meteorite. I allowed Alfor to study in my home. He brought his best scientists with him, and took mine too. He built Voltron, I married one of the Altean scientists" — he lifts a hand before Keith can ask — "we can discuss that at a later date."

Keith pouts, but lets it go for now. Why should he care if Zarkon was married ten thousand years ago? It’s distant past.

"As I was saying, we studied the meteorite and the... portal, as you called it, that it had left in its wake. We had never encountered quintessence in such quantities and in such a pure form. It was exciting to us all. But Alfor had the pleasure of leaving Daibazaal while the rest of us did not. I trust Haggar has explained why exposure to quintessence is best left to limited amounts?"

It had been one of their many topics of conversations when Keith had interrogated her on his new appearance. "She said something about it messing with your head and maybe causing insanity if you’re exposed to it for too long or in large quantities? And that's why she didn't use it to fix me after... After Vazka."

Zarkon inclines his head. "Do you know how we discovered that?"

Keith's face falls.

Oh.
"If it's any consolation it's been pretty obvious to me from the start that you're not exactly on the
sane end of the spectrum." Keith's attempt at a smile becomes more genuine when Zarkon huffs.

"Well, I did spend decafbes exposed to the rift on daily basis. I would say I took it rather well, at
least compared to some of the others. But that is besides the point," Zarkon replies and finishes his
wine.

Keith waits while he refills his glass, curious to see where the story will go.

Zarkon returns and takes a moment to think of his next words. "Alfor was very dear to me, but he
was not without his flaws. He had to have his way. For example, he blamed the rift for the
geological disturbances of Daibazaal. I told him it was not his concern but he had to interfere.
When I would not allow him to make decisions concerning my home, he decided that the
quintessence had driven both me and my wife insane."

"But we've established quintessence can do that," Keith cuts in.

"That is true, and I am not denying the fact that the quintessence might at that time had an adverse
effect on my behavior, but instead of even considering helping me Alfor turned around and walked
away." The bitterness of Zarkon's voice surprises Keith. He didn’t expect Zarkon to show his
feelings quite so openly. Maybe it’s the wine.

As Keith considers Zarkon's words, a frown spreads on his face. "Why didn't he try to help you?
From what Allura and Coran have told me that's not the kind of a person he was."

Zarkon laughs, bitter, and takes a drink of his wine. "Then they have lied to you. Quite frankly I
was not worth the trouble for him. He could not get what he wanted from me when I was not in a
place to listen to him, and though we were close friends it was not in his nature to take the time to
care for anyone who had done something that was wrong in his eyes. Alfor preferred to deal in
absolutes, and I was in the wrong, therefore I fell into the group he labeled as his foes."

Keith leans forward. "Why do I get the feeling you agreed to what he wanted to do in the end?"

"Hardly. While I did tell him that I was willing to follow his desires and close the rift, I did so
because I needed him to be willing to form Voltron. You see, my wife was very ill from the
exposure to the quintessence, and she was convinced that being in contact with the purest form of it
would cure her. So I told the others the plan. We would open the rift wider, then close it." Zarkon
sighs, and to Keith's surprise, slumps into the cushions. "It would have worked too. But the
quintessence was overwhelming and I... lost consciousness from the exposure. Alfor took the
opportunity to destroy Daibazaal."

Keith looks down, his ears drooping. He picks at the soft fur of his tail and tries to come up with
something to say, but nothing seems good enough.

"I would've tried to help you." Keith offers eventually, and risks a glance at Zarkon, worried he has
said the wrong thing.

But Zarkon stares at him with strangely wide eyes. Keith gives him a small, hesitant smile.

"You are sweet," Zarkon says, and for once it doesn't bother Keith.

"So what happened after that?" Keith asks, shuffling a little closer to Zarkon.

Zarkon sighs, his ears twitching down. "Naturally I confronted Alfor about the destruction of my
home. He told me that without me it was his decision to make, and that I should be thankful for
what he had done, as he had, in his words, saved the star system. He had ordered the evacuation of the planet but most of our history and culture was destroyed. We did not have the means or the technology to save it all, like the Alteans had."

Keith's brow raises in disbelief. "He didn't let you borrow that technology?"

"No. I believe his explanation for it was that it had not occurred to him at the time and no one had suggested it for him."

"So you blew up his planet?" Keith can't help the disapproving edge of his voice.

Zarkon shrugs one shoulder.

Keith bites his lip. "I get it. I get that you were hurt, but what you did was still wrong and there's no excuse that's gonna justify that."

Zarkon looks like he's about to argue, but Keith beats him to it. "What Alfor did wasn't right either, but you could've been the bigger person and, I don't know, publicly disgraced him for what he did or something. Challenged him to a duel."

To Keith's surprise, Zarkon smiles. "Perhaps, if I had been so lucky as to have you there to offer your opinions, I might have. But you were not there, and what has passed has passed. There is no changing that."

Keith is taken aback for a moment, and it takes him a few tries to get his bearings again. "So why did you take over the universe?"

Zarkon's smile fades. "I believe that is a story for another day."

Keith takes the hint and doesn't push the matter. "You could either let me watch movies or read out loud for me. I'm getting bored of having nothing new to do," he says instead.

With an indulgent smile, Zarkon sets his wine aside and picks up his book, and waves Keith closer.

Keith shuffles forward until he can settle on Zarkon's lap again, and he lets himself enjoy the warmth of the embrace while Zarkon starts reading the book for him, his voice chasing the last of Keith's concerns away.

"Are you allowed to tell us about this?" Haala crosses his arms and lifts a skeptical eyebrow.

Keith shrugs. "No one told me not to."

"But isn't the answer obvious?" Marzila glances from Haala to Keith. "He's not going to accept the challenge."

Keith slumps back in his seat with a sigh. "But aren't I not allowed to refuse?"

Neither Marzila nor Haala have a response for him, and their silence is more telling than any words could be.

Keith doesn't know if Zarkon will be able to get him out of having to fight Vazka, and he's not too
keen on the idea of relying on the possibility that Zarkon will figure something out. He’d rather have all his bases covered.

"I think the smartest move at the moment is for Marzi to start teaching you to fight now instead of later," Haala says. Marzila throws a dirty look at him, but Keith agrees.

If he wants to survive the possible fight, he will need to start preparing as soon as he can. "Please?" He tries to look as pleading as he can when he turns to Marzila.

She groans and grimaces, but eventually her shoulders slump. "Fine. But if I get told off because of you, I'm taking you both down with me."

"Deal." Keith grins at her. "Can we start now or do you have other plans?"

"Let's go kick your ass then," Marzila sighs, but there's a smile tugging at her lips.

Keith and Haala follow her to the thankfully empty training room, and Marzila spends an hour honing Keith's balance before she's satisfied Keith won't fall down at the slightest push.

"We could tape your tail down," Marzila suggests when Keith stumbles. "Then it wouldn't affect your movements so much."

"He just needs to learn to not fight it," Haala cuts in, much to Keith's surprise.

Haala crosses his arms. "Half of my family got tails, and the first thing you always hear is 'your tail is trying to help you, so don't fight it'."

"I'll keep that in mind," Keith replies. "But I have a question first."

Haala raises an eyebrow, and though he puts up a show of not being interested Keith knows him better than that. "How rare are tails?"

"Not as rare as people make it out to be, but they're not really an advantage in the military," Marzila replies.

"But you can make it even if you've got one," Haala says. "My mother had a tail and she served in the front lines. Though she was a scientist so she wasn't doing much fighting. But because she had a tail I carry the gene for it, so there's a fifty percent chance my children would have tails too."

"It's the same with fur, actually," Marzila adds.

It's a lot for Keith to mull over, but he'll have to do it some other time. At the moment he needs his focus to be on perfecting his stance. It's not easy, and though he gets the idea he doesn't master it in practice.

"We'll try again tomorrow," Marzila says. "Think over what we did today. Maybe it'll be easier next time."

Keith nods, hoping she's right.

She's not, and the week of training that follows does little else than leave Keith aching and
frustrated. I would be fine if Zarkon didn't notice Keith's jerky movements and sour mood.

"What have you done to yourself now?"

Keith gives Zarkon a flat look, his ears lowering and his tail flicking. "I haven't done anything."

Zarkon narrows his eyes. "You are a terrible liar and I assume you have not gone through your life not realizing that. I am not angry, but I do require honesty from you."

Keith could tell Zarkon he doesn't want to talk about it, but Zarkon would be disappointed and that is not something Keith enjoys. "Marzi's been training me. You know it," he says instead; the only reason he and have been able to pull off their training is because Keith had told Zarkon she's helping him with his balance.

"Oh? And why has your training taken such a violent turn all of the sudden?"

Keith grimaces. Of course Zarkon wasn't going to let it go. "Because she's teaching me how to fight as a Galra?"

The clank of the pad hitting the table makes Keith flinch. He knew Zarkon wouldn't be happy to hear Keith has been doing the one thing Zarkon told him not to do. He should've just kept his mouth shut.

"I told you that you do not need to start practicing combat yet." Zarkon steps closer to Keith, the set of his jaw tight.

Keith looks down, collects himself, and looks back up. "I know you want me to pretend like there's no way I'll end up in the Arena, but I need to prepare for the chance that I do end up there. I need to do that to feel safe."

A silence falls between them, but Keith refuses to look down. If he looks down Zarkon won't let him have this. If he takes even a step back he won't be able to train with Marzila again.

"She is training you wrong," Zarkon states, and Keith crosses his arms. "I assume your problem is still your balance. Perhaps if you were in an environment where that would not be an issue, it would be easier for you to train your skills and get used to your new physique."

Keith has no idea what Zarkon means, but as long as he's talking about Keith training, Keith won't say anything.

Zarkon sighs. "I have nothing else I need to do today, so if you want, I can show you what I mean."

"Yes. Please," Keith replies without hesitation.

Zarkon inclines his head. "I will have to change into something more appropriate. Wait here."

Keith watches him walk into the bedroom, and he tries not to fidget as he waits for Zarkon’s return.

It seems like hours before Zarkon returns in one of his more casual dark suits, and he waves Keith to follow him. Keith hurries after him, and he catches up to Zarkon a few feet out of the door.

"Where are we going?"

Zarkon glances at him. "Patience."

Keith throws a glare at him, but decides to let Zarkon lead him on for now.
Zarkon leads Keith all the way to Haggar's wing, and though passing Haggar's laboratory and venturing deeper into the eerily silent wing sends a chill down Keith's spine, he doesn't show it.

Zarkon leads Keith almost to the end of the dim hallway, and Keith fidgets with curiosity while Zarkon unlocks the large doors there. He tries not to crane his neck to see what's behind the doors when they open, and though Keith is nervous his curiosity keeps him from hesitating when Zarkon waves him in.

For a moment the room is dark, then Zarkon turns the lights on, and Keith's jaw drops at the sight of the wide, open room. The ceiling is so high Keith has to look up to see it, and his steps echo in the empty space as he walks in deeper into the room. The only thing there for him to notice are the many circular metal plates of varying sizes on the floor and the handles on the walls, some so high Keith doesn't know how anyone could reach them.

"Come here." Zarkon's voice echoes in the room, surrounding Keith in a way that should be oppressing but isn't.

Keith spins around, taking in as much of the room as he can before heading back to Zarkon, who has somehow acquired a small basket with a tightly shut lid. "What are we doing here?"

"The druids use this room for some of their experiments. They also use it for their training," Zarkon replies.

Keith glances over his shoulder. "It's just a big empty room."

The corner of Zarkon's lips quirk up, and Keith's tail flicks. "I want you to stand over there." He points at one of the larger metal circles on the ground, and though Keith does as he's told he raises a questioning eyebrow.

Zarkon joins Keith, standing on a circle a few feet away from Keith, tapping on his pad. "Do try to hold on."

"Wha—"

Keith yelps as the plate lifts from the ground. He crouches down and grips the sides of it, staring at the floor that's getting farther and farther from him until Keith is so high he'd break something if he were to fall, even in his new Galra form.

"I don't think this is gonna help." Keith clings to the edges of his plate, lifting his alarmed eyes to Zarkon.

"It will," Zarkon assures him. He taps his pad a few times, and Keith feels almost weightless.

Keith doesn't get a chance to ask what Zarkon did before he hops across the plates between them. Keith has to sit up so that Zarkon won't step on him, and he looks up at him with a confused frown, his jaw brushing against Zarkon's leg.

"Trust me," Zarkon says, and though Keith isn't sure if he should he nods.

Zarkon smiles, and pushes Keith off the plate.

Keith yelps in alarm as he falls a few feet, but his descent is slower than it should be and he lands on another plate with a soft thump. He stares at Zarkon smiling down at him and considers cursing him in the worst possible ways.
"Artificial gravity," Zarkon explains as he opens the lid of the basket still in hands. "Even if you fall, you will not injure yourself."

"A little warning would've been nice!" Keith's ears flatten and his tail swings from side to side, but it only serves to make Zarkon chuckle at him.

"You will want to dodge."

It's the only warning Keith gets before Zarkon flings something bright red at his face. Keith ducks, and the object continues on its way until it hits a wall. It looks like a ball, and going by the thump it makes against the wall it's not hard.

Keith glares at Zarkon. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Teaching you," Zarkon replies and throws another ball at Keith.

Keith dodges again.

He does fine until Zarkon changes plates again. Keith can't quite turn around in time to see the next ball coming, and it hits him on his ear. The ball is soft enough not to hurt, but it still stings quite a bit. Zarkon lands another hit on Keith’s shoulder while Keith recovers from the first hit, and by the third hit Keith curses and abandons his plate in favor of a better position.

It's not like he's going to fall to the ground and hurt himself if he loses his balance.

Keith knows Zarkon gives him the time to settle on the plate he picks. He's happy with the distance between him and Zarkon, and he's even a little higher than Zarkon now, but Keith still can't do much else than dodge, and Zarkon is a lot quicker to change his position this time.

It takes Keith several minutes, but he gets used to the altered gravity and moving around in it. The only problem Keith has is that the more easily he moves around, the less time Zarkon gives him to react.

After a while Zarkon lets the now empty basket drift towards the ground in favor of hopping across the plates and flinging the balls floating in the air at Keith. Just because he can, Keith throws a few balls at Zarkon as well, even if he misses every time and Zarkon gets more ammo out of it.

Keith ends up dodging one of Zarkon's assaults by jumping from his plate and aiming for the handle on the wall that should be out of his reach. His new physique and the altered gravity help him reach the handle, but Keith overestimates the jump and ends up slamming his head against the wall.

"Are you alright?" Zarkon calls over Keith's pained groan.

"Yeah," Keith replies, still rubbing his forehead.

Keith supposes he shouldn't be surprised when Zarkon comes over to him and takes a hold of the handle by Keith’s side with ease. The gentle way in which he cups Keith's face in his hand while he checks him for injuries calms Keith's mind, and it makes it easier for him to ignore the dull pain throbbing behind his eyes.

"I think we should take a break," Zarkon says.

"Okay." Keith nods. It will give him a chance to get over the pain and get his bearings again.
Zarkon pulls Keith into his arms and pushes them off the wall, and his strength is enough to get them to the closest plate with little effort. Keith holds on to him a little tighter than he needs to, but not controlling his own movements in the altered gravity isn't something he enjoys, even if he trusts Zarkon not to let him get hurt.

Keith’s tail wraps around Zarkon’s leg when he lets them fall from the plate and towards the ground. Keith knows they’ll be fine; the altered gravity will keep them from crashing to the ground.

He still clings to Zarkon with all he's got.

Their fall comes to an abrupt but soft stop several feet from the ground, and Keith risks a glance down. The floor isn't far enough for Keith to get injured if he falls, but his tail still tightens around Zarkon's thigh.

"I will not let go," Zarkon says, and Keith knows it's the truth. It doesn't make his tail unfurl though.

So Keith focuses on the smile Zarkon offers him, and does his best to return the sentiment. He picks at Zarkon's jacket, finding it silly he used to think the thick material of it is a little too much in the ship's warmth.

Of course it isn’t too much; Zarkon might like stylish clothes, but he also values his comfort. Keith's claws catch on the near black fabric, but Zarkon doesn't tell him to stop.

Zarkon runs his knuckles along Keith's spine, and Keith's tail unfurls in favor of wrapping around Zarkon's wrist. He groans while Zarkon chuckles, and Keith buries his heated face in Zarkon's chest. "I can't control it."

"You will learn," Zarkon assures him, but the laughter is still in his voice.

Keith groans again.

"Once you get a hang of your balance, you will learn to utilize all your other skills in no time," Zarkon continues, "you just need to stop fighting your own body."

"I know," Keith mutters into Zarkon's chest.

"You have done rather well." Zarkon shakes his wrist. "But I would not object if you were to let go of my hand."

Keith reaches for his tail and unwraps it from Zarkon's wrist, but he refuses to lift his head from Zarkon's chest. It helps that Zarkon has an annoying habit of smelling really good. No one who wears armor all day should be allowed to smell as good as he does.

Keith traces a seam on Zarkon’s clothes absently, his breathing slowly syncing with Zarkon's.

"You seem fascinated with my clothes," Zarkon observes.

"You dress well," Keith replies, then grimaces. "I mean... You've got a good sense of style. Um. I... Fuck." Keith wishes the gravity would fail and he'd crash to the ground.

Zarkon laughs, soft and warm, and pets Keith's head, and Keith is glad he can hide his blush in Zarkon's chest. "I will take that as a compliment," Zarkon says.

Keith nods minutely. That's better than Zarkon holding it over his head, or making fun of him.
"Does your head hurt?"

Keith considers it. "Not anymore, no."

"Do you want to stop or do you think you are up for one more round?" Zarkon looks down at Keith, and Keith lifts his eyes to meet his.

He hums, tilting his head and flicking his ears without meaning to as he considers it. "I think I can go another round."

The smile Zarkon gives him is all the confirmation Keith needs to know he made the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

I'll be posting the next chapter late next week. I want to finish the few chapters I've got lying around half written, and it's gonna be my birthday next week so I'll be busy with that too.

I hope you liked this!
Eventually Keith gets the hang of moving around with the tail, and Marzila teaches him some basic moves he can actually pull off now. She's proud of him, and Keith feels like he's not so doomed to die when he has to face Vazka in the Arena.

It does nothing to alleviate the nightmares waking him up in the middle of the night though.

The worst thing about the nightmares is that Zarkon wakes up every time Keith does, and there's nothing Keith can do to hide them from him. Keith is sure Zarkon will grow tired of him soon, and kick him out of the bed; maybe to the couch, at worst to another room, but Keith is sure Zarkon isn't going to tolerate being awoken almost every night for much longer.

Still, when Keith snaps awake again, gasping for breath and holding his middle to keep the imaginary blood inside himself, Zarkon merely places a calming hand on his arm and tugs gently.

Keith lets Zarkon pull him into his arms, taking comfort in the heavy weight of him against his back.

Maybe it's just going to be another thing Keith will have to learn to live with, like the light he needs on at all times after his time in the isolation cell.

But there has to be a limit to what Zarkon will put up with. A dim light he can ignore by just turning his head isn't the same as waking up because Keith has nightmares. Keith can barely stand it himself.

There is no way Zarkon is going to put up with it all for long.

“I have thought of something that might help you relax,” Zarkon starts, and Keith sighs before he can stop himself.

This is it, Zarkon is going to meddle in some unhelpful, probably Haggar related way, then kick Keith out of the bed when it doesn't work.

“What is it?” Keith asks, setting his tea cup down on the table.

The look in Zarkon's eyes is the one he gets when he thinks he's come up with something he thinks Keith will like. “We are passing by a planet that is a part of the Empire, and they have a quite famous spring market taking place in a few days.”
Keith raises an eyebrow, unsure as to how it affects his life.

Zarkon interlaces his fingers and tilts his head. “I would be willing to allow you to attend it, if you want.”

“Yes,” Keith replies immediately.

Zarkon smiles. “I suspected as much. I assume you will want to take your friends with you.”

Keith stills halfway through a nod. “You're not coming?”

“Would you like me to come?” Zarkon raises an eyebrow and picks up his tea cup. “Your friends might be uncomfortable with it.”

Keith wouldn't mind spending a day away from the ship with Zarkon, but he also wants to share the experience with Marzila and Haala. Zarkon could join them, but he knows Zarkon is right; if he were to come with them, Haala and Marzila would be uncomfortable, to say the least.

“So, you'd be okay if I went with Marzila and Haala instead of you?” Keith eyes Zarkon, taking in every minute shift of his expression.

“Yes,” Zarkon replies, seemingly genuine.

It's a trap and Keith knows it, but he's unsure of what kind of a trap. Is it about who Keith chooses? That seems unlikely as Zarkon should already know Keith likes him enough to let Zarkon get him off in a medical bay bed.

No, it's about something else...

“Are you trying to see if I'm going to run the first chance I get?” Keith crosses his arms, his ears flattening against his head and his tail thumping against the side of his chair.

Zarkon shifts in his chair. “Would you?”

“That's not the point. Stop testing me.”

They stare at each other across the table, Keith's tail flicking from side to side making the only sound in the room when it hits the chair with a soft thud every now and again.

Keith is the first to break the silence. “You could just trust me.”

“And you could take advantage of leaving the ship,” Zarkon counters, setting the cup down with a hard clink.

It takes most of Keith's willpower not to frown, but he reminds himself that Zarkon isn't just being difficult, he's worried about Keith trying to leave. And going to a busy market would be an ideal place for Keith to disappear in.

Keith sighs and forces himself to tamper down the anger bubbling inside him. “Do you want to come with me?”

Zarkon takes a sip of his tea. “I would prefer that, but I am unsure if I have the time to do so.”

The honesty is something Keith appreciates, and it makes it easier for him to let his anger wither out and die. He chews his lip, careful not to injure himself with his teeth. “Thace could come with me.”
Zarkon tilts his head.

“Assuming he's not busy,” Keith hurries to add.

“He is not,” Zarkon replies, then takes a long sip of his tea as he thinks it over. “That would be an acceptable compromise, if you do not mind having him with you.”

Keith smiles. “I don't. I like him.”

“Then I will tell him to accompany you and your friends to the planet,” Zarkon says, inclining his head slightly.

Keith almost leaves it there, but he wants to thank Zarkon so he stands and circles the table, and leans down to press their foreheads together. Zarkon turns to Keith and tilts his head until their noses bump, and cups Keith's face in his hands. He runs his thumb across the faint line on Keith's cheekbone, then down to the corner of his lips.

Keith's heart beats just a little bit faster. He knows he won't get a kiss, but the memory of the one they had shared is still clear in his mind, and he can't help but think back to it.

Zarkon tilts Keith's head back, his breath hot on Keith's neck.

Keith's breath hitches and he climbs on Zarkon's lap, laughing softly when he stumbles. Zarkon huffs and nuzzles Keith's neck, and any embarrassment Keith might have felt over his stumbling vanishes. Zarkon encourages Keith to tilt his head again, and Keith obliges, gasping when Zarkon bites the tip of his ear gently.

Keith's tail flicks and hits the tea cup at the edge of the table, sending it flying to the floor.

Zarkon stills and Keith stiffens, waiting to be told off. But Zarkon snorts and buries his face in Keith's shoulder, laughing quietly as his hold on Keith's waist tightens.

After a second or two of stillness Keith relaxes and chuckles. He gets a smile in return, and he has to fight back the urge to kiss Zarkon.

“Explain the mating thing to me?” Keith tilts his head, his ears twitching. “Do you exchange rings or something?”

Zarkon huffs. “No.”

Keith nods slowly. “Do you hold a ceremony?”

“No, but couples often choose to hold an announcement celebration,” Zarkon replies.

Keith frowns. “Then how does it work?”
Zarkon shifts, holding Keith close so he won't fall from his lap, a thoughtful frown appearing on his face. “It is a bond between two people that cannot be broken.”

“Like ours?” Keith swallows, unsure of what he wants the answer to be.

“No. Our bond is unique,” Zarkon replies, “the bond between mated couples is not quite as literal. It is based on emotion and the certainty that you are meant to be with someone. You feel it with your whole being and the intensity of it can be crushing, but when you are with that person, you are at peace. It is a remnant of an ancient time when our survival depended on our ability to form strong bonds with each other.”

Keith nods slowly and mulls over Zarkon's words. He doesn't know what such certainty would feel like, but there's a part of him that would like to know what it would be like.

“Thace said you choose a mate,” Keith says, and when Zarkon frowns he hastens to add, “I asked him about Galra relationships when you were mad at me. After the blackout? He just mentioned it.”

“It is a choice,” Zarkon confirms.

Keith bites his lip, his ears twitching back “It doesn't sound like a choice.”

“You think you cannot feel such intense belonging with more than one person?” Zarkon raises an eyebrow. “You cannot mate with a person who does not feel the same for you, and just because you feel that belonging with someone does not mean they are the right person for you. It is, in the end, a choice. You must not only have the feeling, but acknowledge it and accept it, and have it returned in kind. They must be yours as you are theirs.”

Keith's brow creases and he chews his lip gently, his tail swinging from side to side. He doesn't really understand the whole mating thing any better, but maybe if he ever feels it, he might recognize it for what it is.

“I think I should clean the tea,” Keith says, nodding towards the shattered cup, and Zarkon inclines his head.

Keith remains silent while Zarkon has the cleaning supplies brought to them, and though he mutters a thank you to Zarkon when he moves his chair out of his way, he doesn't say anything else while he rubs the tea from the floor.

Keith presses his face against the window of the observation deck to see the planet better. His tail swings from side to side, the force of it hard to ignore, and from his reflection Keith can see his ears perked as high as they can go.

“Haven't you ever seen a planet before?” Haala asks from his spot a few feet behind Keith.

“No since you guys caught me,” Keith replies, his voice absent.

Haala doesn't reply, and Keith doesn't bother glancing over his shoulder to see what his expression is like. He's most likely scowling anyways, as it has been his default expression ever since he realized he was back on Keith guarding duty.
Not that neither one of them minds it, but Keith isn't about to tell Haala to stop pretending like being around Keith is the worst thing in the world. It's just how Haala is, and Keith knows what it's like to have his personality criticized so he doesn't want to do that to anyone, especially without a good reason.

The ship slows down, the blue and green of the planet below them reminding Keith of Earth, and a bang of homesickness hits him. To his surprise Zarkon lowers his shielding at it, offering him comfort. Keith nudges him as playfully as he can. He's still learning how to communicate through the bond, but he thinks he does well.

After a while Zarkon's consciousness fades into the background of Keith's thoughts, but it doesn't go away completely. Keith doesn't know how he feels about Zarkon's new habit of keeping the bond more open between them, but he keeps to himself enough that it doesn't bother Keith.

Maybe it's because of Vazka. Zarkon has definitely been more concerned with Keith's safety, and keeping the bond more open is a good way to keep an eye on Keith and make sure he's not in danger.

“You know,” Haala starts, “if we go to the hangar now, we can be the first ones in the shuttle.”

Keith nods and takes one last look of the planet before bolting after Haala.

Marzila is supposed to join them in the hangar, and considering the fact that Haala is wearing the most casual outfit Keith has ever seen on a Galra, he's curious to see if Marzila has dressed down as well. It's a change from the usual and Keith wants to see what the Galra are like in a more relaxed environment.

It had taken Keith by surprise to see Haala in casual clothing. The rich blue shirt and the grayish blue jacket with the too large collar hanging over his shoulders are something Keith hasn't seen before, and he almost laughs when he realizes the cut of Haala's dark pants is the closest Keith has seen to regular Earth cargo pants since coming to space.

Keith had let Zarkon help him pick his clothes, so he'd ended up with knee high boots with blessedly flat heels that Zarkon had gotten him just so he would have an easier time walking around, and not quite form fitting pants, and Keith's favorite black shirt.

It's the jacket that Keith would have never chosen himself. It's a beautiful dark maroon color with complex seams and cuts, and Zarkon had buttoned the collar up so that it went from looking just stylish to downright militaristic. It has pockets though, so Keith doesn't complain.

Zarkon had also tied Keith's hair up in a neat ponytail, and to Keith's shock he'd finished the whole thing by braiding a bit of Keith's hair around the ribbon holding the ponytail in place. Keith doesn't know where Zarkon learned to do that, and he didn't ask.

Many of the Galra in the hallways are buzzing with excited energy, no doubt waiting for a chance to get onto the planet. Zarkon has put Keith on the first shuttle out, since it is the one he is going to be on himself.

He had said something about meeting someone, but Keith hadn't been able to get any details out of him.

“There's Marzi,” Haala says, snapping Keith out of his thoughts.

Sure enough, Marzila is standing near the hangar doors chatting with a woman Keith has never seen before. They are both wearing what look like two layered beach dresses with sleeves
scrunched at their elbows. Marzila's is a beautiful emerald green with a lighter bottom layer, and she has a long, salmon colored shawl draped over her shoulders. She has even loosened her braid so that it looks like its about to come undone.

Keith thinks she's beautiful.

As soon as Marzila spots them, she bids goodbye to her friend and hurries to them, grinning as she comes. She throws her arms around Haala's shoulders and nuzzles his cheek before before moving to give Keith a hug. “This is going to be fun.”

“Yeah,” Keith laughs, squeezing her briefly before stepping back. “Who are we till missing? Zarkon?”

Marzila inclines her head. “And Thace.”

“He's probably just fixing his clothes,” Haala says. “He hates looking less than perfect in front of the Emperor; he says it reflects poorly on his character.”

“It would,” Keith replies. He doesn't explain Zarkon's appreciation for style and fashion, thinking it would be too much information in such a crowded place, but he does take some pleasure in the confused looks he receives from his friends.

“Does either one of you know anything about the planet?” Keith asks instead.

Haala shrugs, but Marzila inclines her head. “The Mrie are a pacifist race, so they have a strict no weapons or armor in their events policy. Everyone has to follow the rules. Their main export is these really sweet golden sugar cones they make, and they make great romance literature.”

Keith raises an eyebrow. “You like that sort of thing?” He makes sure his voice holds no negative note.

“No, but Valo's a big fan.”

“Here's Thace,” Haala cuts in, ending the conversation before it had a real chance to even start.

Keith turns to see Thace stride towards them in hasty but controlled steps, almost as if he's attempting to look like he's not in a hurry. His deep blue and gray suit is reminiscent of the ones Zarkon likes to wear, but not quite as stylized. It might be a simple matter of money, or maybe Thace just isn't the type to want to wear the most attention drawing clothes available to him.

“Do you have everything you'll need with you?” Thace asks as he comes to a halt.

Haala groans, his ears drooping. “Yes. I'm not a child anymore and Marzi's not an idiot. I don't know about him though.” He nudges his head towards Keith.

“I don't have anything I could bring with me,” Keith says, his shoulders slumping slightly.

Thace's ears twitch back. “I'm sure the Emperor will give you some currency. That's what you would need the most.”

Keith nods, even though he wouldn't be entirely surprised if Zarkon didn't give him any money. It would limit Keith's escape options, not that Keith has any intention of running away.

Thace ushers them into the hangar and towards the shuttle waiting for them.

“Why aren't we using an airlock?” Keith asks.
“We might as well get onboard here and not bother with the airlock. It takes a little more time, but this way we can skip a step in going down to the planet,” Thace replies.

Haala, Marzila and Keith hang back while Thace goes to talk to the pilot. Soon Thace waves for them to follow him into the shuttle, and Marzila shows Keith to a seat by the window.

They sit in silence while the pilot gets the ship ready, and Keith tugs at the bond to get Zarkon to hurry. He knows it's childish, but he wants to smell the fresh air of a planet. Zarkon lets his amusement pass through the bond, but with it comes and assurance that he's on his way.

Keith smiles and sits up, and Thace frowns at him. Keith ignores him in favor of focusing on the doors, his ears perked up so that he can hear Zarkon's approach.

It doesn't take long for Zarkon to join them, his expression softening minutely after he chases Marzila from Keith's side and takes her place. The color and style of his suit compliments the colors of Keith's clothes, though Keith isn't sure if it's intentional or not.

“We are ready to depart,” the pilot says, and Zarkon gives him the permission to do so.

It's all the pilot needs to get the shuttle moving.

Keith turns his focus to the window so that he can get a glimpse of the planet the second they clear the hangar doors, and his excitement keeps him from swatting Zarkon's hand off when he adjusts Keith's collar.

The ship shudders to motion, and Keith's tail wraps around Zarkon's leg. He has to crane his neck to see the planet on the minute long trip from the ship to the station hovering over the planet.

Zarkon lets his amusement over Keith's excitement trickle through the bond, but Keith catches the hint of anxiousness Zarkon is trying to hide. His tail squeezes Zarkon's leg tighter, and he tears his eyes from the window for long enough to offer Zarkon a reassuring smile.

When the shuttle docks with an airlock, Keith is the first one on his feet. He'd be the first one at the door as well, but Zarkon grabs his arm. “Do not wander off.”

“I won't,” Keith promises. To assure Zarkon further he glues himself to his side, and lets everyone else exit the shuttle first.

Zarkon guides Keith out of the shuttle, but stops before they can head any further. Thace, Haala and Marzila have moved a little further away, but since Keith can hear them talking, he knows they can hear him as well. It doesn't stop him from turning to Zarkon.

“I'm gonna stay with them,” Keith says, nodding towards his friends pretending not to listen in. “Unless you want me to come with you instead.”

Zarkon looks like he wants to say yes, but he decides against it. “If I am not too busy, we can spend some time together later.”

Keith smiles. “Sounds fun.”

“We will have to go through the customs. As you do not have any identification yet, I will sign you in as a member of my house. It will grant you the permission to enter the planet, but it will also make me responsible for your behavior, so I expect you to stay out of trouble.” Zarkon gives Keith a look that leaves no room for argument.
Keith nods and stands a little taller.

“Now stay by my side until I tell you otherwise.” Zarkon heads towards the bright yellow gates down the corridor without waiting to see if Keith follows his order, and Keith has to rush after him.

The others stay close by, and Keith throws an excited grin over his shoulder for them. Marzila is the only one to give him one back, but Keith doesn't take it personally.

Getting through the customs would have been more time consuming without Zarkon there to scare the willowy, weasel like alien into speeding things along with his mere presence. Keith tries not to be amused by it, and since Zarkon is nothing but polite Keith chooses to believe the clerk is scared because they don't usually sign in intergalactic emperors and their companions.

The others take a lot longer to get through, and Zarkon guides Keith to the side while they wait for them.

“We will take another shuttle down to the planet itself,” Zarkon explains. “I will allow you access to my finances, and you are free to buy whatever you want, as long as you use common sense. I expect you to stay by Thace's side at all times; I have instructed him to allow you to decide what you are going to do, so do not concern yourself with that.”

Keith reaches up to touch Zarkon's cheek. “It'll be fine. I'm not going to disappear. I don't have anywhere else to go but back to you.”

It doesn't change the tense set of Zarkon's shoulders, but his expression softens minutely.

If Thace hadn't joined them at that moment Keith might have pulled Zarkon down so that he could have pressed their foreheads together. As it is he snatches his hand away and takes a step away from Zarkon, but he's not quite fast enough to prevent Thace from seeing it. Thace is quick to school his expression into something polite and a little submissive as he stops a few feet from them and clears his throat.

“What?” Zarkon turns to Thace, an annoyed frown appearing on his face.

Keith touches his arm to calm him down, and to his surprise Zarkon glances at him and lets his pose relax just a little.

Thace glances between them. “I got the clerk to secure the next shuttle down for us. It will leave in a few keeseks.”

Zarkon inclines his head and returns his attention to Keith.

Thace hesitates before walking away, and Keith wonders why before Zarkon brushes a strand of hair from his face, dragging his attention from Thace back to him. “You can reach me at any time.”

Keith smiles. “I know. But I won't get into trouble. Just let me know if you have time for me so we can get space coffee or something.”

Zarkon tilts his head. “Get what?”

“Coffee? A hot drink made of beans? It's a typical Earth date drink.” Keith bites his lip, regretting saying anything.

“I will try to make some time for you,” Zarkon promises.
They join the others and head down the closest corridor to get to the shuttle that will take them
down to the planet. Keith barely has the time to take in the bright colors of the walls and the floor,
and he grows more and more nervous with each step.

The shuttle is small and egg shaped, and to Keith's dismay there are no windows in it. He presses
against Zarkon's side on the journey down, taking some comfort in the solid warmth of him. It
doesn't calm Keith down like he'd hoped, but at least he feels a little surer of himself and going on
a planet. Zarkon turns his palm up, and Keith jumps at the chance of taking his hand.

He lets go when the shuttle lands, and the only reason Keith doesn't rush to the door is that he
doesn't want to get a disapproving look from Zarkon.

It leaves Keith as the last one to step out into the warm breeze, and he thinks he might choke up a
little.

Everything is green, but not the kind of green he'd seen on Earth. The brushes and grass around
him are much more vibrant, almost blinding, and the sky is a striking turquoise. A bright yellow
bird flies over them, and Keith’s gaze follows it until it disappears between rust colored buildings.

Keith can't take it all in fast enough.

His concentration on the scenery breaks when Zarkon nudges his shoulder. “I need you to focus.”

It's not easy, but Keith focuses on Zarkon and Zarkon alone.

When he is sure he has Keith’s attention, Zarkon shows him his pad. “You do not need to concern
yourself with the prices. The currency here is used across the Empire, and you will be paying with
a code chip so all you need to know is how to use it. I need you to press your hand here.” He taps
the palm shape on his pad, and Keith does as he's told.

The pad pings, and Zarkon taps it a few times before putting it away. “Here.” He hands Keith a
dark, silvery octagon chip that fits nicely in Keith's palm.

“When you use this you press this on the cashiers chip reader and keep your thumb here”— Zarkon
points at the lighter part of the octagon — “and enter this code to the screen.” He hands Keith a
piece of paper with a nine character code consisting of letters and numbers.

Keith grabs the paper, examining it with a small crease on his brow. The handwriting is elegant yet
easy to read, and Keith wonders if it's for his benefit or something that comes naturally for Zarkon.

He bites back a huff, feeling silly for analyzing Zarkon's handwriting of all things.

“Can I buy them lunch?” Keith nods towards the others and puts the chip and the piece of paper
into his pocket.

“If you must,” Zarkon replies. Keith can't tell if he likes the idea or not.

He glances around to make sure no one is watching them before grabbing Zarkon's collar and
pulling him down just enough to bump their noses together. “Thank you.”

Zarkon smiles. “We should get moving.”

The others hurry after them when they head towards the market place.

The happy chatter of people bustling around is the first thing to reach Keith, and he speeds up until
he's walking a step ahead of Zarkon. The first glimpse of the market makes his jaw drop; it’s huge, and there's no way Keith won't be staying there until closing hours.

Keith stops, needing a moment to take it all in.

There are people of all shapes, sizes, and colors going about their business, and stands with colorful banners that wave in the breeze. The ground is paved with flat stones, and it looks recently cleaned.

Zarkon touches Keith's shoulder. “I will be leaving you now.”

Keith looks at him with what he hopes is a reassuring look. “I'll see you later then.”

Zarkon studies Keith for a few seconds longer before heading away.

“What do you want to do first?” Marzila asks as soon as Zarkon is out of earshot.

Keith bites his lip, his tail flicking. “I was thinking we could just look around first?”

“That is a good idea,” Thace agrees.

Keith glances after Zarkon, turning fully around when he spots Zarkon talking to a Galra with a striking white hair. Keith can't hear them, but Zarkon tilts his head down in the way he does when he’s just been told something he didn't want to hear, and the Galra with him waves in Keith's general direction. He seems upset about something, and Keith can only assume it's his presence.

It makes Keith frown.

Zarkon starts towards the crowd, and the Galra sticks to his side. Keith keeps a close eye on them before they disappear into the hustle of the market.

“Keith?”

He swirls around to face Thace, offering him a sheepish smile when he sees the frown on Thace's face. “Sorry. My mind wandered.”

Thace's frown deepens for a second before vanishing. “We were thinking we could pay for a storage slot. That way we don't have to carry our purchases with us all day. We have well over three quarters to spend here, so it would get tiring.”

“Sounds good,” Keith replies, and throws one final glance in the direction Zarkon and his friend had disappeared in before heading towards the market.

The market place is huge and busy, and looking around takes a lot more time than Keith expected. They end up deciding to get lunch halfway through, and Keith has to fight Haala over who pays for it.

“I think I have the highest salary in this group,” Thace points out.

Keith crosses his arms. “And I have free access to Zarkon's money and a permission to use it.”
It shuts everyone up. As consolation for losing the argument, Keith lets his friends pick the place they’ll eat in, as it’s only fair.

While they debate over the best place to pick food from, Keith wanders around, but never far enough to be out of sight.

A glimmering ornament catches Keith’s attention, and though he glances at Thace, he thinks he won't go far enough if he just goes to quickly see the ornament a little closer. He might end up out of Thace’s direct line of sight, but it's not like he's running away.

He promised he wouldn’t do so.

Keith hurries to the glimmering ornament, intending to just look at it for a moment before going back to the others. It’s beautiful, almost like an animal of some kind built out of sequence, and Keith fears he’ll break it if he touches it.

He should get back to the others. He can always come back later and show the ornament to them. Satisfied with his reasoning, Keith leaves the ornament where it is, and starts heading back to Thace’s visual range.

Except...

A word catches his ears.

Keith stops, his ears perking as he focuses on locating the voices again, but he can't hear them. He must have imagined it; a wistful dream he thought he'd gotten over. He sighs and starts forward again.

And stops when he hears it again, this time knowing he's not imagining it.

Voltron.

Keith focuses on the voice, searching for it until he hears it again. It belongs to a small alien with a thick, scaly skin and short arms. They are accompanied by a person who to Keith's delight looks almost like a chipmunk, despite being the taller of the two. They look annoyed, their attention on each other rather than the bright fabrics they are browsing.

Keith starts towards them, forgetting all about Thace and his promise to stay close to him.

They are talking about Voltron. How could he not go to them?

“— just because he's a Paladin doesn't mean he gets to boss us around.”

Keith stops a few feet from the duo and clears his throat, his tail jerking from side to side and his ears twitching back. The duo falls silent and swirls around to face Keith, their surprise shifting into anger and disgust when they see him.

“What do you want?” The smaller one of the two snarls, their voice growing high pitched.

Keith steps back. It's not a reaction he was expecting. He has done nothing to warrant the hostility. “I was just...”

The chipmunk like alien steps forward, standing as tall as they can and still being a head shorter than Keith. “How about you do us all a favor and just back off. That Galra stink hurts my nose.”

Keith's eyes widen, and it takes him a second to remember he doesn't look like a human anymore.
“Just get lost.” The smaller of the two adds. “Just because it's a peaceful planet doesn't mean we have to put up with your kind.”

Keith opens his mouth to argue, but they are starting to get disapproving looks from the passersby, and Keith doesn't want to cause a scene.

It's not that important. The duo probably isn't going to be in contact with Voltron anytime soon. And Keith doesn't know what he would even ask them to tell Shiro if they were to see him. He doesn't even know if he wants to send a message or just go with them.

Keith hears Thace calling for him, but the shock of having so much hate and anger directed at him keeps him still.

Is it normal for the Galra to receive such hostility?

“Oh Keith!” Thace's voice snaps Keith back into reality, and he turns around.

The aliens seem baffled all of the sudden, but Keith wants to get away from them and go back to his friends.

“Here!” He calls, and rushes towards Thace's voice.

Keith has to step around a rack of wind chimes to come face to face with Thace, and the worry in his eyes catches Keith off guard. “You're not supposed to wander off,” he reminds Keith.

Keith's ears droop and his tail drags across the ground. “Sorry. I just got distracted. I didn't mean to disappear.”

The hardness of Thace's expression melts. “Just don't do it again.”

Keith nods. “Did you settle on where we're going?”

“Yes. If you're ready?” Thace raises an eyebrow, and Keith takes the hint to start walking.

Keith lowers his ears at them and refuses to let them help. He can manage it on his own.

And he does.

Marzila cheers, and Keith rolls his eyes at her.

“We're going to take a picture to celebrate,” Marzila declares, making Haala groan.

Keith raises an eyebrow. “How?”

“Oh, you don’t know? The pads have cameras in them,” Marzila replies and points out a free table in the veranda. “Does the commander want to be in the picture too?”

Thace offers her a polite smile. “Only if you want me in it. It is your picture, after all.”

“I want a picture with all of you,” Keith cuts in before Marzila can say anything. “You're all my friends.”
Marzila inclines her head. “Then it's settled.”

Haala sighs, but when Marzila drags them all to a corner out of everyone's way he's the first to pull Keith to his side. Thace settles by Haala's other side, and Marzila presses against Keith.

She arranges her pad so that she can see them all in. “Big grin now,” she says, and Keith does as he's told seconds before Marzila snaps the picture.

There's no sound or a flash, so Keith follows the cues he gets from the others to know when he can drop his smile and pull away. “Can you send that to me?” He asks, and Marzila inclines her head without taking her eyes off her pad.

“I'm sending it to all of us,” she says, and taps her pad once more before pocketing it again and grinning at Keith.

Thace clears his throat. “I have to take a moment to check in with my team. If you'll excuse me.”

Haala and Marzila wave Thace off, and Keith nods. Thace bows his head and walks away, and Keith watches him go until he disappears around a corner.

“He's probably calling the department heads. We don't rank high enough to listen in,” Haala says, bringing Keith's attention to him.

“It's fine,” Keith replies, “if our food comes before he returns, do we start eating or do we wait for him?”

“We wait for a reasonable amount of time before starting,” Marzila says and nudges Keith and Haala until they move forward to the table she had spotted earlier.

To Keith's surprise the waiter that brings them drinks is a Galra, and Keith thanks him for it, getting a shocked look from the waiter and raised eyebrows from Haala and Marzila.

“What?” Keith frowns.

“He didn't grow up with us,” Haala hurries to say to the waiter, who relaxes and bows before disappearing to serve another table.

Marzila leans closer to Keith. “The waitstaff is not supposed to be seen.”

“Oh.” Keith chews the insides of his cheeks. “That doesn't sound nice.”

Haala shrugs. ”Talking to the kitchen staff on the ship is okay, and everyone there knows you grew up with outsiders anyways. But it's a matter of pride for the professional waitstaff to be able to serve their customers without being noticed. Acknowledging them is kind of insulting.”

Keith doesn't quite get it, but it's a part of the Galra culture so Keith doesn't argue. The Earth customs would be as strange to his friends as their customs are to him, and Keith isn't going to be the person to try to force his beliefs and traditions to someone.

“Can I ask you something?” Keith looks at Marzila. She inclines her head with a curious expression. “How did you end up training me?”

Marzila's eyebrow quirks up, and she shares a look with Haala. “I broke one of my student's arm in five places.”

Keith stills, his eyes widening slightly. Marzila shrugs. “I was deemed mentally unstable due to
trauma and my instructor license was revoked. I could barely believe it when the Emperor sent for me, even if kicking the ass of a single prisoner wasn't exactly a step up in the world.”

“What trauma?” Keith asks, deciding it was best to ignore Marzila's last comment. “If you don't mind telling me,” he adds quickly.

Marzila's smile falls, and her ears lower. “I told you I was a part of a special task force when we met, right?” Keith nods, unsure of where this is going. “Well, my team was called to a planet to get rid of a rebel group that was hidden somewhere in the city, and we went in hoping to deal with the rebels without bothering the civilians. I was a mission or two away from getting my own team to command, so my captain told me to take the lead.”

She sighs, her eyes downcast. “So we went in, I stayed behind to coordinate everyone, and everything was going fine. Then the rebels blew up the entire city block, and my whole team died, and I got this” — she motions at the left side of her face — “I was too dazed to do anything. I remember the civilians pulling me from the rubble and I remember the hospital staff not knowing what to do with a Galra. My leg was shattered by a piece of building and they couldn't fix it, but they were smart enough to call our healers to come and get me. I got fixed up and I picked a job even if I was told not to, but I had a teaching partner so all I had to do was fix the forms of our students and that didn't require much.”

“But you broke someone's arm,” Keith reminds her, earning a displeased look from Haala.

Marzila grimaces. “He was getting on my nerves. I kicked his ass and ruined his dominant arm, but the bones in my leg couldn't take it and it shattered again. The healers fixed it again but they told me I'd have to be careful even when walking, so I started saving for a prosthetic.”

Keith's eyebrows rise. “You would've cut off your leg?”

“For having a fully functional one? Yes. I would've gotten one for free if the therapists hadn't deemed me mentally unstable and unlikely to ever work in the military again. Well, that and the incident with the student. It revoked my right for full benefits.” Marzila takes a sip of her juice. “Agreeing to train you came with the benefit of having the druid’s help. They replaced the bone in my leg and now it works perfectly.”

“Is it weird if I say you're welcome?” Keith grimaces, but Marzila laughs.

“Thanks for saving my leg,” she says, the familiar easiness of her smile returning.

“I got stuck with you because I was on shift,” Haala cuts in. Keith snorts and Marzila giggles at him, and Haala sighs before focusing on his drink.

Thace returns before anyone can say anything else. “I apologize for that.”

Everyone waves him off.

Their food arrives moments later, and this time Keith knows not to acknowledge their waiter.

It takes Keith a little while to get used to spending Zarkon's money, but once he gets the hang of it, he buys himself a few shirts he's sure Zarkon won't like, some sweet and salty treats and candy, and
a small cube that flashes in bright colors when he shakes it just because it makes him smile. He's a little worried he won't be able to eat the treats fast enough before they spoil, but Thace assures him they can store them in the ship in a way that prevents spoiling.

They try out all the free tasters offered to them, and Keith buys them all soda like drinks they can carry around.

They are nearing the far end of the market when Keith remembers seeing a stand with animals nearby, and he asks Thace if it's okay for them to go see it.

“The Emperor will not be happy if you buy a pet,” Thace tells him, and Keith rolls his eyes.

“I just want to see them.” Keith's ears droop, and though Thace scowls at him, there's a smile tugging at his lips.

“Alright then.” Thace nods towards the direction where the animals are. “Lead the way.”

Haala and Marzila wander after them, a lot less interested in the animals than Keith. It's not a problem for Keith, there's no way they are going to be excited about the same things all the time, after all.

The smell and the sounds the animals make are the first thing Keith picks up on, and he hurries forward.

There are birds and rodents in spacious cages, and what looks like a cross between a lemur and a tortoise hanging by its tail from the ceiling of the stand. Keith smiles at it, and it screeches at him in return.

The sound sends a black and red ball of fluffy fur running, and Keith almost falls down when it hits his feet.

“Sorry about that,” comes a gruff voice from behind the counter. The alien running the stand pokes their hairless blue head into sight, peering at Keith with wide gray eyes. “She's a little skittish.”

Keith picks the fluffy animal up. She’s no bigger than a house cat, but she has an almost fox like look to her, and her large eyes make Keith think of a star sky. The red dots on her face form a beautiful pattern, and she has thin red stripes running across her back all the way to the three short, fluffy tails.

“They’re not for sale, but I can book you up if you're interested in one,” the owner of the stand says as he comes around his desk. He's not tall, almost less than half of Keith's height, and he's round and his toothless smile is friendly.

“Why don't you sell them?” Haala asks, keeping a safe distance from the animals.

“I'm just showing them off and educating people. If someone wants one of these I'll get them in touch with a good breeder,” the owner replies, his eyes fixed on Keith and the animal nibbling at his sleeve. “She likes Galra. You guys are practically the only ones she’ll willingly interact with.”

Keith smiles. The owner shoves his hands in his pockets. “She's from your planet, so maybe she's more comfortable with you guys.”

Keith looks down into the animal's eyes. “She's nice.”

Thace and the owner both laugh. Keith raises an eyebrow, and Thace shares a look with the seller.
“He didn't grow up with us,” Thace tells the owner before turning to Keith. “They might be nice as cubs, but they grow up to be some of the fiercest animals on our planet. If you can form a strong bond with them and they respect you, they will be lifelong companions and protect you with their lives. Otherwise they might try to kill you.”

The animal lets out a sound, like a small puppy that hasn't learned to bark yet. Keith rubs his thumb against her side, his ears lowering slightly.

“You can't keep it,” Thace reminds him.

“I know,” Keith replies. But maybe he could ask Zarkon about it. Maybe Zarkon would let him have a pet. “What kind of an animal is she?”

“Kizra,” Thace says, “from the Kriztara mountains. They have a habit of decorating their nests with the gemstones found there.”

“In case you want to look them up, you should know that the archaic term for the cubs is kito,” the owner says, and Keith’s widened eyes snap to him. “There are a lot of good books that were written a few decades ago and that’s what most people still call them.”

Keith looks down at the ball of fluff in his hands, and she yawns, letting out a soft mewl as she does so, and settles better in Keith’s arms. Keith clicks his tongue and the animal looks up to him, her bright, curious eyes blinking and her ears tilting from side to side.

This is what he reminds Zarkon of.

Keith sighs and offers the animal back to the owner. He accepts her with a smile, and Keith turns to Thace. “I think I’m ready to move on.”

Thace inclines his head, and when Keith glances past him, he sees Marzila and Haala have already moved to observe the paintings a nearby stand is selling. Keith and Thace join them as soon as they’ve said their goodbyes to the owner.

Marzila buys a painting Haala insists will clash with their decoration. Keith doesn't know what constitutes as good art in Galra eyes so he can’t say if the depiction of a bluish savannah and the three moons is good by those standards.

He supposes it's nice, though he keeps that to himself, if for no other reason than to keep himself from getting involved with the argument over Marzila's decoration skills.

“Let's check out the other half of the market,” Haala suggests after a while, giving up on convincing Marzila that the painting isn’t a good purchase, and Keith nods.

They still have over a quarter before they should head back, and Keith wants to buy something else that is solely his.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is another longer one, so you’ll have to wait until next week for that one. Plus there’s a new season coming and I need to do my Voltron bingo for that one.

Good news though! I did (quick and nowhere near perfect even on character design
level) sketches of Haala and Marzi while working on this chapter. Here! They're more idea stage sketches than anything, so they're not entirely accurate to this chapter, but I thought you guys might want to see them anyways.

i hope you liked this!
The sun hasn't begun to set when Zarkon calls for Keith to join him in the palace of the local ruler — a Czar of some kind, as Keith understands it.

Thace takes Keith to the gates of the palace and leaves him with the guards waiting for him there. The guards are tall and fit, and there seems to be not a single hair on their light gray skin. They have four large, dark eyes and thin lips that Keith discovers soon hide rows of sharp teeth. Their golden clothes are styled like armor, and it’s the only thing that makes them seem guard like.

The guards lead Keith through the bright garden overflowing with flowers, and up the yellow marble steps of the palace, and then through the pastel colored corridors all the way to the third floor, where they leave Keith by a set of pale blue doors.

Keith knocks before entering, his ears lowered but his tail flicking with curiosity.

Keith isn’t surprised to find he’s entered a bedroom, but it's more muted than the rest of the Palace and he wasn’t expecting that. The colors there are deeper and more earth like, and the round bed with it's many pillows looks almost too soft.

Since he can't see Zarkon anywhere, Keith heads to the balcony doors to see if Zarkon is there, or if he needs to wait for him to join him.

The sight from the balcony is of the lush garden, and though it's beautiful, it's not the ideal sight for Keith. He's not sure what would be, but it's not a brightly colored garden.

Zarkon is there, sitting on a chair he has pulled from under the small corner table, enjoying the warmth of the sun.

Keith's breath catches in his throat for a second. The setting sun casts Zarkon in warm light, and though he doesn't open his eyes or acknowledge Keith's presence in any way Keith knows he’s not doing it out of malice. He's relaxed, more relaxed than Keith thinks he's ever seen him, and in Keith's opinion it's a good look on him.

A soft smile spreads on Keith's lips and he makes his way to Zarkon. He'd pull up a chair of his own, but it doesn't seem necessary. Instead he stands by Zarkon's side and leans down to press his
nose against his cheek, enjoying the hot warmth of it.

Zarkon tilts his head to give Keith a better angle and smiles. “Did you enjoy your time today?”


“Then why were you distressed earlier?”

Keith sighs. He supposes he shouldn't be surprised. “It was nothing. There were these people that were less than nice to me because I'm Galra. It just threw me off the loop for a while. I'm fine now so don't worry; it's not the first time someone’s been mean to me.”

Zarkon hums, and falls silent for a moment. “We are expected at the night feast today. I have sent for a proper outfit for you. In the meantime I would suggest you shower and rest.”

Keith pulls back. “What's a night feast?”

“A local custom,” Zarkon replies, finally opening his eyes and looking at Keith. “We will be joining the other guests here. It is a meal held after the sun sets and the moon rises.”

Keith isn't thrilled about the idea of sharing a meal with what he expects to be dignitaries and the likes, and he'd argue with Zarkon if he thought it would do him any good. But he knows better. So instead of arguing he heads back to the room and locates the door to the bathroom. He takes a quick but thorough shower, and once he's dried up he forgoes dressing and heads to the bed, intending to heed Zarkon's advice about resting up.

Keith wakes up when Zarkon tugs at his tail. “Your clothes are here.”

Keith groans and buries his face deeper into the cushions for a moment before pushing himself up. He rubs his eyes and yawns, and when his gaze drifts to the balcony windows he sees the sky is tinted orange and green with the setting sun.

He glances at Zarkon, and he has to do a double take at the clothes he's wearing.

It's more of an outfit, really, black with deep purple and silver details, and the underside of Zarkon's cape — the cape that seems to be a part of the high collar that looks like it's sewn around Zarkon's neck — is a shade lighter purple than the other side of it. The thick black fabric of the cape is decorated with simplistic but elegant stitching, and it drapes over Zarkon's shoulders almost rigidly. Keith wouldn't be surprised if it limited his movements in some way.

His coat is fitted perfectly, and it bears a striking resemblance to Galra armor, down to the the metallic looking sleeves that start at his elbows and end right before his knuckles on the back of his hands. The silver detailing of his knee high boots is intricate, and Keith wonders if they are as uncomfortable to wear as they seem.

“I require you to cooperate without complaining,” Zarkon starts, snapping Keith's attention to his face. “The easier you follow directions, the more time I have to explain the finer points of dining with high society to you.”

Keith frowns. “Okay?”
Zarkon inclines his head, and taps on his pad a few times. After a few seconds they hear a knock on the doors, and Keith pulls the closest pillow to cover himself while Zarkon goes to open the doors. He lets in four Galra, and Keith's ears flatten as he glares at Zarkon. His tail would swing violently if he wasn't sitting on it.

“They are going to help you dress,” Zarkon explains.

“I can dress myself,” Keith replies, his voice cracking a little.

Zarkon stares at him with an unreadable expression. “You are going to be dining with leaders of entire nations. I have gone to great lengths to arrange for your seat at the table, and I expect you to meet the standards of such an event, as I have assured our host you can do. You are going to accept their assistance.”

Keith's ears flatten, but he knows there's no point in arguing with Zarkon when he's using that particular tone of voice. “Can I at least put my underwear on before they turn me into a barbie?”

“I do not know what that is.” Zarkon glances at the Galra, “but you may put your underwear on if that is what it takes to get you to do as you are told.”

Zarkon waves the Galra to set up their shop by the balcony windows, taking the dress bag from them as they pass. Zarkon pulls a pair of underwear for Keith from the bag, and covers Keith with his cape, an annoyingly indulgent smile on his lips. Keith narrows his eyes at him, but scoots off the bed and accepts the offered underwear.

The fabric is thin and soft on Keith's skin, and it's a near perfect match for his skin tone.

Zarkon shows him to the Galra team before walking out of the door, saying something about getting himself a glass of wine.

Keith doesn't know how to feel about the poking and prodding of the Galra, and he doesn't understand why he needs a physical examination to be dressed.

“Your markings are curious; they are not very Galran,” the tall Galra with a bright, short fur who Keith thinks is the leader of the team says, “what are you mixed with?”

“Oh.. My father was human,” Keith replies.

The Galra hums, his brow creasing. “And these markings are typical for that race?”

Keith laughs. “No. Humans don't have any markings.”

All four of the Galra stop.

“Then why do you have those?” One of them asks, and Keith frowns at her over his shoulder.

“I don't know.”

The Galra share a puzzled look among themselves, but they don't say anything more about it. Keith doesn’t bother telling them that it may just be human genetics mixing with Galra genetics creating something new, like Kiira thought.

“Can I ask your names?” Keith asks, hoping he'll be more comfortable with the attention if he can put names to the faces.

“I'm Rizo,” the leader of the group says. “That's Aza” — he points at the shortest of the team, a
furless woman with a short white hair and painted markings on her face. “Vrinda”— he points at the thick furred woman with short, stubby ears— “and that is Indrak.” The last of the group, a thin and tall man with dark hair bows.

Keith nods. “I'm Keith. If you didn't know.”

“We know,” Rizo assures him.

The Galra don't talk to Keith while they rummage through their things, and Keith tries to see what they are doing, but to no avail. Eventually they return to Keith and Aza shows him a white jar. It doesn't worry Keith as much as the brush like tools she's holding.

“What's that?” Keith looks from the jar to Aza's face.

“Paint,” she replies cheerfully. “Don't worry, it doesn't stick to textiles,” she adds when Keith's face falls.

“Can we skip that?”

Rizo and Aza exchange looks while Vrinda and Indrak return to going through their things.

Keith is about to ask them why he'd need the paint anyways when Zarkon returns with his wine. Keith's ears droop, and Zarkon doesn't miss it. “Is he giving you trouble already?” He asks Rizo, who seems uncomfortable to answer.

“I don't need to be decorated,” Keith says, taking the issue from Rizo's hands. “I mean, paint? That's a little over the top, don't you think?”

A minute frown appears on Zarkon's face, and Rizo and his team are suddenly busy with their tools. “You agreed to this,” Zarkon reminds Keith.

“No, I agreed to come to a dinner. You said nothing about paint,” Keith retorts.

Zarkon walks up to Keith, his movements dangerously calm. “You are accompanying me to a meal with the high society of this region of space. I expect you to look the part. I want you dressed in an appropriate way for someone accompanying me. The paint is a part of an old, traditional Galran outfit I want you to wear today.”

“But still.” Keith knows there's no point in arguing, but he can't help it.

Zarkon grabs his jaw, his hold commanding but not tight. “It is to show the others that you are with me, and that I hold you in high regard. And that I do not want anyone touching you.”

Keith's lips quirk up against his will, even as he lets his discomfort seep through the bond. “You're a possessive ass, you know?”

“If you say so,” Zarkon replies and offers Keith a soft smile. “Now stop fighting and do as you are told.”

Keith sighs and nods. He's not going to get out of it, and there's no point in starting a fight that will only leave them both upset.

Zarkon studies Keith for a moment longer before letting go of his jaw and going to sit on the edge of the bed.

Keith turns his attention from him to Aza, and spreads his arms in defeat. “Let's do this, then.”
She inclines her head and pulls on gloves — along with the rest of her team — before hurrying to Keith. She ties his hair in a loose bun before applying the pearly purple paint on Keith's skin until he's covered in it. Indrak paints silver markings on Keith's skin, starting by covering his natural markings, and then extending them in a fitting design across his arms and legs, and even his back and front, and up his neck and face. Indrak doesn't go overboard with the decorations, but Keith still thinks it's too much. Especially when he adds what Keith can only call eyeliner around his eyes.

Vrinda starts working on Keith's hair as soon as Aza and Indrak are not in her way, brushing it and putting products on it until Keith's scalp stings from the constant tugging. Rizo focuses on Keith's claws, sharpening and painting them in dark glimmering black.

Once they're done with his appearance, Rizo gets the clothes Keith will wear.

Indrak has Keith put on a black pair of think, glimmering stockings, and Aza helps Keith into a pair of slightly heeled boots. Then Vrinda and Rizo start layering wrap skirts that never reach his knees with asymmetrical hems and colors that compliment Zarkon's outfit on Keith.

The last piece of clothing they put on Keith is a black backless dress with such fine fabric Keith worries he'll ruin it if he so much as brushes his hands against it. Rizo and Aza put it on Keith, guiding his arms and head where they need them to be. The collar is snug, but not too tight, and the short sleeves end just an inch over Keith's shoulders.

The silver markings on Keith's skin show faintly through the black fabric.

Keith pouts at Zarkon while Aza and Indrak put a see through, deep purple, skin tight sleeve on his left arm, starting right above his elbow and ending with a ring like hoop looping around his middle finger.

To Keith's horror the next step in his dressing is jewelry. He opens his mouth to protest, but a single look from Zarkon silences him.

The jewelry consists of a complex dark choker with opal shaped glimmering purplish gems, a chained sleeve like ornament decorated with the same gems and rings that Aza puts on his right hand, and a heavy bracelet on his left wrist.

They even add a wide silver bracelet on Keith's tail, and clip on earrings that are just a little too heavy on Keith's ears.

Once they are done, they bow at Zarkon and pack their things before walking out of the doors without another word.

Keith glares at Zarkon who studies him over the rim of his wine glass. Keith doesn't miss the smug smile on his face.

"Satisfied?" He spreads his arms. "I feel stupid."

"You look beautiful," Zarkon replies. "You will be glad for the paint later on."

"I doubt it." Keith grimaces and makes his way to the tall mirror at the other end of the room to get a better look at himself.

While he will admit that the clothes don't look bad, and they probably look even better next to Zarkon, he barely recognizes himself. Half of his hair is pulled up and tied with who knows what so that, though his hair falls freely, it stays brushed back. Even his bangs have been pulled off his
face. Keith tilts his head, only then spotting the thin, loose braid that keeps his hair from falling to his face.

When Zarkon joins Keith by the mirror he's carrying a hexagon box, and he makes Keith hold it while he opens the lid. Inside the box lies a dark, reddish purple tiara like ornament with silver highlights and glimmering purple gemstones decorating it, and the design of the tiara is strikingly similar to the crown Zarkon wears.

Zarkon doesn't offer Keith any explanation as to why he has it, and Keith is too dumbfounded to ask. Zarkon handles the tiara with tender care when he takes it out of the box and settles it on Keith's head while Keith stares at him through the mirror.

Keith's eyes widen, and he's pretty sure the only thing keeping him from bolting is his shock at having a tiara on his head. Zarkon seems unconcerned with Keith's emotional state as he adjusts the tiara and fastens it on Keith's head with pins.

“I trust you will not lose this,” Zarkon says, glancing at Keith's face through the mirror. “It belonged to my mother.”

Keith lets out a strangled noise. “I can't wear it.”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

Keith's eyebrows shoot up. “What if I break it? I'm kind of scared to even move with this on my head!”

Zarkon snorts. “It has survived for thousands of years, I doubt you will be able to break it.”

“You're just making it worse.” Keith's voice cracks a little, much to his displeasure.

Zarkon tilts his head. “It is important that you understand the significance of the tiara, and wear it with the dignity it deserves. It was forged for the first Queen Emperor who united the warring clans and brought peace to our people. It has been in my family ever since.”

Keith frowns and glances at the imposing tiara resting on his head.

“It is one of the only surviving pieces of my family heritage. It would mean a lot to me if you were to do me the honor of wearing it, as it is not meant to be in a box.” There's something in Zarkon's voice that keeps Keith from arguing.

It's just for one night. He can live with that. Even if he feels unworthy of it.

“Stand straight,” Zarkon says, “imagine there is a string on top of your head pulling you up.”

Keith follows the instructions, standing as straight as he can.

“Lower your chin,” Zarkon instructs. “And relax your shoulders.”

Keith shakes his shoulders minutely to get the tension out of them.

“Do not clench your jaw,” Zarkon continues, and Keith opens his mouth as wide as he can before taking good care of not biting his teeth together. “And stop fidgeting.”

Keith freezes, his hands fisted by his sides.

“When in doubt, you should loosely clasp your hands either in front or behind you,” Zarkon says.
Keith nods and clasps his hands in front of himself, and Zarkon tilts his head as he studies Keith through the mirror. “Do not look so concerned. You should appear calm and confident.”

Keith nods again, and does his best to calm down. He doubts he can pull confidence off, but he thinks he can do calm.

Zarkon looks Keith up and down before kneeling and adjusting Keith’s legs to his satisfaction.

“Try not to engage too much with any discussion. I know you have your opinions, but these people are not going to share nor appreciate them. Answer the questions presented to you politely and shortly. If you are uncomfortable with something, I expect you to let me know. I will keep our bond open for the evening.” Zarkon stands and studies Keith with a critical eye. “You will be fine.”

“I’ve never been good with social gatherings,” Keith replies.

Zarkon inclines his head. “I understand that, but if you wish to continue our relationship, this will be something expected of you.”

Keith sighs. “Is this something you do regularly?”

“No. And I will, of course, arrange for a tutor in case we decide to pursue a more serious relationship. This feast is as informal as they come, so you do not need to be as well prepared.” Zarkon offers him a reassuring smile.

After one last look at Keith, Zarkon heads back to sit on the edge of the bed. “I will instruct you on the proper etiquette now.”

Keith takes one last glance at himself before joining Zarkon on the bed.

The dinner is as imposing as Keith had feared it would be.

The seven leaders with their companions, one of whom has two of them, have places assigned to them in what Keith suspects is a carefully planned formation around a large octagon table. Zarkon had explained that the table is built with self sealing pieces so that everyone has their own side and no one is at the head of the table.

The Czar of the Mrie is to join them soon, and Keith is to present himself to him and offer him the small gift Zarkon had given him. Apparently it’s something every one of the companions have done at some time or another. Zarkon had said it’s because the Czar is very particular about the people he allows to dine at his table, but not for the same reasons Zarkon is particular about his dinner company.

Keith reminds himself several times of everything Zarkon had told him, and he takes full advantage of Zarkon’s advice for him to keep quiet and stay by his side. He even makes a point of presenting himself as Zarkon had taught him.

Not unsurprisingly, Keith becomes an immediate focus of the attention, but Zarkon stays between him and everyone else and eventually almost starts a fight when he implies that the prince consort of the Yvinian Queen is not wearing the latest fashion in their respective planet.
Keith doesn't know what the fashion in the Yvinian home planet is, but he thinks it can't be any worse than the neon bright yellow colors the wiry humanoids with stretched out limbs and wooden skin are wearing. Zarkon's comment drives the attention from Keith to the more gossipy topics, and Keith is fine with that.

The conversation flows easily, but Keith tunes it out for the most part. It's not like he has anything to contribute.

When the Czar appears the room falls silent, and everyone but Zarkon bows. The Czar is the one to bow Zarkon, and Zarkon offers him a polite nod of his head in acknowledgment of it. Zarkon waves Keith forward, sending his reassurances through their bond.

Keith knows what he's supposed to do, Zarkon had made sure of it, but his heart still hammers in his chest so fast he fears it will give out.

He steps forward, his head respectfully lowered, and half curtsies, half kneels as he offers the gift to the Czar. Zarkon had been very clear that he was not to meet the Czar’s eyes or say a word unless spoken to until the Czar approved of his presence.

The Czar takes the gift and hands it to his servants without opening it. He waves Keith to stand, and Keith does the best he can to adopt the stance Zarkon had taught him.

The Czar circles Keith, clicking his tongue in a fastening pace as he goes. Keith doesn't know what it means, but Zarkon's mind pressed against his is a reassuring presence, and he clings to that with all he has. The Czar stops inches in front of Keith, and the impatient air of him makes Keith glance up. The Czar scrunches his face in what could be considered a smile.

The Czar widens his eyes. “Your name?”

“Keith.”

“That's not a very Galran name?” The Czar turns to Zarkon, his gray skin wrinkling, almost disappearing under his dome like crown as he widens all of his four eyes.

“He did not grow up with us,” Zarkon replies, “but he is one of us, nonetheless.”

There's a warning in his voice than no one in the room misses. The Czar lets out a shrill whine, and his head bobbles from side to side. “I suppose he fits.”

Zarkon inclines his head and waves Keith back to his side.

The Czar sits by the table, and the rest of them follow. Keith takes his cues from Zarkon, but also from the other companions. They all chat pleasantly while the waitstaff brings their food and drinks, and since no one else acknowledges the staff, Keith doesn't do so either.

The food looks delicious and smells even better, and Keith has a hard time not picking up his spork before everyone else does.

As Zarkon had advised Keith, he focuses on enjoying the food and ignores the conversation flowing around him. A glance at the other companions assures him that they are doing the same.

It isn't until the Minister of Myy, a small eyed, large eared, pale man with a skin that looks a little too tight and teeth that barely fit his mouth brings up Voltron that Keith's attention zeroes in on the conversation around them. Zarkon sends a warning through their bond, even as he sips his wine with a politely interested smile on his lips.
“I’m just wondering how hard it is to take out one rebel cell?” The Minister asks.

“They have a very powerful weapon,” The Yvinian Queen cuts in.

The Minister waves her off. “But they're such a menace. Surely the Galra Empire should able to do something about them?”

“The issue has my full attention,” Zarkon replies, his voice and expression denying none of the tension Keith feels trickling through their bond.

“Didn't they destroy your Command Center?” The Minister insists.

The tension in the bond increases so fast Keith has to take a moment to adjust to it. A single glance at Zarkon tells Keith his pokerface hasn't failed yet, and Keith fears he might be the only person in the room aware of how little Zarkon likes the topic.

“It is of no consequence,” Zarkon says, and takes a sip of his wine. “We do not rely on a single command post to be able to function at maximum efficiency.”

“But that is quite a blow against you, isn't it?” The Minister tilts his head, and Keith fears the bond is going to snap from the tension leaking from Zarkon.

Keith presses against Zarkon through the bond, and pushes his knife against the plate with as much force as he can without being obvious, his teeth grating at the sound it makes.

Zarkon freezes but he doesn't flinch, exactly, but he's the only one not to outwardly react to the sound.

The whole room falls silent, all eyes zeroing Keith, who offers them all a sheepish smile. “Sorry.”

The bond fills with fond amusement and a hint of gratefulness, and Keith looks down to hide his smile.

A silence falls on the table for a moment, then Ri'ix, the only person to introduce themselves by name to Keith, as was part of her race's customs, clears her throat. The colorful scales of her skin turn into a deep green, and she ruffles her spike like hair. “I was wondering if you intend to do something about the raiders in the Xagi section of our space?”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything.

Ri'ix's spikes bristle and she turns bluish gray. “I understand it's in the outer lines of the Empire, and that it probably isn't important for you to have a presence there, but we have a newly established colony on one of the planets, and we haven't been able to take the supplies, food, and medicine they need to survive since your forces abandoned your station there.”

Zarkon takes a sip of his wine. “I was unaware there were any raiders left in that section.”

“They returned once you drew your forces,” Ri'ix replies. “I cannot be sure if it's true, but apparently they are following Voltron to know where it's safe for them to return.”

Keith stills.

“I will make sure that your colony is seen to first thing tomorrow,” Zarkon promises, and Ri'ix turns a lovely shade of lilac.

“It's horrid, what that monstrosity of a machine is doing,” the Czar says as he waves a servant to
bring him another serving of fluorescent blue jelly. “I wager they are doing it on purpose.”

“They don't know about the raiders,” Keith cuts in before he can think better of it.

The silence that falls is so thick it's almost suffocating. Keith swallows and grips his spork a little tighter. “I mean, from what I understand they don't have a problem with you, just the Galra. They aren't trying to cause you any harm.” He glances at Zarkon, but gets no support from him. “It's just... I think it's worth considering.”

“Ignorance is not an excuse,” the Czar says, breaking the silence of the room. “They are still responsible for the harm they have caused, don't you think?”

Keith swallows. “Yes.”

Zarkon seems far too interested in his wine, and Keith realizes he'll have to dig himself out of the hole he put himself in.

He'll just have to remember to keep his past with Voltron a secret. Who knows what would happen if he'd let it slip. “From a tactical point of view,” he starts, setting his spork down and sitting a little straighter, “Voltron's unwillingness to harm non-Galrans could be used to our advantage.”

A quiet, agreeing murmur travels across the table.

Keith grows bolder at it. “If they were aware of the damage they're doing, then maybe they'd stop.”

“That's an interesting idea,” The Minister says. “But it doesn't change the damage they have already done, and the fact that they have to pay for it.”

“They're teenagers,” Keith replies.

“And that excuses their actions?” The Minister shoots back.

“You must understand,” Zarkon cuts in, “that Keith is approaching the issue from a very Galran perspective. We do not approve of sending children to a battlefield, and while we will treat Voltron as any enemy that is fully aware of their actions, Keith is not entirely wrong. They are not adults, and thus they may not understand the full consequences of their actions. It is unfortunate that we must treat them as adults.”

No one argues with Zarkon. Keith's tail thuds quietly against the chair of his leg.

A servant fills Zarkon's glass again. “It is such a horrendous thing, to send a child to a battlefield where they have no place in. I regret that I cannot treat them as the children they are.”

It's not that Keith is surprised by Zarkon's words, it's the sincerity of his voice that makes him stop for a second.

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By the time Keith and Zarkon head back to their room it's well past midnight, and Keith is sure Zarkon has had too many glasses of the sugary wine. Keith isn't exactly sober himself, but he took good care to not get too drunk. He wasn't keen on testing how good his balance would be if he did in front of all the dignitaries.

Zarkon on the other hand is way past sober, though he does a remarkable job at hiding it. Keith feels it through the bond, though, and he sees it in the unusual sway of Zarkon's walk, even if he continues to move in a nigh perfect straight line.

“If we ignore your little outburst, you did rather well,” Zarkon says, his ears twitching up and a smile appearing on his lips.

“Thanks.”

They take the the stairway up, and Keith laughs at Zarkon when he complains about it.

“Stairs are a useless invention,” Zarkon insists. “An elevator does the same job.”

“Not everyone has elevators,” Keith replies.

“They are easier to make than stairs. All you need is some rope and a flat board.” Zarkon stops, glaring at the stairs for a moment before meeting Keith's eyes. “If I could I would have the inventor of these things found and publicly executed.”

Keith snorts and shakes his head before continuing on his way. Zarkon follows him, not outwardly grumbling, but Keith can practically hear his internal monologue through their bond. It makes him smile, and warmth that he takes for genuine affection for a moment bubbles inside him.

He blames it on the wine muddling his mind.

They get to their room without an incident, and Keith sighs in relief as he kicks off his boots and slumps on the edge of the bed.

His feet ache and he's tired, but watching Zarkon wander around the room with an unusual lack of purpose is amusing enough to put a smile on his face.

Keith strips his stockings off as well. He barely notices Zarkon coming to a halt a few feet from him, but he feels Zarkon's eyes on him. “Do you want something?”

“You should take the rest off too,” Zarkon replies, and Keith barks a laugh as he looks up and smiles at Zarkon, who is doing his best to look nonchalant.

“Smooth.” Keith shakes his head, and bites his lip, eyeing Zarkon as he considers his options. He doesn't have to, but he kicks off his stockings and underwear, and scoots up the bed until he's in the middle of it, and starts unfastening the choker.

“Not that,” Zarkon says, and Keith stills. “Just the clothes.”

Keith raises an eyebrow at Zarkon, but decides to indulge him nonetheless. There's no harm in it, and Zarkon has already seen Keith without his clothes. And if Keith is honest, it's kind of exhilarating to be the center of Zarkon's unwavering attention. Even if the tiara feels suddenly heavy on his head.
It takes Keith a little effort to get the dress off without taking off the choker as well, but he manages it somehow, and he tosses the dress to the floor.

Zarkon circles the bed, prowling like a predator ready to pounce his prey. Keith's ears twitch in excitement, and his tail thumps against the covers.

Keith strips the skirts off one by one, his heart beating a little faster with each layer.

When he sheds the last layer Keith is sure Zarkon can hear his heartbeat as well. He continues to circle Keith, and Keith does his best to stay still under the sharp gaze. He can't help but glance over his shoulder a few times, his breath catching in his throat at the heat in Zarkon's eyes.

Finally, Zarkon stops in front of Keith, and they stare at each other in loaded silence. Keith shifts, and Zarkon tracks the minute movement.

Desire trickles through the bond and Keith swallows, heat rushing to his stomach. He spreads his legs just a little without thinking. The soft, barely audible growl Zarkon lets out makes Keith harden, and he doesn't try to fight the fast growing arousal in him.

Without hurrying, Zarkon unclasps his cape and lets it fall to the ground. Keith clenches the sheets in his hands, barely remembering to be careful not to tear them with his sharpened claws.

Zarkon smiles, the sweetness of it dangerous with the hunger in his eyes, and he meanders to the bed.

Keith's tail thumps against the bed and he lets out a shaky breath, the anticipation making him shiver. Zarkon's smile gets a mischievous hint to it, and without a warning, he crawls up the bed to Keith.

While Zarkon comes closer, Keith scoots back, giggling, and when Zarkon reaches him Keith spreads his legs to make room for him. Zarkon stops so close their noses almost touch. Keith licks his lips, glancing down even though he knows he's not going to get a kiss.

Zarkon seems more interested in just looking at Keith, and though the attention is not something Keith objects to, it gets old fast. "You could touch me."

Zarkon hums and tilts his head. "I could."

"Then why don't you?" Keith tilts his head and smiles. Zarkon's brow creases, and he almost brushes his knuckles against Keith's cheek.

*The paint.* Keith huffs, but he lets Zarkon ogle him as much as he wants. To give him a better view, Keith leans back, planting his hands on the bed for support.

Eventually Zarkon brushes his fingers softly against Keith's bicep, the pearly paint turning into glimmering silver, and the silver paint shifting into deep, rich shimmery purple.

Keith sighs and tilts his back back, baring his neck to Zarkon, who ignores the invitation in favor of trailing his hands down Keith's sides, then up his back until he can grip Keith's hair and pull his head further back. Keith's breath catches in his throat, and he tilts his head as far as he can.

Zarkon's breath is hot on Keith's neck, and Keith shivers, expecting the bite but still hissing when Zarkon sinks his teeth so deep into Keith's skin that Keith is sure he's drawing blood. It does nothing to quell his growing arousal, and he feels Zarkon's desire grow through the bond.
He can practically taste the paint on his own skin.

Keith moans and throws his arms around Zarkon's shoulders. He claws at his back and the thick fabric of his clothes, not really caring if he damages them.

There's too much clothing.

It's not fair. Keith is naked and Zarkon isn't and Keith isn't going to let that slide.

He searches for the seam that will let him undo Zarkon's coat, growling when he can't find it immediately. Zarkon chuckles against his neck before pulling away. He holds Keith up with one arm wrapped around his middle while he shows the right seam to Keith, who doesn't waste a second before tearing at it.

With a little effort and more force than he probably should use, Keith gets the coat undone. Zarkon shrugs it off with more ease than he has any right, and Keith tears at his shirt. "Too many layers."

Zarkon laughs. "I get cold."

"Get this off," Keith orders, and though Zarkon huffs he does what Keith wants. He lets go of Keith without a warning, and Keith falls on the bed with a huff, and he stays there, enjoying the view of Zarkon pulling the shirt off.

The realization that he's genuinely attracted to Zarkon hits Keith out of nowhere. He stares up at Zarkon while he shakes the shirt off, and he wants to touch and learn every inch of the exposed skin. He wants to know if the darker, scale like parts are as hard on Zarkon's shoulders as it is on his forehead.

There's nothing stopping Keith from finding out, and he's had enough to drink to not care if he shouldn't. He pushes himself up, breathing in the scent of Zarkon, and glances up at his almost stunned expression. Keith smirks and runs his hands up Zarkon's arms.

He memorizes the feel of it. Soft skin followed by stiff but not as hard scales as Keith expected. Keith bites his tongue and runs his hands along Zarkon's shoulders, then down his chest, the jewelry on his hands catching on the scales every now and again. His eyes linger on the faded scars on Zarkon's skin. He wonders briefly about their origin, but decides he'll ask about it some other time.

Zarkon purrs, the low vibration of it reverberating through Keith, and now that Keith can truly hear it he smiles. His ears flick, and his tail wraps around Zarkon's leg, and Keith presses his hand above Zarkon's heart, a little lower and more to the left than Keith is used to, even if it's where his own heart is now too.

He doesn't dare look up when he runs his hands down Zarkon's sides. Keith swallows and presses a kiss on top of Zarkon's heart. He feels the way Zarkon's pulse quickens just for a second before calming down again.

It's still encouraging, and Keith drags his claws along Zarkon's sides and gently bites the spot right below the one he kissed. Zarkon cups the back of Keith's head to keep him still, and Keith smiles against Zarkon's chest before licking the spot he just bit.

Zarkon's hold on his hair tightens, and Keith grins. He trails the seam of Zarkon's pants, but despite the alcohol in his system he hesitates.

Zarkon pets his head. "You're... We do not have to rush this. Take your time."
Keith nods and wraps his arms around Zarkon's middle, running his fingers along the slightly raised spine. More plated than scaly, and Keith huffs a laugh. It's almost like Zarkon has an exoskeleton.

“What?” Zarkon pulls Keith away by his hair, and Keith grins at him.

“You're different,” he replies. Zarkon raises an eyebrow.

“From what I'm used to,” Keith clarifies. “I'm not complaining.”

Zarkon smiles, and before Keith knows what's happening he's pushed to the bed and Zarkon is on top of him, kissing and biting and running his hands across Keith's skin. Keith moans and lets his head thud against the covers.

Little by little Zarkon makes his way down Keith's body. He's a little too rough, but Keith doesn't mind. His mind buzzes from the wine and Zarkon's touch, nulling any concerns and objections he may have usually had.

Zarkon leaves a mark on Keith's hip, and mouths his way down Keith's thigh.

Keith groans, gripping the covers tighter for a second before grabbing Zarkon's shoulder. Zarkon grins against his thigh, and bites down hard enough to make Keith hiss and pull back. Zarkon glances at his face, raising an eyebrow, and Keith kneels his shoulder gently. “Mind your teeth.”

“I will try,” Zarkon replies. Keith eyes him for a moment longer before letting Zarkon have his leg back.

Keith slumps back on the covers with a sigh.

He should tell Zarkon to stop. He's drunk, and Keith isn't exactly sober either. They shouldn't be doing this, not now. They should wait until the alcohol has faded from their systems.

Keith groans and nudges Zarkon, encouraging his to move where Keith wants him.

Zarkon takes his time, but Keith gets him where he wants, and he gasps when heat engulfs his length.

It's too good and too much and Keith claws at Zarkon's shoulders to get more of it. Zarkon gives Keith what he wants.

Zarkon presses against their bond, and Keith lets his consciousness overwhelm him.

Keith isn't sure where he ends and Zarkon begins. He can practically taste himself, he can feel the weight of himself on Zarkon’s tongue just as well as he can feel Zarkon pulling back to suck the tip of Keith’s dick. Keith sighs and lets himself slip further into the bond and get lost in it.

It doesn't occur to Keith to warn Zarkon about his orgasm, but he doesn't have to. Zarkon pulls away with a wet pop seconds before warm stickiness hits Keith's stomach. Keith muffles his scream in his hands and slumps on the bed, barely registering Zarkon moving up his body, kissing and biting him every now and again.

Keith doesn't care.

He absently puts an arm around Zarkon's shoulders when he reaches Keith's neck, and sighs at the gentle nibble Zarkon gives his ear.
When Zarkon moves from Keith's ear to bite his shoulder, Keith only hisses at the pain and trusts Zarkon to not hurt him more than he can handle.

Maybe he shouldn't. Zarkon isn't sober, and the small voice in the back of Keith's head tells him that he should quit while he's ahead. They can continue this in the morning if they want to.

Keith lets Zarkon yank him down and onto his lap, and he lets Zarkon press and grind against him, and grip his hips hard enough to bruise. It's nice and Keith wants to go again, and he's buzzed enough to not care about the fact that Zarkon isn't sober either.

Or he is until he's sure Zarkon's claws dig so deep into his skin that they draw blood.

They shouldn't be doing this. They shouldn't be doing any of this.

“Stop.” Keith pushes at Zarkon's chest, his voice barely above a whisper.

A cold chill runs through Keith when Zarkon ignores him, and he pushes against Zarkon more intently. “No. Stop.”

Zarkon growls and pulls back, his ears flattening and an annoyed frown on his face. Keith lowers his ears in response, his tail untangling from Zarkon's thigh, and he crosses his arms on his chest.

Maybe he's overreacting.

Before Keith can decide if he should let Zarkon continue, Zarkon pushes himself off Keith and turns his back on him, the set of his shoulders tight. Keith swallows and fixes his eyes on the covers, his tail thumping anxiously against the bed. “I —”

“You should go shower,” Zarkon says, his voice betraying none of his emotions. Keith flinches, but scurries towards the bathroom as fast as he can.

He freezes in front of the mirror, his eyes widening at the sight of the messed up paint and the bruises Zarkon has left on his body. There's a thin trickle of blood running down his left thigh from where Zarkon’s claws had pierced his skin, but Keith doesn't stop to think about what could have happened if he hadn't called things off.

Upset Zarkon is better than injured Keith, and come morning, Zarkon will agree with it, Keith is sure of it.

Keith isn't sure what he's supposed to do with the tiara, so he leaves it at the most secure spot in the bathroom he can find, which turns out to be a shelf rather than the small vanity. He leaves the rest of his jewelry by its side, and takes a thorough but quick, chilly shower. He could get the water warmer, but he doesn't feel like tampering with the controls.

After toweling himself dry, Keith returns to the other room. Zarkon is already curled under the covers, his back turned to Keith.

Keith sighs and crawls on the bed, his ears twitching down as he tries to decide if he should bother Zarkon or let him sleep. In the end Keith decides he'll sleep better if he explains himself to Zarkon, and he clears his throat. When he gets no response he scoots closer to Zarkon and pokes his shoulder.

Zarkon continues to ignore him, and Keith frowns before leaning over Zarkon's shoulder. “Hey.”

Zarkon grumbles, but opens his eyes and glares at Keith.
“I didn't mean to upset you,” Keith starts. “It's just that— ”

“You do not have to explain yourself,” Zarkon cuts in, his voice tired but sincere.

“But I do,” Keith counters.

Zarkon sighs and pushes himself up. “I do not require a reason from you.”

“Well I have one.” Keith leans his forehead on Zarkon's shoulder. “We're not exactly sober. I just don't feel like we should be having sex right now. We can try again in the morning if you want.”

Zarkon huffs, a soft smile on his lips. “I am not angry with you.” Keith raises a skeptical eyebrow. Zarkon shrugs the shoulder Keith isn't leaning on and tilts his head. “I should have had better control.”

Keith looks up at Zarkon, his eyes wide. He was sure Zarkon would be angry.

Zarkon brushes his knuckles over Keith's cheek. “You were beautiful today.”

“I'll let you paint me again some time if you want,” Keith offers.

Zarkon smiles. “I would like that.”

Keith can't help but laugh, from amusement or from the wave of affection that hits him, he doesn't know.

Zarkon smirks and shoves Keith down on the bed. “Go to sleep,” he orders, and curls around Keith, nuzzling his damp hair before settling down.

Keith nods and presses as close to him as he can, a soft purr like sound resonating in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter comes when I have time to edit it, since I'm gonna be busy next week and I don't want to make promises that I may or may not be able to keep.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

I'm kinda proud of myself for getting this out this week. I wasn't sure I was gonna make it, but I did. Yay me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zarkon is too busy to do more than wave Keith away come morning, and though Keith is a little upset he's not getting morning sex, he's also relieved. His body is sore from all the bruises from the night before and he's happy to heal himself a little before trying again.

“You should go spend the day with your friends. We have a few quarters before we must return to our ship,” Zarkon says, not bothering to look up from the pad in his hands. “I will call Thace to come get you.”

Seeing no point in arguing, Keith dresses and heads to the gates where Thace is already waiting for him, as promised.

Haala and Marzila question Keith about him having spent the night in the Palace, and Keith tells them the bare minimum to keep them happy. He'd rather not recount all of his experiences there to them.

They get breakfast, spend as much money as they can in a short amount of time on a whim, get lunch, and wander around the market with no real purpose.

Keith buys Zarkon a book that the seller tells him is a limited edition print. Keith has no idea if Zarkon will like it, but he hopes the thought will be enough to make Zarkon happy.

It's closer to sunset when Thace tells them they need to leave, and though Keith already misses being on a planet he doesn't complain. If he makes an issue about leaving Zarkon will be less likely to allow him to repeat the experience.

Zarkon is waiting for them by the shuttle that will take them up. He smiles at Keith for a second, and Keith returns it with ease.

“Did you have fun?” Zarkon asks, and Keith nods.

“I might have put a dent in your account,” he says, his ears twitching down as he smiles sheepishly.

“I doubt you have done any noticeable damage to it,” Zarkon assures him. Keith rolls his eyes and almost shoves Zarkon before remembering they are in public. He nudes Zarkon through the bond instead.

Zarkon glances at him, and for a moment Keith expects him to not retaliate. Then he shoves Keith through the bond with more force than is strictly necessary. Keith snorts, getting a curious look from Thace, but he ignores it.

Getting back to the ship is as time consuming as getting to the planet had been, but at least Keith doesn't have to carry all the things he'd bought while they go through the customs. Thace had
explained all their things will be flown directly to the ship, and Keith thinks it’s a good way to go about it as he watches a small, fluffy alien struggle with several bags and an exasperated officer trying to ascertain what they are carrying without causing a scene.

Once they get into the familiar shuttle that will take them back to their ship, Keith gets the window seat and he presses his face to the window until they dock again. He listens to the chatter around him, taking note of Thace failing to mention the time Keith had wandered off when Zarkon asks him how their trip had gone. Keith isn’t sure if Thace is covering for himself or for Keith, and he doesn’t really care; as long as Zarkon doesn’t have an excuse to get mad at Keith he’s happy with whatever reason Thace has for omitting that little incident from Zarkon.

Keith is the last one to exit the shuttle, and the ship's artificial gravity feels a little too heavy for the rest of the evening.

He stays up long enough to give Zarkon his new book, feeling relieved and pleased when Zarkon puts the book on the shelf where it can be seen by anyone who might stop by.

He presses his forehead against Zarkon's for a few seconds before heading to bed, thanking him again for letting him go down to the planet, and even for the night in the palace.

Haggar studies Keith with a critical eye.

Keith resists the urge to shift in his spot on the examination table. He wants to put his shirt back on, but Haggar narrows her eyes so Keith remains perfectly still.

“You are a behind in your progress. You should be able to do more,” Haggar says, her disappointment with Keith clear in her voice, but Keith knows it's not just because of his progress with his rehabilitation, as he has come to call it.

“So what should I do?” Keith still asks. He doesn't want to be behind in his progress. He'll have to fight Vazka to death sooner or later, he can't afford to be behind in his progress.

“Your balance is within the acceptable parameters while you are walking, but you need to work on your fine motor skills and running. I'll arrange for a track where you can practice if you think you need it.” Haggar's frown deepens. “I'll also give you something for... this.” She waves at the bite marks, bruises and scratches covering Keith's body with an almost affronted scowl on her face.

“Thanks,” Keith says. “And the track sounds like a good idea,” he adds, biting the insides of his cheeks to stop himself from smiling when Haggar throws a glare at him.

She gives him a spray she thinks will help Keith the most, and tells him to get out of her medical bay. Without further prompting, Keith pulls his shirt back on and hurries out of the door to the hallway where Haala is waiting for him.

“Well?”

Keith shrugs and heads down the hallway. “Apparently I need to run more.”

“I can arrange that,” Haala says, and Keith gives him a nasty look before a smile breaks on his face.
They head to meet Marzila in their usual mess hall, and Keith is happy to find she's already gotten them lunch. “We need to chase him,” Haala tells her, and Marzila raises an eyebrow at Keith.

He tells her what Haggar had said, and she nods. “We can add some speed to your training.”

Keith nods. “And I should work on my fine motor skills, apparently. I don't know if that's something we can do. I might have to take up needlepoint or something.”

Haala and Marzila do a synchronized head tilt that makes Keith huff into his cup of tea. “Needlepoint?”

“It's a form of embroidery.” Keith waves his spoon. “One of my foster fathers was really into it.”

“I hate embroidery,” Marzila grumbles. “My mother wanted me to take it up. She's pretty well known in the industry and she wants someone in the family to follow her, but no one else is into it.” She grimaces. “My brother says she's taken in a war orphan and apparently they are actually interested in what she's doing, so maybe she's finally getting her wish.”

Keith eyes widen in surprise. “You have war orphans?”

Marzila and Haala share a flat look. “Yeah,” Haala says, sounding bitter all of the sudden. “There's a giant robot killing us on regular basis flying around. Sometimes the people who die have kids.”

Keith looks down to his soup, his ears drooping against his will. He's not hungry anymore.

He stays quiet while Marzila and Haala chat, only saying anything when directly spoken to. The solemn looks Haala and Marzila give him do nothing to lift Keith's mood — quite the contrary; he’d be happier if they just pretended the last few minutes had never happened.

As soon as they have all finished their lunch Keith claims tiredness as an excuse to return to his quarters.

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“Can I see Vazka?” Keith asks one evening, making Zarkon still for half a second before he continues writing on his pad like nothing had happened.

“Why would you want to do that?”

“I want to see him,” Keith replies, putting his own pad down on the couch. He had downloaded a book on Galran physiology and biology just to learn more about it and himself, and though it is interesting he's tired of listening to the narration about muscle density.

Zarkon finishes writing his sentence before putting the stylus and the pad down on the table and turning to Keith. “I do not see why you would want to do that.”

Keith shrugs. “He tried to kill me. I don't want the next time I see him to be when he's gonna try to do that again. I want to see him and talk to him before that.”

The silence that follows is tense, and Zarkon studies Keith closely for a long moment. Keith stays still and meets Zarkon's eyes. He can't back down if he wants to get his way. Zarkon frowns and taps his claws on the table a few times before standing up and striding to Keith.
Keith makes him room on the couch, and waits with bated breath while Zarkon considers his decision, ready to argue his point if need be.

“I do not want you near him,” Zarkon says eventually.

“And I don't want to be near him, but I need to do this,” Keith replies, “just let me have this.”

Zarkon doesn't look convinced, and Keith moves closer to him until he can touch Zarkon's arm, and he lets his ears droop and his tail thump against the couch for maximum effect. “I need to do this. Chain him to a wall of you have to, have a dozen guards in the same room, just let me talk to him for five minutes. Please.”

Zarkon frowns. “It is not about adequate protection for you, that is easy to arrange. I am more concerned about what he might say to you.”

It's a valid point, and Keith recognizes it as such. There's no way for him to know if Vazka can say something that might upset him. “I can handle it,” Keith still says, sure that he can deal anything Vazka may throw at him. “I've had to deal with you for... how long have I been here?”

Zarkon glances away. “I do not know how you are used to calculating time.”

Keith grips Zarkon's arm tighter. “Then tell me in your terms.”

“To put it as simply as I can, you have been here for almost three quarters of a tsiga,” Zarkon says. Keith raises an eyebrow, and Zarkon tilts his head. “The time it takes our planet to circle the sun.”

“A year?” Keith sits back. He's not sure how long a Galra year is, but he's fairly sure it's longer than an Earth year.

“If that is your term for it, then yes,” Zarkon says. “I think it is safe to assume that you will be staying with us for a long time.”

Keith groans. “I've told you, I have no intention of leaving. Could you stop acting like I am?”

Zarkon doesn't seem assured, and Keith doesn't know what to say to convince him of his decision to stay. “I don't want to leave you.”

“But the Paladins are your friends,” Zarkon says, sounding almost pained at calling the others Paladins, like the term is not something they deserve. “Surely you do not expect me to believe you have no desire to see them again.”

“Of course I want to see them again, but I'm also taking your advice and trying to let them go,” Keith replies, “and let's be realistic, they wouldn't want me back looking like this anyway.” Keith waves at himself and sighs, his expression turning sour as he turns away from Zarkon and crosses his arms.

“Shiro wouldn't be able to look at me,” he mutters, not caring if Zarkon hears him or not.

But of course Zarkon hears him, and he shifts towards Keith. “I was under the impression you were close. I would assume that a true friend would not care how you look.”

Keith lets out a mirthless laugh. “Maybe before you traumatized him. There's no way he could look at me and not remember what happened to him.”

“Anyone who cannot accept you as you are now does not deserve your time,” Zarkon says.
Keith shakes his head. “You don't get it. Shiro is my best friend. He's the closest thing to family I have. I —” Keith stops, his tail flicking and his ears flattening as he looks down at his clenched fists. “I love him. I know we could’ve never been anything but still.”

He pulls his knees to his chest and sighs, his eyes cast down. “I know there couldn't have had anything between us but I love him and I don't want him to hate me.”

Zarkon doesn't say anything, and he doesn't let anything through the bond. Keith wouldn't be surprised if he was offended or upset over Keith's confession, and he doesn't bother looking up to see his expression. He’s not sure if it’s because he doesn’t care or because he doesn’t want to see Zarkon upset with him at that moment.

“I'd rather stay here and be happy than go back and be miserable.” Keith's ears droop and his eyes sting, but he ignores it.

The room is filled with heavy silence for a long minute, then Zarkon shifts. “Are you happy here?”

It catches Keith off guard, and his eyes snap up. He doesn't know what Zarkon's angle is, but he's sure he has one. “More or less,” he replies, “I have friends. And you. This thing that we have...”

“I want you to be happy here,” Zarkon says. “It is important to me.”

“I am happy,” Keith insists, “but I also miss my friends.”

Just to be sure Zarkon believes him, Keith rests his cheek on his knee and looks Zarkon straight in the eye, a soft if sad smile on his lips. “If I'd go back to them I'd miss you, and I don't want that either.”

Zarkon doesn't return the smile, but some of the tension leaves him, and he glances at Keith's pad. “What are you reading?”

Keith grimaces. “Just a book.”

“Oh? And what book would that be?” Zarkon sits a little straighter, resting his arm on the back of the couch.

“It's a book.” Keith tries to snatch the pad away, but Zarkon is faster and he gets it from Keith easily.

“Hey!” Keith tries to get the pad back, but Zarkon keeps it out of his reach while he reads the summary of the book, his eyebrow rising higher with every passing word.

Soon Zarkon drops the pad on the couch, turning to Keith with an amused smile. “If you are interested in our physiology you could have just asked about it.”

Keith groans. “Maybe I wanted to read about it.”

“May I ask why?” Zarkon seems genuinely interested in Keith's reasons, and Keith slumps against the couch.

“I just wanted to know more about what you guys are like — what I'm like now. And...” Keith clears his throat, unwilling to continue. He tilts his chin down to get his bangs to fall over his face to hide the blush creeping on his cheeks.

“And what?” Zarkon prompts, his curiosity now obvious in his voice. Keith should've kept his
There's no way Zarkon will let it go now. He might as well come clear. “I just thought that if I understand the Galra physiology a little better I'll be more comfortable with... you know...” He waves his hand between them, and Zarkon gives him a politely confused look.

“I just want to have an idea of what I'm doing when we have sex.” The words come out too fast, and Keith's face heats up and his ears flop forward when he presses his forehead to his knees.

Zarkon stays quiet for a moment, then he huffs, and laughs quietly. Keith presses his head tighter against his knees.

“If you want to know about that you could have just asked. I can explain how sex works among us a lot better than that particular book can. Or I could get you a better book, at least.” Zarkon's amusement is clear in his voice, and he runs his hand through Keith's hair.

“I want to know about the other stuff too,” Keith mumbles against his legs.

“Would you like a better book then?” Zarkon asks.

Keith considers it. The book he has now isn't the easiest to listen to, and he would prefer a better one, so he nods.

“Is there anything else you need?”

Keith looks up. He wants to see Vazka, but Zarkon isn't likely to let him have that.

Keith moves up, pushing his forehead against Zarkon's, then he presses a kiss on Zarkon's jaw before moving to niggle the tip of his ear. Zarkon tilts his head to give him better access, and Keith takes full advantage of it. He waits until Zarkon sighs softly before pulling away and wrapping his arms around Zarkon's neck.

“Can I see Vazka?” Keith asks as casually as he can.

Zarkon blinks slowly before laughing and touching his knuckles against Keith's jaw. “You are persistent.”

Keith grins and nods.

“I will consider it, but do not get your hopes up,” Zarkon says, and Keith nods again, knowing when to back off.

It's more than he thought he'd get anyways.

It takes over a week until Zarkon tells Keith he can see Vazka, but they have to go to the prison ship he's on to do so.

Keith can't sleep that night.

The reality of meeting Vazka is different from the possibility of doing so. It's not hypothetical anymore; it's not something that will happen in the far future, if ever.
Keith wishes he hadn't asked for it.

Everything about the prison ship is oppressive. The silence is heavy, and the occasional sounds of the inmates and the sentries patrolling the hallways breaking it make Keith want to flinch every time.

Zarkon glances at him, his expression serious. “You do not have to do this.”

“I want to,” Keith replies, shaking his anxiety off and steeling himself for what’s to come. He is not going to give Vazka the satisfaction of scaring him off.

It's not even Vazka alone, it's the ship itself. He can't stop thinking about Shiro being in a place like this, alone and scared, waiting to be tossed into the Arena to fight for his life again, and the thought of it fills him with anger. Shiro didn't deserve to be in a place like this. Shiro didn't deserve any of it.

“Let's just get this over with.” Keith steps past Zarkon and strides down the hallway. He doesn't want to fight with Zarkon. Not now.

And not over Shiro’s time with the Galra. It's pointless. Keith knows Zarkon had no personal involvement in Shiro's treatment, and what happened to Shiro was just something the Galra did. It isn't right, but Keith would rather focus on facing Vazka than argue morality with Zarkon.

Keith makes sure to stay only a few steps ahead of Zarkon, not wanting any of the sentries or guards to stop him. Zarkon doesn't bother him beyond telling him which way to go every now and again.

They come to a stop by a set of door at the end of a long, quiet hallway. The guards there check Keith out for any hidden weapons, stating multiple times that it's part of the standard procedure, though they direct their words at Zarkon rather than at Keith. Once they're satisfied Keith isn't carrying anything to kill Vazka with, the guards step aside.

Zarkon waves Keith to him, and though Keith knows what he's about to say he still goes to him. “You do not have to do this,” Zarkon says again, as Keith expected.

“I want to. It's fine, don't worry so much.” Keith forces a smile, but he can't quite hide his anxiousness from Zarkon.

“Would you like me to come in with you?” Zarkon asks.

Keith sighs, his shoulders slumping. “No. I'll be fine. Besides, if I need you I can let you know.” He motions at his head, trusting Zarkon gets his meaning without him having to voice it in front of the guards.

Zarkon doesn't look happy, but he lets Keith have his way.

Keith walks up to the door, and throws Zarkon one last glance over his shoulder. His heartbeat is too loud in his ears as the guards open the door, and Keith takes a deep breath before stepping through it.
The room is bare.

There's nothing on the walls, and there are no chairs or even a table. There's only Keith and Vazka, whose hands and ankles are cuffed to the floor. Keith thinks it's done with magnets, but he can't be sure.

Vazka studies Keith with curious eyes, and Keith frowns at him. He's smaller than Keith remembered, but it might just be the lack of armor or Keith's own new size.

Vazka's fur has lost its shine and it's matted. There's a small patch of fur missing from his left cheek, and the way he holds himself makes Keith believe he has an injury of some kind on his right side — maybe a broken rib or a large bruise.

Maybe someone had stabbed him.

“That's an interesting look,” Vazka says, his voice raspy.

Keith's ears flatten as he crosses his arms. “I don't care what you think.”

Vazka shrugs before tilting his head and smiling. “Did the Witch at least tell you she was going to mangle you up?”

Keith frowns but doesn't answer, though he knows Vazka will draw his own conclusions from it.

They stare at each other in loaded silence for a few seconds before Vazka sighs and tilts his head. “I assume there's something you want from me?”

Keith's tail flicks. “Why do you want to kill me?”

Vazka laughs, and Keith suppresses a growl. He can't let his emotions get the best of him. He can't let Vazka get under his skin.

“Does it really matter?” Vazka shakes his head.

“It matters to me,” Keith snaps. “I think I have the right to know why you're trying to kill me for a second time.”

Vazka waves his hand as much as he can. “I don't benefit from telling you that.”

“Why did you kill Jadri then?” Keith asks, his voice more clipped than he’d like.

“That's definitely something I shouldn't be telling you,” Vazka replies. “But,” he starts before Keith can snap at him, “I could tell you something in exchange for information from you.”

Keith shifts. “What kind of information?”

Vazka hums, pretending to consider it. “Show me your arms.”

Keith blinks, dumbfounded. “My arms?”

“Yes.” Vazka inclines his head and smiles. “I'm curious about your markings and they're usually present in arms.”

Keith narrows his eyes, but after a moment of consideration he shrugs off his jacket. They're just markings, there's no harm in letting Vazka see them. He's still apprehensive as he rolls up the left sleeve of his shirt to let Vazka see the crescent markings.
Vazka leans forward and narrows his eyes, studying Keith's arm with far too much focus. Keith pulls the sleeve down a little too soon to keep his discomfort hidden, but Vazka doesn't comment on it as he leans back on his heels.

“So which question do you want me to answer? And keep in mind that your precious Emperor is only interested in one answer,” he says instead, offering Keith a brief smile before his eyes sharpen and he focuses on studying Keith's face.

Keith bites his lip, a minute frown on his face. He wants both of the answers, but he knows which one he's more interested in, and it's not the one Zarkon would want an answer to.

Maybe it's not that important.

“Why did you kill Jadri?”

The knowing smile Vazka gives him does nothing to ease Keith's mind. “She betrayed our cause. I dealt with her. Simple as that.”

“What cause?” Keith crosses his arms when Vazka laughs at him.

“You don't honestly expect me to tell you everything just because you ask?” Vazka raises an eyebrow, and Keith glares at him, his tail flicking from side to side, but he remains quiet. Vazka is not going to bait him.

“You know what?” Vazka starts, his voice annoyingly conversational. “I'll tell you something your Emperor wants to know if you answer a question.”

Keith shouldn't, he knows it's a trap, but he also knows Zarkon is frustrated with how little they have managed to squeeze out of Vazka. “What do you want to know?”

“Has the Witch said anything about how you came to be?” Vazka tilts his head. “I thought the Empire hadn't become aware your home planet until recently.”

“No, she hasn’t.”

Vazka hums, his brow creasing. “She's keeping secrets from you. I wouldn't be surprised if your Emperor was doing the same.”

“I know everything I need to know,” Keith counters, refusing to let Vazka make him doubt Zarkon. If it was important Zarkon tell Keith about it.

Vazka doesn't look convinced, but Keith narrows his eyes and flattens his ears at him to keep him from saying anything.

“Did she make you according to your Emperor's specifications? I have heard a rumor that he likes pretty, small things, and you do fit that type.” Vazka tilts his head. “Does he dress you up and show you off? Does he put you in pretty clothes and parade you around so that everyone can see your pretty face? Does he keep you by his side so that everyone knows that he's the only one allowed to touch you? Or do you just lounge around naked like the toy you are until he decides he wants you?”

Keith lunges forward, baring his teeth and ready to dig his claws into Vazka's face.

“You hurt me now and you'll be in so much trouble even your Emperor won't get you out of it without ruining his own reputation,” Vazka says even as he jerks back.
Keith stills. It shouldn't matter to him if Zarkon's reputation suffers because of him, but it does. He doesn't want to cause Zarkon so much trouble by not being able to control himself. Especially not when Vazka is wrong and just trying to annoy Keith, and succeeding alarmingly well.

“What did Jadri say to you?” Vazka asks, as if nothing had happened.

Keith steps back, takes a deep breath, and considers what he can safely reveal. “Something about how Zarkon shouldn't be alive and how I'm half Galra, which isn't a surprise to anyone.”

“She told you about the portal?” Vazka raises an eyebrow.

Keith crosses his arms. “What portal?”

“You're not a good liar,” Vazka says, offering Keith a sweet smile. “It's more of a rift anyways. Your Emperor knows about them. He has to: they're one of the best sources of pure quintessence, even if they are extremely rare these days.”

Keith stays quiet, waiting for Vazka to continue.

Vazka sighs and cocks his head, giving Keith a patient look. “I'm going to die anyways, so I might as well let you in on something, right? Maybe make things more fun?”

Keith refuses to respond, but Vazka doesn't seem bothered by it. “Hypothetically, there might be a, uh, someone, beyond the rift that will take your Emperor's place and bring peace and unity to this universe,” Vazka says, and the almost manic glint in his eyes makes Keith lean back.

“Peace is good, is it not?” Vazka continues, oblivious to Keith's discomfort. “Don't you want that too? A peaceful universe where we live along everyone else as equals. A universe where everyone is happy and there is no pointless war.”

Keith does want it, but there's something about Vazka that makes him doubt the kind of peace he's talking about would be good for anyone. It's the same feeling he got from Jadri, that there is something off, but he can't pinpoint what it is.

“Sounds more like another conspiracy theory to me,” Keith says, crossing his arms. “Or an invading force.”

Vazka scoffs. “Hardly. And who knows, you might relate to them more than to those around you now.”

“I doubt that.” Keith glares at Vazka. He's ready to call the chat to an end. “Goodbye.”

He turns even though he doesn't feel comfortable turning his back to Vazka despite the fact that he's tied down.

“I've seen markings similar to yours before.” Vazka says. Keith stills, and though he debates the benefits of just walking away he turns around. “Might have been your mother. Don't you want to know where to find her?”

Keith's claws dig into his palms and he bites the insides of his cheeks so hard he tastes blood.

Of course he wants to meet his mother, but he can't believe what Vazka is telling him. It's too convenient. He's just trying to get to Keith. He's trying to put a rift between him and Zarkon.

“Go fuck yourself.” Keith rushes to the door before he can change his mind.
“One more thing,” Vazka calls after him. Keith stills with his hand hovering over the control panel. “Tell your precious Emperor that he can stop stalling. I have no interest in fighting you if you can't defend yourself. I don't want to give your Emperor an excuse to claim I chose a challenger who I knew had no chance of winning and then personally challenge me to a rematch.”

Keith opens the door and marches out. He tries his best to appear unaffected as he strides past Zarkon, who follows him without a word as if it was their plan all along.

Keith doesn't stop until he reaches a quiet, empty hallway. His claws dig into his palms and he scowls at the floor, trying to reign in his anger at Vazka.

Zarkon stops by his side at an unusually respectful distance, waiting for Keith to say something.

“I'll tell you everything he said if you promise me something,” Keith starts, turning to face Zarkon.

Zarkon inclines his head, his expression serious.

“I want you to train me.” Keith meets Zarkon's surprised expression without blinking. “I want you to train me so that I can kill that son of a bitch.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not gonna make any promises on a chapter next week since this month has suddenly turned into a busy mess. I'll try, but I won't promise anything.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith isn't sure why, but he hadn't expected having Zarkon train him be as painful as it is. Compared to Zarkon Marzila never did more than poke him gently with a stick.

Keith hisses as he applies the soothing ointment on the latest large bruise on his side. Zarkon had struck him with a staff hard enough to send him flying and then he'd criticized Keith's stance while Keith had done his best not to throw up from the pain of having been used as a punching bag for an hour.

But Keith doesn't complain about it. He'd asked for it, and he'd told Zarkon not to let him off easy — not that he'd expected Zarkon to do so anyways.

“Are you alright?” Zarkon asks when he enters the bathroom.

“Yeah.” Keith turns around and spreads his arms as much as he can. “Now I know I need to work on protecting my left.”

Zarkon doesn't look amused, and Keith goes back to applying the ointment when it becomes obvious he's not going to get a reply. He ignores Zarkon while he rummages through the cabinets, and he doesn't spare him a glance when he comes to stand behind Keith.

“Put that away,” Zarkon orders, and Keith sighs before placing the ointment on the vanity.

He meets Zarkon's eyes in the mirror and raises an eyebrow. “Now what?”

Zarkon doesn't reply, but Keith's eyes catch the bottle of quintessence he's holding. “What are you doing with that?”

“Fixing you,” Zarkon replies as he screws the cork open and pours some of the quintessence into his palms. “You cannot train if you are injured.”

Keith doesn't have a good argument against it, so he pulls his hair off his back and leans his palms on the counter to give Zarkon better access to his back.

The strangely warm quintessence and the heat Zarkon's hands soothes the ache of Keith's muscles. He sighs when the pain of the bruises and muscles starts to fade away. He'll be hurting again tomorrow, but he welcomes a night of sleep where he only has to worry about nightmares waking him up.

“You are doing fine,” Zarkon says, “we will try something new tomorrow, but you should be satisfied with the progress you have made.”

“I am. But I need to be better. I can't take on Vazka otherwise.” Keith balls his hands into as tight fists as he can with his claws. “Who knows how good he is at combat.”

“He will not be better than you,” Zarkon assures him as he moves to apply the quintessence to Keith's side. “I have a reputation to maintain, and if you were to be killed even after being trained by me I would have Haggar bring you back just so I could properly explain what a disappointment you have been to me.”
Keith laughs and shakes his head. “Of course you would.”

Zarkon doesn’t reply, but Keith doesn’t mind it. He closes his eyes and enjoys the way the quintessence chases away the pain of his injuries.

“You should rest,” Zarkon says after he's coated Keith's injuries in the quintessence. “I will have to see to something so I cannot keep you company this evening.”

“You can say you're trying to defeat Voltron. I'm not expecting you to stop that just because of us, and I'd like you to be honest with me,” Keith says as he straightens up and turns to meet Zarkon's eyes.

Zarkon stares at him, looking almost surprised, before a small smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “I do not wish to make you uncomfortable.”

“And I appreciate that, but I'd like to know what you do, especially when it involves my friends —” he raises a hand to silence Zarkon “— I can handle it. I'm not a child, I know how war works and I'm not expecting you to roll over and let them win or anything. That's the last thing I expect you to do if I'm honest. I just want to know what's going on.”

Zarkon regards him with a contemplative look before inclining his head. “We have reason to believe that your friends, along with the Blade of Marmora, might attempt to reach a specific facility of ours. It would be unfortunate if they did, and not just because I do not like them disabling or destroying important outposts.”

Keith nods and crosses his arms. “Why is this one so important then?”

“It houses a scientific discovery that, if released from its containment, could cause significant damage to all nearby systems. Even the entire galaxy.” Zarkon takes in a deep breath and tilts his head. “I am unsure of how to prevent that, since we cannot move the subject at the time. The construction of another working confinement cage as well as well as a cage we can transport the subject safely in is not something that can be done overnight.”

Keith frowns, and tries to think of a solution. “Just assuming that the Blade has agents in your ranks, couldn't you send out a rumor or something about the danger of going to that facility?”

“It might also encourage them to go to the facility faster,” Zarkon counters.

Keith supposes he has a point, and sort of suggesting Zarkon up the security of the place he's not sure how to prevent Voltron from going there. “Why do you even think they're going there anyways?”

“They stole files that contain information about the facility. We are merely being cautious. They have a habit of reaching the important facilities sooner or later,” Zarkon replies.

“Just don't be too obvious about it. That might catch their attention even better,” Keith says, then grimaces. “Which I assume you already know.”

“I do, but I appreciate your concern.” Zarkon smiles and waves at the door. “Now go rest. I will join you later.”

Keith pulls Zarkon down and nuzzles his cheek before heading out of the door, with Zarkon right behind him. He goes to put on some clothes while Zarkon leaves to do whatever he needs to do, and though Keith wants to run after him and find out what exactly what is going on, he stays behind and curls on the couch with Thace’s latest homework.
Keith stays up waiting for Zarkon to return for as long as he can before heading to bed. When he wakes up in the morning he's alone, and he's not sure if Zarkon ever came back.

Marzila is excited to inform Haala and Keith that she has been given an assignment away from their ship, but she can't tell them where she’ll be going. “It's just for a few weeks, and then I'll be back.”

“You couldn't get anything onboard this ship?” Haala asks, and though he sounds annoyed, Keith knows he's also happy that Marzila is happy.

“I'm just covering for the head of security there. It'll be good for me. If I don't mess this up I can start getting back to doing real work,” Marzila counters, a scowl on her face.

“We're going to miss you,” Keith says, more to prevent a fight that might start between Haala and Marzila than anything, even if it's not a lie.

Marzila shrugs and stops before the elevator doors. “It's a quiet place from what I've gathered. I'll be just lounging around and watching monitors, and then I come back here.”

“Maybe I should come with you,” Haala suggests as the elevator doors open.

Marzila throws him an angry glare and Keith ducks into the elevator to get out of her way. She and Haala join him, and Keith stays between them while they take the elevator down.

Zarkon is supposed to teach Keith in an hour, and Keith is happy to have that as an excuse to ditch his friends when they are both in such testy moods.

So when the elevator doors open, Keith makes his excuses and rushes in the opposite direction of his friends.

He wanders to the training room Zarkon had told him to go to and settles down to wait until Zarkon joins him, stretching and hops around to warm himself up. It takes a while and Keith almost grows bored while he waits, but eventually Zarkon walks through the door, having changed out of his armor into something more appropriate for kicking Keith's ass.

Keith had taken to wearing clothes suited for training as well, and all he needs to do to be ready is shed his jacket.

“I am going to teach you a technique that I believe will help you,” Zarkon says as a greeting, and Keith stands straighter.

“We are built to attack fast and with force,” Zarkon starts, “that is where our strength lies, and there are few who can survive that. We do not tire easily, but endurance is not our strength either. We do not favor drawn out fights because of it.”

Keith raises an eyebrow. “So you want me to tire Vazka out?”

“It is your best chance. You will exert less energy if you are more reactive instead of proactive at first, but do not give up control of the situation. You will either annoy Vazka into making a mistake, or you will tire him out,” Zarkon replies. “And if nothing else, you will learn something
about his fighting style."

Keith takes a slow, deep breath and tilts his head from side to side. “I'm more into attacking than stalling but I guess it could help.”

Zarkon inclines his head and gets a long staff from the armory. “Take the other end and keep it pressed against your side.”

Keith follows his order, unsure of where this is going.

“This is something I learned from my mother, so Vazka should have no knowledge of how to counter this.” Zarkon nudges the staff, and Keith takes a step to the side. “This is about your ability to anticipate and react to my movements. When I can feel no resistance in the staff, you are doing it right.”

Zarkon pushes Keith with the staff as he steps forward, forcing Keith to step away from him. “Consider this a dance of sorts,” he says as he takes a step to the side, forcing Keith to move as well. “You must move in perfect sync with me, or you will die.”

Keith laughs and skips back when the staff presses against him again. “Doesn't sound like a fun dance.”

“But it is a useful one to know,” Zarkon says and steps to the side again. “Now focus.”

Keith tries, and though it takes him longer than he expected, he gets the hang of anticipating Zarkon's movements.

When Zarkon is satisfied with Keith's development, he takes the staff from him and tosses it to the corner of the room. “We can now move onto attempting the same thing without the staff.”


He grins and takes a step back. He remembers this. He remembers how their last round ended. He takes another step back, and Zarkon takes a step forward. “Stay out of my reach.”

Keith nods and focuses on anticipating Zarkon's movements. He knows Zarkon gives him a chance to react, even if it's barely for a second. Keith still takes full advantage of the extra second to get used to the new rhythm of Zarkon’s movements.

As soon as Keith figures out how the sidestepping works without the stick, Zarkon changes the pattern and forces Keith to adapt to it faster. When Keith doesn't step away fast enough Zarkon trips him and lets him crash to the floor.

It happens more often than Keith would like, but Zarkon is fast when he wants to be, and though Keith knows it, it still catches him off guard.

After an hour or so Keith grows tired. After a half an hour more he's ready to call it a day. He lets Zarkon feel his exhaustion, and waits a minute before deciding to voice his thoughts.

He doesn't get a word out before Zarkon trips him to the ground and pins him there. Keith lets out a miffed sound and glares at Zarkon for a second before putting all his strength into pushing him off. He still can't manage it, but at least he can say he tried.

Zarkon laughs and nuzzles Keith's cheek.
Keith leans into it almost on instinct, groaning when he relaxes against his will. “That's unfair,” he grumbles.

Zarkon hums and nips Keith's jaw. “Are you done studying your books yet?”

It takes Keith a few seconds to realize what Zarkon is talking about, and he groans again and shuts his eyes. “I dunno.” He tilts his head to give Zarkon better access to his ear. “I want to say yes but...”

“You are nervous,” Zarkon finishes for him.

Keith sighs and nods. “Yeah.”

Zarkon worries the tip of Keith's ear with his teeth for a moment before pulling back, bumping his nose to Keith's. “Then stay with your books.”

Keith isn't sure if he should argue with Zarkon. He wants to say yes and a little nervousness shouldn't stop him, and yet he's relieved to have been told no.

It's not that he's worried about the differences between humans and Galra, he's spent enough time studying the way the Galra are built to be comfortable with it. He even paid extra attention to the way their genitalia works since that's what he's planning on getting acquainted with.

He won't be surprised by the almost but not quite similar shapes or by the ridges or even by the fact that apparently Galra dicks are sheathed.

Keith can get behind it.

That's not his problem. What bothers Keith has nothing to do with differences in genitalia and all to do with actually having sex with Zarkon.

Lying there — under Zarkon with his arms pinned to the floor and with nowhere to go — Keith feels small. He's not sure he can actually take Zarkon, even with the new height and built he's had since he got turned into a Galra. Zarkon is imposing and big, and Keith is still small compared to him. Maybe too small.

Zarkon tilts his head. “What are you thinking?”

Keith grimaces, but decides it's best if he brings the issue to Zarkon's attention now and not when they're about to have sex. “You think I'm too small?”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow and Keith makes a face. “I mean, if we'd have sex. I'm not too small for that?”

Zarkon laughs and sits up, letting go of Keith's arms. “I am unsure if I should be flattered.” Keith frowns, and Zarkon offers him a brief smile. “You are not too small. In fact, Haggar made a point of it in the report she wrote on the changes she did to you.”

Keith's face falls. “She made a report about that?”

“It was more of a footnote,” Zarkon replies, “I believe she was merely attempting to tease me in her own peculiar way. Do not concern yourself with it.”

It doesn't exactly alleviate Keith's mood, but he doesn't push it. If Haggar thinks they can have sex, then they probably can.
“Wanna take a shower?” Keith asks.

Zarkon's smile is warm and sweet, and he inclines his head.

Keith leads the way back to their quarters. He ignores the excited and nervous rhythm of his heart while he strips his clothes off and steps into the shower.

His tail wraps around Zarkon's leg while he massages soap into Keith's back, and he laughs when Zarkon covers his hair with bubbles.

He lets Zarkon pull him into his arms, and pretends the calm warmth filling him up is just the bond and nothing more.

“Tomorrow I will teach you something special,” Zarkon whispers into Keith's ear before resting his cheek on top of Keith's head. Keith can only nod in response.

Keith joins Haala in the lower airlocks to say goodbye to Marzila. “I'll be right back,” she assures them before pulling Keith into a bone crushing hug. “Don't let Haala sulk too much.”

“I won't,” Keith promises.

She lets go of him and throws her arms around Haala, nuzzling his face and purring softly. Haala holds her until the pilot clears her throat and tells Marzila they must leave.

Once the shuttle has departed Haala mutters something about a book he's been meaning to read, and leaves Keith in the hallway.

Keith doesn't mind it — even if he's technically not supposed to be alone yet. Zarkon has been less strict about it recently, and Keith hopes it's because he thinks Keith is good enough to defend himself and not because he's got something else on his mind.

Instead of lingering in the hallways, Keith hurries off to find Thace. They haven't had the chance to study recently, and since Zarkon isn't going to be teaching Keith until late that evening and Keith has time to spare. If Thace isn't busy Keith might as well take full advantage of it.

But of course Thace has a new project going on, and he can't spare Keith the time for a full lesson. “You can stay here and do a test you if you'd like,” he offers, and Keith takes him up on it.

Keith gets a few curious looks form the handful of officers seated by their computer terminals, but most of them ignore him. Thace gives Keith the empty terminal at the back of the room and sets him up with the test.

“Let me know if you need help,” Thace says and waits for Keith to nod before hurrying back to his officers.

Keith watches him go, wondering what they are working on before deciding it's none of his business and putting his headphones on. He focuses on the voice reading him sentence after sentence, and he picks one from the given options or writes down the correct replies. It doesn't give him a chance to learn any new vocabulary, but knowing how important picking the correct word is, Keith doesn't mind.
He's halfway through his material and not paying any attention to the world around him when a crumpled piece of paper hits his head. Keith starts and looks up, and pushes his headphones down when he sees everyone but Thace staring at him.

Thace is glaring at a woman with half a dozen styluses stuck in her short ponytail. She must be the one who threw the paper at Keith.

“What?” Keith's eyes dart from one Galra to another.

Thace turns his eyes to him. “Could you take a listen at this?” He asks and tilts a pair of headphones up.

Keith bites his lip and shrugs before pushing himself up and making his way to Thace. He glances at the other officers with wary eyes before putting the headphones on, and the woman with the styluses in her hair taps her monitor with her claws.

A deep sound — almost like a bass from another room — fills Keith's ears. It vibrates through him, growing deeper and higher at random intervals, but there's still a structure to it, even if Keith can't quite put his finger on what it is.

Keith looks up at Thace, “What is this?”

“We don't know,” Thace replies, “what does it sound like to you?”

Keith frowns and listens to the recording for a few seconds before shrugging. “I don't know how to describe it in a way you'd understand.” He sets the headphones down and offers Thace an apologetic look. “It's got a some kind of a rhythm or a structure to it though.”

Thace inclines his head. “We're not sure how to describe it in our report.”

Keith’s ears lower as if in apology. “I'm not sure how I'm supposed to help with that.”

Thace isn't bothered by it, but the other officers seem disappointed. Keith isn't sure why. They must have known he wouldn't have the references needed to make a comparison they would understand.

“I suppose we can submit this report as it is now, then,” Thace says, casting a mildly disappointed look at his staff before turning to Keith. “I must go see the Emperor now. You can stay here until I return.”

“I think I'll come with you. I'm supposed to meet up with him anyways,” Keith replies.

Thace inclines his head. “Very well,” he says in a disturbingly similar tone to the one Zarkon often uses when he says if you must, but he doesn't want Keith actually doing anything. Keith isn't sure what he did to earn that tone from Thace.

Maybe he's about to crash a private meeting.

Thace leads Keith to the bridge, and unsurprisingly everyone is surprised to see Keith there. Keith ignores them in favor of offering Zarkon a brief, small smile. Zarkon doesn't return it, but his eyes soften for just a second and it's enough for Keith. It's not like he expected Zarkon to show any real affection to him in front of the commanders. Cenzi might have an aneurysm if he did that, at least going by the way he's trying to to let his face show just how little he likes having Keith around.

Keith sticks to the sidelines while Thace tells Zarkon about the sound. Zarkon doesn't seem that
interested in it until Thace plays the recording, and even then he only tilts his head a fraction to the left.

“Have Haggar listen to it,” he orders Thace, who bows and steps aside.

Keith meanders to Zarkon, keeping just enough distance between them to be inconspicuous, but still being close enough to him to earn an amused glance from Zarkon. Keith stands a little straighter and clasps his hands behind his back to keep from fidgeting. It only deepens Zarkon's amusement, but he lets Keith stay by his side.

It takes hours, but eventually Zarkon decides he's done silently judging his subordinates and shows Keith out of the bridge doors without a word to anyone else.

Keith follows him to their quarters and changes his clothes to something more appropriate for their training session while Zarkon finishes signing reports or whatever it is he does with his pad each evening.

Keith waits while Zarkon changes out of his armor, and he tries to contain his curiosity as to what Zarkon is planning for them while he follows Zarkon through the hallways.

Zarkon leads him all the way to one of the druid's halls. It's a large, empty space with a dome like roof and dim lights high on the walls that somehow cast the hall in almost warm light. There are banged up sentries lined against one of the walls, and Keith doesn't even begin to guess what happened to them.

“What are we doing?” Keith asks.

“Target practice,” Zarkon replies, then tilts his head. “Hopefully.”

Keith has no idea what that means, and he doesn't ask. Zarkon will tell him when he's ready. Keith watches in growing confusion as Zarkon sets two of the sentries in the middle of the room, a few feet apart from each other and one a little behind the other.

Once Zarkon is satisfied with his arrangement he returns to Keith, his expression serious enough to make Keith pay close attention. Zarkon studies Keith closely and Keith straightens up without thinking about it.

Keith has to stop himself from stepping back when Zarkon pulls out his bayard. For a split of a second Keith expects Zarkon to attack him, the memory of their first meeting flashing through his mind. So when Zarkon offers the bayard to him — looking less than happy about giving it away but still sure of himself — Keith hesitates, but takes the bayard eventually.

“You ought to have a long range weapon with you in case you will need it. You are not allowed to take firearms to your fight with Vazka, but there is no rule against using a bayard,” Zarkon says.

“That's good to know but there are a few problems with this.” Keith lifts the bayard and gives Zarkon an incredulous look.

Zarkon tilts his head. “Which are?”
Keith raises an eyebrow. “Well, for one I piloted the Red Lion so I’d do a lot more with the red bayard. Secondly, my bayard was a blade, not a long range weapon.”

“You piloted the Black Lion once, which means you can use this bayard,” Zarkon replies, “and you can learn to form other weapons.”

Keith isn't sure about it, and he lets it show on his face. “Can I have my own bayard, at least?”

Zarkon offers him a somewhat sympathetic look. “Unfortunately it was lost when Voltron attacked the Central Command.”

Keith supposes he shouldn't be surprised by it.

“Start by awakening the blade —” Zarkon raises a hand to silence Keith “— you have piloted my Lion, you can do it.” He circles Keith, who tracks his movements closely.

“Be sure of yourself,” Zarkon says as he comes to stand behind Keith, brushing a strand of hair from Keith's face. “Be calm, and most importantly, trust yourself and do not hesitate.”

Keith glances over his shoulder before focusing on the bayard in his hand, trying to be calm and sure of himself. He can't quite manage it though. He had only piloted Black when Shiro had been in danger, he doesn't see how that makes him worthy of wielding the black bayard.

Zarkon places his hands on Keith's shoulders, his touch reassuring and grounding. “I have faith in you.”

Keith takes a steadying breath and steels himself. He can do this, if not for himself then for Zarkon. Keith would hate to disappoint him.

Or get them both killed, if Haggar is right and breaking the bond would be fatal to them both.

Maybe he should talk to Haggar about that.

Keith shakes his head and pushes the thought out of his mind, doing his best to calm himself. Instead of thinking about possibly holding Zarkon's life in his hands, he focuses on the bayard. It feels strange yet familiar in his hand, and in a way it's good to be holding a bayard again.

Keith barely realizes what's happening before he's holding his familiar blade. His surprise doesn't stop him from taking note of the pride Zarkon lets bleed through their bond.

“Now what?” Keith asks, never taking his eyes off the bayard in fear of it disappearing.

Zarkon circles Keith, his focus on the shape of his bayard. There's a disgruntled sort of curiosity about him, like he's fascinated by the unusual form of his bayard and hating it at the same time. Keith knows it's not because of him as much as it is because of Zarkon's possessiveness of the bayard.

Zarkon taps his claws along the blade, the sound echoing in the silent hall. The thought that there used to be a time when Keith would have driven the bayard through Zarkon without hesitation crosses Keith's mind, but it's distant and unpleasant, and he tilts the blade from Zarkon.

Zarkon lets his hand fall and turns his focus from the blade to Keith. “Do you have a preference in long range weapons?”

“Not really,” Keith replies, “I know how to fire a gun but it's not my go to weapon.”
“You cannot use a firearm,” Zarkon reminds him. “I think we should focus on something that is more close to your blade. Perhaps a mallet or a mace type of weapon?”

Keith frowns. “I don't know if that's my style.”

Zarkon inclines his head, a thoughtful look on his face. “A bladed whip?”

Keith laughs. “Why do I get the feeling you want me to use your chosen weapons?”

“They are efficient,” Zarkon replies. Keith can't argue with that. He still remembers the fear he'd had to fight back when he'd taken on Zarkon with Red.

“I don't know if I could use one,” Keith says, the bayard becoming a leaden weight in his hand before the blade vanishes. Zarkon frowns, and Keith averts his eyes, his ears drooping and his tail brushing against his leg. “I can try it.”

“Good,” Zarkon says and clasps his hands behind his back. “Now, there are two ways of going about using different bayard forms.”

Keith nods, and gives Zarkon his full attention.

“The easiest way is by natural progression and growth as a paladin, but that can take years.” Zarkon cocks his head, looking thoughtful for a moment. “You have less than four weeks, so I think we can forget about that.”

Keith swallows at the reminder of the impending death match, but pushes his dread down to focus on what matters right now. “And the second way?”

A minute frown appears on Zarkon's brow. “We are going to force it.”

Keith's face falls, but he schools his expression to something more neutral before Zarkon can comment on it. “How?” He asks instead.

“To put it simply, by putting you in the right state of mind,” Zarkon replies, “this is going to be mentally taxing, but I have confidence in your ability to learn this before your fight.”

Keith isn't as sure about it as Zarkon is, but his confidence is reassuring and Keith is willing to learn if it will save his life. “Are you sure this will work?”

“Yes. Blaytz was the first of us to awaken a secondary form of his bayard in our day, and I wanted to know if I could do it as well. It took me a few weeks to figure it out, but since I am already familiar with how to do it, you get the benefit of my experience.” Zarkon smiles in what is probably supposed to be a reassuring way, but Keith's not feeling it.

“Okay,” he still says, “tell me what I need to do.”

“Start by forming your blade.” Zarkon gives the bayard a pointed look, and Keith does as he's told, even if it takes him a little effort. The bayard feels heavy somehow, like it’s fighting him.

“Start by planting your feet. Be immovable. You must be sure of yourself, to your very core. Imagine that sentry is going to kill you right now, and decide it is not an option.” Zarkon circles around Keith, stopping behind Keith again.

Keith raises an eyebrow. “The one armed sentry?”

“Yes.”
Keith nods and focuses on the broken sentry.

“Now, refuse to let the sentry win. You are Galra, you must act like one. Victory is your only option, and you must feel it with every fiber of your being. Do not just think it, feel it. Know it as a fact that cannot be refuted.” Zarkon touches Keith's elbow, grounding Keith while he does his best to do what Zarkon wants him to do.

Zarkon places his hand on Keith's, encouraging Keith to grip the bayard with more certainty.

With Zarkon's hand on his the bayard feels lighter, and Keith feels a little more confident that he'll succeed.

“Close your eyes,” Zarkon says quietly, pressing his chin on Keith's head and guides Keith's hand down to his side. “Visualize what you want. See it in your mind as if it is truly happening. Feel the shift in the air and the minute tremble that travels through the bayard when you hit your target. Hear the whip cut the air.”

Keith does, or tries to, at least. He pushes everything else out of his mind and focuses only on what Zarkon wants from him, taking his time to be sure he gets it right.

“You must be sure of yourself. This is what you need to do to win, so this is what you will do.” Zarkon places his free hand on Keith's hip. “When you are ready, you strike your enemy down.”

Keith nods minutely and takes a deep breath as he lets himself calm down and visualizes what he wants, doing his best to be sure of himself and his ability to form the whip Zarkon wants him to form.

When he's ready he lets out a breath and opens his eyes, and swings the bayard forward, letting Zarkon guide him through the motions.

The bayard cuts the sentry in half in one quick, dimly glowing flash, much to Keith's surprise. He's sure it's because Zarkon is helping him, and not any talent on his part. It still makes Keith stop and marvel at the possibilities of what he might be able to do in the future.

“Very good,” Zarkon says and lets go of Keith. “Now do it on your own.”

Keith tries, for hours, but he can't replicate the whip Zarkon wants him to use. He grows frustrated, and as he loses his calm the bayard becomes harder to control and keep even in the blade form.

Eventually Zarkon calls it a night. “I did not expect you to succeed on your first try. You must practice daily, and you will be able to form the weapon you want. You are doing well.”

“If you say so,” Keith grumbles in reply and offers the bayard back to Zarkon.

But Zarkon declines it, looking like he's trying hard not to be sour about it. “I want you to keep it for now.”

Keith smirks as he lowers the bayard. “How much did that hurt to say?”

Zarkon doesn't dignify Keith with an answer as he heads to the door.
Keith practices with the bayard every day for hours on end, on top of bettering his combat skills with Zarkon and honing his balance with Haala and sometimes even with Haggar. He learns to ignore his tail for the most part, and he even gets a hang of working with it, though Keith wouldn’t be surprised if it was only a temporary truce.

It leaves him exhausted, and he thinks he might fall asleep on the Arena at the rate he's going at.

The only thing that keeps him from giving up is the open delight and pride on Zarkon's face when Keith manages to form the blade whip for a few seconds, even if it does nothing more but scratch the paint of his broken sentry opponent.

That's the only day he lets himself have an early evening.

He showers for longer than usual, and doesn't bother waiting for Zarkon to return from his impromptu meeting with Haggar before digging into his evening snack and heading to bed, deciding a good night's sleep will go a long way to help him practice the next day.

Keith isn't quite asleep when Zarkon climbs on the bed and nuzzles his cheek. Keith cracks an eye open and smiles. Zarkon doesn't say anything as he nips at Keith's jaw and licks his neck, giving Keith a questioning look.

Keith nods and sighs, and lets his eyes fall shut again, enjoying Zarkon's touch on his skin and the heavy tiredness in his bones.

He melts against the bed when Zarkon pushes his shirt up and kisses the exposed skin. Keith runs his claws lazily up Zarkon's arm, not really caring about where this is going but enjoying it and the burning heat slowly pooling in his belly. Somewhere in the back of his mind Keith wonders at which point Zarkon changed out of his armor.

Keith absently lifts his hips when Zarkon pulls at his underwear, and Keith groans softly when Zarkon takes a hold of his length and works him to full hardness, slow and lazy, not bothering to hurry.

Zarkon bites Keith's hip and Keith gasps, gripping Zarkon's shoulder a little tighter and his tail thumping against the bed. He urges Zarkon to move lower, but there's no urgency in it. Zarkon still gives him what he wants, sucking the tip of Keith's cock into his mouth, his hands trailing down to grab Keith's ass.

Keith moans and spreads his legs further.

Zarkon's claws brush against Keith's hole, and Keith's eyes snap open, a realization hitting him hard. He plants his foot on Zarkon's chest and pushes him away, letting out an urgent noise.

"You're not putting your claws in me!"

"And why is that?" Zarkon sits up, looking annoyed at the interruption.

Keith stares at him with a flat expression, slowly raising an eyebrow when Zarkon tilts his head. “I'll give you two guesses.”

Zarkon frowns, then he huffs a quiet laugh before crawling up the bed to press his forehead to Keith's. “I know what I am doing.”

“I don't care. I don't want you even accidentally scratching my insides,” Keith replies, but there's a smile playing on his lips, and his ears twitch up.
Zarkon snorts, but he doesn't push it. Keith wraps his arms around his shoulders and bares his neck, pleased when Zarkon bites down on the exposed skin. He lets Zarkon press him to the bed with his weight, a soft moan escaping his lips.

On a whim, Keith shifts until he can wrap his leg around Zarkon's thigh, pressing against him and grinding his hips up to get the friction he needs. Zarkon — to Keith's delight and relief — presses down on him even as he lifts his head to give Keith a curious look.

Keith barely notices it. He lets his eyes fall close and focuses on the heat building in his belly and the feel of Zarkon's weight pressing him down until his orgasm hits him.

There's a part of Keith that absently thinks he should apologize for messing Zarkon's clothes, but he's tired and relaxed, and his mind buzzes with content, lazy happiness.

After a moment Keith opens his eyes, squinting up at Zarkon's fondly amused if exasperated face. Keith frowns. He's not sure what he did to earn that expression, and he raises a questioning eyebrow since asking seems like too much work.

Zarkon sighs and presses a kiss on Keith's forehead. “Go to sleep.”

Keith nods and closes his eyes. When Zarkon pushes himself off the bed, Keith misses his weight and warmth on top of him.

He falls asleep before Zarkon returns, though he stirs when the damp cloth presses against his skin. Keith thinks he mumbles a quiet thank you, but he can't be sure.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to get the next update to you next week.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 37

Getting here was like pulling teeth. Wow. Hope the wait was worth it to you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Keith's breath shudders.

He's not ready for this. He can't do this. He can't win a fight against Vazka. He doesn't even know how good Vazka is at combat. For all he knows Vazka could be some kind of a prodigy, or had years of training, or both.

He barely notices the druids fitting the armor on him. It's like a streamlined, lighter version of Zarkon's armor, at least when it comes to the colors, and for a brief moment Keith is reminded of his old Paladin armor.

The druids step away when Zarkon enters the room. Keith registers him telling the druids to go away, but it's all distant somehow.

The walls feel too faraway. It's not that the room is large, or at least it didn't seem that way when Keith entered it with Zarkon the night before. The bed is on it's own section of the room, two steps higher than the rest of the floor. There's a small hexagon table with three chairs around it, and there are three soft chairs in one corner.

The walls are packed with shelves and drapes that muffle any echoes that might have otherwise penetrated the room. The drapes aren't like the ones in Zarkon's quarters in the Command Ship, or even in their quarters on Cenzi's ship, both of which in they were stylistic but not eye catching, and thus easy to ignore. They blended into the walls in a natural way. Here they are just off enough to be immediately noticeable, and Keith can't ignore them.

But the walls still feel too faraway. Everything is too faraway. Even Zarkon seems to be light years away despite the fact that he has moved close enough to touch Keith at some point.

Zarkon takes over fastening the armor on Keith. “You will be fine. I have full confidence in your ability to defeat Vazka.”

Keith swallows even though his throat is dry.

Zarkon finishes with the armor and moves to braid Keith's hair. “You must clear your mind and calm down. If you allow your fears and anxieties take over you will have a harder time winning.”

“I know,” Keith croaks, then clears his throat. “I've never done anything like this before. I'm not actually used to killing people, and doing so in an Arena in front of who knows how many people —”

“Listen,” Zarkon cuts in and turns Keith around, gripping his jaw to force Keith to meet his eyes. “They are not here to see you die. They are here to offer you their support. Do you remember when I told you our people used to be divided?”
Keith nods as well as he can.

“There was a time when, if conflict arose, opposing clans would choose a champion to fight to death instead of going to outright war. The clans would come to show their support and unity to their champion, offering their own will and spirit to their champion so that they may be victorious.”

Zarkon runs his knuckles across Keith's cheek.

It makes Keith feel a little better, and he offers Zarkon a shaky smile.

Zarkon studies Keith with a solemn expression for a moment before leaning down and kissing him gently, if urgently. Keith pulls him closer, deepening the kiss almost frantically. Zarkon allows it and cups Keith's face in his hands and pulls him closer, biting Keith's lip so hard it stings. Keith loves it.

And for a moment he thinks he might love Zarkon too, just a little bit.

It makes Keith gasp and break the kiss, but he doesn't pull away. He stares at Zarkon — almost like he's seeing him for the first time — and to his dismay the feeling is still there. That little hint of what might be defined as love.

“Hey.” Zarkon's voice snaps Keith back to reality, and he blinks.

“I will not allow harm to come to you,” Zarkon continues, “you are mine.”

Keith bites his lip. The part of him that might once recoiled at the idea of him belonging to Zarkon is no more than a muffled protest in the back of his mind declaring that if he were to belong to someone it would not be Zarkon.

It's almost too easy to snuff out.

Because in the end, in some strange way, Keith supposes he does belong to Zarkon. Maybe not as a possession like Vazka had said, but in the way he felt like he belonged to Shiro; had known it in his very core and his heart, felt it with a certainty he'd never even thought about questioning.

Some part of him still does belong to Shiro, and Keith wouldn't be surprised if that part never disappeared.

He leans against Zarkon's palm and nods. Then, needing to do something to get his mind off of things, he takes a deep breath and steps away from Zarkon. “When I get back we're going to talk about your habit of dressing me up.” Keith glances at his armor. “I think this is more you than it is me.”

“It is modeled after the style of my house. I had the design tweaked to fit you, but it was not originally designed with you in mind,” Zarkon replies.

Keith is about to ask who the armor was originally designed for, but the hesitant knock on the door stops him. Zarkon scowls at the door and spares Keith a glance before going to open it.

Keith's ears perk up when he hears Haala's voice, and Zarkon steps aside to let him in. Haala looks sheepish in Zarkon's presence, but he doesn't hesitate when he walks up to Keith and thrusts a sword at him.

“You're supposed to have a sword with your family insignia, but since you're a nobody I thought you might want to borrow mine.” Haala shifts, his ears twisting back.
Keith takes the sword and tries it out, pleased to find it's easy to handle. “Thanks.”

Haala inclines his head and turns to Zarkon. “I would like to escort him today.”

“As long as he is fine with it.” Zarkon looks at Keith with an inquisitive expression, and Keith nods.

“I'd like that.”

Haala smiles at Keith, but there's sadness in his eyes.

“I must go see Haggar. I trust you two can handle yourselves,” Zarkon says, and waits until Keith nods before heading out of the door.

A grim silence falls into the room after his departure, and Keith shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

Haala clears his throat, but he doesn't quite meet Keith's eyes. “I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with, and being assigned to babysit you might've been one of the worst things to ever happen to me, but I like you.”

Keith raises an eyebrow and smiles.

Haala scowls at him and crosses his arms. “You're like an annoying younger brother I never wanted but I'm obligated to care for.”

Keith blinks, then lunges at Haala, the sword clattering to the floor seconds before he throws his arms around Haala and holds him as tight as he can. “I'd be glad to be your brother.”

Haala scoffs but holds Keith in his arms without a complaint, resting his chin on top of Keith's head and rubbing calming circles on his back. Keith doesn't pull away for several minutes, but when he does he feels marginally better.

Zarkon stops by to inform Keith of the timetable and to hand Keith the knife Alfor had given him, and he orders Keith to hide it in his boot. He also tells Keith to hide the bayard, and Keith does as he's told.

Keith presses himself against Zarkon’s side, and Haala gives them some space.

Zarkon doesn't say anything, but he lets his affection for Keith seep through the bond and take over Keith's mind. There's a reassurance in there, that Zarkon will be there for Keith every second of the way.

Keith knows that if he were to ask, Zarkon would walk Keith all the way to the Arena. He doesn't ask, even though he wants to, especially when Zarkon presses a kiss on his forehead before walking out of the door and leaving Keith in Haala's care.

They don't speak, beyond Haala saying Marzila had taken the day off and she should be there by now, but Haala's presence is enough to keep Keith grounded.

The next time the silence breaks is when Haala tells Keith they need to be going.
Keith isn't sure if the static in his ears is the roar of the spectators or the rush of his own blood.

Haala grips his arm to get his attention, and Keith has to shake his head minutely to get his senses to work again.

“Don't panic. That's the worst thing you can do. A bit of fear is good, it keeps you on your toes, but panicking is going to get you killed. Just be brave and ignore the crowd. They don't matter.” Haala squeezes Keith's arm for a second before letting go. “I'll be right here and I'll come get you when you're done kicking his ass. When he falls just stay still and don't do anything, and I'll be there in less than a keesek.”

Keith nods and does his best to shake his fear and anxiety off. He can't quite manage it, and he's sure the downward tilt of his ears and the twitching of his tail give his feelings off.

Haala walks Keith through the gates, and Keith focuses on the feel of the ground under his feet and the walls, taking in the layout of the Arena like Zarkon had told him to do, focusing on nothing but that and blocking out everything else, especially the crowd. The ground is like rock, uneven at places but solid and it doesn't slip under Keith's feet, but there's a layer of sand like dust covering large parts of the ground that Keith will have to be careful of.

He doesn't pay attention to Vazka until they're standing before the Arbiter, an ancient looking Galra in thick robes and decorative armor. Zarkon had given him a lengthy explanation about traditions and laws and how this is a legal proceeding before all else and will be treated as such. Keith had drowned most of it out, and there's a part of him that regrets it now.

“This is a tradition passed down from ancient times,” the Arbiter starts, his voice carrying across the Arena, “the chosen Champion of the Empire will fight the Lawbreaker to death according to the rules of execution by combat. Do the Aides vouch that the combatants are armed and suited according to the directive?”

Both Haala and the woman by Vazka's side reply yes.

The Arbiter's eyes drift from Keith to Vazka, then he bows his head. “Take your places. On the gong.”

Haala guides Keith to take a few steps back and offers Keith a last encouraging look before following the Arbiter and Vazka's Aide out of the Arena, leaving Keith alone with Vazka.

Vazka smiles brightly, looking Keith up and down. “Still being the doll I see,” he says far too conversationally for their situation. “Can you turn around so that I can see the 'Property of the Emperor' stamped on your ass?”

Keith's ears flatten and he glares at Vazka, his teeth grinding together. He can't hear anything but the rush of blood in his ears, silencing out every other sound around him. He's shaking with fury, and he tenses, ready to lunge at Vazka the second he can.

But the brief, satisfied smirk that crosses Vazka's face stops Keith.

Hadin't Zarkon told him to be in control of his emotions? That he makes the most mistakes when he's angry?
Vazka is trying to get him to screw up.

Keith needs to stay calm. He needs to focus. He can't let Vazka get under his skin. He has to —

Vazka lunges at him, and Keith has a split second to get over his surprise before Vazka's sword is coming at his face.

Keith steps aside. Vazka stops, his expression confused before he frowns and lunges at Keith again.

Keith dodges again, and again, until his anger dissipates and Vazka grows annoyed. Keith takes note of the way Vazka moves, how he favors force more than finesse even if he’s obviously skilled, and how he keeps his sword on his right. He also notes how much slower Vazka is compared to Zarkon.

Vazka lunges at Keith again, and Keith steps aside. Vazka swirls and attacks again. Keith dodges, sees the opening in Vazka's defense and aims his sword at Vazka's side.

But Vazka grabs his wrist before he can land the strike. Keith's eyes widen and Vazka's fist connects with his face, the hilt of his sword digging into Keith's cheek.

The crack and the pain flaring across his face tells Keith his nose breaks. He sees stars, and for a second it distracts him from the crushing pain in his wrist. He almost drops his sword.

Keith knees Vazka's groin, taking the opportunity to pull the dagger from his boot. The knee distracts Vazka just enough for Keith to plunge the dagger into his side.

Vazka lets go of Keith and jumps back, blood oozing from the wound that to Keith's disappointment is not as severe as he'd aimed for.

Keith takes a step back, switches the sword from his right hand to his left, and spits the blood from his mouth. His head buzzes, but he shakes it off.

Keith sheaths the dagger just in time to block Vazka's sword. Keith grits his teeth, struggling against the weight of Vazka's sword on his.

His wrist must be broken. It feels like it, and he hesitates to use it to support his sword.

Vazka drives a fist to Keith's side, and Keith barely gets out of the way of the sword aimed at his head. Keith grits his teeth and swings his sword at Vazka with all his strength before rushing out of his way.

He needs to figure out a new strategy.

Vazka comes at him again, and Keith counters him before dodging and aiming at Vazka's side. He gets a hit, but Vazka steps away and avoids the full blow of it. He comes at Keith again and Keith blocks his attack.

The only warning Keith gets before Vazka's fist connects with his head is the brief smirk on Vazka's face.

Keith stumbles back. His vision blurs, and it dawns on him that Vazka is trying to knock him out or at least get him disoriented enough to be unable to fight.

Keith backs off, putting enough distance between them to have room to pick up speed before
throwing his sword at Vazka, not really caring if it hits him as long as it distracts him.

As Keith hoped Vazka is far more focused on the sword than Keith. He doesn’t react fast enough when Keith hits the ground and slides past him, his tail steadying him on the fast turn around. Keith drives his dagger into Vazka's thigh, and while Vazka jumps away from him he gets up and aims the dagger at Vazka's throat.

Vazka grabs Keith's wrist, but the dagger catches his attention before he can do anything else. “Is that Altean design?”

Keith kicks Vazka’s knee as hard as he can instead of answering.

Vazka head butts him in return, and Keith's vision swims. He twists his arm from Vazka and stabs his gut before stepping back.

Vazka grabs his tail and twists it hard enough for Keith to bite back a cry of pain. “Pros and cons, doll,” Vazka says and pulls at Keith's tail.

If Vazka wants Keith closer, Keith supposes he can give him what he wants. He aims the dagger low, cutting Vazka's side when he steps aside and lets go of Keith, punching Keith in the side of his head to keep him from following before putting some distance between them.

Keith glances back at his sword lying a few feet behind him, and hobbles to it without taking his eyes off of Vazka.

Darkness dances at the edges of Keith's vision, and Vazka is dripping blood everywhere.

It's a race to which one of them falls first. Keith suspects Vazka will win. He can barely hold onto consciousness, and Vazka — though panting and looking less than perfect — is still standing without faltering.

Keith can't afford to get close to him again. One more strike on his head and the last thing Keith will need to worry about is losing consciousness. There's no point in him picking up the sword.

He needs to do something fast.

The bounding pain of his head drowns out all the sounds around him. All that exists is the steady thrum of his too fast heartbeat and the pain it brings with it.

He takes a deep breath and steels himself. He's not letting Vazka win. He's not. If Vazka wants him dead he's going to have to work for it, and Keith will take him with him.

Keith still has the bayard. He doesn't know if he can form a blade with it, let alone the whip, but he can't go near Vazka and he needs to do something.

A clarity falls over Keith, and he lets go of his anxiety and fear. He plants himself, refusing to back down no matter what. Failure is not an option.

He picks up the sword and flings it at Vazka, hoping he'll expect Keith to do the same trick twice. Instead of rushing after the sword Keith pulls out the bayard. There's something, like a shadowy presence — a consciousness — that Keith doesn't recognize in the back of his mind, and the bayard is lighter than it's ever been in his hand.

Like his own used to be.
He visualizes what he wants, and swings the bayard at Vazka, imagining Zarkon is there guiding his movements.

The surprise on Vazka's face is worth all the pain Keith has endured. It's not enough to keep him from dropping flat on the ground to avoid the blade whip swooshing through where his middle had just been. The whip slams against the near wall, sending rubble flying everywhere, and Keith uses the momentum to swing the whip back at Vazka.

Vazka rolls out of the way, scrambling to his feet while Keith uses all the strength he has left to swing the whip at him.

It might have hit Vazka if he was able to hold the bayard in the whip form, but his head hurts and for a second he can't see.

The bayard shifts back to the familiar blade form, and for a moment it's heavy in Keith's hand. Keith takes in the dumbfounded look on Vazka's face and sends the blade flying across the shortened distance between them, but Vazka stops it before it can do more than pierce his armor, his hands bleeding, and his sword clattering to the ground. Keith hadn't had the strength to throw it any harder.

So Keith rushes after the bayard, using all the rage and strength he has left to ram against it and force it through Vazka.

The silence that follows is deafening, only broken by Vazka coughing up blood as he stares at the blade stuck hilt deep in him. He looks up at Keith, anger and confusion clear in his eyes, and grabs Keith's throat as if to strangle him.

An eternity passes before Vazka falls to the ground.

Keith blinks away the blood dripping into his eyes, slowly becoming less and less aware of the world around him.

At least he's still standing.

He just has to last until Haala comes for him.

The smell of a medical bay is familiar, yet tainted with despair hanging in the air.

Keith groans and cracks his eyes open, but he doesn't recognize his surroundings. He's lying on a cold table, his armor stripped off and a sheet thrown over him.

“I don't know what the Emperor has been teaching you, but you might want to look into a fighting style that doesn't involve getting repeatedly hit in the head,” Haggar's voice says somewhere from Keith's left.

“Did I win?” Keith turns to look at her.

She inclines her head, a satisfied smile gracing her lips. “Yes.” She pauses, almost hesitant. “I healed your wounds and took care of your concussion. Your wrist was broken in several places, and it will be sore for a few days, and you will have some bruising and scrapes, but it should be
nothing you can't heal on your own.”

“Thanks,” Keith says as he pushes himself up, holding the sheet against his chest out of a sense of modesty he can't quite let go of, and he looks around the unfamiliar medical bay. “Where's Zarkon?”

“He was here a moment ago, but he had to go take care of something,” Haggar replies. “I believe he is expecting you in your room. You may go if you feel like it, but drink that first.” She points at the glass by Keith's side.

Keith nods and reaches for the glass, finishing the thick juice in one go before putting his armor back on, since it's the only clothing he has available. He bids Haggar goodbye before heading out of the door.

He gets looks as he makes his way to where his and Zarkon's room is, hoping but not expecting Zarkon to already be there.

But Zarkon is there, focused on his pad with a scowl marring his face. He's taken most of his armor off, but he's still wearing the under armor suit and his boots. He looks up when Keith enters, his scowl fading away as a soft smile takes over his face.

“I was unsure if you would be returning here tonight,” he starts, putting his pad down and giving Keith his full attention.

Keith shifts, hesitant for a moment before making his way to Zarkon. He has to stop to nudge Zarkon's feet to get him to uncross them, but as soon as he can he climbs on Zarkon's lap, throwing his arms around him and clinging to him with everything he has.

He survived.

He's alive.

He wants to feel like it too.

“Take me to bed,” Keith says, his voice barely above a whisper.

Zarkon shifts, his hold on Keith loosening just a fraction. “What?”

“Take me to bed,” Keith repeats, his voice stronger this time, and lifts his head from the crook of Zarkon's neck to meet his eyes. “I want you.”

Zarkon studies him closely for a long moment before inclining his head and nibbling at Keith's jaw. Keith lets his eyes fall shut, and he clings to Zarkon when he stands up and carries Keith to the bed. He lays Keith down gently and urges him to scoop up the bed before undoing Keith's boots and dropping them to the ground. Keith helps him by undoing the rest of his armor while Zarkon strips off what's left of his own.

Keith pulls Zarkon down, nipping his ear and moaning softly when Zarkon bites his neck. Keith struggles to free himself from his under armor suit while Zarkon sucks at the tip of Keith's ear. He manages, somehow, and Zarkon takes the opportunity to mouth his way down Keith's body.

Keith's head thumps against the bed and he claws at the resilient fabric still covering Zarkon for some reason. He wants it off. Zarkon chuckles and grins up at Keith, then sits up and shrugs off the top of his under armor suit before getting back to sucking a mark on Keith's hip.
“Wait, hold on.” Keith pushes at Zarkon's shoulder. “I'm still not letting you stick your claws in me.”

Zarkon huffs and pushes himself off Keith. “Stay still.” He climbs off the bed and leaves Keith there, half hard and barely undressed.

Keith scowls and strips off the rest of his clothes while he waits.

Zarkon returns moments later, an amused smile falling on his lips when he sees Keith has undressed. Keith is far more focused on the towel, bottle and jars Zarkon is carrying.

Zarkon drops them on the bed and sits down, beckoning Keith to come closer. “Dip your fingers in this,” he orders as he opens the larger jar.

It's filled with clear liquid of some kind, and when Keith puts his fingers in it it's smooth and a little thick to the touch. He studies his fingers with mild curiosity, and Zarkon takes a hold of his hand to keep him still. The liquid dries into a flexible, soft layer on Keith's claws, and Zarkon runs his thumb across them. “Try it.”

Keith presses his claws on his palm, frowns, then rubs his claws against his arm. They're dull, and no matter how hard Keith presses he can't do more than leave faint lines on his arm that fade away moments later.

“It is the same substance you had on your teeth when you were changed into a Galra,” Zarkon explains as he sets the jar aside on the nightstand.

It makes sense, Keith supposes. “And this is okay to use? You're not just improvising?”

Zarkon raises an eyebrow. “It is. We have used this to have safer sex for decades. I think you will be fine.”

Keith nods, feeling better. Without a warning Zarkon yanks at Keith's legs, sending him sprawling on the bed. Keith yelps, then laughs when Zarkon nuzzles his neck and nips his ear.

Keith runs his hands up Zarkon's arms and shoulders, and wraps his legs around Zarkon's waist, his tail thumping against the bed.

Zarkon kisses the scrape on Keith's temple where Vazka had struck him, and Keith's breath stutters, the memory of the nausea and pain clouding his mind for a second. He bites his lip and forces the memory back down.

Vazka isn't going to ruin this for Keith. He's dead. Keith killed him.

“You are safe,” Zarkon says, pressing his nose against Keith's for a second. “You won.”

Keith nods. “Distract me?”

“As you wish.” Zarkon bites Keith's neck and runs his hands down Keith's sides, spreading his legs a little further.

Keith pushes against the bond, needing to feel Zarkon's mind as well as his body, and Zarkon yields. There's something like desperation under the desire and practiced calm of Zarkon's mind. Like he needs to reassure himself that Keith is alive and well.

Keith lets out a quiet whimper and pulls Zarkon closer.
Zarkon kisses and licks and bites Keith's skin, giving extra attention to every spot that makes Keith gasp or moan. He doesn't waste time taking Keith in his hand and working him into full hardness. Keith grips Zarkon's shoulders, moaning and letting the desire and heat cloud his mind and chase away the memory of Vazka impaled on his blade.

After a minute Zarkon sits up and pulls a pillow from the head of the bed, and encourages Keith to lift his hips. Keith does, his heart skipping with excited anticipation.

Zarkon presses a kiss on Keith's collarbone. “Just relax.”

“I know. I've done this before,” Keith replies, and the way Zarkon stops to give him an almost disgruntled look makes him snort. “You didn't really think I'd never had sex before, did you?”

Zarkon bites Keith's thigh instead of replying, and Keith laughs, feeling lighter all of the sudden.

Zarkon reaches for the bottle and Keith pushes himself up. He wants Zarkon out of what remains of his clothes. Zarkon chuckles, but lets Keith push his under armor suit down his things. He helps Keith by kicking the suit off before pushing Keith back down on the bed.

“Mind your claws,” he reminds Keith when he reaches for Zarkon again. Keith nods and runs his claws down Zarkon's spine when he leans down to nip at Keith's ear. Keith focuses on Zarkon's mouth on him and nothing else, especially when Zarkon lifts his leg and runs a slick finger between Keith's thighs.

Zarkon gives Keith's ear one last nip before resting his forehead on Keith's, his eyes focused on Keith's.

“Just relax,” Zarkon says before he pushes a finger inside Keith.

For a moment, Keith tenses, his breath catching in his throat. Then he reminds himself to relax and breathes out.

Zarkon studies him for a second longer before sitting back and taking Keith's length in his free hand. Keith moans and closes his eyes, and grips Zarkon's thigh with his left hand. His tail wraps around Zarkon's arm in a vice like grip, and he fists his right hand in the sheets as tightly as he can without hurting himself.

Soon Zarkon adds a second finger, working Keith open fast but thoroughly.

Keith can do little but gasp and moan, but he tries. He reaches for Zarkon, doing his best to recall what he'd read from the books, and cups Zarkon's sheathed length. Zarkon's breath hitches, just for a second, and he shifts closer to Keith to give him better access. He guides Keith through the bond, and Keith is grateful for it.

Not that he can do much more than press his palm against the heavy weight in Zarkon's sheath when Zarkon adds a third finger and curls them, sending sparks of pleasure shooting up Keith's spine.

Zarkon leans down to nuzzle Keith's cheek, gently grinding against Keith's palm, and there's a part of Keith's mind not clouded by arousal or desire that finds it just a little bit funny.

Keith drops his hand when Zarkon sits back up. He hisses at the loss of Zarkon's fingers in him when Zarkon reaches for the towel and the second jar he'd left on the bed. “Trust me,” Zarkon says, and Keith nods, not really caring what Zarkon is talking about as long as he puts his fingers back inside Keith.
He feels empty without them.

Zarkon scoops some of the thick transparent gel from the jar and sucks a mark on Keith's thigh as he pushes his fingers back in Keith.

Keith sighs and closes his eyes, and pushes against Zarkon's fingers.

He needs more. He feels empty. He feels —

Numb.

He's going numb.

Keith pushes himself to his elbows with an urgent noise escaping his lips.

“Trust me,” Zarkon repeats, “you will thank me later.”

Keith swallows and nods, trusting Zarkon to know what he's doing even if Keith's not entirely sure he agrees with it. Zarkon encourages Keith to take himself in his hand, and it distracts Keith enough for him to stop worrying about what Zarkon is doing.

As long as it feels as good as it does it can't be bad.

Keith's breath shudders and he pushes himself onto Zarkon's fingers then into his own fist, and he stops caring about anything but the fast building heat in his belly.

Zarkon curls his fingers and Keith's body locks up for a second before he cries out, his orgasm hitting him without a warning.

He's aware of Zarkon pulling his fingers out, and he sees Zarkon towel his hand, but he doesn't have the energy to move.

Zarkon pulls Keith up, holding him in his arms as he nuzzles Keith's neck, and Keith purrs and kisses Zarkon's shoulder. Zarkon lays him back down on the covers face down, and Keith frowns and pushes himself up to his elbows. “I wanna see you.”

“You will,” Zarkon assures him, nipping the back of Keith's neck, “you just need to trust me and relax.”

Keith throws Zarkon a dubious look, but he lies back down and sighs, focusing on the sated feeling still clinging to his bones. Zarkon rearranges Keith's limbs, encouraging him to lift his hips until he can push the pillow back under him.

Keith settles down and closes his eyes, trying not to let the growing anticipation take over and make him tense. He knows it will hurt a lot more if he tenses.

Zarkon runs a hand up Keith's back and leans down to nibble his shoulder, gripping Keith's hip with his other hand. “Are you sure about this?”

Keith nods. “Yes. I want you.”

Zarkon kisses Keith's shoulder and nudges his legs to get him spread them a little further. Keith obliges and tilts his head so that he can see Zarkon's face. Zarkon holds his gaze, and Keith takes a deep breath and lets it out when Zarkon pushes into him.

Keith's breath shudders and he grips Zarkon's hand holding his hips still. “Relax,” Zarkon says, his
voice soft, and presses his mind comfortably against Keith's.

Keith focuses on that, breathing deeply and calmly while Zarkon pushes deeper into him slowly, filling Keith up until he feels like he's going to split.

He gasps and presses his forehead to the covers, breaking his eye contact with Zarkon.

Slowly the sense of fullness shifts from enjoyable to too much, and Keith grips the covers in his hands, forcing himself to stay relaxed. He ignores the burning of his body and focuses on breathing.

He can handle it. He knows he can.

He can't take it.

Zarkon rubs his back and shushes him. “Just breathe.”

Keith tries, but his body shakes from the strain and he can't take it. His eyes water and he bites back a whimper.

“Just breathe,” Zarkon repeats, pressing a kiss on the nape of Keith's neck.

Keith grits his teeth and forces himself to take a deep breath. Zarkon kisses his neck again, then stills, his thighs pressed against Keith’s. “Relax, kito. You are doing so well.” He nips Keith's shoulder. “I told you you could take it.”

Keith presses his face harder against the covers and tries to relax. Zarkon runs his hands up and down Keith's back and presses gentle kisses across Keith's neck and shoulders, filling the bond with warmth and comfort.

Keith doesn't know how long they stay like that, but when his breathing eases out and some of the tension leaves his body, Zarkon rolls his hips. Keith hisses and tenses, and the nudge through the bond is the only reason he relaxes again.

Zarkon gives Keith a second before pulling out a little and shallowly thrusting back in. Keith tenses again for a second, biting his lip to keep himself quiet. Zarkon does it again, and Keith groans, clutching the sheets in his hands.

Zarkon leans down to press his chin on Keith's shoulder. “Do you want to stop?”

Keith doesn't have an answer for him. He's not sure what he wants. Zarkon takes it Keith's lack of answer as a yes and pulls out, and Keith hisses at the sudden emptiness.

He wants Zarkon back in him.

“Better?” Zarkon asks, and Keith shakes his head.

Zarkon chuckles, and Keith lets out a soft, satisfied sigh when Zarkon pushes back into him.

“Stop,” Keith says before Zarkon can push more than a few inches in. Zarkon stills, and Keith feels a hint of curiosity and worry over Keith's wellbeing through their bond.

Keith pushes himself up to his elbows and glances at Zarkon over his shoulder. “Let me.”

Zarkon inclines his head and, after nipping Keith's shoulder he pushes himself up and puts his hands on Keith's hips, not doing more than keeping them there, gently rubbing Keith’s skin with
his thumbs. Keith takes a deep breath and pushes back, just a little, until the fullness and stretch starts stinging.

Slowly, Keith takes more and more of Zarkon in, and he starts feeling the familiar heat of arousal growing in him. He moans quietly, smiling at the briefest flash of impatience Zarkon can't keep from flashing through the bond. Keith gets it.

He feels it too.

Keith is hard by the time his thighs press against Zarkon's, and he throws Zarkon a grin over his shoulder. “See? Patience.”

Zarkon snorts and runs his hands up Keith's back while Keith dissolves into a fit of laughter that turns into a loud moan when Zarkon grabs his braid and pulls gently.

Keith takes the hint to move, pushing his gratitude at Zarkon letting him take the lead through the bond before he focuses on finding the perfect rhythm and angle for them both.

Zarkon encourages him to alternatively either change his speed or his angle, and Keith's breaths come out as soft moans.

Without giving Keith a warning, Zarkon slams into Keith.

Keith cries out and slumps in the bed, shocked and breathing hard. Zarkon taps his hip gently, almost teasingly, and Keith looks over his shoulder at him.

Zarkon raises an eyebrow. “Too much?”

“No,” Keith replies. He wants Zarkon to do it again. His whole body rings from it and he wants more. He pushes himself up to his elbows and fucks himself on Zarkon's cock.

Zarkon's hold on his hips is loose at best, and Keith can't anticipate the next time he meets Keith's thrusts. He shivers from the anticipation and from having Zarkon so deep in him.

Zarkon slams into him again, knocking the breath out of Keith.

“Again?” He asks when Keith stops gasping for air, and Keith nods. Zarkon's hold on Keith's hips tightens, and he thrusts into him, faster and harder, but not giving Keith what he'd asked for.

Keith groans and pushes against Zarkon, and Zarkon chuckles before ramming his cock into Keith again. Keith cries out and presses his forehead on the bed, and lets Zarkon do as he pleases.

Zarkon doesn't give Keith a chance to get used to a rhythm, thrusting shallowly at times and hard and fast at others, and Keith can do little more than take it.

Keith loves it.

Zarkon pulls out of him, but before Keith can complain Zarkon flips him around and pulls him closer, a smile on his face. “You said you wanted to see me.”

Keith wraps his arms and legs around Zarkon, sighing when Zarkon enters him again. Zarkon presses his forehead against Keith's, moving slowly at first but picking up speed fast.

Keith claws at his back, gasping and moaning, and trying to meet Zarkon's thrusts for a few moments before giving up and taking what Zarkon wants to give.
It's like they are all that exists. Zarkon is all Keith feel in him and around him, and he doesn't know where Zarkon's mind ends and his own begins.

Maybe it doesn't matter.

Keith leans up to bite the soft skin on Zarkon's collar, muffling his cries and pleads for more — for release — against Zarkon's skin. He needs just a little bit more.

Zarkon fucks him hard and deep, and Keith screams, his vision blacking out for a second as his body locks up, his orgasm hitting him hard.

Zarkon growls, gripping Keith's hip so hard he draws blood, and thrusts into Keith, coming so deep in him that Keith can taste it. He can feel it with every inch of his body.

Zarkon leans his forehead on Keith's shoulder, his breathing fast and heavy, just like Keith's. It takes him a moment to get his bearings and look up, and Keith smiles at him as much as he can.

“Was that good?” Keith asks, his voice coarse.

Zarkon huffs and presses his cheek against Keith's briefly. “Yes.” He nips Keith's jaw. “As long as you enjoyed it as well.”

Keith nods, his eyes catching on the bite mark he'd left on Zarkon's skin. He touches it, smiling to himself. Zarkon glances down and sighs, then nudges Keith's leg with his knee. “This is going to be uncomfortable.”

Keith looks up, confused for a second before Zarkon pulls out of him. Keith hisses, feeling empty and hollow. Zarkon pets his hair as he settles by his side, pulling Keith into his arms. “We will have to shower,” he says, and Keith nods.

“Later?” Keith snuggles against Zarkon and brushes his jaw with his knuckles.

Zarkon inclines his head, touching his nose against Keith's before pressing his forehead against Keith's. A low purr emanates from his chest, and Keith smiles lazily. Zarkon runs his claws along Keith's side, and after a while Keith purrs too, much to his dismay.

Zarkon chuckles and nuzzles Keith's temple. Keith shifts to look at him, taking in the soft, lazy smile, and he's struck with that feeling that he doesn't want to call love.

He blinks and presses his face against Zarkon's chest, letting his eyes fall close for a moment. If Zarkon catches onto his feelings, he doesn't say anything about it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm taking a brief hiatus since it took me over week to get through editing this (bet it shows too) and I need to rest my brain a little. Depressive phase and all that jazz. So while you'll probably be getting another chapter in a few weeks, I'm not making any promises on when I feel like editing again.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Look! I'm being productive again! Enjoy this little filler chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith's body aches in a not entirely uncomfortable way.
It drags him from his sleep, and he groans before pushing himself up, blinking the last of the sleep from his eyes. It takes him a moment to remember he'd killed Vazka in front of thousands of people the day before.

It takes him another moment to remember the cause of his body aching the way it does. Keith slumps on the bed, slowly becoming aware of every individual ache and sore spot.

He had sex with Zarkon.

He had almost died, and he had sex with Zarkon.

“And here I thought you were going to sleep all day.” Zarkon's voice stops Keith from spiraling, and Keith's eyes snap to him and he pushes himself back up. He’s not sure if he’s up to dealing with Zarkon just yet. He's not sure where their relationship is now, and he hasn't been awake for long enough for him to start trying to figure it out.

Zarkon walks up to the bed and hands Keith a glass. “This will help with the pain.” Keith doesn’t ask how Zarkon know he’d need it as he drinks the pink, too sweet juice.

Zarkon sits on the edge of the bed, brushing his claws softly against Keith’s leg. “We will be returning to our ship today.”

Keith nods as he sets the glass aside, and avoids looking directly at Zarkon, unsure of he’s ready to confront everything that had happened last night just yet. He still sees Zarkon tilt his head from the corner of his eye.

Zarkon had carried Keith into the shower last night, and when Keith had been too tired and aching to stand down he'd sat on the floor with Keith and washed his hair. He'd complained about the bite mark Keith had left on his collarbone, but there had been amusement in his eyes, and no serious complaint in his voice, and he hadn't done anything about it.

Keith wonders if the mark is still there.

“Is something wrong?” Zarkon asks, concern coloring his voice.

“No,” Keith hurries to say, “it's just that...” He sighs, unsure of how to explain himself.

Zarkon shifts. “Go on.”

Keith shrugs and studies the wrinkles in the sheets. “I was just wondering what's gonna happen between us now.”
“Nothing we do not want to happen,” Zarkon replies, brushing a strand of hair behind Keith's drooping ears. “Do you regret last night?”

Keith thinks about it, then shakes his head. “No. I just don't know what's going to happen now.”

“We are going to start by returning to our ship,” Zarkon says, “then you will rest. After that we will see.”

Keith pulls his knees to his chest and glances at Zarkon before focusing on his claws.

Zarkon sighs. “I am not going to ask you to do anything you are not comfortable with. If you want last night to be the only time we have sex then we can leave it at that.”

“I don't want that,” Keith says a little too fast, and bites his lip as he considers his next words. “I'm just not sure how I'm supposed to act now.”

“Like you always have,” Zarkon replies.

Keith looks up, a hint of a hesitant smile playing on his lips. He supposes it's good enough for now. “How long until we leave?”

“Long enough for you to get yourself presentable and to eat something,” Zarkon replies and stands. “But do be considerate of the fact that we will be leaving soon.”

Keith nods and watches Zarkon walk out of the door.

Haala catches up with Keith before they leave the ship. He clasps Keith's shoulder and smiles, and hands Keith a curved dagger with a beautifully detailed gold and silver handle and four sharp, claw like, slightly raised hooks on the blade that Keith imagines would do significant damage when the dagger is pulled out of someone.

“Marzi wanted me to give it to you as a 'congratulations on not dying' gift. She said she won it during game night at her new post,” Haala explains.

Keith lifts his eyes to meet Haala's. “You talked to her?”

“Yeah,” Haala replies, frowning, “she was going to say hi to you before she had to get back to work but you fainted.”

“Oh.” Keith turns the dagger and looks it over one last time before sheathing it. “Thank her when you call her next time?” Haala inclines his head and Keith crosses his arms, a little annoyed that he hadn't gotten a chance to see her himself.

Haala sighs and shoves Keith's shoulder. “Lets go before we miss our shuttle.”

Keith follows him through the ship, his movements stiff and on the jerky side. Haala glances at him but doesn't comment on it, and Keith is grateful for it. How would he explain that he's still recovering from having had sex with Zarkon to Haala of all people?

Even if it had been great sex.
They reach the airlock where Zarkon and Haggar are already waiting for them, deep in conversation. Keith hides the dagger under his clothes to keep Zarkon from noticing it right away. He doesn't know if Zarkon will let him keep it, but that's a fight he'd rather have in private.

Haggar frowns at Keith, taking in his stiff way of walking. Keith glues himself to Zarkon's side to avoid having to explain himself to her.

They get into the shuttle, and Keith shifts uncomfortably in his seat the whole minute long ride to their ship. He would've simply stood if Zarkon hadn't guided him to sit down. He springs up the second the ship docks, and he sticks by Zarkon's side until they're out of the airlock.

“Go get some rest,” Zarkon tells Keith as soon as they're safely on their familiar ship.

Keith nods and waves Zarkon goodbye before heading to the safety of their quarters. Haala trails after him without a word. He turns out to be a good buffer between Keith and all the other Galra they pass. All Haala has to do is give them a particularly nasty glare and they leave Keith alone.

The attention shouldn't surprise him, Keith supposes. He'd just put on a spectacle for everyone to see, and it's only natural for the Galra to want to interact with him all of the sudden. Haala takes Keith all the way to the door of Keith and Zarkon's quarters, but he stops before Keith can walk through the door, shifting his weight from one foot to another.

“Do you want to come do my rounds with me tomorrow?”

Keith tilts his head, and Haala crosses his arms. “Just thought it'd do you some good to do something.”

“I'll come,” Keith promises.

Haala smiles for a second before frowning. “Just don't be late. Be by my room before the second quarter, okay?”

Keith nods before opening the door and returning to the comforting familiarity of his and Zarkon's quarters.

It's not until late that evening — when he wakes up with his body still aching — that Keith decides to see Haggar about some kind of pain relief after all, just to be sure it won't be a problem come morning. He might have to explain why he needs it, but he doesn't want to walk around the ship tomorrow if he's still feeling like he is now.

He shuffles to the door, already dreading explaining why he needs Haggar's help, but he swallows his anxiety down and opens the door, and makes his way to the elevator.

Keith lists all the reasons why seeing Haggar is a bad idea while he takes the elevator to the right floor, and then he lists the few reasons he can think of why it's not a bad idea while he walks down the hallway.

Keith adds Haggar being unhappy about seeing him to the con list when he enters her lab and she scowls at him. “Did I not fix you yesterday?”
“Yeah.” Keith shifts, wringing his hands as much as his still sore wrist allows him to. “This isn't because of that.”

Haggar lifts an eyebrow. “Then why aren't you moving properly?”

Keith shifts again, his face heating up. “Zarkon and I might have had sex,” he says fast and quietly. He doesn't meet Haggar's eyes.

She's quiet for a long time, then she sighs and waves Keith to her table. “I suppose that explains his mood today.”

Keith doesn't ask her to elaborate. He stands by the table until Haggar narrows her eyes, and Keith bites the insides of his cheeks as he hops on the table, doing his best to ignore the sting shooting up his insides.

“Is this going to be a regular thing?” Haggar asks while she rummages through her cabinets at a leisurely pace.

“No,” Keith replies a little too fast, “I think we just went too fast. I'll make sure that won't happen again.”

Haggar hums and returns to Keith with a small vial on her hand. “Drink this.”

Keith does, and Haggar stabs his thing with a needle. “Ow! What he fuck?”

“You're fixed,” Haggar replies with no remorse in her voice.

Keith flattens his ears and grits his teeth. She didn't have to do that and they both know it.

“Now, I need you to understand something,” Haggar starts, stepping closer to Keith.

“What?”

She grabs Keith's ear without a warning, digging her nails in and twisting until Keith yelps, his eyes watering from the pain. He grabs her wrist but she only tightens her hold, pulling Keith’s ear down. “You are not going to be a distraction. You've already done enough of that. I don't care if you screw each other every single day as long as it does not affect the smooth running of the Empire or keep Zarkon from performing his duties as the Emperor, or doing what must be done.”

Keith bites back a cry of pain and nods, not knowing what else he can do.

Haggar studies him, her grip on his ear tightening for a second before she lets go. Keith bolts back, his ear thrumming and twitching, and he reaches up to touch it. It's hot under his skin, a he drops his hand when his ear stings from the contact.

“Go back to the Emperor's quarters now. You should rest,” Haggar says like she hadn't just nearly ripped Keith's ear to pieces.

Keith backs away until he's at a safe distance from her before hurrying to the door. He runs into Thace on his way out, muttering an apology to him without slowing down to talk with him.

He takes the shortest route back to his and Zarkon's quarters, moving as fast as he can as he goes. If he's lucky he'll get there before Zarkon does and he can pretend to be asleep.

But of course Zarkon is already there, seeming perplexed as to why Keith is walking through the door instead of already waiting for him there.
“Where were you?” He asks, and Keith grimaces.

“Nowhere. I think I'm gonna go to bed early,” he says and bolts for the bedroom door, but Zarkon grabs his arm and turns him around, a frown on his face.

His frown deepens when he sees the awkward angle of Keith's ear. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Keith says.

Zarkon narrows his eyes. “Do not lie to me.”

Keith considers doing just that, but he'd rather not have both Haggar and Zarkon angry at him, so he lets his shoulders slump. “I went to see Haggar. Haala asked me to go on his rounds tomorrow and I wanted to be able to walk without a problem. She twisted my ear and told me not to distract you. I'm fine. I just want to sleep so I'll be well rested tomorrow.”

Zarkon stares at Keith with an unreadable expression for a long moment. Keith tries to pull his arm from his hold, but Zarkon doesn't let go. Keith frowns at him, wondering what's gotten into him now. It isn't until Keith pokes the bond that he realizes Zarkon is furious.

Keith tries to take a step back, but Zarkon's hold on his arm tightens.

Keith clears his throat. “Zarkon?”

Without a warning, Zarkon pulls Keith to the door so fast Keith almost falls. He drags Keith through the hallways, ignoring Keith's objections and the fact that Keith can barely keep up with him.

He drags Keith all the way to Haggar's labs, and there's nothing Keith can do to stop him.

Haggar stops talking when Zarkon drags Keith through the doors to her lab. Thace is still there as well, and unlike Haggar he doesn't bother hiding his surprise.

Zarkon drags Keith forward until he's standing in front of Haggar. “What were you thinking?”

“I wanted him to listen,” Haggar replies, but there's a tenseness in her voice that betrays her uncertainty.

Zarkon lets go of Keith and steps past him, slow and menacing, and Keith takes a few steps back. Thace retreats as well, and he circles the room until he reaches Keith. “Stay close,” he whispers and pulls Keith to his side.

He doesn't have to tell Keith twice. He appreciates the illusion of safety Thace presents, and he appreciates Thace not leaving him alone with Zarkon and Haggar even more.


“If he cannot handle having his ear pinched then perhaps —“

The shattering glass makes Keith jump, and Thace pulls him behind his back. Even Haggar takes a surprised step back.

Keith peeks around Thace, swallowing when he sees the table has cracked from the force of Zarkon bringing a sword down on it. The liquids from the bottles and vials dripping down to the floor is the only sound in the room.
The bayard is a lot brighter than Keith remembers it being. Or maybe it's just the lights.

“You do not harm him,” Zarkon repeats, and both Keith and Thace shrink back.

Haggar takes another small step back as well, bowing her head respectfully, though Keith wouldn't put it past her to just be acting to pacify Zarkon. “It won't happen again.”

The sword disappears after a few long second. “Your results were unsatisfactory,” Zarkon says, waving at the broken table, “do them again.”

Haggar inclines her head and starts towards the table.

“After you have seen to Keith,” Zarkon adds. He doesn't wait for Haggar's reply before turning around, looking for Keith, narrowing his eyes when he sees Thace.

Keith steps away from him, not wanting to put Thace in Zarkon's line of fire as well. Zarkon walks up to him and grabs his shoulder, insisting but not hard, and Keith lets himself to be guided closer to Haggar, who is rummaging through her cabinets for a jar.

She scoops some of the salve onto her fingers while she approaches Keith, and Keith's ears flatten at the memory of her treatment of them. She glances at Zarkon glued to Keith's side before gently prying Keith's still throbbing ear straight, and applying the salve on it.

As soon as she's done Zarkon drags Keith away and out of the lab.

Keith remains silent until they're back in their quarters, and when Zarkon points him to the table he goes as fast as he can without downright running.

Zarkon disappears into the bedroom, and Keith remains by the table.

A druid brings them tea while Zarkon is in the bedroom, and Keith mutters a quiet thank you to them before they go. He doesn't dare to touch the tea.

Zarkon joins him moments later and pours Keith a cup of tea, and sets a biscuit on his plate before pouring himself a cup and sitting down. “You seem uncomfortable.”

“You didn't have to go off on her like that,” Keith says, his voice steady but quiet, as if he's worried about upsetting Zarkon. He's not — not really. He knows Zarkon wouldn't hurt him.

It's just that Keith doesn't want to fight with him.

“I have already had one conversation about her treatment of you with her, and since she did not believe me when I asked her nicely I thought a harsher reminder was in place,” Zarkon replies, sounding almost too rational.

Keith nibbles at his biscuit and thinks.

There's something oddly comforting about Zarkon's protectiveness, but also something a little disturbing. Keith always thought Haggar was beyond Zarkon's wrath. She was supposed to be untouchable. He’s not supposed to pull a sword on her.

“Drink your tea and get some rest. If you intend to join your friend on his shift, you need to be awake and alert,” Zarkon says, and Keith drinks his tea in silence before heading to bed.
Zarkon finds out about the dagger before Keith wakes up, but to Keith's surprise he doesn't immediately take it away from him. He merely gives Keith a disappointed look and shows Keith he has the dagger, the demand for an explanation clear in his eyes.

“Marzila gave it to me as a gift. For beating Vazka.” Keith shifts his weight from one foot to another. “I promise I won't stab you with it,” he adds, and Zarkon smiles, handing the dagger back to him.

“Why did you hide it?” He asks.

Keith turns the dagger in his hands, his tail twitching. “I thought you wouldn't like it.”

“I do not like you hiding things from me,” Zarkon says, a hint of warning in his voice, “but I will let you keep it. As long as you do not keep things from me again.”

“I won't,” Keith promises.

He takes a quick shower before putting on what he hopes is an appropriate outfit and heading out of the door, excited to see what exactly Haala does for living.

He reaches Haala's door moments before he steps into the hallway, and though Keith would've been interested to see what Haala's room looks like, he doesn't ask to see it.

“Ready?” Haala asks, ruffling Keith's hair.

Keith complains about it, even though he knows Haala only does it because Keith doesn't like it. “What exactly are we doing today?”

“Well, first we go to the kitchen to get food. Then we take the food to the cell block where we force Hanek to feed the druid's prisoners— don't look at me like that.”

Keith's scowl deepens, but he directs it at the floor instead of Haala.

“Then we do an inventory on everything and then we get lunch,” Haala concludes.

“You're trying to keep me distracted.” Keith glances at Haala. “Because of Vazka?”

“I promised Marzi I wouldn't let you get caught up on your fight. She'd rip out my dick if I didn't follow through. I'm doing this for my future children.” Haala gives Keith a pointed look, and Keith snorts.

A few seconds later he breaks down laughing.

“What?” Haala asks.

“I'm just imagining you as a father,” Keith says.

Haala stops, his ears drooping as his expression turns from confused to miffed. “I could be a good parent.”

“I'm not saying you couldn't. Just that it's a funny thought,” Keith calls over his shoulder. He hadn't bothered to slow down when Haala had stopped. “You could scowl your children into obedience.”

“It's not funny! It's a serious topic. And you're off babysitting duties if you keep that attitude up.”
Haala huffs before rushing after Keith, who is still giggling quietly.

“Stop that,” Haala grumbles, and Keith slaps him with his tail without meaning to.

Haala’s face falls, and Keith rushes to the elevator before he can retaliate. The other officers there keep Haala from doing more than poking Keith’s side a little too hard.

The food cart is waiting for them in the kitchen, and Haala has Keith push it when they head to the lower levels where the cells are.

“They’re not really prisoners,” Haala explains, “the druids deal with them so we guess they’re test subjects, but nobody is really sure about it. They work in secrecy.”

“They’re test subjects,” Keith confirms, a grim expression on his face.

Haala shows Keith to the cell block without another word.

“Hey” New guy! We got you food to serve,” Haala calls, getting the attention of the bulky, furless Galra leaning on the wall and scrolling down his pad.

“Have him serve it,” the Galra who Keith assumes is Hanek, calls back, jerking his head towards Keith.

Haala lowers his ears. “Have the Emperor’s personal guest serve food to the druid’s test subjects? Should I put that suggestion down in a report?”

Hanek shoves himself off the wall and hurries to them, taking the cart from Keith with a curious once over thrown at his way.

“He’s okay,” Haala says as he takes Keith to the small storage room connected to the cell block. “He just needs to learn his place. Now let’s get this mess sorted out.”

Keith nods, wondering what he’s going to have to do.

Haala tells Keith to count everything, and then make sure the labels are accurate and that everything is in the right place. Haala checks what the inventory should look like from his pad and marks any discrepancies down, and makes notes of everything that needs to be replenished or replaced.

There are handcuffs and batteries of some kind in varying sizes, and hand guns and batons that Keith knows have a dangerously high electric current running through them.

Keith counts them all, and as Haala had promised Keith gets lunch afterwards.

“So why does Thace think I should ask you if you're okay?” Haala asks as he sets his tray down.

Keith groans and runs his hand down his face. “It's nothing. Zarkon went off on Haggar because she twisted my ear. No big deal.”

Haala’s jaw drops, his confusion slowly morphing into amazement. “He did what?”

Keith glances around the mostly empty mess hall to make sure they’re not drawing attention.

“How did you get him to do that?” Haala continues in a more hushed tone, and Keith returns his attention to him. “No one thought that’s something that could happen. The witch is supposed to be untouchable. There are even some that even think she's the one running things. Do you realize how
big that is?”

Keith shrugs. He doesn't want to think he's done anything special. He doesn't want Zarkon getting angry with Haggar to mean anything. He'd said he'd talked to her before about her hurting Keith, and she had broken that rule, that's all. Of course Zarkon would get angry over that. He wants people to do what he says.

“I didn't do anything. I think she just didn't do what Zarkon wanted her to do and he got mad, that's all,” Keith says, focusing on his salad and soup.

“It's still pretty unusual,” Haala insists.

“I suppose,” Keith mutters and shoves a big piece of meat into his mouth so that he doesn't have to talk.

Later — after he has showered and had dinner, and changed into a loose t-shirt — Keith lies on the couch waiting for Zarkon to join him.

He doesn't want to go to bed and fall asleep alone. He fears the nightmares that will undoubtedly come. The darkness and being gutted and Vazka pierced on his blade haunt him, and he doesn't want to be alone with it all.

And he'd been thinking about Vazka, about their fight, and most importantly about the faint memory of the strange consciousness that had brushed against his. He thinks it's worth mentioning to Zarkon, even if he's not sure how he's going to explain it.

It might have not even been real. Maybe he just imagined it. Maybe it was just the concussion playing tricks on him. And if it was real, shouldn’t Zarkon also be aware of it by now? He should have felt it through their bond, after all.

He's dozing off when Zarkon joins him, looking only marginally less tired than Keith feels.

Keith smiles at him, and mumbles a sleepy hello as he pushes himself up.

“You look like you should be in bed,” Zarkon says as he comes over to pet Keith's hair.

Keith yawns and nods. “I sleep better with you.”

Zarkon smiles. “Then lie down. I need to go through a few documents before I can go to bed. If you fall asleep I can carry you to bed.”

Keith nods again, and waits until Zarkon sits down before resting his head on his thigh, finally letting sleep claim him, deciding to tell Zarkon about the faint sense of other consciousness in the morning.

As his body grows heavy and his mind drifts, he thinks he’d felt the other consciousness before, but he falls asleep before the thought can fully form, and all that's left of it in the morning is a vague sense of importance.
I'm gonna keep this fic on a semi-hiatus for now. I had a productive day today and it was raining, so I got this done, but I'm not promising I'll have the motivation to work on the next chapter at my usual pace.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

In addition to this chapter I also updated Chasing the Sun so the last part of that is now up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith exits the shower and towels himself without hurry. He puts on a loose shirt and underwear, not bothering with pants since he's not planning on going anywhere but bed that evening.

Zarkon is still sitting comfortably on the couch reading his book, just like he'd been when Keith had decided to take his shower. Keith wanders to him and sits on the arm of the couch, and wraps his arms around Zarkon's shoulders, briefly pressing his nose to his temple.

“I was thinking,” Keith starts, waiting until Zarkon inclines his head. “Do you guys have something like sex toys?” His words come out faster than he'd like.

Zarkon turns to him, one eyebrow arched. “Why do you ask?”

Keith chews his lip, his tail twisting from side to side. “I was just... I know I'm gonna get used to having sex with you in time, but maybe I don't always wanna take things slow, you know? I was just thinking that if we had something to, um, speed up the whole process then that might be fun sometimes.” The words tumble out of his mouth, and Keith bites his tongue to silence himself.

Zarkon blinks slowly, his expression unreadable as he closes the book, and Keith swallows. Maybe he shouldn't have said anything. It's stupid anyways, it's not like they need anything to prepare Keith with. It was just a stupid idea and he should have kept it to himself.

Zarkon tilts his head slightly. “I think that can be arranged.”

Keith lets out a relieved breath and smiles. “Great. Do I get to say what I want or are you just going to pick for me?”

“I hear you have made an acquaintance of sorts with one of the druids. I will instruct Haggar to order them to assist you,” Zarkon replies.

Keith's ears twitch back and he stifles a protest, thinking it through. Kiira isn't the worst person to have as help. She's a druid so she's a little eccentric, but Keith thinks she'll be a grownup about it. “Okay.”

“What is it settled.” Zarkon opens the book again.

Keith supposes it is, and he leans his head on Zarkon's shoulder. “I think I'll head to bed,” he says casually after awhile, nipping Zarkon's ear before he pushes himself off the couch.

He walks to the bedroom door slowly, wondering if he dares to...

“You could come too,” he says before he can talk himself out of it. He doesn't wait to see if Zarkon puts the book down and gets up before slipping into the bedroom.
He hops in the bed and sheds his shirt even though he doesn't think Zarkon will come.

The slowly passing minutes only solidify Keith's belief. Maybe he wasn't clear enough. Maybe Zarkon just isn't in the mood. Maybe —

The door opens, and Zarkon steps through it. Keith's heart skips a beat as he sits up.

Zarkon strips off his coat and drops it on the floor as he approaches Keith. He kicks his boots off as he crawls on the bed and closer to Keith who retreats and tries not to giggle.

Zarkon catches him easily and pulls him down the covers and pins him there. Keith sighs when Zarkon mouths his skin, and he pulls at Zarkon's clothes when he reaches for the drawer where Keith had moved the lube and the numbing salve and the liquid coating. Zarkon had chuckled but left it at that.

Keith strips his underwear off while Zarkon takes his shirt off and dips his claws in the liquid coating. Zarkon pushes Keith back down, and Keith spreads his legs for him without prompting.

Zarkon works Keith open, whispering sweet nothings into his ear and kissing and biting his neck and shoulder as he does so.

Keith cries out when Zarkon enters him — slow and careful so he won't hurt Keith.

Keith moans and pushes pushes his hips up, digging his claws into Zarkon's back and bites his shoulder.

He lets Zarkon pick the pace, enjoying the slow, deep thrusts Zarkon fucks him with. It's almost agonizingly slow, but Keith can't bring himself to tell Zarkon to go faster. To give him more.

The pleasure builds in Keith's belly and his tail wraps around Zarkon's thigh, pulling him closer.

He clings to Zarkon when he comes.

Later — after Zarkon has cleaned him up — Keith rests his head on Zarkon's chest and listens to his heartbeat, letting the steady rhythm of it lull him to sleep.

Zarkon is unusually busy, but Keith tries not to think too much of it. He'd told Zarkon about the consciousness he'd felt, and though he couldn't tell Zarkon what it had been and Zarkon hadn't seemed too worried about it, he can't help but wonder if it's part of the reason Zarkon doesn't have time for him the way he usually does.

And Haala is getting anxious about Marzila's fast approaching return, not that he'd ever admit it out loud. It's obvious to Keith in the way Haala needs Keith to distract him more than Keith needs Haala to keep him busy. As a result Keith becomes intimately familiar with the way Haggar's test subjects are treated, at least by the guards.

He's not sure if the indifference of the guards is better than some emotional response to the prisoners, but at least they're not abusing them. They just don't care, and there's something terrifying in it that makes Keith's spine chill.

He reminds himself that Haala isn't like the other guards. Haala had never been indifferent to
Keith. From what he'd seen of the other guards during his time in a cell, the guards charged with regular Empire prisoners aren't like that either. They had cared about the general wellbeing of their charges.

It makes it easier for Keith to tell himself that the guards assigned to looking after Haggar's subjects are just distancing themselves from their charges because of what they are, and not because they don't care about what Haggar does to them.

“They're not us,” Haala says as an explanation once. “They're outsiders. And they're helping. Some would call it an honor to be chosen by the druids.”

Keith flattens his ears, but he doesn't argue. He doesn't want to fight with Haala. Not over something he knows they won't agree on.

Haala still picks up on his unvoiced opinion about the treatment of the prisoners, and he doesn't ask Keith to join him on his rounds in the following days.

Keith seeks out Kiira a week or so later, having worked up the courage to talk with her about possibly getting whatever constitutes as a sex toy for the Galra.

To Keith's surprise Kiira steamrolls over everything he intended to say as soon as Keith gets a hello out of his mouth and drags Keith to a room Keith hasn't been in before.

There are large tanks and tables filled with various instruments, and Keith doesn't want to think about what the druids do there. Kiira drags Keith across the room to one of the smaller tanks, and she taps on the panel in what must be the most excited way Keith has ever seen a druid do anything.

The smoky glass clears, revealing the liquid that's not quite bright enough to be quintessence, and something that looks like a cross between a tadpole and a hairless kitten floating in the liquid.

“This is my child,” Kiira declares, leaning down to observe the tank better. “The critical phase has passed. The child has over a sixty-five percent chance of developing healthy, and with every passing week those chances grow better.”

“Glad to hear that,” Keith says, observing the tank with morbid sort of curiosity. He supposes the creature in the tank could be starting to look like an actual child, but it's just off enough for Keith to not get why Kiira feels the need to coo at it.

“Was there something you wanted?” Kiira asks suddenly. straightening up and cocking her head at Keith.

Keith stops for a second, wondering if he can bring this up in front of Kiira's baby. He takes a few steps back, and Kiira follows. “It's nothing important, really. Zarkon just told me to ask you if you'd help me with something.”

Kiira waits while Keith considers his words.

“It's just that —” Keith bites his lip and reconsiders his wording. “Zarkon and I have been sort of having sex and, um, we've got a bit of a size difference to work through and...”
Keith's tail thumps against the leg of the table he's standing next to, and he cringes at his own words. There had to be a better way of phrasing that.

“You need something to help with that,” Kiira finishes for him, and Keith is suddenly glad for her way of looking at things. Of course she's not going to think anything of it.

Keith's shoulders slump in relief, and he cracks a smile. “Yeah.”

“I can look into that and inform you when I have narrowed the options down,” Kiira suggests.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” Keith replies, and when Kiira starts explaining the development of her child, he leans on the edge of the table and listens to her, doing his best to understand and memorize what she's saying, just to be a good friend to her.

Kiira hijacks Keith's time a few days later to talk about what kind of products and toys Keith should look into, and Keith takes back ever thinking that Kiira's blunt approach to the subject is a good thing.

At least it distracts Keith from wondering why Zarkon didn't return to their quarters last night.

Keith is half asleep on the couch when Zarkon joins him on a late night, and the look in his eyes is enough to jolt Keith wide awake. He reaches for Zarkon when he comes to his side, taking his hands in his. “What happened?”

Zarkon kneels before Keith. “I have to ask you to do something I do not want to ask of you.”

Keith swallows, his ears flattening. “Just tell me what's wrong.”

Zarkon cups Keith's face in hi hand. “Do you recall when I told you about your friends stealing information on a certain facility?”

Keith nods. He remembers their chat about it well, and he doesn't like where this is going at all.

“They have just breached the security grid.” Zarkon brushes a strand of hair form Keith's face. “Now, I would like to think that the security there is enough to keep them at bay, but I am intimately aware of what one can achieve with Voltron, so I would like you to tell them to retreat.”

Keith's face falls. “You want me to talk to them?”

“Yes. And if the safety of the universe is not enough to consider doing what I ask of you, you should know that I sent your friend Marzila to that facility.”

Keith's tail twitches and he scowls. “You're trying to manipulate me again?”

“No.” The finality of Zarkon's tone is enough to make Keith believe him. “I did not send her there because I assumed this might happen. I sent her there because she is qualified to do the job I
required her to do.”

“And how am I supposed to stop them?” Keith lifts a pointed eyebrow. "I don't exactly have their phone number at hand.”

“I can connect you to them through the Black Lion,” Zarkon replies and stand up. “Are you going to do this or do I order the destruction of that facility?”

Keith frowns. “There are people there.”

Zarkon tilts his head. “And?”

“You're just going to kill them all? My friends are in there!” Keith stands, forcing Zarkon to take a step back.

“Their lives do not matter. Not when their deaths can save hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives.” Zarkon narrows his eyes when Keith opens his mouth to argue. “We can discuss your hangups after the situation has been dealt with.”

Keith grinds his teeth together, fully prepared to tell Zarkon off, but a thought crosses his mind. Zarkon could have just destroyed the facility and be done with it. He has no reason to ask for Keith's help. Unless he wants to see how Keith reacts to hearing his friend's voices again. Maybe he wants to see if Keith tries to leak sensitive information to them.

“I'll talk to them,” Keith says, pushing his doubts aside.

Zarkon leads Keith out of the room without another word, his pace so fast Keith has to run a few steps to keep up with him. Zarkon leads Keith to an operations center, and one look from him sends most of the technicians scurrying. The three druids and the sentries stay, as well as Thace whose focus is on the screen and the flow of information passing it fast.

Haggar isn't there, and Keith isn't sure he wants to know what she's up to.

“You are not needed,” Zarkon tells Thace, who looks dumbfounded for a split second before bowing and leaving the room. He throws a glance at Keith, but Keith can't read his expression.

“Stand there,” Zarkon orders, dragging Keith's focus from Thace to him.

Keith goes to the station Zarkon pointed him to, and studies the screen before him to distract himself from the nervous twitch of his tail. He swallows around the lump in his throat and listens to Zarkon tell the druids what he needs them to do. Once the druids are briefed Zarkon joins Keith, and rests his hands on Keith's shoulders.

“You will do fine. I have instructed the on site fleet to isolate and surround the Black Lion —“ Keith swirls around, but Zarkon raises a hand in warning “— not to harm it, but to keep the Lion in place and to act as a transmitter of sorts. You and I are going to reach the Lion and make it switch its comm systems to our frequency, and then you are going to tell your friend to stand down before Haggar arrives there and destroys the facility site and everything around it.”

Keith swallows again. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Turn around and put your hand here.” Zarkon guides Keith's hand to a panel before pressing himself against Keith's back and covering his eyes with one hand and wrapping the other one around Keith's middle. “You remember this. Focus on the Black Lion. Try to reach it. I will do the rest.”
Keith nods before taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. He does his best to relax and clear his mind, and focuses on the Black Lion. His blood thrums in his ears and a part of him hopes this won't work. He doesn't want to talk to Shiro only to lose him again.

But he has to. He has to save his friends.

He has to save Shiro.

So Keith clings to Zarkon's arm wrapped around his chest, his tail twisting around Zarkon's leg, and reaches for the Black Lion with everything he has, clawing at the connection he's not sure is even there.

He can't feel the Black Lion, not in the same way he'd felt Red, and panic claws at Keith's insides. He can't feel more than a faint impression that might be Black as likely as it might be his own imagination, and Keith doesn't know what to do.

Zarkon takes the problem from his hands by practically ramming through their bond to get to that impression, throwing Keith off balance for a moment. His mind has vertigo of its own, and Keith can't focus on anything but the feeling of being pushed out of his own head.

Zarkon pulls his mind from Keith's and lets go of him, and Keith stumbles until his arms catch the edge of the console. “You can talk to him now.”

Keith's legs tremble and he draws in a shuddering breath. His throat is so dry he's not sure he can make a sound, but he has to try.

“Shiro?” Keith's voice is barely above a whisper, and he swallows before trying again. “Shiro?” It comes out a little louder, and Keith feels a little more confident.

“Shiro?”

The reply — when it comes — is shocked and hopeful. “Keith?”

He's not ready to hear Shiro's voice. Keith chokes up and closes his eyes, taking a second to collect himself before speaking again. “Hey. I — no, listen — I need you to listen, okay?”

Keith's heart breaks at the urgency in Shiro's voice, and he hates himself for having to stop him from talking. “I need you to tell the others to fall back.”

“I don't —“

“Just do it and I'll talk with you for as long as you want to,” Keith cuts in, desperation creeping into his voice.

“Okay,” Shiro replies, but Keith knows he doesn't want to switch the channel even for a second. He can hear it in Shiro's voice.

The wait for Shiro to get back to him from telling the team to retreat is almost too much for Keith, and he gets a sudden urge to bite his claws. His legs feel like jelly and he focuses on taking in slow, deep breaths, and waits until Shiro is done talking with the rest of the team.

Keith glances at Zarkon whose focus seems to be on one of the druids, but even though Zarkon is unusually shut out from Keith's mind, Keith knows he's not ignoring Keith. Still, Keith appreciates the illusion of privacy.
“Keith?” Shiro's voice snaps Keith from his thoughts and he smiles shakily without meaning to.

“Yeah?”

Shiro exhales, and Keith can imagine how scared he was that Keith wouldn't be there anymore. “They promised to retreat right away,” Shiro says.

“Thank you,” Keith replies, biting his lip. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Shiro says a little too fast, “I — we miss you.”

Keith doubts it, but he doesn't want to fight. “I miss you too. Well, maybe not Lance but the rest of you.”

Shiro laughs, and Keith can't help but laugh too, feeling lighter all of the sudden. He had missed Shiro.

“Look, Shiro, I'm —“ Keith hesitates, not wanting to bring attention to the obvious but knowing avoiding it won't do them any favors either “ — I know you worry but you don't have to. I'm fine. I'm safe. I've got friends, no one complains about my behavior or personality... I've been learning a new language. I went to a — what was it?” Keith glances at Zarkon, destroying the illusion of privacy.

At least Zarkon is considerate enough to pretend like he hasn't been eavesdropping the whole time. “The spring market?”

“And then the dinner —“

“Night feast,” Zarkon corrects him, like Keith expected him to do.

Keith nods and offers Zarkon what might pass for a lopsided smile before focusing on Shiro again. “A spring market, and then I got dragged into this fancy dinner, they called it a night feast... And speaking of which you guys need to be more careful about what you do. You put a colony of innocent people in danger because you forced the Galra out of... I'm not sure which section, but it's not important. What's important is that there are raiders coming to the sectors after you and attacking everyone else who travels there.”

“I'll make sure were more careful,” Shiro promises, and Keith's heart sinks at the guarded edge in his voice.

Of course it's there, Keith had acknowledged Zarkon's presence, and Shiro would be foolish not to be wary of it.

“How's everyone else doing?” Keith asks.

Shiro hesitates, just for a second, but Keith notices it and he almost tells Shiro to forget it.

“They're fine,” Shiro says, “Pidge found Matt.”

“That's great. She must be happy.” Keith runs a hand through his hair, acutely aware of his ears all of the sudden. “How's Red?”

Shiro's hesitation is more obvious this time. “Red's fine. Lance is piloting it.”

Keith grimaces, suddenly understanding Zarkon's possessiveness over Black a little better.
“But Coran thinks it's just until you come back,” Shiro rushes to add.

The silence that follows is tense, and Keith glances at Zarkon who is still focused on the druids before sighing, his shoulders slumping. “Look, Shiro, I...“

Keith falls silent, not knowing how to say what he needs to say.

“Yeah?” Shiro sounds wary, and Keith doesn't blame him.

“I need you to promise me something,” Keith starts.

“Anything,” Shiro replies without hesitation, and Keith blinks the wetness from his eyes.

He takes a deep breath and forces his voice to be steady. “I need you to promise you won't come for me.”

“What? No, Keith, we're not just going to abandon you.”

“I don't want to come back there,” Keith cuts in, flinching at how harshly the words come out. “I don't need to be rescued. I'm fine.”

“Don't say that,” Shiro says, his voice tense. “Don't say that. Just... Don't think like that, okay? We're —“

“I don't want to come back,” Keith cuts in, even if it tastes like a lie and he struggles not to let the tears in his eyes fall. “I don't want to... Just let me stay here.”

“Keith.”

Keith can't remember ever hearing anyone said his name in such a desperate way. It breaks his heart, and he wants to tell Shiro he'll do anything to get back to him. He wants to promise Shiro they'll be together again, but he doesn't. He can't. He would lead Zarkon straight to Voltron, and no matter how much he doesn't hate Zarkon, he knows handing Voltron over to him is not a good decision.

“Shiro I — “ Keith is grateful for the distraction Zarkon provides by calling his name quietly enough for Shiro to not hear it.

Keith turns to Zarkon, half hoping he'll tell Keith that his conversation with Shiro is over. The hard look on Zarkon's face catches Keith off guard, and for a second he thinks he's done something wrong. Then Zarkon waves at the screen the druids are focused on. “They have not left yet, and unless they do so in the next twelve dobashes I will allow Haggar to destroy that facility.”

Keith swallows and nods before taking a deep breath and focusing on Shiro again. “The others are still in the facility. They need to get out now or they'll die. You need to get them out of there.”

“What's so important about that place?”

“Don't argue,” Keith snaps, frustration creeping into his voice. “Just get them out of there.”

Keith stops to take a deep breath, calming himself down. “Look, I've got a friend there and I can't lose her. Do this for me, okay?”

“I'll get them out of there,” Shiro promises, “just tell me why it's so important.”

“I can't,” Keith replies. “Just get them out of there, okay?”
Keith can practically see the frown on Shiro's face, and he knows one of them has to call their chat to an end. Shiro doesn't seem likely to do so.

So Keith swallows down the lump in his throat and closes his eyes. “I gotta go. I'll talk to you some other time, okay?”

“Keith don't —“

“Goodbye, Shiro.”

“Keith —“

He cuts the line before Shiro can finish his sentence. It feels like tearing his own heart out, but it's the only way Shiro will get the rest of his team out of the facility and save them. Keith blinks, tears blurring his vision, and backs away from the console to keep himself from getting Shiro back on the line.

Zarkon studies him with an expression Keith doesn't have the energy to decipher, but just to be sure Zarkon won't talk to him Keith rushes out of the room and finds the closest empty room he can hide in.

Keith hides in the dark conference room for what must be hours. He sits on the edge of the windowsill, his legs pulled to his chest and his cheek pressed against his knee, and stares at the passing stars without seeing them.

In a way, he hates Zarkon for letting him talk to Shiro. Hearing his voice did nothing but bring up old feelings and memories Keith thought he'd moved past. He's mad at Zarkon and the Empire for keeping him from Shiro. He's mad at Allura for dragging them all into her fight. He's mad at Shiro for going on the Kerberos mission in the first place, and he's mad at himself for no specific reason at all.

He feels like he's going to explode and implode at the same time, and he wants to claw his skin off and punch the nearest wall, or just yell at someone. Anything to get rid of the pressure inside him.

The door opens and closes, but Keith doesn't look up to see who it is. He doesn't have to.

Zarkon walks up to him and sits on the edge of the windowsill. “Your friends are safely out of our space,” he says after a while, but Keith can't find it in him to care.

Zarkon falls silent, studying Keith for a long moment. “I thought you would have enjoyed a chance to talk to your friend.”

Keith shrugs. He’s not entirely unhappy about it, he'd gotten a chance to say goodbye to Shiro after all.

“Are you going to sulk all day?” Zarkon asks, but there's nothing in his voice that indicates how he feels.

Keith would've preferred it if he was being snarky or frustrated or anything but annoyingly polite. Zarkon gives Keith a minute to answer, but Keith remains silent, staring at the window with too
dry eyes. Zarkon sighs, a clear indication of how little he appreciates Keith's sour mood, and it makes Keith scowl. He throws a glare at Zarkon, getting a disappointed frown in return.

“I hope you at least appreciate the fact that I allowed your friend to leave with my Lion,” Zarkon says, his tone dangerously clipped.

Keith should be careful. He knows angering Zarkon isn't smart, and no matter how bad his own mood is Zarkon is not the type to accept excuses. Keith knows it, but he's going to explode and he can't stop himself. “It's not your Lion.”

“I beg your pardon?” The chillness of Zarkon's voice should be enough to make Keith apologize and take his words back.

“It's not your Lion,” Keith repeats sharply, “you lost it when you decided to take over the universe. You have no right to it. You have no right to call yourself a Paladin. The Black Lion left you, and it's not coming back. Why would it? You're not worthy of it anymore, so stop deluding yourself by thinking that you are. It's not some thing for you to own, the Lions are alive. They have thoughts and opinions and feelings, and you can't just do what you want with them. You're never getting the Lion back, and you're never getting Voltron. Just accept it and move on. And you know, maybe Black bound me to you because she couldn't stand being bound to you anymore, and now I'm the one stuck with you.”

The bond turns cold, then Keith loses all sense of Zarkon.

Keith feels empty and alone, and he grasps at the bond with desperation, his breaths becoming shallow. He needs the constant sense of Zarkon back. But Zarkon simply stands and walks to the door without giving Keith even a look.

Keith scrambles after him. “Wait, I didn't mean it like that.” He puts himself between Zarkon and the door, pressing his hands against Zarkon's chest like he has any chance of stopping Zarkon if he wants to go past him.

Finally Zarkon looks at him, but there's none of the warmth Keith is accustomed to seeing on his face. Just calculating coldness, so much like when they had first come face to face, and Keith doesn't know what to do. He wants his Zarkon back.

“I'm sorry,” Keith says, his voice weaker than he intended.

Zarkon narrows his eyes and steps around Keith, and heads out of the door, leaving Keith near tears and feeling more alone than he has in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

In my defense you guys wanted Keith and Shiro to interact.

I hope you liked this!
The bed feels empty without Zarkon, and Keith barely gets an eyeful of sleep all night. He's exhausted come morning, but he still sits on the couch all day waiting for Zarkon to at least stop by.

His mind thrums from the emptiness Zarkon had left behind when he’d pulled his walls up, and Keith doesn’t know what to do with it. He can’t remember ever feeling so alone.

Not even when he was in the isolation cell.

Keith calls Kiira to bring him food instead of going of the mess hall. He jumps when she knocks on the door, and though he knows it's not Zarkon, for a moment he still hopes.

Keith dozes off eventually, curled on the couch with his pad, but he sleeps so fitfully he knows Zarkon never comes.

Keith gives it three days before deciding that he needs to address the situation. He doesn't think it would be a good idea to barge onto the bridge and demand Zarkon's attention as it would be far more likely to anger Zarkon further than get him to hear an apology.

Instead Keith decides to play it smart and ask Haggar if she knows what Zarkon is up to, and maybe get her to convince Zarkon to talk to him.

Keith knows she's noticed there's something going on. She's always aware of everything, to a terrifying if impressive level, and three days should be enough to make her tired of the situation.

So Keith makes his way through the quiet hallways, passing only a few tired officers and a handful of sentries patrolling the ship.

When he enters Haggar's laboratory — half expecting her to have retired for the night already — he's not sure what he's supposed to say to her anymore. How is he going to explain that he basically stabbed Zarkon in the one place that probably still could hurt him and twisted the knife to get it deeper.

“What do you want?” Haggar's voice cuts through the silence, and Keith jumps a little before turning to face her.
“I was just wondering where Zarkon is?” Keith bites his tongue to keep himself from grimacing at the uncertainty of his voice.

Haggar studies him silently before walking to her desk and typing something on her computer monitor. Keith shifts and waits for her to say something, every passing second of silence making him more and more anxious.

“He is resting,” Haggar offers eventually. “And you are not going to disturb him.”

“I don't want to disturb him, I just wanted to know where he is,” Keith says, and he doesn't blame Haggar for the incredulous look she gives him. “Okay, maybe I wanted to talk to him, but I don't want to bother him if he's resting.”

Haggar returns her attention to her monitor, and Keith hesitates for a moment before shuffling to her. “How mad is he?”

“You are the one who shares a telepathic bond with him, not me,” Haggar points out.

Keith bites his lip and looks away, crossing his arms to keep himself from fidgeting.

Haggar stills, then turns to Keith with a contemplative scowl on her face. “What are you not telling me?”

“Zarkon's blocking me,” Keith sighs and sits on the edge of the desk, careful not to touch any of Haggar's pads or instruments. “I can't feel anything.” He waves at his head, not knowing how to explain the emptiness plaguing his mind.

Haggar's scowl deepens, and Keith casts his eyes on the ground.

The silence continues for several long minutes, but eventually Haggar heads to her office, waving Keith to follow her as she goes. Keith does so, his steps defeated and his shoulders slumped, and when Haggar points him to a free chair he falls on it with a tired huff.

Keith rubs his eyes and accepts the tea Haggar offers him a moment later with a quiet thanks.

Haggar sits on her chair behind her desk and studies her tea instead of Keith. In response Keith sips his tea and lets his eyes wander around the room.

“He didn't come to our quarters,” Keith says quietly, almost afraid to break the silence.

“That would be because he's in mine,” Haggar replies. She huffs a quiet laugh when Keith's ears twitch down and his tail smacks against the leg of his chair. “He didn't want to return to yours and he was in need of rest. I did what I thought was best, no need to get jealous.”

“I'm not jealous,” Keith retorts, his ears flattening.

“Of course you're not.” Haggar smiles at him in an annoyingly knowing way, and Keith sets his tea cup down with just enough force to let her know he doesn't appreciate it.

They lapse into another silence, and this time Keith doesn't try to break it.

“I don't want you to think that I have something against you,” Haggar starts, her voice conversational, and takes a sip of her tea.

“But?”

“But unlike Zarkon I recognize you for what you are,” she finishes and sets her cup down.
“Which is?” Keith asks even if a part of him dreads to hear her answer.

“A danger.” Haggar gives Keith a hard look that Keith has no idea how to respond to. “You an unpredictable fickleness to you. You have potential to be an ally, and I acknowledge that, but you have an equal potential to be an enemy. You have just shown how severely and easily you can hurt Zarkon and I assure you, that is not an easy thing to do. You also have friends on the other side of the war.”

She sips her tea, and Keith waits for her to continue, mostly because he doesn't think he can talk around the lump in his throat.

Haggar lowers her cup. “I would prefer to think of you as a friend. I think we both know what Zarkon wants you to be, but unlike him I'm not so quick to dismiss how you came to be here or where your loyalties lie.”

“I don't want to hurt him,” Keith cuts in.

Haggar gives him a warning look that silences him. “Yet you have done just that, and I cannot help but worry for the day you will do so again.”

Keith frowns at her, but it's all he dares to do.

Besides, she's right. He did hurt Zarkon, even if he didn't mean to, and the only way he might be able to fix that is if he can apologize to Zarkon. He thinks, but he doesn't have anything to say that might convince Haggar that he has no intention to cause Zarkon any further distress or harm.

“I'd say he's the one doing the hurting right now,” he says instead, hating himself for it a little, but he needs Haggar to see his side if he hopes to have her help.

Haggar raises an eyebrow, a small smile that Keith can't read playing on her lips. “You think he's trying to hurt you by avoiding you?”

Keith scoffs. “What else does he expect completely shutting me out to accomplish?”

Haggar takes a sip of her tea and considers her answer. Keith lets her take all the time she needs. “Avoiding you —” Haggar tilts her head and studies Keith with a thoughtful expression “— has the benefit of not having to confront whatever it is that you two are fighting over.”

“I'm not sure I understand,” Keith says, frowning.

Unsurprisingly, Haggar looks at him like he's being too slow for her taste. “He doesn't want to fight with you. The best way to avoid that is by avoiding you.”

Keith's eyes widen and he looks down, his bangs falling on his face to hide his surprise.

His surprise turns to shame soon. He hadn't considered the possibility that Zarkon might just be trying to avoid further conflicts. He'd just assumed it was Zarkon's idea of a suitable punishment, and when Keith thinks how much it seemed like one he doesn't think he can be blamed for drawing that conclusion. It wasn't exactly something Zarkon wouldn't do.

Keith takes another sip of the tea. It's bitter, or maybe it just seems like that after so many cups of Zarkon's favored sweeter teas.

“Could you tell him I stopped by?” Keith asks, glancing at Haggar to gauge her reaction.
She offers him a smile, like she'd been expecting Keith to ask just that. “Of course.”

They finish their tea in somewhat comfortable silence, and Keith thanks her for the cup before retiring for the night.

The bed is still too large and too empty, and when Keith sleeps it's fitful and too light.

Haala leaves to go see Marzila, and Keith suspects it's more because he's worried for her than because he misses her. Keith would tell him that she's capable of taking care of herself if he thought even for a second that Haala's concern was because of Marzila's ability to protect herself. Haala respects her too much to insult her like that.

No, Keith knows it's not that.

What Haala is worried about is how Marzila is dealing with being put in such a stressful situation so soon after returning back to active duty. Keith doesn't know if everything that happened has reminded Marzila of her accident in any way, but he trusts Haala's judgment. If he thinks Marzila might need the emotional support, then Keith isn't going to stand in his way.

All he asks is that Haala tells Marzila he said hi.

Haala's departure leaves Keith alone on the ship, and he realizes how few people he actually knows there. Back in Central Command he might have gone to find Kano, but here he has no one. Well, maybe Thace, but Keith isn't comfortable bothering him just for company, and Kiira, but she's busy helping Haggar and taking care of her child.

He spends a day alone, wandering the hallways and stopping by the mess hall when he knows it's at its emptiest to have something to eat.

On the second day — after a night of barely sleeping — Keith decides that there's nothing stopping him from socializing for once in his life. He heads to the mess hall for lunch, his heart beating fast and the nervousness making him shiver.

He can do this. The Galra are supposed to be sociable people, at least among their own.

But Keith isn't one of them, not really. He might look like a Galra, but Marzila had told him that, in a way, he'd been more easily accepted when he looked like a human. At least then he'd been clearly an outsider. Now he's just another half-Galra, living proof that somewhere out there is a Galra who dared to have a child with someone who wasn't one of them.

Keith is aware of the stigma, but in the end of the day he's still one of them. He's made friends with Galra before, he can do it again, even if these people have no other reason to be around him than him being Zarkon's guest.

So Keith enters the mess hall, taking in the people and the tables, making note of the groups that look most displeased to see him there. He gets himself a plate of the meat and gravy, and what Keith has decided is the equivalent of pasta. He passes on the orange vegetables he'd tried once but found too bitter for his tastes.
He looks around the mess hall, and decides to approach the table of four Galra who had spared him a cursory glance when he’d entered.

His head is filled with white noise when he approaches the table, his ears pressed back and his tail twitching, but his steps more or less sure. The Galra fall silent when Keith clears his throat, and Keith shifts on his feet before nudging his glass towards the empty seat. “Is this seat taken?”

The Galra glance at each other in silence, and Keith regrets ever thinking this was a good idea. He should just excuse himself and leave the mess hall. He’s not that hungry anyways.

He’s just about to make a haphazard excuse and rush out of the door when the woman closest to him waves him to take the seat. Keith offers her a brief smile and sits down before she can change her mind and tell Keith to get lost.

For a long minute an uncomfortable silence hangs over the table, then the Galra continue gossiping about some secret relationship between their friends Keith knows nothing about. Keith doesn't engage in the conversation, and he keeps expecting the group to get up and leave him there at any second.

It wouldn’t be the first time that happen to him, and it's not like he fits in with them.

“You battled well,” one of the Galra says suddenly, snapping Keith from his thoughts. The Galra who had spoken — a shiny haired woman — tilts her head. “On the Arena. You battled well.”

“Thanks?” Keith almost shoves a forkful of of meat into his mouth before telling himself that he's supposed to socialize.

The Galra share a look among themselves, almost like a silent conversation Keith is not a part of.

“Is it true that you're staying the Emperor's quarters?” The Galra on Keith's left — a lieutenant if Keith remembers his Galra insignia correctly — asks and tilts his head, his ears that combat Haala's in fluffiness twitching as he tries to hide his curiosity.

“Yes, that’s true,” Keith replies, his eyes scanning the poorly hidden curiosity on the face of every Galra on the table. “I don't think he'd appreciate me gossiping though.”

Understanding and concern flash through the eyes of Keith's companions, and he can't blame them. No one wants to be doing anything Zarkon might disapprove of.

Keith still feels a little better at having sat down with them. At least they're acknowledging him and making conversation. It's more than Keith expected.

The Galra return to chatting among each other, but they wait until Keith has finished eating before getting up. Keith walks out of the doors with them, and he gets a goodbye form them when he walks in a different direction than they do.

Keith smiles the whole way to the library where he gets himself a book from the list Thace had compiled for him to help him learn the language.

———

Keith is nearly too invested in his book to realize the door opens behind his back. Maybe he'd
ignored it if wasn't looking up a word on the dictionary Thace had loaded onto his pad, but as it is he lets his eyes drift from the words to the door. He nearly drops the pad when he sees Zarkon at the door instead of Kiira bringing him his usual evening tea.

Zarkon gives off the impression of crossing his arms without actually doing so, and Keith scrambles to his feet, though he stops before he can get further than that. He doubts a hug would be welcomed, and he's not sure he could restrain himself if he went closer to Zarkon.

“You're back,” Keith says, feeling silly for stating the obvious, but it's too late to take it back now.

“Haggar said you were looking for me,” Zarkon replies, his voice cold.

Keith doesn't bother pointing out that that was days ago. “Yeah. I did.” He shifts, pulling the hem of his shirt down. “I wanted to apologize. I was angry and I lashed out, and I didn't mean to do that. I never meant to hurt you. I’m sorry.”

Zarkon regards him in silence for a long moment, and Keith shifts again, his tail twitching from side to side, letting out a soft thump when it hits the couch.

Zarkon's pose relaxes minutely, and though it's not forgiveness it's enough to make Keith let out a quiet, relieved breath.

“I came to inform you that I am needed elsewhere. I will be departing tomorrow, and we need to discuss what you will be doing while I am gone,” Zarkon says and takes a step further into the room.

Keith opens his mouth, but no sound comes out so he closes it a second later. It's not what he expected.

Keith wants to ask Zarkon to lower his shielding so that he can feel him, but he fears saying anything. He doesn't want to say the wrong thing again, even by accident.

“It will take a week at most. You need to be careful in the meantime. Without your friend here to escort you and me gone the staff onboard the ship will not treat you quite as much hospitality.” Zarkon walks to to the table, and Keith takes a step closer to him without thinking. “Afterwards I must make an appearance back on Draizagal.” Zarkon falls silent, almost like he's considering something, and heads to the table.

Keith takes another small step towards him. “Can I come with you?” Zarkon glances at him, and Keith shrugs. “I want to see your planet.”

“I could have an escort arranged for you,” Zarkon says, cocking his head and pulling out his usual chair.

“Or I could come with you to wherever you're going?” Keith suggests and bridges the gap between them and pulls his own chair out, resisting the urge to ignore the chair completely and just throwing himself at Zarkon. “I can stay out of the way if that helps.”

Zarkon doesn't look at Keith, but the minute tensing of his jaw tells Keith he's not entirely sold on the idea.

“Look,” Keith starts, then sighs and sits down, deciding one of them has to do so. “I know I've hurt you, and you have every right to be angry, but I need you to not shut me out.” He knows Zarkon knows what he means, but just to be sure his point gets across he pushes against the wall between them.
“I can't stay here without you,” Keith says, his voice quiet and defeated.

Zarkon sighs and sits down as well. “I suppose you can come — he lifts a finger before Keith can do more than open his mouth — as long as you will stay out of the way and not get in trouble.”

“I won't, I promise. I'll be good,” Keith promises hurriedly. He chews his lip, wringing his hands and wondering what he should do to fix thing between them. “Why have you been avoiding me?” He asks instead, even if it might be the wrong thing to do.

“I did not wish to say or do something that would permanently damage our relationship beyond repair, and trust me, I would have.” Zarkon gives Keith a stern look that leaves no doubt about the truth of his words in Keith's mind.

He knows Zarkon could hurt him. Not physically, Zarkon wouldn't do that, but just like Keith can say the things that wound him deep and ugly, Zarkon can do the same to him.

Or he could simply throw Keith into a cell and leave him there if he felt like it.

Zarkon takes a deep breath and clasps his hands on the table, considering something, but Keith can't tell what. He taps hesitantly at the wall Zarkon refuses to lower, but he gets no response.

So Keith reaches for Zarkon's clasped hands instead, hesitantly laying his own on top of them.

It takes a moment, but eventually Zarkon brushes his thumb across Keith's hand. It's a start and Keith smiles, feeling warmer than he has in days.

“Are you going to stay the night?” Keith asks, doing his best to keep his voice casual even as his tail twitches with anxiety.

“I have not considered it yet,” Zarkon replies in a tone that is much more naturally casual than Keith's.

Keith shrugs. “I can take the couch if you don't want to share a bed.”

“Why would I want you to not sleep in the bed?” Zarkon seems genuinely curious, and it alleviates some of Keith's anxiety.

“I just... you're mad at me so I thought you might not want to sleep with me.” Keith bites his lip. “But, you know, I sleep better with you nearby.”

“I suppose I could stay,” Zarkon says, and to Keith he sounds like he's pretending it's a chore. Maybe he's just being wishful.

Keith holds his hand a little tighter as a thanks. Zarkon lets Keith clasp his hand for a minute longer before pulling back and standing up.

Keith follows him with his eyes, and when Zarkon sits on the couch he goes to him, but instead of sitting by Zarkon's side Keith takes one of the decorative pillows from the couch and sits on it by Zarkon's feet.

He rests his forehead on Zarkon's knee. “Please.”

For a small eternity nothing happens, then Zarkon eases the shield and lets some of the warmth of his mind trickle through. Keith's breath shudders and he presses his face into Zarkon's thigh.

He pushes all he has felt in the past days through the bond, letting Zarkon feel his isolation and
loneliness and desperation. He also pushes his regret of hurting Zarkon and all the apologies he'd thought up in the dead of night when he couldn't sleep.

Zarkon cards his fingers through Keith's hair and rubs his scalp. Keith sniffs and scrunches his eyes shut so tight he sees bright stars.

Keith stirs, and he knows it's the middle of the night. The dream that woke him up is already fading, and if it had been a nightmare Keith doesn't remember it.

He rolls over and drapes himself across Zarkon's chest.

Zarkon hadn't woken up, and though Keith would like to think it's because he's gotten used to Keith, it might as well be because he's exhausted. He had stayed up when Keith had headed to bed, and Keith had been fast asleep by the time Zarkon had joined him.

A part of Keith had expected Zarkon not to come to bed at all.

Keith listens to the steady beat of his heart and smiles. He'd missed Zarkon more than he ever though he would. Maybe it was because Zarkon had shut him out even through the bond, maybe because they'd been separated for over a week, he's not sure, and he doesn't really care.

Keith takes a moment to relish in the familiarity of the soft warmth of Zarkon's mind brushing against his, constantly there even if Keith had never paid it attention before.

He's sure he'll never make that mistake again.

Zarkon shifts and drapes his arm across Keith's back. Keith brushes his fingers along Zarkon's jaw softly, a small smile playing on his lips.

He had missed this, and now that he's said goodbye to Shiro there's an easiness in admitting it that wasn't there before. It's almost like the small part of Keith's mind that had screamed at him to never forget he had to get back to Shiro had been silenced.

Keith still misses Shiro and he will always have a place in Keith's heart, but now that he has this, he might be ready to let go of Shiro. Sure, he'd be ecstatic to see Shiro again, but he knows that what he feels for Shiro is just him and not something reciprocated. They had been friends and they were never going to be anything more, no matter how much Keith might have wanted that at one time.

Shiro is a Sun whose light Keith had been lucky enough to bathe in, and he will forever cherish the memory of him.

Zarkon shifts again, then stirs, and blinks his eyes open. Keith smiles at him, and it's easy and warm. Zarkon returns the smile lazily and brushes his claws along Keith's spine. “Bad dream?” He asks, his voice tired, and Keith shakes his head and rests his cheek on Zarkon's chest.

“I just missed you,” Keith replies quietly.

Zarkon studies him, and Keith leans up and presses a kiss on his lips just because he can. “Thank you.”
Zarkon looks confused. “For what?”

“For letting me say goodbye to Shiro,” Keith replies, then shrugs. “For coming back to me.”

“I promised you I would never leave you,” Zarkon reminds him.

“Yeah but,” Keith stops and frowns. “What I said, about you and Black? I didn't mean any of it. I mean I kinda meant it, but I worded everything badly and it came out wrong.”

Zarkon frowns, but he doesn't say anything.

“I meant to say that you've changed from who you were, and Black reacts to that. I imagine Red wouldn't let me pilot her either anymore. And I know you know exactly what the Lions are and it was wrong of me to say otherwise.” Keith hesitates, hating himself just a little for the idea that crosses his mind, but deciding it's worth it if it will make Zarkon forgive him faster. “And, um, maybe Black wishes you'd be the kind of person she remembers you to be so that she could have you back.”

Keith waits for Zarkon to say something, but he remains silent, contemplative.

“And I'm glad I got stuck with you,” Keith says, “I'm glad I get to be with you. If I could I'd thank Black for that. And who knows, maybe she thought we'd be good together and that's why she stuck us together.”

Zarkon laughs, the tension leaving his body, and Keith chuckles quietly.

“You think that?” Zarkon brushes a strand of hair from Keith's face.

Keith nods. “Yeah.”

The last of the tension leaves Zarkon, and finally the bond feels like it used to. Keith swallows and presses his forehead on Zarkon's, enjoying the warmth that fills his mind.

“Try to sleep, ichkya. You need rest,” Zarkon says, and Keith nods before resting his cheek on Zarkon's chest. Zarkon runs his claws along Keith's spine until he falls asleep.

Keith stays awake a little while longer just to relish having Zarkon back.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter whenever I feel like editing.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter Notes

I'm on an editing spree that will hopefully last at least a month. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zarkon and Keith change ships, and when Keith asks Zarkon why they don't just take Cenzi’s ship to where they need to go, Zarkon gives Keith a look, but doesn't offer a reply. Maybe it’s a need to know sort of thing, maybe Zarkon just doesn't want to tell him.

As long as it won't affect Keith's life too much he doesn't care.

The only thing that bothers Keith is that he won't be there to see Haala and Marzila get back, but to his surprise Thace comes along with them, and it alleviates some of Keith's gloomy mood.

“I need someone I can trust your safety with on board the ship,” Zarkon says as an explanation. “And he is heading back to the Central Command since he is more or less useless anywhere else, so he might as well travel with us for now.”

Keith lifts an eyebrow, but doesn't comment on it.

They change ships again after barely a day of traveling, and Keith doses off while Thace explains him the finer details of some grammatical rule Keith is too tired to pay attention to. Thace lets him lean on his shoulder, though he says something about Keith not being off the hook from learning just because he's half asleep.

Eventually they end up on a space station, and Keith walks with Thace to the airlock where his next ship is docked while Zarkon is busy either arranging their next transport — which Keith thought was something he would have done before they ever left Cenzi's ship — or saying hello to someone. He wasn't very clear on it.

“Be careful when you go back to the Emperor,” Thace says.

Keith rolls his eyes. “I know. Zarkon said the same thing. I'll be fine.”

A shadow passes across Thace's face, and though Keith notices it he doesn't dwell on it. He's probably just worried that Keith hasn't learned to assess danger and gets himself stabbed again.

“I'll be fine,” Keith repeats, his voice more certain.

Thace doesn't look entirely convinced.

“I get the feeling you have some kind of a problem with me,” Keith starts, even though he knows it's not his best idea. Thace stops and turns to him, a protest ready on his lips. “Not with me personally, but you have a problem with something related to me,” Keith adds before he can speak.

Thace frowns, then glances around before starting towards a quiet corner. Keith follows him, curious to see where this will lead.
Thace leads him away from prying eyes and ears, and turns to Keith with a solemn expression on his face. “I just worry.”

Keith crosses his arms. “Why?”

Thace looks uncomfortable. “I don't want to see you hurt, that's all.”

“I'll be fine,” Keith assures him. “Zarkon isn't gonna let anything happen to me.”

Thace's expression shifts, and Keith narrows his eyes. “What's your problem?”

“I don't —“

“Because to me it seems you don't want me to be with him.” Keith's ears flatten and he glares at Thace. He doesn't examine his defensiveness of his relationship with Zarkon.

Thace raises his hands and lowers his ears to placate Keith, but though he opens his mouth, he doesn't say anything. Keith waits, just in case Thace will correct him. But Thace doesn't say anything, and Keith's heart sinks, just a little.

Thace was supposed to be different.

“You know, just because I didn't grow up in the Empire, or because I'm only half-Galra doesn't mean I'm not as good as you guys,” Keith snaps. “And if Zarkon thinks I'm good enough that should be enough for you.”

“I don't think you're lesser than us,” Thace cuts in. “I simply have some... reservations, you could say, that have nothing to do with who you are.”

“Is it because I was a part of Voltron? Because I promise you I don't have any intention of letting anything happen to Zarkon.” A hint of desperation creeps into Keith's voice, but he ignores it.

Thace gives him a joyless smile. “You are protective of him.”

“Of course I'm protective of him! I lo —“ Keith bites his lip and looks away, collecting himself. “I like him, and we're good together.”

If Thace caught his slip, he doesn't show it. “I have noticed that you have a unique relationship with the Emperor. I just worry that someone might get hurt, that's all. I don't want to see that happen.” He tilts his head, then adds, “to either one of you.”

It sounds like an afterthought, but Keith ignores it. “Well, you can stop worrying. I'm never going to leave him, and I'm not going to hurt him. And I know he won't hurt me either.”

“But —“

“I think I'm gonna leave now. It's a shorter walk back to Zarkon from here than from the airlock and I don't want to fight with you.” Keith turns on his heels and marches back the way they came from, leaving Thace calling after him.

Keith strides down the hallway as fast as he can without running, telling himself he'll try talking to Thace again when he's not feeling so betrayed. He's so lost in thought that crashes into someone when he rounds a corner. “Sorry,” he says automatically, even before taking a look at who he crashed into.

“Apology accepted. I was actually hoping to meet you.”
Keith does his best to hide the surprise on his face as he studies the Galra carrying two thermos cups, and he realizes he's seen him once before. The long, white hair is hard to forget. He’s the Galra Zarkon met up with at the Market.

Keith takes a step back. “Okay?”

“This is for you.” The Galra offers the other cup to Keith, who accepts it hesitantly. His eyes are just a little too calculative and clever for Keith's liking, and for a half a second Keith thinks of Zarkon, but the question of whether or not a Galra can have irises, let alone ones as brightly blue as the ones studying him distracts him.

Maybe he's just not fully Galra. It’s not like Keith is the only half-Galra in the universe.

“Thanks.” Keith smiles awkwardly and lifts the cup slightly, taking another small step back. “I should be going.”

“I'll walk with you,” the Galra says, smiling politely at Keith's distrustful frown. “It's not safe for you to wander around alone. These people do not know who you are traveling with, and they can get mean when faced with a half-Galra wandering around in civilian clothing, no matter how pretty your face is. And if I'm honest that might even make things worse for you.”

A chill runs down Keith's spine at the implication, but he's still not keen on letting a stranger accompany him. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yes, I did see your Arena fight, but are you absolutely sure you can defend yourself against, let's say five Galra twice as big as you?” The look the Galra gives Keith is infuriatingly knowing, and Keith scowls at him, but he can't argue his point either.

Keith heads down the hallway, and he doesn't say anything when the Galra follows him, though he does keep a close eye on him. He doesn't touch the tea.

“We should take the elevator.”

Keith laughs at the suggestion and turns to face his impromptu escort. “I'm not getting into an enclosed space with a stranger.” Keith frowns, realizing he hasn't caught the strangers name yet. “Who are you?”

“Lotor. And I'm hardly dangerous.”

“I don't know you and I don’t trust you,” Keith snaps and hands the thermos cup back. “I'm not really in the mood for tea either.”

As soon as the cup is out of his hands, Keith strides away. He wants to get back to Zarkon so that they can be on their way, and then he can get some well deserved rest.


Keith sighs and gives him an unimpressed look. “I'm not in the mood for this.” He steps around Lotor, but he steps right back into Keith's way.

“I simply wish to talk,” Lotor says and offers the thermos back to Keith.

“And I simply wish to be left alone,” Keith retorts. “So unless you've got a better reason than wishing to have a conversation, you can get lost.”
Keith pushes past Lotor and hurries down the hallway, hoping to catch the nearest elevator before Lotor catches up to him again. Of course he has no such luck, and soon Lotor is standing in his way again. “If you're worried the tea is poisoned I can assure you it is not.”

Keith had been mildly concerned about that, not that he'd ever admit it.

“And I would like to have a simple conversation with the person currently warming my father's bed each night.”

Keith blinks slowly, his mind turning muddled as he tries to process Lotor's words.

“I assume it's serious considering that he did allow you to wear a priceless family heirloom,” Lotor continues, ignoring Keith's dumbfounded silence.

Keith stares at him, his eyes wide. Lotor's smile fades. “He did not tell you about me.” There's something like tired resignation in Lotor's voice, and Keith shakes his head slowly.


Keith shrugs. He's still processing the fact that apparently Zarkon is a father. He has a child. A son.

This is Zarkon's son.

“ — or perhaps your relationship is actually more serious than his usual ones and that is why he has not brought me up yet.”

Keith shakes his head minutely and frowns at the floor before taking in a sharp breath to snap himself out of the daze he'd fallen into. “I couldn't tell you if it's serious or not.”

Lotor lifts an eyebrow, and Keith can see Zarkon in the movement. It's fascinating and a little disturbing, and when Lotor offers the thermos to him, Keith takes it as an afterthought.

“Shall we?” Lotor steps to Keith's side and tilts his head, and when he starts walking Keith follows him. They fall in step, and Keith tries to figure out something to fill the silence with.

“You're not fully Galra, are you?” Keith blurs before he can stop himself, but the silence was getting to him and he's curious.

Instead of being offended Lotor seems impressed and a little pleased. “My mother Honerva was Altean, yes.”

Keith nods for the lack of anything better to do. An Altean mother would mean... that either there are still surviving Alteans or that Lotor's mother was Zarkon's Altean wife, though Keith isn't sure how that would be possible. Had he ever mentioned what happened to her after they went into the rift? He knows Alteans have long lifespans, and that quintessence can keep a person alive even longer, but why isn't she around then?

And Lotor refers to her in past tense, so maybe she's dead. Accidents and the likes do happen, after all.

“May I ask what you see in my father?” Lotor glances at Keith and guides him to the nearby elevator door.

Keith tilts his head, pretending to consider his answer. “He's an egotistical, possessive,
manipulative, controlling asshole.”

Lotor laughs, surprised and delighted. “I cannot disagree with that, but surely that is not why you are in a relationship with him?”

Keith shrugs. “He's nice to me.”

Lotor gives him an inquisitive look, and Keith sighs as the elevator door open. He steps in, and Lotor follows. “He... he doesn't want me to be something I'm not. And he's there for me if I need him and... he tries, you know? If I have a problem with something he tries to fix it. He's considerate.” Keith tilts his head and frowns. “At least sometimes. When he’s not trying to get me to do what he wants.”

Lotor studies Keith and takes a long sip of his tea. “I'm glad to hear that,” he says eventually, and though he seems sincere enough there's an edge to his voice that Keith can't quite identify.

The elevator stops, and Lotor leads the way out. Keith follows him, sticking close to his side. They exchange meaningless pleasantries and unimportant tidbits of information about their lives. Keith gives more than Lotor, but he doesn't take it personally. Lotor has the right to be curious about the person who is sleeping with his father.

A fact that Keith will be digesting for a long time.

“Here we are,” Lotor says, stopping at a corner and waving Keith forward. Keith looks around and spots Zarkon talking to someone.

Keith turns back to Lotor, a confused look on his face. “You're not coming?”

Lotor smiles, but it's strained somehow. “I have other obligations to see to, and I am already running late.”

Keith nods and offers Lotor his hand. Lotor seems surprised, but it passes fast, and if Keith hadn't gotten so accustomed to reading Zarkon he would have probably missed it.

Before Keith can think any more of it Lotor grasps his arm, and Keith does the same to him.

“It was nice meeting you,” Lotor says, and he sounds sincere enough.

“Likewise,” Keith says.

Lotor bows his head, and just because it seems like the right thing to do Keith does the same. He watches Lotor head back to the elevator before turning around and walking up to Zarkon.

Keith clears his throat even though he knows Zarkon is fully aware of his presence, and waits until Zarkon dismisses the commander he’s talking to before taking the final few steps to him.

“You were upset earlier,” Zarkon says, the question for the reason clear in his voice.

Keith waves him off. “It was nothing. I'm just tired and I took something Thace said the wrong way. Don't worry about it. I'll apologize to him the next time I see him.”

“Alright.” Zarkon tilts his head and eyes the thermos in Keith's hands.

Keith lifts the cup and smiles pleasantly. “I met your son.”

He can practically feel Zarkon's blood turn cold. Zarkon stares at Keith, his thoughts racing fast
enough for Keith to be aware of it, and it's unusual enough for Keith to notice and be curious about.

“What did he want?” Zarkon asks, his voice carefully void of emotion.

Keith frowns. “He just wanted to say hi.”

“And that?” Zarkon nods at the thermos.

“He got me tea.”

“What did you talk about?”

“He asked about our relationship.”

The line of Zarkon's mouth tightens, and Keith scowls at him. “Why didn't you tell me you have a son?”

“That is not something we are going to discuss here,” Zarkon replies.

Keith gets it so he nods, but he lets his determination to continue the conversation seep through the bond.

Zarkon's expression turns sour for half a second before he heads down the hallway. “We have a ship to catch.”

Keith takes a sip of his tea and follows him.

Keith doesn't bring Lotor up until he has Zarkon alone in a conference room. Zarkon seems content enough to be off the station and on their way again, though the sweetened tea might have something to do with it as well.

“So,” Keith starts and sits down, “you have a son.”

“An astute observation,” Zarkon replies.

Keith sighs and rolls his eyes before giving Zarkon an unimpressed look. “You could've told me.”

Zarkon adds more sweetener into his tea and takes a small sip of it. Keith almost expects not to get an answer.

“Lotor and I have what you might call a complicated relationship. I do not enjoy discussing it, and I did not consider it something you needed to know, at least not in the beginning of our relationship.” Zarkon tilts his head. “You have not told me if children are something that might be an issue, and I have been unsure if you would react well to learning about him.”

Keith crosses his hands on the table and considers his answer. “I've never thought about kids as something I'd have to deal with, especially in a relationship. I don’t mind them, but I always imagined them as something that I would have to deal with in some distant future. I just wish you would've told me before I got ambushed on a space station.”
Zarkon inclines his head. “He can be very tenacious.”

Keith smiles. “Gets it from you I suppose.”

Zarkon focuses on his tea again, and Keith worries he's said something wrong. He's not sure what, and he doesn't want to apologize until he knows what he's apologizing for.

Keith clears his throat and shifts in his seat. “He said he's half Altean.”

“He is,” Zarkon confirms.

“Can I ask how?” Keith does his best to keep his voice casual.

Zarkon narrows his eyes and studies Keith for a few seconds before sighing and setting his tea cup down. “My wife was pregnant when I took her into the rift. Lotor is, in a way, all I have left of her.”

Keith frowns. “But didn’t you say she died because of the rift?”

“I never said that,” Zarkon replies, then looks down at his tea. “Though you are not entirely incorrect. Physically she did survive, but the person that was my wife did not return to me.”

“I'm sorry,” Keith says quietly and means it.

Zarkon's expression softens as he returns his attention to Keith. “I appreciate that, but it was a long time ago. I have moved past it and I do have you in my life now.”

He smiles softly, and Keith can't stop the blush from rising to his cheeks. He looks down and lets his bangs hide his smile. He should ask Zarkon about getting his hair cut soon. It's getting too long.

“She was... a very special woman.” Keith looks up to Zarkon's face, and there's something like melancholy in his eyes. “I do not expect you to replace her.”

“I wouldn't dream of trying,” Keith says.

Zarkon smiles at him briefly before adapting a more serious expression. “Now, when it comes to Lotor, I would recommend you exercise healthy caution.”

Keith lifts an eyebrow. “You want me to be suspicious of your own son?”

“Absolutely,” Zarkon replies wholeheartedly. “I can assure you he is fully capable of deception and pursuing his own agendas.”

“Well, he is your son, so I kinda took that for granted.” Keith smirks at the flat look Zarkon gives him.

“Can I ask you about why you two do have such a complicated relationship?” Keith plays with his braid to busy himself while Zarkon considers answering him.

“Lotor grew up very slowly. When he was young I used to tell him stories about his mother, of the kind of person she was, as I believed that was what she would have wanted.” Zarkon takes in a slow breath and tilts his head minutely, as if considering his words again. “Unfortunately, as time passed, I did not have the time he required to give him, and though I was there for him when he fell ill and I allowed him to play in my space and sleep in my bed as he wished, I do not think it was enough. He grew distant and I did not stop it, and we drifted apart. It led to us having a rather nasty argument that we have yet to resolve.”
“At least you were there,” Keith mutters and fixes his eyes on the table.

Zarkon doesn't say anything for a long time, and Keith doesn't bother breaking the silence.

“You should know that the planet we are going to visit is under the rule of one of my most trusted commanders. She is in charge of the mines there, but knowing your... principles, you might have an issue with how she conducts the natives — “Keith scowls at the table “ — who insisted on working the mines themselves, I might add. They have religious value to them and we are respecting that.”

Keith's scowl deepens, but he doesn't direct it at Zarkon. It wouldn't do them any good. And if Keith is honest with himself, he appreciates being told what to expect. At least now he can prepare himself for what he's about to see.

“Thanks for the heads up,” Keith says, just because it feels like the right thing to do.

“You are welcome,” Zarkon replies.

By the time they get to the planet it's too late for them to take a tour of anything but the commander's personal building in the Galra settlement.

The commander — Gnov if Keith remembers correctly from seeing her in the Central Command — doesn't exactly hide her disdain of Keith, but she keeps her opinions to herself. It's more self preservation than any concern for Keith's feelings, and they both know it, and the understanding of it hangs unspoken between them.

She ignores Keith's presence as she tells Zarkon the general strokes of the operation there. Apparently they are mining some kind of a rare substance, and it's not going as fast as Gnov would like.

Zarkon dismisses her when she shows them to the door to the room she says was set up for Zarkon. She seems offended when Zarkon lets Keith through the door before following him, and Keith resists the urge to grin at her.

“You may walk around the settlement tomorrow if you wish, but I would advise you to avoid going further,” Zarkon says as he takes in the room.

It's comfy, more organic than the rooms in the ships. There's no metal under the tapestries or the carpeting on the floor, and there's a faint smell of dry night breeze hanging in the air, like someone had aired the room before they had come in.

Keith beelines for the bed and throws himself on the soft covers. He knows Zarkon is warning him not to go to the mines and witness the treatment of the natives which the Galra have undoubtedly enslaved.

Keith doesn't tell him that he wants to see it. He wants to see it and then look at Zarkon, and if he still holds any love for Zarkon he'll know if what he feels is real or not.

Any thoughts about visiting the mines disappear when Zarkon climbs on the bed and settles on top of Keith, pressing soft kisses along his neck and biting his shoulder.
“You should rest,” Zarkon says and rests his cheek on Keith's shoulder.

Keith sighs and turns his head until he can look Zarkon in the eye. “I don't know if I can sleep just yet.”

“I can tire you out,” Zarkon offers innocently and Keith laughs softly.

“Please.”

The teasing glint in Zarkon's eyes becomes more apparent, and when he encourages Keith to climb up the bed Keith does so willingly and enthusiastically, and he pulls Zarkon on top of himself as soon as he's settled.

Keith wanders through the settlement, taking in his surroundings with a critical eye. The lack of corners on the architecture don't seem very Galran to him, and he wouldn't be surprised if it all had belonged to the natives before the Galra came knocking at their door.

The people he passes give him curious to displeased looks, but Keith ignores them. Going by the fact that almost everyone wears an armor Keith assumes they are all officers who work directly under Gnov, and perhaps their families.

Keith makes sure no one is following him before bee lining for the path that leads to the mines. He'd checked a map before leaving the main building, so he shouldn't get lost. He knows Zarkon will be disappointed, especially since Keith didn't say he was going to leave the settlement, but he hadn't told Keith not to do so either.

Just advised against it.

The sounds of machinery and shouts carries over the silence of the hot, dried up vegetation surrounding him. Keith's ears flatten and his tail twitches from side to side anxiously, but his steps remain sure and he keeps his head high while he marches forward.

He clears the last hill, and as he'd expected the mine is not a pleasant sight. The Galra guarding the workers are in the shade of the scaffolds while the workers load large rocks onto a large, wide, open metal box.

One of the guards fires at the ground when an older worker moves too slow for his liking. Keith growls and rushes down the hill, the sand and rocks slippery under his feet. He runs to the scared worker, ignoring the displeased shouts of the guards. “Hey, you okay?”

The worker balks from him, and Keith has to remind himself that he looks just like the people taking shots at him for not walking too fast. “I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not with those jerks.”

The worker blinks his round, pale eyes and bows before scrambling back and hurrying towards the mines.

Keith looks around, and all he sees is the scared and distrustful looks of the workers. They're small, frail looking people with flat faces, dry skin and not a single hair in sight, and their ears make Keith think of bats.
“Hey!” The shout gets Keith to turn around. “What's your problem?”

The large Galra approaching Keith is angry, and Keith is suddenly grateful he let Zarkon force him to put on the coat he'd gotten Keith a few weeks prior. It has Zarkon's family insignia embroidered on it, and it should be enough to keep Keith safe among the Galra.

The guard stops inches from Keith, glaring at him, his ears pressed down.

“He's old, he's not going to walk as fast as the younger ones. You're an idiot for not realizing it,” Keith says, his voice calm despite the anger burning inside of him.

“You keep your halfbreed ass out of our operations,” the Galra snarls back, shoving Keith's shoulder hard enough to force Keith to take a step back but not hard enough to make him fall.

“First of,” Keith starts, “do not push me. Secondly, I wouldn't have to get involved in your shit if you weren't so trigger happy.”

The Galra looks ready to hit Keith, but he stops at the last second, glancing at Keith's clothes before taking a step back. “Just stay out of the way.”

He leaves Keith with one last angry glare at Keith and heads back to his friends. Keith frowns after him before turning his attention back to the workers. They eye him distrustfully as he approaches them, and Keith makes sure he appears as non-threatening as he can.

“Hey,” he says softly to the healthiest looking worker hauling a rock towards one of the boxes. “Do you need help with that?”

The worker stops, his eyes widening, looking at Keith like he expects to be either laughed at or get hurt. “But... you are one of them?”

“I'm not,” Keith says. “I mean I am one of them, but I'm not with them. If you need anything I'll help.”

“Water,” the worker replies. “We do not come on the upside during the Sun time. The heat dries us from the inside.”

Keith nods. “I'll see what I can do.”

Keith straightens his back and marches to the guards standing comfortably in the shade of the structures surrounding the clearing. “Who do I talk to about getting them more water?”

The chatter cuts out instantly, and all eyes focus on Keith.

“Didn't I tell you to stay out of our operations?” The Galra from the before crosses his arms and glares at Keith.

Keith crosses his arms too. “Yeah. But you're torturing them by denying them basic needs.”

“Who cares? By Gryala’s rings, they live in caves,” one of the guards laughs, and the others chuckle quietly.

Keith’s ears flatten and he growls. “They're still people. They deserve to have their basic needs met. War and occupation don't justify what you're doing.”

“What would a mutt like you know about that?” One of the guards snarls.
“How about I knock you on your ass?” Keith shoots back.

One of the guards snorts, and it's enough to enrage the Galra who had decided that insulting Keith was a good idea. Keith sees the punch coming, but it's so surprising he's not quite fast enough to duck.

His jaw burns from the strike, and Keith doesn't get a chance to straighten out before he's being slammed against one of the support bars. He takes his dagger from his boot where he’s gotten into a habit of hiding it in, but the gun pointed at his face stops him.

The other guards protest, but Keith doesn't hear what they're saying. The gun is a little too hard not to keep at the focus of his attention.

The gun presses against Keith's forehead. “You need to learn your place.”

“You're going to go too far,” someone says.

The gun disappears and the air gets knocked out of Keith's lungs in one strong strike to his stomach. Keith stumbles to the ground while someone jerks the Galra who had assaulted him back.

“Are you insane? He's got imperial family insignia on his clothes!”

Keith gasps for breath and stays on his knees. He's better off not making trouble while he can't breathe. And he has a decent shot at incapacitating at least two of the guards from where he is, as long as they don't pay attention to him.

“Great job, maxra.”

Keith tugs at the bond. He doesn't think he's safe anymore, and he wouldn’t mind Zarkon’s help.

The guards glance at Keith, then at each other.

“What do we do now?”

Keith tugs at the bond again and clings to his dagger tighter.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm planning on getting this fic finished this month so that I can move on to writing the second part of the story. So expect another chapter early(ish) next week.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Posting this a little earlier than I planned but at least now I don't have to worry about being too busy and forgetting about the whole thing later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The guards settle on forcibly dragging Keith back to the settlement, and Keith protests to their rough treatment the whole way.

The silver lining is that Zarkon is waiting for them in the foyer. He takes one look at Keith and waves him away as he narrows his eyes at the guards, and Keith knows he's never going to see them alive again.

Even though it's what Zarkon expects him to do, Keith heads back to their room. He knows Zarkon will join him later, after he's dealt with the guards.

Keith sits by the window while he waits, his jaw and stomach throbbing, anger still simmering inside him.

The dried out fields seem like a fire hazard. From the window Keith can see them stretch out for miles. One spark and the whole thing would be in flames, and the Galra settlement would burn with it.

“Told you not to go to the mines,” Zarkon says the second he steps through the door and hour or so later.

Keith sighs as he turns to face him. “You advised against it, but you never actually told me not to go there.”

Zarkon narrows his eyes and walks up to Keith. “You could have been hurt.”

“I was hurt.” Keith waves at his face. “But that's on your people.”

“You should not have gone down there.”

Keith glares at Zarkon. He's angry. Angry at Zarkon and the Galra, angry at the past for driving Zarkon to be what he is today, angry at himself for going to the mine even after been warned against it.

He's angry, but he doesn't hate Zarkon.

He should and he knows it, but he doesn't. Even now he can't bring himself to hate Zarkon. Everything he feels, all the love and affection and desire, is still there.

“Look,” Keith starts, turning fully towards Zarkon and lifting his hands to show Zarkon he's not about to start a fight. “I just asked if they could get the natives some water. One of them said that the sun is too hot and that they can't deal with the heat. The guards got angry, they started a fight. That's it.”
Zarkon scowls, just for a second, before schooling his expression into something more neutral. “We have a limited amount of water on this planet, and the dry season makes it impossible for us to harvest more of it. Gnov is prioritizing our people and I cannot find fault in her logic in doing so.”

Keith bites his tongue and takes a deep breath, refusing to start a fight. “Can’t you ship more water here?”

“Why would I care if they have water or not?” Zarkon sounds so genuine that Keith can do nothing but stare at him with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open.

“They're people! You took over their home and you're forcing them to work for you, so you're responsible for their wellbeing. You're obligated to care about them.” Keith hops down from the windowsill and marches past Zarkon. “You can't just work them to death.”

“I have no obligation to them. They are not my people,” Zarkon replies, still perfectly rational.

Keith paces the room. He shouldn't have expected Zarkon to agree to give the workers more water. It was stupid of him to think he'd care. “But they're suffering,” he still tries.

“And I have no water to spare for them at this time, so they will have to continue suffering until the rain falls again,” Zarkon says.

Keith wants to hit him and scream at him, but he knows that wouldn't get him anywhere.

“You used to care,” Keith says, “you used to care about other people. You — “ he sighs and spreads his arms, already regretting what he's about to say. “You were a Paladin. You were the first of them. You had to care.”

Zarkon's expression doesn't change, and he lets nothing through the bond. It puts Keith on edge and he hates it.

“You know, if you tried to be more like the person Black chose to pilot her all those years ago then maybe you could get her back.” Keith sends a quiet apology to Shiro and the others for it and hopes Zarkon's obsession with the Lion is enough to make him do the right thing. “It's just water,” he adds with a defeated slump of his shoulders.

Zarkon's expression doesn't change, but Keith doesn't miss the way he hitches his shielding a little higher. “My concern is for your safety, not for them.”

“I don't need protection,” Keith snaps.

“You are mine, that means I protect you,” Zarkon replies, and normally the heat in his voice would make Keith melt a little, now it just angers him further.

“Well I don't think I want to be yours right now,” he says, his voice dark.

Even the obvious shock on Zarkon's face doesn't alleviate Keith's anger, and he gives Zarkon one last disappointed look before walking out of the door.

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Keith isn't sure if he does it just to be defiant, but he heads back to the mines. There are no guards present, but the number of sentries has risen.
Keith waits by the sidelines until he sees the worker he'd talked to before. It takes a while, but eventually he spots the person he was looking for.

“Hey!” Keith hurries to him. “I tried to get you more water but I don't know if I had much luck.”

“You are kind,” the worker says and drops the rock he's carrying into the large box.

Keith smiles. “I'm Keith.”

The worker tilts his head, and Keith bites his lip. “Um, my name? It's Keith.”

The worker blinks and starts towards the mines again. Keith follows him. “Ia,” he says. “That’s what the others call me.”

Keith nods. “Nice to meet you Ia.”

Ia flicks his ears and shrugs. Keith takes it as a nice-to-meet-you-too.

Keith follows him into the mines. The air there is dry and dusty, and the lights are so dim Keith can barely see. It's not as hot as it was on the outside, but it can't be easy to work in either. There are sentries patrolling the crisscrossing tunnels, but they pay no attention to Keith.

Ia heads deep into the mines, all the way to a dead end where other workers are chopping the rock.

Keith helps as much as he can, but the workers refuse to let him work on the actual wall, so he settles for moving the larger pieces that fall from the wall out of the way. No one thanks him for it, but the people hauling the rocks out don't seem to mind his help so Keith assumes the help is accepted if not appreciated.

It doesn't take long for Keith to end up dusty and with aching muscles, but at least he's doing something to help.

When Zarkon tugs at the bond Keith conjures up the best mental impression of giving him the finger and puts more effort into moving the rocks.

Maybe he should see if he could have his own room. They don't have a couch for him to sleep on in their room, but Keith supposes he could curl on one of the chairs if need be. He'd end up with muscle cramps come morning, but he's not going to sleep in the same bed as Zarkon, if for no other reason than to make his anger and disappointment clear.

“For you,” Ia says, snapping Keith from his thoughts. He holds a rock at Keith, and Keith takes it with a confused smile.

“Thanks.” Keith studies the rock, and when he turns is he sees a glimmer of something red under the near black rock of the walls. He rubs at the red bit, and the rock around it falls off, turning into rubble. Keith grows even more confused, and he scrapes the rock off until he's holding a smooth, shiny red oval. “What is it?”

“Sacred,” Ia replies.

Keith nods, then frowns. “The Galra want these?”

“No. They want the ground wall. For what reason, we do not know, but it's worthless to us so we do not mind them taking it. They allow us to keep our sacred stones.” Ia glances at Keith. “We are happy to help our guests.”
“They dwell in the light,” the woman next to Ia mutters. “You shouldn't call them guests.”

“What do you mean?” Keith asks. “I mean, I agree, I wouldn't call the Galra guests either, but what do you mean by them 'dwelling in the light’?”

The woman throws a less than pleased look at Keith and leaves the area with a big rock.

“Evil comes from the light,” Ia says, his voice grim. “There were other guests before. They left us in the shadows and dwelled in the light. They disappeared, the Galra are using their constructions.”

Keith nods. He's not sure he understands Ia completely, but he gets the gist of it and that's enough. “And this stone?”

“They were given to us by the land. They shine with the light of the moons.” Ia chips off a particularly large piece of the wall, and Keith pockets the stone and goes to help him move it.

Keith stays there for hours, until two sentries come to their junction and demand he stand up.

“Why?” Keith asks without facing the sentries.

“You have been summoned,” the sentry replies.

Keith groans and rolls his eyes, and sends his refusal to move and annoyance at Zarkon through the bond. It's a low move on Zarkon's part to send the sentries after him. He could have at least come get Keith himself.

The sentry closest to Keith steps forward and grabs his arm. Keith barely gets out a protest before he's being yanked to his feet and dragged out of the mines. Keith complains and fights, and he knows his arm will be bruised. The workers give them looks, but they only last for a second before they lower their heads and move a little faster.

For the second time Keith gets dragged to the main house of the settlement, but this time Zarkon isn't there to welcome him in the foyer. Instead the sentry takes him straight to his and Zarkon's room. The sentry tosses him in and closes the door, and since Keith can't see Zarkon he hurries to the door, only to find it locked.

Keith kicks the door and curses. Of course Zarkon had ordered it locked. Keith would be angrier about it if he hadn't just tried to walk through it, thus proving why it needed to be locked in the first place.

He huffs and slumps on the less comfortable chair, just because he doesn't want to get dust and bits of rock on the chair he might have to sleep on.

When Zarkon joins Keith a few hours later the sun has set and the room is illuminated by the stars lighting the sky and the lamp Keith had turned on.

Zarkon turns the rest of the room's lights on and changes out of his armor without hurry before taking the seat in front of Keith. Keith glares at him, his ears flat and his tail thumping against his chair.

“You went into the mines,” Zarkon states in a voice that he might use to observe the weather.
“And you're an asshole,” Keith replies, sounding far less composed.

Zarkon shrugs one shoulder, like Keith's words don't affect him in any way, and pulls out his pad. It's infuriating. Keith wants to throw things at him and maybe call him more names.

“I understand that you have a natural inclination to feel sympathy towards people you feel are mistreated, but you must understand that as much as I would enjoy giving you what you want I cannot just break protocol and thousands of years of tradition to please one person.” Zarkon looks up from his pad, his expression carefully neutral.

Keith chews the inside of his cheek, his brow knitted together. He hates that he understands where Zarkon is coming from, and the fact that if Zarkon could he would give the natives the water they need just because Keith asks is kind of sweet, in its own way.

Keith doesn't have a response for Zarkon. How is he supposed to argue with a reason that is based on protocols and traditions and not emotion and common decency?

Zarkon stand up. “Walk with me.”

Keith huffs and pushes himself up, and follows Zarkon out of the door. Zarkon heads down the hallway at a leisurely pace, leading Keith down the stairs and down another hallway. Keith wonders about their destination, but he doesn't want to ask.

Zarkon opens a door at the end of the hallway and waves Keith in. The room is dark when Keith steps in, and he has to wait until Zarkon turns on the lights and closes the door.

Keith's eyes widen and he turns to Zarkon. They are in is a small room with a bed and a table with a lamp that doesn't look like it belongs there on it, and Keith has no idea why they are there.

“Since you do not wish to continue our relationship in its current form I thought it best to have our living arrangements match our relationship status. It would be inappropriate for you to stay in my bed without the appropriate connection between us. I will arrange for a room for you on board the ship when we depart, and you will be staying in the Central Command while I visit our homeworld.”

Keith blinks, befuddled by Zarkon's casual tone and dumbfounded by his words. “You're — “ Keith clears his throat “ — I never said I wanted to break up.”

Zarkon frowns and tilts his head. “You said you do not wish to be mine. That — “

“I was pissed! I didn't mean I wanted to break up!” Keith runs a hand through his hair and takes in a deep breath. “I didn't mean it like that.”

Zarkon lets out a soft breath, and some of the tension Keith hadn't realized was even there evaporates from his expression. “In our culture stating that you do not wish to be someone's implicates a desire to terminate a relationship. I assumed that was the case, and I took the appropriate action. I did not want you to have to ask for your own room. I thought that would be... inconsiderate of me.”

Keith smiles. He can't help it. Even though he noticed the vindictive way Zarkon intended to cut Keith out cold — separate rooms and leaving him in the Central Command, and most likely complete ignorance of his existence altogether — he can't help but feel warm inside.

The need to tell Zarkon he loves him is like a balloon ready to burst in Keith's chest, but the bitterness of how easily Zarkon dismisses the suffering of the natives keeps him silent.
“Do you wish to return to our room?” Zarkon asks, and as much as Keith wants to say yes, he sighs and shakes his head.

“No, I think I could use the space.” He offers Zarkon a mildly apologetic look, not missing the annoyed twitch of Zarkon’s ears. “Just because I don’t want to end our relationship doesn’t mean I want to be with you right now.”

Zarkon inclines his head, then frowns. “Because of the water?”

“Yes, because of the water,” Keith says, trying hard not to get testy. “Look, I can’t accept the way you treat them, and you obviously don’t see anything wrong with it, so I think it’s best if we keep out distance until we can leave this place.”

“That is acceptable,” Zarkon says. “I do not want you to leave the settlement again.”

Keith crosses his arms. “Is that an order?”

“Yes. If you break it I will have you placed in a cell for the remainder of our trip.” The look Zarkon gives Keith leaves him with no doubt that he will do it, too.

Keith swallows. “Why?”

“Because no matter what our relationship status is, it does not justify you breaking the rules as you wish. If you go against my direct orders I will have to punish you, just like I would anyone else.” Zarkon cocks his head. “Perhaps not as severely as others, but I will have to punish you.”

Keith nods. He gets it.

“I would recommend you shower,” Zarkon says. “And I hope you will sleep well.”

“You too,” Keith says and watches Zarkon leave the room, feeling oddly wistful.

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Keith stares at the lamp on the table casting the room in pale purplish light. He's been trying to fall asleep for hours now, but his mind is going too fast and not having Zarkon there has not become any easier to deal with. At least Zarkon hasn't blocked their bond this time. It's there, and Keith shouldn't feel as alone as he does.

Instead of sleeping, Keith thinks.

He thinks about his situation, and he thinks about how unfair it is that the Galra get all the water they want and the people doing all the actual work get nothing but the bare minimum they need to survive.

Zarkon had said it was protocol and customs, but Keith knows it's not the entire truth. The Galra just don't care. It would be easier for Keith to deal with if he hadn't gotten to know them. He knows they can care, and they can care deeply. Even Zarkon is capable of that in his own strange way. Their sympathies just don't extend to other species.

There's no way to get them to agree to give the natives water through emotion. Keith would have to come up with a cold, logical reason for giving them the water they need. The reason would have to be something that would benefit Zarkon and the Galra.
Something like —

Keith springs up, not bothering to put on clothes before rushing out of the door.

It dawns on Keith that running through the hallways in nothing but a loose shirt and his underwear isn't the best of ideas while he takes the stairs up two at a time. He might run into someone, and then he would have to explain himself and deal with Zarkon's disappointed looks.

Keith considers himself lucky he gets to Zarkon's door without being spotted. He sighs in relief when the door opens, he'd half expected Zarkon to have locked him out just to spite him.

Keith turns the lights on and doesn't bother being quiet when he dashes across the room and hops onto the bed. Zarkon grunts and pushes himself up, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

“How badly do you want the rock from those mines?” Keith asks.

Zarkon sighs and slumps back on the bed. “This cannot wait until morning?”

“No. It's a simple question.” Keith nudges Zarkon's shoulder to make sure he's not falling back to sleep.

“It is not vital, but the faster we get it the better,” Zarkon replies and shifts until he can blink tiredly at Keith. “Why?”

“Because the natives dry out in the heat. No matter how much you try to get them to work faster they can't. Literally. They're too dried out and they move slow. I talked to a few of them and they explained it to me. If you give them more water they will be able to move and work faster, and you'll get your rock faster, and you won't be working them to death.” Keith bites his tongue and shifts until he's sitting cross legged by Zarkon's side, practically vibrating with nervous energy.

Zarkon pinches the bridge of his nose. “You woke me up for this?”

Keith nods. “It's a good reason, right? It's based on logic.”

“Why do you insist on this?” Zarkon asks.

Keith shrugs. “I care about them. And maybe I want to believe that there's still some goodness left in you, even if you try to hide it. I'm hoping you'll let me keep believing that.”

Zarkon sighs again, deeper and more tired. “Will you let me go back to sleep if I promise to take it under consideration?”

Keith presses his forehead on Zarkon's shoulder and nods. “Thank you.”

“Now let me sleep,” Zarkon says and turns on his stomach, burying his face in the pillow. Keith sits back up and nods again. He considers staying where he is, but he'd wanted space and he doesn't want to give Zarkon the satisfaction of him literally running back to him in the dead of night.

“Sorry I woke you up,” Keith mutters and crawls off the bed. “Can I borrow your coat?”

Zarkon lifts his head just enough to crack his eyes open and glare at Keith.

“I forgot to put clothes on,” Keith says as an explanation.

“Fine,” Zarkon sighs and buries his face in the pillow again.
Keith grabs the coat from the chair where Zarkon had folded it on, and tiptoes across the room and shuts the lights off before slinking out of the door.

The coat smells like Zarkon, and Keith wraps it around himself and lets the scent fill his senses.

He's so wrapped in the safe familiarity of it that he collides with the petite woman rounding the corner.

“Sorry,” Keith mutters and kneels to help the woman get the towels she'd dropped.

The woman bows her head, her pink hair flopping on her eyes. Keith's hands still when he sees her ears. The hair he'd thought was dyed, but her ears are almost leaf like, and it dawns on Keith that she's not fully Galra either.

“I didn't mean to run into you,” he says and hands her the towels he'd managed to pick up.

She bows her head again and stands, and Keith pushes himself to his feet. Keith isn't sure why she's not answering him at first, but then he remembers what Thace had told him about household staff. They weren't supposed to be seen, and they weren't supposed to be talked to. It was something he'd stressed, that Keith would have to act in a manner fitting of his status.

And since Keith was wearing Zarkon's coat there was no way a half-Galra servant would address him.

“I'm really sorry,” Keith says again, and gives her a wide berth as he circles her to continue on his way. He suspects he'll be the subject of the rumor mill come morning.

“Excuse me?”

Keith barely hears her, but he swirls around and gives her his full attention, smiling encouragingly. “Yes?”

She shuffles on her feet, clinging to her towels a little tighter, her green eyes twinkling. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Keith asks.

She shifts again. “That you're, um... you know.”

Keith shrugs, though he thinks he may have an idea of what she's getting at.

“The Emperor's favorite,” she says.

“Favorite what?” Keith takes a step closer to her, though he makes sure to stay as non-threatening as he can.

“ Ifeya .” She shifts, then hurries to add, a little too loudly, “companion.”

Keith doesn't kid himself into thinking that the first word had been very complimentary, but he shrugs. “I wouldn't know.”

The truth is he doesn't want to answer her, but he's not comfortable insulting her either. The woman looks at him, and it lasts just a little too long and her eyes are a little too sharp.

Keith smiles, but it's becoming strained. “I'm gonna go to bed now, so.” He bows a little and turns to leave.
"I'll walk with you." She hurries to Keith's side. "Maybe we could share secrets."

Keith wraps the coat tighter around himself. "What kind of secrets?"

"You're the Emperor's favorite. There must be secrets only you know. I can tell you a few in return."

Protectiveness Keith hasn't felt for anyone but Shiro in flares inside of him, and he stops and swirls to face the woman, barely resisting the urge to bare his teeth at her. "What do you want?"

She stops and takes a step back, a meek smile on her lips. "Nothing."

"You're lying." Keith takes a step closer to her, narrowing his eyes when the smile doesn't fall from her face. "And you're an idiot if you think I'd ever give away anything to you."

Her smile wavers, just a little, and Keith grabs her arm before she can flee. He should drag her to Zarkon and let him deal with her. She's probably a spy, or at least working for someone in power. Keith should do something. He can't just let her walk away.

"I don't mean any harm," the woman says, distress creeping into her voice. "I'm just doing my job."

Keith tightens his hold and glares at her for a few seconds longer before letting go of her arm. "Get lost."

She hurries away from Keith with a concerned glance thrown over her shoulder. Keith glares after her until she disappears behind a corner. He's in a sour mood the whole way back to his room.

Keith considers waking Zarkon up again, but he's fairly sure that the servant is something that can wait until morning. Right now he needs sleep.

And Zarkon's coat turns out to be just what he needs to get it. Keith lies under it, smelling the familiar scent of Zarkon and imagining he's there by his side as he drifts to sleep.

Keith mentions the servant to Zarkon in the morning, and though Zarkon's expression doesn't change Keith knows he doesn't like what he's hearing. He reminds Keith to stay in the settlement. He also says they will be leaving come evening, and if Keith is not there when Zarkon leaves the main building, Keith will be left on the planet and he will be free to stay in the mines for as long as he likes.

It's not a threat, exactly, but Keith still keeps it in the back of his mind while he wanders around the settlement until the sun starts setting. He wonders if Zarkon is doing something about the water issue. He hadn't said anything about it while Keith had seen him in the morning.

Maybe he'd just said he'd consider it because Keith had woken him up.

But he'd promised, and Zarkon always keeps his promises.

Keith is already waiting for Zarkon with their packed bags when Zarkon walks into their room. Keith wants to ask if he'd given any thought to the water situation, but he doesn't dare to bring it up.
“A planet in the next system is having a monsoon season. The rainwater is drinkable, and our experts estimate shipping it here would be more cost efficient than replacing the workers or waiting until the dry season passes and they can work at full capacity again,” Zarkon says, his eyes not meeting Keith’s.

Keith’s mouth hangs open for a second before he shuts it with a clank of his teeth. He bolts to his feet and hurries to Zarkon, and throws his arms around him. “Thank you.”

“It was a logical decision based on financial benefits and the time wasted if we wait for the rain to fall again,” Zarkon says.

Keith smiles and hugs Zarkon tighter before letting go and pulling Zarkon down to press their foreheads together. “You're not as evil as you like to pretend.”

Zarkon huffs, his smile indulgent. Keith holds him for a second longer before letting go and stepping back. “Can we go home now?”

Zarkon inclines his head. “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter either on Friday or Saturday, depending on how busy I am this week.

I hope you liked this!
So I was going to post this tomorrow but a sudden invitation to a barbecue made me decide to post this today because I don't know how much time I'll have tomorrow. So if I said to anyone that I'd post this on Saturday... oops.

It takes them a day and a half to reach the Central Command, and Keith glues himself to a window as they approach it.

He hadn't expected to miss it so much, but seeing it again feels a little like coming home. He wonders if his cushion is still on Zarkon's floor.

Maybe the ship was damaged so badly there was nothing left of Zarkon's quarters and everything is new.

The ship slows down, and Keith hurries to meet Zarkon by the airlock. Zarkon's already there, and Keith joins him without saying a word. It doesn't take long for the ship to dock, and Zarkon shows Keith through the airlock.

The Central Command hasn't changed, at least not in any way that Keith can recognize, and it's comforting, in a way. Keith wonders if he still remembers his way around as he follows Zarkon. He thinks he'll manage if he reorients himself with something familiar. Like Zarkon's quarters.

Or their quarters. He doesn’t what the correct term is.

Keith isn't sure if Zarkon is reading his mind or if he just wants to see his old space, but he leads Keith straight to his — their — quarters. They're as big as Keith remembers, and all of Zarkon's little knick-knacks are still on the shelves.

“My cushion's gone,” Keith notes, frowning more at his own almost disappointed tone of voice than anything.

Zarkon stops and tilts his head, an amused smile playing on his lips. “Would you like it back?”

Keith shrugs. “I think I'll manage without it.” He wanders around the room to the shelves. “Can I put my stuff here?”

“Of course,” Zarkon replies. “You can do it while I meet with the commanders. I should not be gone for long.”

Keith nods and starts unpacking while Zarkon leaves the room. He hesitates to put the red stone Ia had given him on the shelf, but in the end he decides to put it there. Zarkon said it was alright, and Keith wants the stone to be visible.

Next Keith puts his clothes where they used to be, and then he lounges on the bed.

He had missed the bed. It's comfy and soft, and Keith hopes Zarkon's bed on Draizagal is as nice.
He imagines it will be. He can’t see Zarkon not wanting the most comfortable bed he can get his claws on in his home.

Maybe a good night's sleep in a familiar, heavenly bed is what they both need after their conflict on the planet. Maybe it will stop Zarkon from being tense around Keith. It's not obvious, but it's there, and Keith is good enough at reading him to pick up on it. Maybe it's there because Keith had cared so much about the natives. Maybe because Keith accidentally almost ended their relationship.

He can't imagine how Zarkon must have felt during the hours Keith had been gone. Keith had even given him the telepathic finger when he'd tried to contact him. And Zarkon had arranged for Keith to have his own room and everything.

Because Keith had said one stupid thing while angry.

Maybe Keith should talk to Thace and apologize for the way he'd said goodbye. Then he can ask Thace to get him a reference sheet of phrases and words to avoid or something so that he won't accidentally end any other relationships, even temporarily. He thinks he'll do it tomorrow, when it's not so late and he's not so tense from traveling.

As he waits for Zarkon to return, Keith ends up taking a shower. It seems like the logical thing to do, and the hot water relaxes him.

He gets an idea, barely formed but still lingering at the edges of his mind, and Keith smiles. It's not the worst of ideas, as long as Zarkon stays away for long enough and doesn't mind it's something Keith can pull off.

Zarkon returns moments before Keith steps out of the shower, and Keith towels himself up and moisturizes while he listens to Zarkon settling in. Keith hopes he's changed out of his armor, though it's not going to ruin Keith's plans if he hasn't, just complicate them a bit.

Keith wraps a towel around his waist and grabs a bottle from the shelf before leaving the bathroom.

Zarkon is immersed in a book, which suits Keith just fine, just like the fact that Zarkon had changed out of his armor and into his most casual suit. He hasn't even fastened the collar.

Keith fights back a smile and saunters up to him. “I'm gonna need that,” he says and takes a hold of Zarkon's book.

Zarkon's ears twitch down and he narrows his eyes at Keith, his hold on the book tightening.

Keith lifts an eyebrow and stops fighting the smile tugging at his lips. “Please?”

Zarkon lets go of the book his reluctance clear on his face, and Keith marks his page before setting it down on the table. He smiles as he climbs on Zarkon's lap, and he sets his towel and the bottle
down beside them. Zarkon gives Keith a quizzical yet indulgent look.

Keith wraps his arms around Zarkon's shoulders. “Trust me?”

“Of course,” Zarkon replies, and the sincerity of his voice makes Keith still for a few seconds.

Then Keith presses his forehead to Zarkon's, holding him close.

Zarkon cards his claws through Keith's hair, and Keith huffs and pulls back, and grabs Zarkon's wrists. “How about you just sit there and let me do the work?”

“Oh?” Zarkon quirks an eyebrow, but lets Keith guide his hands back on the couch.

“Just stay still,” Keith says, then adds jokingly, “or I'll have to tie you up.”

Zarkon's eyebrow rises higher. “You want to tie me up?”

“Do you want me to tie you up?” Keith counters.

They stare at each other in surprised silence. Keith shifts. He hadn't thought about it before, but now that the idea is in his mind Keith finds he doesn't exactly mind it, though he doesn't think he'd ever go through with it. He's not sure what Zarkon thinks about it, but going by the expression on Zarkon's face he might at least pretend to consider it before turning it down just to humor Keith.

Keith lets go of Zarkon's hands and wraps his arms around his neck, pulling him closer and pressing their temples together. Zarkon lets Keith take the lead, indulgent and curious as to what Keith is up to.

Keith presses a kiss to the corner of Zarkon's mouth before gently grabbing his jaw and tilting his head to the side. Zarkon's hands twitch, his claws brushing against Keith's leg.

“Stay still,” Keith whispers before nipping at Zarkon's ear. When Zarkon sighs so quietly Keith barely hears it, Keith sucks the tip of his ear, worrying it with his teeth until Zarkon shivers.

Keith opens Zarkon's coat and moves to bite the soft skin of his neck. Zarkon almost grabs Keith's legs, but he stops at the last second. For a moment Keith wants to congratulate him, but he doubts it would do him any favors.

He sucks a mark on Zarkon's skin while he pushes the coat from his shoulders, and Zarkon shifts to make it easier for Keith to get it off. Keith leans back just for long enough to get the shirt off Zarkon as well, and he has to slap Zarkon's hand back when he tries to touch him again.

Keith shifts and kisses and touches every inch of exposed skin before sliding to the floor. He unfastens Zarkon's pants, only to have Zarkon grab his wrists.

“Keith.”

Keith knows the carefulness of Zarkon's tone and he sighs as he sits back on his heels. “I want to. And I'll mind my claws, don't worry.”

He smiles at Zarkon, and Zarkon lets go of his wrists. Keith returns to undressing Zarkon, nervous and excited at the same time. He reminds himself of what he'd read and tugs at the bond to let Zarkon know he'll welcome guidance before taking a slow breath through his nose and cupping Zarkon through his sheath. Zarkon spreads his legs further, giving Keith an encouraging nudge through the bond.
After a second of gathering courage, Keith licks along the length of Zarkon's sheath and massages it gently with his hand. Zarkon brushes his knuckles against the back of Keith's free hand resting on Zarkon's thigh, encouraging and comforting at the same time.

Keith licks and mouths at Zarkon's sheath, getting comfortable with the feel of it and the taste. He's never been as conscious of his teeth in his life.

When he's comfortable enough, Keith pushes his tongue into the slit of Zarkon's sheath, moaning softly at the taste that fills his mouth.

Zarkon pushes Keith's hair behind his ear, but he's careful not to grab Keith's hair or even put a hand on his head. Keith appreciates it. It's encouraging without being demanding.

Keith teases Zarkon until he can suck the tip of Zarkon's cock into his mouth. He sighs, and reminds himself to be mindful of his teeth. He should get something to cover his teeth with for future.

Zarkon lets out a heavy breath and nudges Keith through the bond, encouraging him to take more of him in.

Keith pulls back and smiles. “You want me to accidentally bite you?”

“I would prefer if you did not,” Zarkon replies.

Keith hums and climbs back on Zarkon's lap. Zarkon runs his fingers along Keith's calves, and Keith presses his forehead to Zarkon's, cupping his jaw in his hands. Their breaths mingle, but neither one of them moves to close the distance.

Keith licks his lips, the taste of Zarkon lingering on them making him shiver, and reaches for the bottle left forgotten on the couch.

“Mind your claws,” Zarkon says, almost absent, and Keith can't help but grin.

“I know.” Keith doesn't mention that he'd already prepared himself in the shower. He still lubes them both up.

“Keith.” There's an urgency in Zarkon's voice that Keith finds sort of endearing, and he presses a kiss on the corner of Zarkon's mouth.

Any concern evaporates form Zarkon's expression when Keith guides Zarkon inside him. Keith sighs and grabs Zarkon's hands, and interlaces their fingers. “Let me.”

Zarkon inclines his head briefly, his eyes fixed on Keith's face.

Keith likes it, he likes being the focus of Zarkon's attention. Especially when Zarkon looks at him like he's the center of his universe. It's reassuring — loving.

Keith's breath hitches and he leans down to bite Zarkon's neck. He doesn't have to encourage Zarkon to tilt his head back. For once he's freely giving Keith everything he wants to take, and the sense of power it gives Keith is intoxicating. He guides Zarkon's hands to his thighs and braces his hands on Zarkon's shoulder and on the back of the couch before pushing himself down harder, hissing at the pain flaring inside of him before ignoring it to the best of his abilities.

Slowly, Keith picks up the speed, moaning when the pain subsides, making way for the special kind of pleasure he’s only ever felt with Zarkon, through their bond and their closeness, from
having Zarkon so deep in him Keith feels it with every fiber of his being.

It’s always almost too much but never enough, and Keith thinks it might drive him mad if he’s not careful.

Zarkon's grip on Keith's thighs tightens, but he doesn't try to control Keith's movements. He lets Keith stay in charge.

It's too much, and Keith grabs Zarkon's face and kisses him, messy and wet, with no finesse until he thinks he might faint from the lack of air.

Keith whimpers and pulls Zarkon closer. “I'm yours,” he breathes against Zarkon's lips.

“I'm yours,” he repeats and pulls back just enough to look Zarkon in the eye, tightening his hold on Zarkon's face.

“I'm yours,” Keith says, his voice breathless but certain.

Zarkon looks at Keith like he's something precious and brushes his claws along Keith’s jaw. “Mine.”

Keith smiles and nods. “Yours.”

Keith clings to Zarkon like his life depends on it, resting his forehead against Zarkon's, never breaking eye contact.

Zarkon pushes his mind against Keith's until they don't know where one ends and the other begins.

They come together, and they don't bother untangling their minds or bodies for several long minutes.

Zarkon suggests a bath, and Keith nods, his face buried in Zarkon's neck.

Keith isn't sure if he's ready to apologize to Thace, but he doesn't want to fight with anyone anymore.

He's still fixing the damage he'd done on the planet and after he'd talked to Shiro. He wants to have at least one relationship that's not suffering because he can't keep his mouth shut.

Keith corners Thace in an elevator when he's returning from his lunch break. He offers Thace his most sheepish look while he waits for the other officer in the elevator to disembark.

“I'm sorry for snapping at you at the station,” Keith says the second they're alone. “I was tired and Zarkon and I had had a fight so I was feeling overly defensive of us.”

Thace blinks slowly. “Oh. Well. I accept your apology. And I apologize for upsetting you, even if it wasn't my intention.”

“It's fine,” Keith replies, smiling.

It's like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. Thace seems happier as well.
“I have a few exercises I would like you to look at,” Thace says.

It surprises Keith, but he recovers fast. “Sure.”

Thace inclines his head and steps through the elevator doors when they open. “Haala and Marzila are coming here tomorrow.”

Keith perks up. He misses them both, and he can't wait to ask Marzila if she'd seen his friends.

Keith follows Thace to the communications center that must be at least four times as big as the one in Cenzi's ship. Keith stifles a laugh, thinking Cenzi must be excited to have him off the ship. And Zarkon, though he'd die before admitting it. Keith knows in his bones that not a single person likes having Zarkon breathing down their neck, and being stuck on a battle cruiser with him leads just to that happening.

“Here,” Thace says and hands Keith a pad with the exercises. “You can complete them on your way to our home planet.”

“You're not coming?” Keith glances over the text on the pad.

“Only if I get assigned to the ship heading there,” Thace replies. “I must get back to work now. If you need anything I'll be available in two quarters.”

Keith nods and thanks Thace for the pad before heading out of the doors and letting Thace get back to his work.

He spends the rest of the day wandering around the ship, familiarizing himself with his surroundings again. He receives looks everywhere he goes, but he ignores them. He knows he stands out. Not counting the kitchen staff, he's the only person there not wearing an armor, and as far as Keith knows he's the only half-Galra on board as well.

Of course he draws attention.

At least no one is looking at him like he shouldn't be there anymore.

Keith's feet take him to the training room he'd first met Marzila in, and just out of curiosity he tries opening the door to the armory. It opens, and Keith isn't sure why he's surprised by it. He picks one of the dull swords instead of a staff, and wanders to the center of the room.

He doesn't pay attention to how long he practices with the sword, and he doesn't pay attention to the door.

“Not bad.”

Keith swirls around, ready to swing the sword if need be. He doesn't recognize the Galra before him, but her pose is relaxed and she seems friendly, so Keith figures she's not a threat. She's tall and her fur is short and silken, with darker markings on her face. She's let the fur on her head grow a little longer, making it seem like she's got a pixie cut, and her ears are almost as big and soft looking as Haala’s.

She's also not wearing armor, but her clothes are definitely some kind of a uniform. They are a combination of dark leather and heavy red fabrics, her coat high collared and long hemmed, and her slightly heeled boots reaching over her knees.

Keith is obviously not the only non-armored Galra on board the ship.
She takes a leisurely step towards Keith and unfurls her tail that's just a bit more fluffier than Keith's. “I'm Zairi.”

“Keith.”

She smiles and tilts her head. “I know. You're bit of a celebrity around the Empire. No one gets to share a living space with the Emperor and not become known to everyone, especially not for as long as you have.”

Keith shifts. “I don't know who you are though.”

Zairi takes another step towards him. “Well, these days I'm a public affairs broadcast specialist.”

Keith's eyes widen. “You're a journalist?”

“That's an oversimplified way of putting it. And I work on the broadcast network so reporter would be more accurate.” Zairi smiles, all too bright teeth and cheerfulness.

Keith flashes her an uncomfortable smile and takes a step towards the armory. “I'm not sure if I should be talking to you.”

“It's fine. I know better than to make a story out of the Emperor's... whatever you are. It'd be suicide to publish anything you say,” Zairi says. “A very painful, slow, possibly druid induced suicide.”

Keith squints his eyes at her. Zairi may say she's not going to make Keith into a story, but he's not going to trust her so easily either.

“And besides, I hear you're friends with my brother.”

Keith stops and turns around, and takes another look at her. “You're Haala's sister?”

Zairi grins and inclines her head. “Unfortunately.”

Keith smiles, genuine this time. “I think I'm gonna like you.”

Zairi leans towards Keith, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “Likewise.”

Keith puts the sword away and heads to the mess hall with Zairi. They share pleasantries as they walk, though Keith nudges Zarkon through the bond to make sure it's okay of him to talk to her. Zarkon gives him a cautious yes, so Keith watches what he says.

Zairi gets folog, which makes Keith irrationally happy as it's one of Haala's favorite foods, and Keith has to admit it's not bad. He gets a plate of the fired meat too, and he dips the bread in the dressing that comes with it while Zairi informs him that Haala is her youngest sibling from the same parents.

“Our father met Nevian few years after our mother disappeared and they have their own kids. They're family and we love them but Haala never really saw her as a parent,” Zairi says.

“What was he like as a kid?” Keith asks. “He's so... grumpy. Was he always like that?”

“More or less,” Zairi replies, smiling. “He was cheerier before our mother disappeared. It was hard on him. He was a little too young to understand what was going on but not old enough to be oblivious that something bad had happened.”
Keith nods, his ears drooping back. He gets it. He knows what it’s like to lose a parent.

“I was hoping he would’ve been here,” Zairi sighs.

“Thace says he's coming here tomorrow with Marzila,” Keith replies.

Zairi perks up. “Then I'll be saying hi to him today and deal with Haala and his lady friend tomorrow.” She shoves a big piece of bread into her mouth. “Is she as scary as I’ve heard?”

Keith snorts at the idea of Marzila being scary. “Marzi's great. Haala really likes her.”

“Good.” Zairi dunks the rest of her bread in the dressing. “That's good.”

Keith nods and focuses on cutting up his meat into edible pieces.

“So,” Zairi starts, her tone turning playful. Keith glances up. “Your relationship with the Emperor is rather close, right?”

Keith snorts and shakes his head. “I don't know you well enough to talk about that.”

Zairi pouts. “Come on!”

Keith shakes his head and shoves a forkful of meat into his mouth.

Keith sighs and reaches under the couch. He'd realized too late that his stylus had fallen from his hand, and it had rolled under the couch like it was trying to personally insult him.

Keith grits his teeth and crawls around the couch to see if he can reach it from the other side. He'd have an easier time trying to get the stylus if he could get more than his fingers under the couch.

“Now this brings back memories,” Zarkon jokes as he exits the bathroom, his skin almost glowing from the heat of his shower.

Keith groans and sits back. “I dropped my stylus.”

Zarkon tilts his head. “Just move the couch then.”

Keith gives him a flat look. It's a simple solution and he's disappointed in himself for not thinking about it, but he's not going to let Zarkon know that.

Zarkon smiles and walks up to the couch, and leans down to grab the edge of it. He lifts the couch so that Keith can grab the stylus, and though Keith rolls his eyes he's grateful for the help.

“Did you enjoy it?” Keith asks as he sits back up, trying not to sound bitter, and at Zarkon's confused look he adds, “having me crawling around naked and blind?”

Zarkon sets the couch back down and shrugs. “You were not an unpleasing sight.”

Keith frowns at his nonchalant tone, and Zarkon drops his smile. “Is this truly something you wish to talk about?”

“Yes,” Keith replies, dead serious, “I think we need to talk about what happened back then. I don't
want it to be some unspoken thing that's gonna fester between us and drive us apart little by little.”

Zarkon inclines his head and walks around the couch, and sits down. “If you are concerned that I found you arousing when you were staying on your cushion, I assure you that is not the case.”

Keith follows Zarkon and sits by his side. “You didn't think about me like that even once?”

“I did acknowledge that you were not unattractive despite the roundness of your ears back then. I saw it the first time we came face to face. But I do not deny that I enjoyed the sight of you naked at my feet, but contrary to popular believe I do not derive sexual pleasure from situations like that”—Zarkon tilts his head. —“unless you were choosing to crawl on the floor naked and perhaps blindfolded with the understanding that it was mutually agreed upon action.”

Keith smiles briefly. “I'll keep that in mind.”

Zarkon returns the smile, but drops it after a few seconds. “I cannot say I regret the distress I caused you, but I assure you I did not do any of it out of malice.”

Keith bites his tongue and considers it. He knows Zarkon isn't lying, but he can't ignore the hurt he still feels when he really stops to think what he's gone through. “Not even when you put me in isolation for piloting Black once?”

“That —” Zarkon falls silent, a minute frown marring his face. “I apologize for that. It was unfair of me and I should not have done that.”

Keith blinks, his eyes wide. Apology was the last thing he expected to get out of Zarkon. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“I am sure you are aware that I do not react with perfect rationality when my — the Black Lion is concerned,” Zarkon says.

Keith snorts and nods. “I've noticed.”

Zarkon, to Keith's surprise, nods. “I have spent virtually my whole life trying to find it. The thought of someone else piloting it — bonding with it — is... distressing, in a way that only few things have ever been, and I do not know how to react to it without getting angry.”

“That's very grown up of you to admit,” Keith says, his lips quirking up, “you might want to try working on that, though.”

“If we get Voltron”— Zarkon raises a hand to silence Keith, then cups his cheek —“I would want you by my side, in the Red Lion. I would not trust anyone else as my second.”

Zarkon tilts his head, considering, and Keith almost misses the hint of a smile that graces his lips. “You are a Sun and a guiding star, and I fear I would be lost without you.”

Keith swallows around the sudden lump in his throat and he surges forward, throwing his arms around Zarkon's neck and holding him as tightly as he can. He’s not sure if he wants to laugh or cry, or maybe both.

“Did you read that line in one of your books?” Keith's voice is muffled by Zarkon's shirt.

Zarkon huffs. “I would never admit to that being the case.”

Keith laughs and nuzzles Zarkon's neck.
“Hey.” Zarkon pulls away until he can look Keith in the eye. “If I had no other option but to allow someone else to pilot the Black Lion, you would be my only choice.”

Keith swallows again and smiles, blinking against the sudden wetness of his eyes. “That means a lot to me. But you should know that Shiro is good to Black. He’s not going to let any harm come to her.”

Zarkon doesn’t quite grimace, but it’s close. At least he doesn’t argue with Keith. As a reward Keith nips the tip of Zarkon’s ear before turning serious again.

“Can I ask you something? I promise I’m not trying to start a fight.”

Zarkon hesitates, for just a second, before inclining his head.

Keith pulls back and puts a little distance between them again. “Why is it so important for you to maintain a tradition of enslaving other races?”

Zarkon sighs. “Keith—”

“I’m just trying to understand it, that’s all,” Keith injects.

Zarkon frowns, then takes in a slow breath. “My people lost everything because I trusted outworlders and treated them as equals. They were left without a home, scattered across galaxies and relying on others. And they suffered because of it, people took advantage of their distress. I am not willing to allow that mistake to be repeated.”

A shadow passes Zarkon’s face, and Keith’s ears droop.

“They had nothing, and they were hurt for it. I could not allow it to continue. I could not allow the people who hurt us to get away with it.” Zarkon turns to Keith, something urgent in his eyes. “You must understand. We had just started to form bonds with other races, and that caused our home to be destroyed. My people were hurt and lost, and I gave them the chance for revenge. We have always been warriors and conquerors, and clearly our attempt to move away from that was a mistake.”

Keith shakes his head minutely as Zarkon looks away. “I am all that is left of Daibazaal. I cannot allow my people to repeat the mistakes I made in the past because I have built them a new home and they may not remember the pain we went through.”

Keith scoots forward and touches Zarkon’s arm. “Hey.” He waits until Zarkon looks at him. “It wasn’t your fault. What happened back then? It wasn’t your fault.”

Zarkon forces a smile, but there’s nothing sincere about it, and it breaks Keith’s heart. He surges up and throws his arms around Zarkon’s neck. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Slowly, Zarkon wraps his arms around Keith and holds him close, a little too tightly. Keith holds him as close as he can, wishing there was more he could do.

Eventually Zarkon pulls away, his calm and collected mask slipping back on, and he offers Keith a brief smile. Keith returns it, and if Zarkon didn’t send his clear desire for Keith to change the subject to anything else, he might have said something else.

Keith doesn’t know what to say, but the silence isn’t something he enjoys either, and he tries to think of anything to say. He leans his temple on Zarkon’s shoulder, and smiles when a thought crosses his mind.
“Hey?” Keith shifts until he can rest his chin on Zarkon’s shoulder, and waits until he has Zarkon’s attention before smiling sweetly and lifting an eyebrow. “So you want me crawling naked on the floor?”

“I would not object to it,” Zarkon replies, tension leaving his body.

Keith hums and nods slowly. “Can you order food?”

Keith waits until Zarkon inclines his head before standing up. Zarkon arranges for their food while Keith wanders into the bathroom, and after using the toilet and washing his hands he spends a few minutes brushing his hair. He'll have to have it cut soon. Maybe he could see a professional when they get to Drozigal.

Keith pulls his hair back and pins it, but he doesn't tie it up. He does his best to get his bangs to look good, and he thinks he does rather well. Then he grabs a wide ribbon from his basket and sets it aside.

By the time Keith starts undressing he can hear plates clinking. He smiles, ignoring the way his heart beats just a little too fast. He hopes he's not going to panic. He's not uncomfortable, but he still hopes he's not going to trigger some trauma he doesn't know is there. He's just getting over Vazka gutting him, he doesn't need anything else messing with his head.

Keith grabs the ribbon before exiting the room, and he's not surprised to see Zarkon has picked up his latest book. Keith had to pry it from him the last time, but he doesn't expect to face similar problems now. Zarkon doesn't look up when Keith wanders to him.

“Wanna help me with this?” Keith waves the ribbon in front of Zarkon's face until he looks up. Keith drops the ribbon on his book and sits on the ground, nervousness and excitement filling him.

Zarkon remains still for an agonizingly long second before setting the book down. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Keith replies, and offers him a quick smile.

Zarkon ties the ribbon across Keith's eyes, and though losing his vision makes Keith tense for a second, the ribbon isn't thick enough to plunge him into darkness, and Zarkon's leg pressed against Keith's side is reassuring.

Zarkon pets Keith hair while he adjusts to his lack of vision.

It's familiar, and to Keith's surprise he relaxes.

It's easy for him to fall back into trusting Zarkon to make the decisions and just existing. Zarkon still gives him ample time to get used to the situation before he stands up and heads for the table, telling Keith to follow him.

It's not until he starts moving that Keith realizes that this isn't like it was in the past. He laughs when he forgets what direction he's supposed to go, and when Zarkon tells him he's doing great Keith tells him to shut up before knocking his head against a chair.

Keith curls at Zarkon's feet and lets Zarkon feed him. He listens absently while Zarkon tells him about his day, comfortable in the knowledge that if he wants to say something he can.

Later Zarkon teases Keith by having him follow him around the room, and Keith bites back curses when he bumps into furniture, though he lets himself laugh at his inability to navigate the space without seeing it. Zarkon reminds Keith that it was his idea to add the blindfold, and as much as
Keith wants to tell him off for it, he doesn’t. Instead he calls Zarkon an ass and tries to trip him without much success.

Eventually Zarkon returns to the couch and to his book, but he gives Keith a pillow to sit on before focusing his attention on the book, absently carding his claws through Keith's hair.

Keith enjoys it.

He even thinks they could do this again sometime.

Just to make sure Zarkon will agree with him, Keith shifts until he's sitting between Zarkon's legs. He doesn't know if he has Zarkon's attention or not, but it doesn't stop him from running his hands up Zarkon's thighs until he reaches his crotch. Keith mouths him through the fabric first, then he undoes Zarkon's pants and pulls them down.

Keith lets Zarkon keep his hand on Keith's head while he works Zarkon to full hardness, and he lets Zarkon guide him when he sucks him off. Keith's jaw hurts and he wishes he'd have something for his teeth, but he's aching hard and his senses are filled with nothing but Zarkon.

Soon Zarkon grabs Keith’s face keeps him still, and when Zarkon comes into Keith's mouth Keith does his best to swallow it all down. Keith gags, his eyes watering, and though he wants to be able to take everything Zarkon gives him he has to pull back. He ends up with his face warm and sticky and his jaw hurting and wet from drool and come.

Keith draws in a ragged breath and licks his lips. His jaw hurts too much to close his mouth just yet, but he tries.

A moment passes, then Zarkon pushes the ribbon from Keith's eyes. His flustered smile is the first thing Keith's eyes focus on.

“Are you alright?” Zarkon asks.

Keith nods. Zarkon's smile softens and he pulls Keith on his lap.

The friction of his clothes on Keith's aching length makes Keith hiss, but he grabs Zarkon's wrists before he can touch him. “Let's just call it payback for all the times you got me off, okay?”

Zarkon hums and presses his nose to Keith's temple. “If you say so.”

“I do,” Keith confirms and buries his face into Zarkon's neck, breathing in the scent of him.

“Keith?” Zarkon sounds almost hesitant, and Keith lifts his head.

“Yeah?”

“Is this going to be a good memory?” Zarkon leans back to study Keith's face better, something like concern in his eyes. “To balance out your less pleasant memories of your stay on your cushion?”

Keith smiles and presses a messy kiss to the corner of Zarkon's mouth. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes
Okay this is a definitive 100% not budging on this, next chapter on 22nd.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Can you guys believe this is the second to last chapter?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marzila is her happy self when she greets Keith, but there's a reserved edge to her that Keith isn't used to.

“Did you kill my friends?” He asks, assuming the problem is with whatever happened in the facility.

Marzila grimaces. “I didn’t kill them. Just minor maiming. A few broken bones here and there, but they should be fine. I was gentle, since I knew they were your friends.”

Keith isn’t sure how he feels about it, but he appreciates Marzila's thoughtfulness. “Thanks. I suppose.”

Marzila smiles and cocks her head. “You're welcome. By the way, the tall one with the white bit in his hair? Cute for someone pink with round ears?”

Keith raises an eyebrow, an incredulous smile tugging at his lips. “Shiro?”

“I guess. Anyways, he seemed nice, kind of naive and way too sympathetic to his enemies, but nice. He was very concerned about evacuating that research facility before the Witch blew it to pieces. I assume it's a failing on his species part so I won't hold it against him. You're like that too sometimes, so it wouldn't be right of me.” Marzila smiles, and Keith decides to ignore the insults and focus on the compliments.

“Shiro's one of the best people I've ever known,” Keith says. “He's the only person I know who would make sure the people who tortured him and forced him to fight for their entertainment for over a year would evacuate a building that's about to be destroyed.”

Marzila's smile falls, and Keith kicks himself mentally.

“I didn't mean it like that. I just... he's got every reason to want to see the Galra dead and he still made sure you were safe. I know it might not mean anything to you but where we come from? That means everything.” Keith touches Marzila's arm, offering her a small smile that she returns after a while.

“Like I said, he was nice,” Marzila says and shrugs. “Now come on. I've got a sister to meet.”

Keith lets her drag him down the hallways until they reach Haala's door. Marzila doesn't bother knocking, and Keith can only let out a small noise of protest before he's yanked over the threshold.

“How I really have to be here?” He asks, uncomfortable in the space that's too small to hold all four of them.

“Yes.” Haala's voice drowns out the no from both Zairi and Marzila.
“I’d appreciate if you stayed though,” Marzila adds, and Zairi inclines her head in agreement.

Keith sighs, and while Zairi and Marzila greet each other he circles the room to join Haala on his bed. The only bed in the room. Maybe he somehow got a one bedroom. Maybe he's sharing with Marzila.

“Do not leave me alone with these two,” Haala whispers heatedly and pulls Keith down to his side.

“How bad could this be?” Keith whispers back.

Haala looks at Keith like he'd just grown another head. Keith lifts an eyebrow and shrugs.

“So, I hear you got kicked out of the military for unstable behavior,” Zairi says, and Haala raises a pointed eyebrow at Keith.

Marzila's smile seems frozen on her face, and Keith fears of what she'll do. “Since I'm employed by the military you might want to check your facts.”

Both Haala and Keith grimace at her clipped tone.

“Oh, I'm aware that you've been reinstated. But you were also let go a few years ago. I was just curious as to why.” Zairi crosses her arms loosely and tilts her head, and Marzila narrows her eyes at her.

“Okay!” Haala hops between the women. “There will be no murdering anyone in my room.”

Keith takes the chance to bolt to the door. “I've got things to do. I'll see you guys later.”

Haala calls after him, but his distressed voice cuts off when the door closes and Keith is happy to pretend he didn't hear anything.

Keith spends the rest of the day avoiding Haala. He knows leaving him alone with Zairi and Marzila wasn't fair, but Keith has no interest in being a witness to a murder, let alone an accomplice when someone inadvertently forces him to help hide the body.

He'd much rather let Haggar study him again.

The thought makes Keith furrow his brow. He wonders if Haggar had brought Kiira with her when she'd arrived late last night. He hasn't heard from her or any of the druids that had followed her, so he suspects that Kiira had either stayed behind, or she's too busy to come find Keith. Or maybe she'd sent Keith's things with another druid or she's waiting for Keith to come get them himself.

He figures he might as well check since he has the time to spare.

Even after all his time with the Galra, Keith isn't used to the druids. He doesn't dare to interrupt their work, but he doesn't see either Haggar or Kiira anywhere.

Keith shuffles closer to the druids and clears his throat. A few of them turn to face him, and he bites his lip. “I'm looking for Haggar? Or Kiira?”

“The High Priestess is in the Chamber,” one of the druids says.
Keith nods slowly. “Could you tell me where that is?”

“Do you have permission?” The druid asks.

“Um. I don't know? She's told me I could always talk to her.” Keith resists the urge to fidget.

The druid starts towards the door, and Keith follows them. They lead Keith deep into the wing that's only for the druids to use, and the silence there grows heavy and oppressive. Keith wants to take his boots off to keep his steps from echoing in the hallway. The sound is too loud, and it makes him flatten his ears and flinch every time his step echoes a little louder than the one before it.

The druid stops at the very end of the hallway, in front of a set of tall doors, and Keith swallows.

“You may go through.” The druid says and steps aside.

Keith tries not to be anxious as he pushes the doors open, barely noting that they shouldn't be as light as they are. He walks through the dark, narrow corridor until he reaches the end of it, only to enter a hexagon room with a ceiling arching so high he can't see it in the dim lighting.

Keith's steps echo in the wide space, and he tries to walk across the floor as quietly as he can. He’s not sure what he’s going to say, and he goes through all the possibilities as he crosses the floor.

Haggar is in the middle of the room, sitting in a pool of glimmering quintessence, and Keith wonders if he should descend the the three shallow steps carved into the floor in the same hexagonal pattern as the room, forming the edges of the hexagonal pool with the too bright quintessence that Keith is half convinced is the only source of light in the room.

Keith's words die in his mouth when he realizes Haggar doesn't have her hood on. He hesitates at the edge of the first step. He feels like he's invading on something private, something no one is supposed to see. Maybe he should just back off and leave.

“What do you want?” Haggar asks before Keith can leave the way he came.

Keith starts at the sound of her voice, and he fidgets for a second before circling the pool so that he can face Haggar. “I was just wondering if Kiira came here with you,” he says as he walks, his eyes glued to the floor. “She has something for me.”

“No,” Haggar replies, “she stayed with her project.”

“Oh.”

Slowly, Keith lifts his eyes from the point where the quintessence meets the lowest step to Haggar. He stills. Without the hood covering her head and obscuring her face he can see her. Truly. He can see her and she's... Altean.

She's Altean.

Keith can’t quite wrap his head around it.

“You're staring,” Haggar says, snapping Keith out of his head.

Keith shakes his head and looks away, his tail twitching. “Sorry.”
He should go. He should just leave and pretend he hasn't seen anything.

“Come here,” Haggar says, and Keith stills, hesitating for a moment before descending the steps to the edge of the pool.

“It won't harm you,” Haggar says when Keith doesn't step into the pool.

“You and Zarkon are always telling me to avoid excessive quintessence use,” Keith replies. He's not comfortable with the idea of entering a quintessence pool, no matter how much Haggar wants him to.

“And now I am telling you this is safe. So come here.” There's something in her voice that makes Keith comply.

The quintessence is warm and cool at the same time on Keith's feet as he hesitantly steps into the pool, finding two more shallow steps under the quintessence before reaching the bottom. It feels a lot deeper than it is, and like it barely reaches Keith's ankles at the same time. For a moment Keith wonders if the quintessence is even there, even as it ripples softly as he bridges the gap between him and Haggar.

He hesitates before kneeling in front of Haggar, the quintessence seeping through his clothes without getting them wet or making them cling to his skin.

Keith shifts and coughs quietly. His blood thrums through his body and he's not sure if it's because of his anxiousness or the quintessence.

“How is Zarkon?” Haggar asks, her voice bordering on distant.

Keith shifts again, sending ripples through the quintessence that hit the steps with a quiet splash. “He's fine. We made up and had another fight, and then made up again, and we talked about some things. We're good now. Everything's good.”

“Keep it that way,” Haggar says, her gaze focusing on Keith. “We need to talk about you two.”

“Okay?” Keith doesn't ask why, though he wants to. He hopes she's not going to try to drown him in the quintessence.

“Zarkon has been alone for millennia. That is not healthy for a Galra. Loneliness can drive them insane. Not that that happened to Zarkon. He has always had an unwavering certainty of who he is. Loneliness has not changed that.” She furrows her brow, seemingly lost in thought for a moment. “He will never admit it, but he needs someone who will put him before anything else in his life” — She tilts her head — “If he loves you he will end worlds for you and give you whatever you want. He needs someone who will give him the same kind of love back.”

Keith bites his lip and looks down to the quintessence glimmering around him. He doubts that what Zarkon feels for him could be called love. Affection and fondness, for sure, but love? Keith doubts it. They’re not there yet. Even if Keith likes to imagine that they are, sometimes, when he’s sure Zarkon isn’t paying attention to his thoughts. He likes to imagine what it would be like to be loved, always has. Until now it has seemed like an impossible dream that he was doomed to chase until he died.

But Zarkon could love him in time, he’s sure of it. He feels it in the warmth of the bond and the way Zarkon holds him close at night, and knows it in the way they always gravitate towards each other until they’re touching, be it a soft press of feet under a table or a brush of fingers when there are people around them, and they should keep their distance.
“You do love him, don't you?” Haggar asks, pulling Keith from his thoughts.

Keith takes in a sharp breath, ready to argue, but he thinks better of it. He lets out the breath, his shoulders slumping. “I guess so.”

“Be sure,” Haggar says, “I will not allow your stupidity to hurt him. If you don't love him make sure he knows it, if you do, then treat him like it.”

Keith nods.

Haggar studies him for a few long seconds before glancing down. “He is very fond of you. Attached He's... more like he was. It might distract him.”

“I'm not trying to be a distraction. I get that he has an empire to run and I respect that,” Keith cuts in. “I just want to be with him.”

“That is good to know,” Haggar replies.

Keith wonders if he can stand up, but Haggar extends her hands before Keith can make a decision. Keith hesitates before taking her hands.

Haggar turns Keith's hands so that his palms are up and presses his own hands to the backs of Keith's and cups them.

“Don't be scared,” she says, and before Keith can ask why would he be scared, his hands tingle and grow warm. His eyes widen when a shadow appears between his hands.

Slowly, the shadow forms into a ball, dark and blinding at the same time, electric in its own way.

*Druid magic.*

Keith gasps quietly, mesmerized and a little apprehensive of the energy and power shimmering above his palms. He can't take his eyes off of it.

Haggar sits back, her hands falling from Keith's, but Keith barely notices it. For three long seconds nothing happens, then Keith glances at Haggar and the energy ball dissipates in a blink of an eye.

Haggar hums, but Keith doesn't get a chance to ask why before Zarkon enters the room.

Keith shifts, glancing between Haggar and Zarkon and wondering if he should get out of the pool or stay there. Zarkon studies them closely as he walks to the top step of the pool, and Keith decides to stay still. There's something in Zarkon's eyes that makes him think it's the best choice.

Haggar bows her head until her hair falls down to hide her face.

“I was hoping you would take a look at something before you retire for the night,” Zarkon says, his attention focusing on Haggar alone. Keith frowns at his tone. Zarkon never talks to anyone but him that softly.

Haggar doesn't move, and she remains silent for a long moment. “Can it wait until morning?”

“Of course,” Zarkon replies without hesitation.

Haggar nods minutely.

Keith glances between them, wondering if he should say something. He doesn't feel like drawing
attention to himself though. There's something between Zarkon and Haggar — something intimate — and Keith has no place invading it.

Haggar stands and steps out of the pool, heading straight to Zarkon while keeping her head lowered. She stops by his side and looks up to him, and though they don't say anything Keith knows they're having a conversation of some kind. Haggar touches Zarkon's arm, and Keith looks away.

He doesn't have place there, and he's acutely aware of it. So he focuses on the quintessence and the way it ripples when his tail moves under the surface.

“Keith?” Zarkon's voice draws Keith out of his thoughts. When he looks up Haggar has disappeared.

“Yeah?”

“You can get out of there now,” Zarkon says.

Keith blinks, not understanding what he means at first, but when he remembers he's sitting in a pool of quintessence he hurries to his feet and out of the pool. “She asked me to get in there,” he explains just in case Zarkon isn't happy with him being in the pool.

“Do not make a habit of it.” Zarkon looks Keith up and down, as if to inspect him for damage, and Keith smiles.

“I'm fine,” he says, then shifts, his expression turning serious. “Is Haggar okay? She seemed a little off.”

The line of Zarkon's mouth hardens, and Keith knows he's not going to get an explanation. But then Zarkon lets out a quiet breath, his shoulders slumping slightly.

“She is... not unaware of the time before, but her grasp on that time is weak, and full of blanks and inconsistencies. The little she does remember of the past are simple facts to her, like a planet circling a sun, and she treats them as such. Most of the time she does not recognize herself in those memories, if she can recall them at all beyond faint ideas of what once was. To her they are events separate from her that brought her to where she is now. As time passed she reinvented herself and created an existence separate from who she was.” Zarkon sighs again, a sad smile grazing his lips for half a second. “Sometimes the line of who she was and who she is blurs. It is rare. It happens less and less as time passes, but sometimes she sees herself in the person she was before, and she is more like she was before.”

Keith's ears droop, and he hugs Zarkon as tightly as he can, not knowing what else he can do. He's not sure he understands it completely, but it clearly matters to Zarkon so it matters to Keith.

Zarkon puts his arms around Keith, not really holding him, but keeping him close nonetheless.

Keith presses his face against Zarkon's armor to hide his frown. He doesn't get it. He doesn't understand why it matters so much to Zarkon. He doesn't understand why Zarkon would have an Altean as his most trusted advisor. Zarkon hates them. He's spent ten thousand years getting rid of every last remnant of their race.

He'd never —

Oh.
Keith bites his lip, and his tail twitches. He's not sure if he wants to be right.

Zarkon pulls back and cups Keith's face, his eyes serious when they meet Keith's.

Keith doesn't need to test the bond to know Zarkon knows exactly what he was thinking. He swallows, hesitating, and wraps his fingers around Zarkon's wrists. “Am I wrong?”

Zarkon studies Keith for a moment, his jaw clenching. Eventually he shakes his head minutely, like he's seen Keith do a hundred times. “No.”

Keith nods and looks away.

Zarkon presses his forehead to Keith's. “Stay with me.”

His voice is so soft and quiet Keith almost misses it. Keith closes his eyes and bites his lip, Haggar's words echoing in his mind.

Zarkon holds his face just a little tighter, and Keith's heart clenches.

“I will,” Keith promises. “I'll never leave you.”

Zarkon smiles, soft and grateful, and Keith prays he'll never have to break that promise.

Keith assumed Haala would be happy that Zairi and Marzila get along despite their rocky start, but he drags Keith to the mess hall for a late night drink, his expression sour and his ears flat against his head. Haala gets Keith a cocktail like drink and a glass of something stronger for himself.

“They're ganging up on me,” Haala grumbles and glares at his drink. “Zairi is telling her all my secrets. She's telling her about my childhood!”

“She told me about your childhood too,” Keith says and sips his drink.

Haala pouts. “Does loyalty mean nothing to you people?”

Keith grins at him. “Nope. I used to be on the other side of the war, remember? What makes you think I wouldn't betray your trust for the chance of hearing how you cried the first time you saw the sea.”

Haala's face falls. “I was a child and I grew up in a desert! It was a lot of water to take in in one go!”

“Whatever you say.” Keith hides a smile behind his glass when Haala's ears flatten further.

“At least she's not coming home with us,” Haala grumbles into his drink.

Keith lifts an eyebrow. “She's not? Why is she here then?”

Haala shrugs. “She's doing a report on some technical advancement and she's interviewing someone here. I don't know. She didn't go into detail.”

Keith nods. “Are you coming?” His voice is more unsure than he'd prefer, but if Haala notices it he
doesn't mention it.

“Yeah. I'm introducing Marzi to the family. You can stop by too, if you want. Assuming the Emperor allows it, of course.” Haala downs the last of his drink and frowns at Keith. “You want another one?”

Keith lifts his glass to show he still has half of his drink left. “I'd love to meet your family. I'll ask Zarkon about it. I don't think he'll mind. He wants me to integrate and all that jazz.”

“Jazz?” The word sounds strange coming from Haala's mouth.

Keith waves his glass. “Among other things. Or something. I'm not sure, it's a saying.”

Haala inclines his head slowly. “You should integrate. We're good people to integrate into. We take care of our own, even if you're only half of us.”

Keith frowns, and Haala raises his hands. “No offense, but you get what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Keith replies. He knows what Haala means, and he knows he's not trying to insult Keith. It's just the way the Galra are raised to be. “You could work on your wording though,” he still says, and Haala lifts his glass in acknowledgment.

Two days later Zarkon leads Keith to an airlock so that they can start the last stretch of their journey to the Galra homeworld. Keith is filled with excited energy, and he grins at Marzila waiting for them at the airlock.

“Haala took our stuff in already,” she tells Keith, falling in step with him after offering Zarkon a respectful bow. “And Thace is coming too. He's probably going to be at Haala's family gathering.”

Keith frowns. “I thought he had a project to oversee.”

“He did, but the commander who was supposed to come fell severely ill and Thace is the only one who can spare the time to escort the Emperor,” Marzila replies, her voice hushed.

Keith lifts an eyebrow, but he doesn't say anything.

Zarkon had explained to him that due to what he calls an archaic tradition, the Emperor never travels without an entourage. For Zarkon that means having at least two of his more trusted commanders, his personal security detail that no one is sure even exists since the members of it are hidden among the officers onboard the ship if they’re even there, druids appointed by Haggar, and usually Haggar herself by his side, though she has opted to stay behind this time.

“I can take care of myself, of course, but my people feel better knowing I am protected while I travel,” he'd said just last night, and Keith had thought there's a certain sweetness to Zarkon letting himself be protected just so that his people are happy.

Keith says goodbye to Marzila as soon as they pass through the airlock, and follows Zarkon down the hallway in a different direction from her.

“We will take a long route, so we will be traveling for approximately a week,” Zarkon explain as he walks. “The long route is to throw off anyone who might be following our movements. It is a
safety procedure that we do not follow all the time, but since we are not in a hurry I thought you might enjoy seeing a comet passing through one of our star systems and it will take us off the straight course home.”

Keith smiles and shrugs. “Sounds fun.”

“It will be,” Zarkon assures him. “Once we are home I will give you a tour of the Palace, and if you wish you may explore the city itself, as long as you find an escort for yourself.”

“Haala said I could meet his family,” Keith says. He can't gauge Zarkon's reaction, but at least he's not saying no. “I'd like to meet them, if you're okay with that. Apparently Thace will be there too.”

“Yes, I heard your friend mention it.” Zarkon waves Keith into an elevator. “If you wish to attend a gathering of that kind, I will not object to it, as long as Thace will be there as well, and you will return to me at the end of the day.”

“Wouldn't have it any other way,” Keith replies, and just because they're alone, he steps in front of Zarkon and pulls him down and presses their foreheads together. He steps back when the elevator slows down and comes to a halt, and he follows Zarkon to their new quarters that are almost identical to their quarters on Cenzi's ship.

“Wanna christen the room?” Keith asks just because he knows it will confuse Zarkon.

As he'd hoped Zarkon tilts his head and gives him a quizzical look. “I do not know what that means.”

“It's an Earth tradition of having sex in a new... dwelling.” Keith fights back a smile when Zarkon tilts his head just a fraction more. He knows he's not going to get a yes, at least not yet. Zarkon will want to go micromanage the bridge staff of the ship before doing anything else.

“I have no objection to that,” Zarkon says, and Keith stutters. He really hadn't expected Zarkon to agree to his suggestion. He blinks slowly, then grins. He might have not expected it, but he's not complaining.

Keith definitely doesn't object when Zarkon picks him up and presses him against the wall before biting his neck.

Keith has absolutely no objections at all.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to post the last chapter this weekend, so keep an eye out for that.

Also, dunno how many of you peeps are interested, but I posted the first chapter of a Keith/Zarkon time travel AU (it's not gonna take my time away from working on Shelter, don't worry). So if fluffy and healthy mutual pining pre-rift Zarkon/Keith is something you might be interested in, it's there.

I hope you liked this!
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

So here we are. The last chapter of this fic is finally here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith wakes up, his body aching pleasantly, and he stretches before curling against Zarkon's side. The comet had been a spectacular sight. Zarkon had explained why the tail of it had been a beautiful, fiery red, but Keith hadn't paid much attention to his words. He'd just enjoyed the sight and Zarkon's closeness. They'd had dinner on the observation deck and Zarkon had offered Keith a glass of wine, and it had felt like a date.

Afterwards, Zarkon had taken Keith to bed and — it's really the only way Keith knows how to describe it — made love to him. More than once, in fact.

Keith smiles at the memory. He wouldn't mind having another night like that with Zarkon, maybe soon. Maybe on the planet they will be reaching come evening.

Keith snuggles closer to Zarkon and enjoys the warmth of him. It doesn't surprise him when Zarkon stirs and wraps his arm properly around Keith.

"Morning," Keith mutters and smiles at the disgruntled grunt Zarkon gives him in return. "You don't have anything this morning so you can go back to sleep."

In response Zarkon tugs the covers better over himself. Keith chuckles and sits up for long enough to grab his pad and headphones from his bag that he'd left by the bedside despite Zarkon's protestations. He settles back in with his back to Zarkon, and as he'd expected Zarkon lets him be for a few moments before pulling him against his chest and burying his face in Keith's hair.

The book Keith selects is one that he's already familiar with, but he hasn't listened to in Galran before. It makes it easier for him to follow what he hears and fill in the bits he doesn't understand.

He doesn't bother taking his headphones off when Zarkon sits up to get his own pad. He slumps back on the bed moments later, and wraps himself around Keith again.

Some time later Zarkon huffs, his breath warm against Keith’s head, and gets up. When Keith gives him a quizzical look he waves his hand, and Keith stays in bed, listening to his book while Zarkon pulls on his deep red robe — the one that drags on the ground and the flared sleeves that are so long they can't be practical — and heads out of the door.

Keith doesn't think too much of it. Zarkon might be just using the bathroom and he'll be back in a few minutes.

As Keith expected Zarkon returns moments later, but to his surprise Zarkon is carrying a tray.
Keith sits up and pushes his headphones down while Zarkon heads to the bed and lifts the tray. “Breakfast in bed,” he says, and there's a hint of questioning in his voice, like he's not sure he's doing the right thing.

Keith grins and accepts the tray. “Thank you.”

Zarkon climbs back into bed, settling by Keith's side, and takes the cup of tea Keith offers him.

They chat idly while they enjoy their breakfast, and Keith thinks it's a perfect morning after a perfect night. He's not sure what he did to deserve it all, but he hopes this won't be a one time thing.

After the breakfast, Zarkon takes the tray away while Keith heads to the bathroom.

His hair is a mess and he sighs before grabbing the bottle of the liquid that helps him deal with the tangles and knots, and he takes his time rubbing it into his hair before picking up his brush and slowly working to get the mess straightened out.

He should start braiding his hair before bed. Getting it straightened out every morning is starting to be too much work.

Keith sighs and frowns at his reflection. His eyes drift to the hint of deep purple the roots of his hair had shined with ever since Haggar had turned him into a Galra. It's not really that noticeable. It's not like his hair has a different color, the purple is truly visible only when light hits his hair, and Keith doesn't mind it that much. He'd barely realized it had happened himself, he doubts anyone else is paying attention to it either.

He's working on a particularly stubborn knot when Zarkon enters the bathroom, having changed out of his robe and into his armor. Keith stops brushing his hair mid-stroke when he sees the clothes Zarkon is carrying.

“You will be arriving on Draizagal by my side, and you need to be dressed appropriately. I chose this for you,” Zarkon explains and shows Keith the beautiful, dark mauve, military style coat with an uneven hemline and intricate, deep red embroidered detailing. The dark shirt is sleeveless, with subtle deep red detailing and a high neck. The pants are black and nothing too special, but the boots are the heeled ones Zarkon had gotten him all those months ago, while Keith still had a cushion to sleep on.

Keith wonders if he can still walk in them.

“Thanks.” Keith returns to brushing his hair while Zarkon sets the clothes aside.

“Let me,” Zarkon says as he walks up to Keith.

Keith blinks, but hands the brush to Zarkon and enjoys having someone else take care of him. It's not something he's used to, but he likes it.

It makes him feel cared for. Loved, even.

“Put the clothes on,” Zarkon says once he's done with Keith's hair, and Keith does as he's told.

He's a little unsure on the heels, but he's sure he'll adjust before the evening. Zarkon guides him to stand in front of the the mirror before Keith can put on the coat, and Keith lifts a curious eyebrow when he pulls a sparsely decorated metal box from the top shelf on the wall.

“I got these for you.” Zarkon opens the box, revealing a golden armlet with deep red gems
decorating them, and matching earrings, one looping from the tip of Keith's ear to the lobe, the other a spiraling symbol of some kind. Keith wonders if the Galra usually pierce their ears while Zarkon attaches the jewelry to his ears. Probably not, considering how sensitive they are.

Next Zarkon eases the armlet on Keith's left arm.

“No tiara this time?” Keith asks, teasing.

The corner of Zarkon's mouth curls up. “Do you want one?”

Keith shrugs, but doesn't reply. He keeps smiling when Zarkon offers the coat to him, and he puts it on while Zarkon starts pinning Keith's hair up and off his face.

“We are going to have dinner with some of the more important people of our homeworld,” Zarkon says. “You will be a reflection of me, so I expect you to behave accordingly.”

Keith nods and rubs the armlet through the coat. “This isn't going to be visible though.”

“You are not going to be sitting at the table in a coat,” Zarkon replies, and Keith tilts his head minutely. “Your markings are unique, and it is expected that you show them because of it. Unique markings are considered something to be proud of.”

“Oh.” Keith nods and chews his lip.

Zarkon returns to working with Keith's hair, and once he's satisfied with his handy work he attaches a thin golden chain with small red gems decorating it on the pins on Keith's hair.

Once he's done he cups Keith's face, running his thumbs across his cheeks and studying Keith through the mirror. “You are an exceptional sight to behold.”

Keith blushes and tries to dip his head down, but Zarkon's hands under his jaw stop him. Zarkon smiles at him, warm and knowing.

“Why couldn't I dress up later?” Keith asks, his face still burning.

“Because I am not sure if I have the time to see you until we reach the planet and you required the jewelry and assistance with your hair,” Zarkon replies. “Though if we need to fix your hair later we will find the time to do that. And this way you will have a chance to get comfortable in your boots and clothes. Just try to take it easy and not get them wrinkled.”

Keith laughs and wraps his fingers around Zarkon's wrists, pressing his cheek against Zarkon's palm. His tail wraps around Zarkon's leg more tightly than usual.

Zarkon doesn't mention it. Instead he starts explaining his schedule for the day to Keith, stating that it's important that he knows when Zarkon will need him without being summoned. He wants Keith ready at the airlock and his things packed, and Keith doesn't pay too much attention to what he's saying after that, having little interest in hearing all the minute details of everything that needs to happen before they leave the ship.

He's going to see Zarkon's home — his new home at least. Keith doesn't know how they got there.

He doesn't know how he went from hating Zarkon and trying to kill him to getting ready to see his home by his side and —

“I love you,” Keith blurts out.
Zarkon stops mid sentence, falling dead silent. Keith grips his wrists tighter and fights back the blush heating his face. Zarkon blinks, his eyes wide with shock and surprise, his mouth hanging slightly open.

Keith thinks he might have just broken him.

Ten thousand years of terrorizing the universe and Keith broke him with three words.

Keith presses a kiss on Zarkon's palm and leans against his chest, deciding to give Zarkon a minute longer to process his words.

After a moment Zarkon smiles, hesitant at first, then bright and happy, and presses a kiss on top of Keith's head. Keith lets out a relieved breath, and for a moment he thinks he might kill to have Zarkon smile like that again. The thought fades into the back of his mind when Zarkon lets him feel all the warmth and affection and possessiveness he holds for Keith, and it knocks the breath out of him.

It's more than Keith expected to get, and he blinks against the sudden wetness of his eyes.

Keith tilts his head until he can kiss Zarkon, not knowing what else to do. If the way Zarkon kisses him back is anything to go by it was the right thing to do.

Haala is excited to be getting home, and though Marzila seems a little anxious about meeting his family, she's visibly happy to do it. Haala can't stop smiling while he tells Keith all about his family and their house, and his step-mother's cooking.

“You're both going to love it,” he declares.

“Keith is coming to dinner?” Thace's voice gets their attention to him, and Keith makes room for him at the table. Thace thanks him and sits down, setting his tea and pastry on the table.

“Zarkon said it was okay,” Keith says. “As long as someone takes me there and I get back to him before nightfall.”

“I'll take care of it,” Marzila hurries to say. She's still uncomfortable in Thace's presence, but Keith thinks she's doing better.

“You must be excited to see our home,” Thace says, directing his attention on Keith.

Keith nods, setting his spoon down. “Zarkon promised to show me around the Palace, and he said I could look around the city as long as I don't go alone. He thinks I'll get lost.”

Thace quirks an eyebrow, and Haala snorts. “Vadazi's a big city and the roads are hard to follow if you don't know them. You getting lost is a completely valid concern,” he says. Thace inclines his head, and Marzila doesn't disagree either.

Keith suppresses an eye roll and focuses on his pie. He needs to go pack his things soon. He wants to be ready to leave well before he needs to be.

“You guys could show me around,” Keith suggests, getting three agreeing noises in reply.
“I’m unsure if I have the clearance to enter the Palace itself, but I could meet you at the gates some time,” Thace offers.

“Why wouldn't you have access there?” Keith asks, his ears twitching with curiosity.

Thace shrugs minutely. “I have not been a commander for long enough, I think. The Emperor's trust is not easy to gain, and I wouldn't presume to think he would allow me in his home.”

It makes sense, at least to Keith.

“I'm more interested to know why you're eating with us low ranking officers instead of your new and fancy commander friends,” Haala says, an edge of teasing in his voice

“I'm not allowed to have tea with family?” Thace counters.

Haala's ears twitch, and Keith shoves a spoonful of pie into his mouth to hide his smile.

---

Keith hums absently while he packs his things, and just because he has the time he does the same for Zarkon's belongings.

While he packs Keith's mind drifts to Red, and the memory of Zarkon saying he'd want Keith as his right-hand man crosses his mind. The idea itself doesn't bother him, which he's surprised to find. He wouldn't mind being second in command to Zarkon. He thinks they might even be good together.

If either of them would ever pilot a Lion, that is. As they're both far away from the Lions, and Red is beyond Keith's reach and Black downright hates Zarkon, it's never going to be more than an idea. A daydream for them to share.

When he finds the blade Marzila had gotten him for beating Vazka, Keith hides it in his boot without really thinking about it. He’s slowly getting back to his old habit of having a blade with him at all times, and since Zarkon hasn’t complained about it Keith assumes it’s fine.

Once he's done packing, he pokes the bond until he gets Zarkon's attention, and lets him know he's packed everything. Zarkon's amused by it, and Keith smiles when he heads off to find Haala and Marzila.

They're supposed to camp out in the library until they enter the deeper parts of the Galra space. They were going to stay on an observation desk a few floors down at first, but Haala had wanted to show Keith a book with maps and information about the history and architecture of Vadazi, and neither Keith or Marzila had felt like arguing with him. They had reasoned that they can always go to the observation deck later and watch on as they approach the planet. “Seeing the hyperdrive makes my stomach turn anyways,” Marzila had said, but Keith isn't sure if she had been honest or just humoring Haala.

Keith runs into them on his way to the library, and Marzila tells him they had grown tired of waiting for him, and had come to fetch him.

“Once we get home we're going to introduce you to cinematography,” Haala declares as they stop in front of an elevator.
Keith huffs. “I know what that is. Earth has movies too.”

“But this is going to be the good stuff, okay?” Haala lifts a pointed eyebrow, and Marzila gives Keith a look that tells him not to argue.

“If you say so,” Keith sighs, but there's a smile playing on his lips that he can't quite hide.

The elevator arrives, and Keith follows his friends in. “Do you have theaters that show, what? Cinematography?”

“They have showings in the Basalt Hall, yes. We can see if there's anything worth our time playing there, or we can just watch one on our home screens,” Marzila replies.

“And just call it cinema, okay? My father calls it cinematography and us talking like that makes me feel old,” Haala adds.

Marzila and Keith laugh when the elevator stops and they step out, and Haala grumbles and flattens his ears as he steps past them.

Marzila hurries after him, still laughing when she hooks her arm with his. “Don't worry, yeisha. I'll stay with you even when your fur grows thin and dull.”

Haala smiles and presses his temple to Marzila's, and Keith walks past them to give them a sense of privacy.

“Keith won't mind either,” Marzila says, a teasing hint in her voice.

Keith turns to give her a suspicious look. “What's that supposed to mean?” He glances at Haala and hurries to add, “not that I'd ditch you when you get old.”

Haala grins with a little too much teeth, and Marzila's eyes twinkle dangerously even as she tries to look innocuous. “Well, you clearly enjoy the company of older men.”

Keith barks a laugh. “I can't believe you just went there.”

Marzila shrugs. “I'm just stating the facts.”

Haala snorts, and Keith rolls his eyes. “What if Zarkon finds out you said that?”

“I trust you to protect me,” Marzila replies.

Keith smiles and shakes his head. He would, and he doubts Zarkon would mind that much. He might take the opportunity to tease Keith himself.

Keith glances at Marzila and schools his expression into something more nonchalant. “Yeah, well, you know what they say about older men and experience.”

Marzila howls, and Haala groans and hangs his head. “Please. I don't want to be a part of this conversation. Ever.”

Marzila rests his head on Haala's shoulder. “But you are a part of it. And if it helps, I think you're perfectly experienced in every way that matters.”

Haala sighs and glances up, but there's a smile playing on his lips that he can't quite fight back.

Keith dodges the officer rounding the corner and swirls around to face Haala and Marzila, trusting
them to tell him if he's about to walk into anyone. “You know — “

The ship shakes violently and Keith slams against the wall from the force of it. A loud, crashing boom sounds somewhere above them, and Keith looks up as if he could see the cause behind it through the ceiling. “What was that?”

His voice gets drowned out by the alarm, and one glance of Haala and Marzila tells him something is very wrong.

Another deafening crash sounds above them, and the ship rocks, sending Keith tumbling against the wall again. The ceiling creaks, then cracks.

Haala shoves Marzila out of the way before it comes down on them. She crashes into Keith when the ship shakes again, and they fall on the ground, rubble falling over them.

The alarm is the only sound that Keith hears, and even it seems distant. He's not sure why, and he's not sure he wants to know.

Marzila pushes herself off Keith. He's aware of Marzila's distressed cry, but he can't focus on it. He thinks he might have hit his head, and he pushes himself up slowly.

Everything is blurry. There’s smoke coming from somewhere and Keith doesn’t understand why he’s surrounded by bits and pieces of the ceiling.

“Keith!” Marzila's voice pierces the smog clouding his mind, and Keith turns to her.

He blinks, the world coming to focus too fast and too slow, and the blood drains from his face.

Haala's pinned under the rubble, and going by his expression he's hurt. Keith scrambles to him, ignoring the pounding in his head. “Are you okay?”

Haala grimaces, dust falling from his fur when he flattens his ears. “Do I look okay?”

“He's bleeding. I need to know why before I can lift this,” Marzila says, her voice steady despite her distress clear in her eyes.

“Let me. I've got smaller hands.” Keith waits until Marzila shuffles out of his way, bracing himself when the ship shakes again.

“It's my leg. Something's gone through it,” Haala says, and Keith nods.

He takes a deep breath before snaking his hand under the rubble, careful not to accidentally hurt Haala further and fearing the ship will rock again and his arm will get crushed, or more rubble will fall on them and kill them all.

His fingers brush against a piece of metal lodged in Haala's thigh. “I got it.” He traces the shrapnel until he's sure it's not connected with anything besides Haala, and nods. “We can lift this,” he says as he shifts so that his shoulder is under the larger piece of ceiling on top of Haala.

He keeps his hand on the bit in Haala's thigh, just to make sure it won't move too much.

“Ready?” Marzila asks, and Keith nods. He helps her lift the rubble as much as he can, and Haala pulls himself free.

He's bleeding badly, and Keith's hand is hot and sticky from it. Marzila and Keith hurry to his side, and she's already yanking the ribbon from her hair.
“No don't touch it!” Haala grabs Keith's wrists when he reaches for the piece of metal stuck in his leg. “It could be the only thing keeping me alive right now.”

“He's right. If you take it off he'll bleed out faster, especially if it has pierced an artery,” Marzila agrees, and Keith yanks his hands away. He moves out of Marzila's way and chews his lip anxiously while she ties the ribbon above the wound on Haala's thigh.

Keith becomes aware of the tugging in his mind, and he takes a deep breath through his nose. He tries to assure Zarkon that he's fine, just startled, and projects his confusion over the situation at him.

The bond grows chilly, then resigned, then downright wrathful.

Voltron.

Keith swallows, his throat dry. This can't be happening.

This is not real.

The floor trembles, a loud crash carrying over the alarm.

“We need to move,” Marzila says, already helping Haala to his feet. “Keith, come on. We need to get to a more secure place.”

Keith scrambles to his feet and helps Marzila support Haala. They pass a few officers either helping their injured friends to safety or rushing to their stations as fast as they can in the destruction surrounding them. Marzila leads them to a hallway that’s still in one piece, and helps Haala to sit down again before pulling Keith aside.

“He needs help,” she says to Keith, her voice hushed.

Keith glances at Haala, wincing at the sound of his shallow, labored breath. His eyes are unfocused, and he's clearly in a worse shape than he'd like them to pretend, but the bloody trail he’s left behind, and the blood pooling around his leg too fast for comfort is all anyone needs to see to know he’s not fine.

“The druid's labs are a few floors down. I could run there and get a container of quintessence,” Keith suggests.

Marzila inclines her head. “Hurry.”

Keith nods and bolts down the hallway. He knows Marzila will take care of Haala until he gets back, but he still fears he won't be fast enough. He'd get rid of his heels if he didn't fear slowing down even for a second.

The elevators are most likely not working, and Keith doesn't bother to check. Instead he takes the maintenance shaft down. The Galra around him don’t even spare a glance at him.

Zarkon tugs at the bond, as if to gauge where Keith is, and Keith lets him, barely taking notice of Zarkon's desire for him to get to safety. His throat closes up when he realizes why Zarkon wanted to know where Keith is, but he doesn't slow down.

He's going to kill them.

Zarkon is going to personally kill Shiro and the others. Keith can feel it. He knows it.
He is going to find a way out of the ship and take on Voltron head on, and without Haggar there to cover him Keith doesn't know if he can do it.

He's not sure he wants Zarkon to win. He's not sure if he wants Shiro and the others to win either.

Keith stumbles, his head too light, and grits his teeth. He'll worry about that after he's saved Haala. Zarkon can take care of himself, and the others are in the Lions. They can hold their own for a while. Keith will stop them after he's gotten the quintessence to Haala.

Keith rounds another corner, and slams straight into Thace.

Keith would run past him if Thace hadn't grabbed his arms. “Easy.”

Keith shakes his head and tries to pull away. “No, I have to to — “

“We need to get you to the Emperor,” Thace says.

“No, I have to — “

“He asked me to get you to him,” Thace cuts in, and Keith frowns.

Zarkon doesn't want him where he is. He wants Keith to get to a safe location. Keith yanks his arms free of Thace's hold and takes a step back. “No he didn't.”

The line of Thace's mouth hardens and Keith takes another step back. “I really need to go now,” Keith says, the hairs at the back of his neck standing up.

“Yes, you do,” Thace agrees, and Keith frowns. “You need to go back to your friends, and out of here.”

Keith stumbles back, shaking his head. “No. I need to... Did you... Did you tell them where we are?”

“Yes,” Thace replies, and lifts his hand when Keith opens his mouth. “I need you to listen. I'm not your enemy. I'm with the Blade of Marmora. They're —“

“You're working against Zarkon.” Keith's ears flatten and he stops retreating. “And you expect me to trust you?”

Thace seems confused for a moment before he schools his expression to be more neutral. “I'm trying to get you to safety.”

“I'm safe,” Keith snaps. “I don't need your help, and I'm not going anywhere.”

“You can't stay here either. You don't belong here,” Thace says.

“You don't get to decide that,” Keith snarls back, and when Thace takes a step towards him Keith lunges forward and drives his heel to his knee.

Like Keith had hoped Thace is too surprised to react fast enough, and Keith gets another hard kick in before Thace tries to grab him. Keith dodges him and bolts down the hallway.

He'll get the quintessence to Haala and then he'll deal with Zarkon and Voltron, and if the Blade care about Thace they'll get him out of there before Zarkon finds out he's a traitor.

The ship shakes again, and a loud crash somewhere near Keith makes his heart jump. He doesn't
slow down though. He can't. Haala needs him to get the quintessence.

He just needs to get around this corner and down another shaft, and he'll be a little way from the door to the druid's laboratory.

He just has to —

Keith stops in his tracks.

There, in the middle of the long hallway, just a few feet from Keith's destination, disheveled and out of breath but there —

"Shiro."

Keith doesn't know if the ship rocks again, or if he just loses his balance, but the world tilts and Keith doesn't know why he doesn't fall down.

Shiro smiles. Keith had forgotten how blinding the sight of it is. His vision grows misty and he swallows around the lump in his throat, and he barely sees Shiro hurrying towards him.

Shiro is there.

Shiro is there and Keith could touch him if he wanted. And he wants to. He's just not sure he dares to.

The choice is taken from his hands when Shiro pulls him into a bone crushing hug. Keith remains frozen. He doesn't know what he's supposed to do. Shiro holds him a little tighter, and Keith touches his sides tentatively. Shiro buries his face in Keith's neck, a tremble running through his body.

Absently, Keith notes that he's taller than Shiro now. Maybe it's the boots, maybe he never realized how tall Haggar made him.

Shiro pulls back and smiles at Keith, his eyes wet but shining. "Hey." He touches Keith's face, his hand lingering, and his smile fading a little when he actually takes in Keith's appearance.

Keith's ears droop and his tail twitches. Of course his appearance is a problem. It's not like Keith didn't expect it. "Why are you here?"

"I came to take you home," Shiro replies, and though he tries to fight it, his smile wavers.

Keith brushes his hand across Shiro's arm before letting it fall limply on his side. "You shouldn't have."

Shiro shakes his head. "Don't say that."

Keith tries to step back, but Shiro grabs his arms to keep him still. "No, Keith, listen. I'm not leaving you here. You're safe now, we came to save you. I'm going to protect you, and I'm not going to let Zarkon or anyone else hurt you ever again."

Keith frowns and pulls back from Shiro. "He never hurt me. What makes you think he hurt me?"

Shiro opens his mouth, baffled, but no sound comes out.

"You're the one killing my friends." Keith bites back a sob and pulls himself free from Shiro's hold. "I told you to leave me here. Why couldn't you just believe me?"
“I’d never leave you. You know that,” Shiro says, his voice quiet.

Keith's eyes burn, and the step he takes back is the hardest step he's ever taken. He wants to go with Shiro. He wants it so bad he thinks he might die if he doesn't go, but...

He can't.

He can't lead Zarkon to Voltron. He can't put his friends into that kind of danger.

And he can't leave Zarkon. He'd promised he'd stay. He'd promised, and he doesn't want to break it.

And He has to get the quintessence to Haala.

“I don't want to come with you,” Keith says, and it hurts more than anything ever has. He steps around Shiro and hurries towards the entrance to the maintenance shaft to keep Shiro from seeing the tears in his eyes.

He needs to get the quintessence from the laboratory, and he needs to get it to Haala who is still alive. Keith is not going to accept another reality. Haala is going to be fine.

“Keith, wait.” Shiro takes his wrist, and Keith's breath shudders as he tries to steady himself.

“I have to go. And I need you to leave before you do anymore damage.” Keith's voice isn't steady like he'd hoped.

“I'm not going to leave you,” Shiro says, turning Keith around and holding him by his shoulders. “I'm never going to leave you again.”

Keith shakes his head. “Please.”

“You two need to go, now.” Thace's voice snaps Keith's attention from Shiro to him, and anger bubbles in his chest.

“I'm not leaving,” Keith states and steps away from Shiro's reach, his tail swinging from side to side in a clear sign of his anger. Keith sees Shiro glance at it from the corner of his eyes, and it only fuels his anger.

“You don't get to decide where I stay.”

Thace limps closer to them. “One of us has to leave, and you're the one who suffers here.”

Keith barks a humorless laugh. “I don't suffer here.”

“You aren't safe here either. Zarkon will kill you. I know you can't see it yet, but everyone who has been anywhere near as close to him as you are have died sooner or later,” Thace replies.

“Haala's the one dying now, and that's on you,” Keith snarls.

Thace's face falls, but Keith can't find it in him to feel sorry for him. This whole mess is Thace's fault.

Haala is dying because of Thace.

Shiro shifts, his eyes leaving Keith, but Keith is too busy glaring at Thace to pay attention to him. At least until Thace looks past Keith as well.
Keith frowns and glances over his shoulder. He swirls around when he sees the two large, masked Galra standing behind him. The larger one of them steps closer to Keith, their tail swaying from side to side in anticipation.

“Just come with us,” Shiro pleads.

Keith shakes his head. “I can't.”

The Galra come closer to Keith, and he bolts the other way, only to be caught by Thace. Keith lets Thace take his weight and uses the opportunity to pull the dagger from his boot and stab it through Thace's thigh.

Thace grunts and lets Keith go.

Keith runs, panic rearing its head in his chest. He hurries down the hallway until he reaches the elevator doors, but when he slams his hand on the panel to open them nothing happens.

They're out of order. Just like he thought they would be.

Keith swallows and, without meaning to, tugs at the bond. It gets Zarkon's attention, if only partially. Keith clings to him, not offering any explanation for his distress. Zarkon is too busy to pry.

“Keith!” Shiro calls, and Keith swirls around to face him and the two masked Galra.

“Shiro please. Just let me stay,” Keith pleads.

The Galra without the tail pushes past Shiro and marches towards Keith.

“Kolivan,” Shiro warns.

“He is coming with us,” the Galra — Kolivan — responds, and grabs at Keith when he's close enough. Keith ducks under his arm and steps away, only to be caught by the other Galra. They lift Keith off the ground and pin his arms to his sides.

Keith panics. They're going to take him away.

Haala is dying and they won't let Keith help.

They won't let him stay with Zarkon.

Keith kicks and fights back with everything he has, and the only reason he doesn't call for help is the hand covering his mouth.

They are taking him away and Keith can't stop them.

It gets Zarkon's attention.

Keith freezes.

It's not an idea or a feeling or an impression that fills Keith. It's Zarkon's voice, clear in his mind like it's never been before calling out his name, alarm clear in his voice.

He's all around and inside Keith's mind, possessing him in a way he never has, and Keith knows he's crying from the wetness of his face, just like he knows Zarkon is looking for him, frantically, desperately, out there in the freezing cold of the space, among the rubble of the ship.
Keith's feet hit the ground, and he thinks Shiro says something, but his voice seems to come from somewhere far away.

The bond grows taunt from both Keith and Zarkon pulling at it, like they could get to each other with just the force of their will alone.

Somewhere in the distance, Shiro speaks, but his voice is drowned by the boom that sounds when the ship rocks and shudders.

Keith's mind flares with pain, and he clings to the bond instinctively. It's being pulled from him, roots deep in his mind and all, and Keith fights it with everything he has.

The pressure in his head becomes unbearable and the bond is straining, strands snapping apart, like metal wire coming under too much strain.

Keith can't stop it. The bond is breaking and he can't stop it.

His mind screams, for Zarkon, for the bond to not break, for the pain to stop, he doesn't know.

The ground disappears form under his feet and everything turns black.

Chapter End Notes

So that's it for Shelter Part 1, part 2 to come out in.... July or late June. I'm starting work at a new place on Monday so I won't have quite so much time to write as I normally have, so it'll take me a few weeks to get the first chapters of Part 2 done.

That being said, if you wanna talk to me you'll reach me fastest on my tumblr which is where you can also let me know/request/prompt scenes etc from this fic 'verse that you wanna see. I'll take the liberty to not write anything that would spoil the future parts tho, but basically anything up to this point goes. As last Christmas, I'll only be filling prompts that come to my tumblr inbox, and I'll post them all here once I'm done. I'll take prompts up to... let's say 16th of June.

I also ((procrastinated)) doodled Keith from this fic this morning because hey! Last this is now officially finished.

If you made it here I'd be curious to know what you think of this story so far and I hope you've liked this :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!