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**Love Bite(s)**

by ArchetypeOfAdespota

**Summary**

In which Keith gets bitten by a Love Bug, and Lance is less okay with this than anyone honestly expected.
Cooties Are Real

Chapter Notes

So, eyugho over on tumbler made.... This.

Eyugho, you are a monster, and I spent all day throwing a first chapter together instead of doing anything else I had planned. I hope it's half as amazing as your AU post was.

This chapter now has ART! and MORE ART! Courtesy of the absolutely charming klanceasteroid.

Also, come say hi at My tumblr If you wanna chat with me! Promise I don't bite, unless you're into that.

The planet smells amazing. The sky is a delicate pink color, the sun a pale orange, casting a pastel glow over the flush of vegetation the red, blue, and green lions are nestled in. The shrubs of the undergrowth hang heavy with flowers, the nearby trees groan under the weight of ripe fruit. Even the short, soft grasses they wade through seem to emit a sweet scent when crushed under their boots.

Keith has had his helmet off enjoying the luxury of fresh, non-recycled air for a grand total of forty-five seconds before Pidge's voice crackles over the coms.

"Probably a good idea to keep your helmets sealed, guys. The local fauna are putting off some really weird chemical signatures."

Lance groans in protest, and Keith gives a disappointed sigh as he reaches for the helmet that he's only just hooked to his belt.

"Weird how? Like, spit acid in our faces weird? Liquefy our internal organs with venom weird? Or, or, taste especially delicious if we cook 'em weird? Give us superpowers if we let them bite us weird." Lance quips. "I'm just saying, weird doesn't have to be bad, y'know. All this negativity, jumping to the worst conclusions. Maybe not every planet wants to kill us, eat us, or sell us to the Galra."

Keith rolls his eyes and hides his exasperated smile behind his helmet as he pulls it back over his head. "No, of course not. Just the last dozen we've been to."

"See, it's bad attitudes like that that lead to being trapped in giant alien spiderwebs, or carried off by giant alien eagles. You receive what you give, Kei-" Lance cuts off midway through his diatribe to stare at Keith. Then he snickers.

Keith has already gone cross-eyed staring at the insect crawling across his faceplate. It looks pretty non-threatening, at least. Alright, that's actually an understatement. It's pretty large for a beetle, about the size of a small kiwi fruit, but it's got no fangs, or mandibles, or barbs, and the sticky little feet...
inching its way across the clear plasteel of his helmet end in round little nubs instead of spikes or sharp insectoid feet.

It's also bright pink, and distinctly heart shaped.

"Aw, Keith." Lance giggles again. "It's so cute. I think you should keep it as an accessory. It suits you."

Pidge glances over at them absentely, still sweeping the nearby flora with her scanner, then does a double take and points it right at Keith's face, forcing him to blink away spots as the lasers momentarily blind him. The bug flutters its wings.

"Keith." She says lowly. "You should really seal your helmet. Slowly."

The mirth dies off Lance's face. "What, the little Valentine's bug is the dangerous thing? Are you kidding me?"

"I'm detecting high amounts of that foreign chemical in it, yeah."

Keith swallows, reaching slowly up to the side of his head towards the button that will seal his helmet off. Just as he reaches it, the bug gives a sudden burst of movement, scurrying downward and under the lip of the visor. It hangs there, upside down for a moment, both of them completely still. Keith swears it's staring at him.

Then it lunges.

Keith feels a sharp pain on his cheek, and a rapid, spreading warmth that bleeds out from the bite and through his whole body. Warm, then hot, then burning, and then his whole body is on fire and he's stumbling back, tripping on something, falling, his back impacting the soft grass with a dull thud as his muscles lock up from the searing heat in his blood, and dimly he can hear Pidge and Lance shouting his name, feel the impact of their feet on the earth as they dash over to him, but the world is black, the sounds are muted.

"-gotta get him back to the ship-

"-take the insect for testing-

"-don't have time for-!

"-an antidote you idiot!"

There is a sharp tug on his cheek. Almost immediately the burning lessens, but not enough, and he doesn't have the strength to resist as someone tugs him to a sitting position. He groans in pain, his battered muscles protesting the movement, and abruptly they stop.

"Keith! Keith, stay with me buddy. I swear I will give you so much shit if I have to write 'death by adorable heart bug' on your grave."

A series of light smacks on his unbitten cheek hurt more than they should, and he struggles to open his eyes, intent on glaring at Lance for his terrible bedside manner, but the light hurts, and it only gets brighter as he feels Lance tug his helmet off.

"-stop." He manages to croak, his throat suddenly dry as a desert, and forces his eyelids open to see Lance bent over him, his face a mask of panic, eyes wild with worry, and-
The pain stops.

All of it, all at once, the tension in his muscles evaporating into thin air and leaving him boneless and more relaxed than he can ever remember being in his life as he gazes up at Lance, whose brow furrows in confusion at whatever he sees on Keith's face.

The soft orange light of the planets sun frames Lance, throwing his silhouette into sharp relief against the alien sky, and highlighting the golden tones in his skin. The world is sort of fuzzy at the edges, and his brain feels vaguely like it's been stuffed with soft cotton fluff, Keith registers dimly, but Lance is sharp and clear and beautiful before him. Lance blinks, slowly, confused, and Keith feels his stomach plummet abruptly for the split second he can't see the ocean blue of his eyes, until he realizes that the sharp contrast of Lance's eyelashes against his skin is just as nice, and sighs in relief, and-

He knows that Lance is pretty, has spent countless hours in too-close proximity with him, seen him in all of his moods and states of being, spent enough time pretending not to stare at him across training rooms and dining room tables and halls filled with smoke and gunfire not to know, but.

Wow.

Lance is so pretty.

Even when he's snapping his fingers in Keith's face like that. Even when his beautiful face is a mask of terrified concern.

"Keith? Oh quiznak, hurry up with the stupid bug, Pidge. Earth to Keith? Hello?"

Keith blinks up at him, and slowly reaches up to capture Lance's flailing hand in his.

"Hi." He breathes. Lance freezes. Keith reaches his other hand up to Lance's face, drags his fingertips down his cheek and marvels quietly at its softness. "You're so pretty, Lance."

There is a moment of total silence, in which the blood drains from Lance's face and Pidge leans over his shoulder into Keith's field of vision, looking stunned. Keith understands. She must have just realized how amazing Lance is too. Keith's eyes widen at the thought of Lance holding Pidge the way he's holding Keith now, his gut twisting uncomfortably.

With a sudden movement that leaves Lance reeling backward in surprise, Keith throws himself forward and wraps his arms around Lance's lanky frame. He scowls at Pidge over Lance's shoulder.

"Dibs."

Pidge clears her throat and taps her helmet.

"Castle, this Pidge. We need an emergency pickup. I think Keith's dying."

Coran and Allura take one look at the small, heart shaped bite mark on Keith's cheek, the way he's wrapped around Lance's lanky frame like an especially clingy starfish, and Lance's harried expression as he drags Keith into the med bay, and burst into hysterical laughter.
"Oh, oh no-" Allura gasps, doubled over and wiping tears from her eyes. "I'd hoped those wretched things had gone extinct while we were in stasis. Oh Keith-"

Coran has to lean against one of the medbay consoles to support himself, claps a hand to Allura's shoulder as he wheezes. "Oh, the wonders of the black market! Millions of parsecs and thousands of years from home, and one of them turns up here!"

Shiro and Hunk, standing behind them, exchange blank glances with each other, their panic from Pidge's distress call melting away in the face of the Altean's mirth. Pidge raises an unimpressed eyebrow at them.

"So I take it you've seen one of these before?"

She proffers the clear sample flask containing the beetle at them. Allura takes one look at it and breaks off into fresh peals of laughter.

"Hey!" Lance tries to wave his hands at them in irritation, but is sidetracked when Keith makes a protesting sound and latches on tighter to his side. He goes red and settles for waving just his free arm. "So does that mean Keith isn't dying? Because I'm pretty sure Cranky McMullet hugging me is a sign of brain failure. Or the universe ending."

"You're so dramatic, Lance." Keith giggles and nuzzles Lance's arm. Lance makes a sound like a small animal being stepped on.

Shiro clears his throat.

"I think we'd all appreciate knowing what's going on."

Coran gets his wheezing down to a manageable level and stumbles over the the medbay's main terminal.

"It's a Quartian Love Bug." He chuckles, quickly pulling up the computers data on the insects and spreading the information packets across the display for them all to see. "It's quite safe really, just a bit... Inconvenient for the one that's been bit."

Hunk stares up at the holograms of the bugs, all of them various shades of pink. "A Love Bug. You're kidding."

"Not at all! They used to be incredibly sought after on the black market, usually by young folks such as yourselves. The Altean empire tried to ban the trade of them - invasive species you see - but they were so popular it was impossible to get rid of them all!"

Allura finally collects herself, and gestures at the screen with an expression dangerously close to fond. "They were a bit of a fad when I was a girl. Several of my friends managed to get a hold of one, and passed it around the court. At least a dozen young men were bitten inside a week. You've never seen such pandemonium- they followed their ladies around singing love songs and showering them with praise and flowers." She presses her lips together, clearly trying not to laugh again.

"So, let me get this straight." Pidge breaks in, adjusting her glasses roughly as she swipes through the images to get to the encyclopedia entries behind them. "This bug bites people, and it makes them fall in love?"

"Oh, it's a bit more complex than that." Coran waves an airy hand at her. "The bite induces a sort of romantic imprinting, usually on the first person the recipient of the bite sees. The Love Bug was so sought after because it allowed someone to experience the full affections of their crush for a short
time, with relatively minor consequences. It's not permanent, not to worry."

"Really." Allura says warmly, eyes still sparkling with laughter. "It's quite harmless."

Pidge, still looking at the holoscreen, nods. "It says it lasts from four days up to a week. Side effects include headache, nausea, and moderate to severe embarrassment."

"No. No no no, I can't deal with this for a week!" Lance protests. "There's gotta be some way to get him back to normal sooner. Or maybe we can just lock him in his room until he's himself again? Look at him, he's gonna kill me when he's back to normal!"

They all turn to look at Keith, who's wrapped his arms around Lance's stomach from behind and is nuzzling between his shoulder blades. At Lance's protest he freezes, pulling away. He looks up at Lance with wide, sad, horrified eyes.

"I- I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was upsetting you. Do you want me to stop? I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I can just go..." And then his breath hitches, and those enormous purple eyes fill with tears. He looks like a puppy who's just been kicked and is wondering what it's done wrong.

Lance makes a choking sound. Hunk actually whimpers.

"Oh no, Keith, man, come on, don't look at me like that, please. You know you'd never do this normally, right? You're not that far gone, come on, oh god don't look at me like that please just stop ok don't make me the bad guy here Iseriouslyfeellikeamonsterdon'tdothis."

Keith hiccups. Lance makes a sound halfway between a whine and a protest and closes the short distance between them, sweeping Keith back into his arms.

"No, no, you're fine dude, don't worry about it, all the hugs you want okay? I am all about the hugs. Just please stop making that face." Immediately he feels Keith relax and go boneless against him, tucking his head under Lances chin and sighing contentedly.

"How do you of all people have weapons-grade puppy dog eyes, seriously." Lance mutters into his hair.

"This is going to be the greatest week of my life." Pidge proclaims, snickering.

Shiro looks at her sternly. "This is not an opportunity to collect blackmail. I expect all of you to do what you can to make this easier on Lance and Keith."

"I will do literally anything as long as I never have to watch Keith make that sad face ever again." Hunk says, burying his face in his hands. "My heart seriously can't take it, you guys."

From the warm circle of Lance's arms Keith nuzzles against his neck and coos. "You smell so nice."

Allura titters.

"Maybe it won't be that long." Lance gazes up at the ceiling, as though the metal beams have the ability to grant him patience against this madness. "Maybe he'll snap out of it early. He's obnoxiously stubborn right? Maybe it won't be so bad."
This Is Fine

Chapter Summary

*clears throat*
*steps up on a soap box*
*hoists a megaphone*

Y'ALL READY FOR SOME LANGST?!

Keith reaches out to steal Lance's hand as they walk to the common area, then fondly watches the flush that crawls up his neck.

"K-Keith, dude." Lance groans, "Come on. I never took you for the touchy-feely type."

Keith just laughs and bumps their shoulders together. "Why wouldn't I want to touch you?"

Of course he wants to touch Lance, he thinks, rolling his eyes. Lance is always touching him. He's come to expect it, over their nearly a year in space, those fleeting moments of human contact Lance offers him whether he wants them or not. Where once there was only the desert wind and the heat of the sun to touch his skin, now there is Lance: as a hand on his shoulder as he leans around him to peer at a view screen, as a knee pressed against his on the couch during downtime, as a back pressed to his in the chaos of a firefight.

Lance is always touching, always reaching out. Keith has always been so afraid to reach back, until now. Why had it seemed so hard?

Keith smiles at the thought, then gives Lance's hand a gentle squeeze. Lance jumps. It's adorable.

"Where are we going?" He asks, when Lance finally composes himself enough to look over at him.

"We are going to watch a terrible Altean movie. Because real life is a little too weird right now, and a little bit of escapism is probably just what the doctor ordered. And because if I have to babysit you for the next week it'll be a heck of a lot easier with you sitting still in one place. Unless you wanna go do something by yourself?" Lance pauses, his tone shifting upwards towards something hopeful. "Because really, if you had something to do today other than, y'know, getting bitten by a creepy drug-bug and following me around like a lovesick puppy, by all means, don't let me stop you."

Keith frowns and tightens his grip on Lance's hand. "What? No. Why would I want to leave you?"

Lance groans and scrubs his free hand over his eyes. "Right, of course, silly me. Awful space movies it is."

The common room is deserted when they arrive. Keith is selfishly glad, especially when Lance pulls Keith in front of him and takes him by the shoulders, steering him backward until his knees hit the couch and he collapses down onto the cushions.

"Right, you sit here, and I'll find us a movie. Okay?"

Keith's insides shiver at the simple use of "us" from Lance's mouth, and he nods. "Okay."
"Cool. I'll just..." Lance backs away for a few steps before turning around and heading for the media panel next to the viewscreen. He glances over his shoulder a few times as he goes, catching his foot on the leg of one of the armchairs thanks to his inattention.

"Are you okay?" Keith calls, but Lance waves him off. Keith is suddenly struck by the realization that he had had to call. Because Lance is that far away. All the way across the room.

Keith is on his feet and trotting over to join him before he really processes why, the itching discomfort beneath his skin at the idea of being far from Lance too much to handle. He breathes easier when his fingers catch on the rough material of Lance's jacket. Lance gasps - he must have been uncomfortable as well. Keith winds his arms around Lance's waist and sets his chin on his shoulder so that he can peer at the media display.

"What are we watching?"

Lance's forehead hits the wall with a hollow *thunk*. He takes a deep breath, in and out, before he answers. He sounds slightly strangled.

"This one, I guess." He gestures to the cover art on the screen, and Keith is surprised to find he recognizes it. He wrinkles his nose.

"That one was terrible. Even by Altean standards, I think. By the time you have space flight you should be able to make a CGI explosion look real."

Lance snorts and swipes a finger across the screen to the next title. "Fine then, since you're so picky. What about- hey wait."

He turns to look at Keith out of the corner of his eye. Keith's face warms at their proximity- they're so close he can count the freckles that dust the bridge of Lance's nose. "You almost sounded like yourself there."

Keith offers him a raised eyebrow and a slightly incredulous smile. "Who did you expect me to sound like?"

"I dunno, like the clearly brainwashed Love Bug zombie you are?" Lance's eyes shutter abruptly. "This... honestly makes it worse, I think. Here, we'll watch this one." He mashes the play icon without looking, and Keith trails behind him back to the couch.

"Are you okay, Lance? You're acting kind of weird."

"...Me. I'm acting weird. Man, what is in that bug bite. It must be so relaxing." Lance waves a casual hand in the air, then throws himself down on the couch and pats the cushion next to him. "I'm just peachy-keen. Couldn't be better. Don't worry about it. Just sit down and watch-" He pauses and squints at the title card that's just appeared onscreen. "... *No Petunias for Miss Beeblebrox*. Wow. There's no way this is gonna be a winner."

"Hey, you picked it." Keith laughs, and settles himself onto the couch, pulling his feet up and tucking himself in snugly against Lance's side, setting his chin back on his shoulder so that their cheeks brush.

Lance stiffens, and after a few moments of trying to focus on the movie Keith realizes that he's not breathing. He pulls away to look at him, tilting his head. Lance is completely still, his eyes round and staring unseeing at the screen.

"Lance?"
Lance blinks, then sucks in a breath so sudden that he chokes on his own spit and has to turn away to
cough.

"Totally fine-" He coughs. "Walkin' on sunshine over here, that's me."

Keith narrows his eyes at him. "Are you sure? We can watch another movie if you want."

Lance covers his eyes with one hand and groans. His expression is pained, but his laugh seems
genuine enough, and Keith feels the tightness in his chest ease at the sound. "It's not the movie,
Keith. Seriously, just shut up and watch it."

Keith gives him one last considering look, but sinks back down into the couch without another word.
Lance turns his attention back to the screen, and gradually the tension in his shoulders eases.

It's a bit cold in the common room.

Keith shifts a bit so that he can pull Lance's arm around his shoulders. Lance jumps and sits up,
tensing again.

"What are you-"

"It's cold."

"You have a jacket!" Lance complains, trying to take his arm back. Keith tightens his grip.

"I'd rather have you."

Lance is too busy making weird choking sounds to resist Keith pulling his hand into his lap and
tangling their fingers together.

The movie really is terrible. Keith finds his attention wandering barely ten minutes in, but Lance
seems content to keep watching so he turns his mind to more important things, like the warmth of
Lance's arm around him, and the steady rhythm as he breathes in and out, his ribs shifting slightly
and pressing them closer together on the inhale. It's so soothing, Keith thinks, allowing his eyes to
slip shut and his head to rest more heavily against Lance's chest. Why haven't they been doing this
every night?

Lance moves slightly, grumbling about his arm falling asleep, and Keith's head slips. He could catch
himself, but he's too comfortable, prefers to let himself slide down to sprawl boneless across Lance's
lap, his face propped in the crook of his bent elbow. He doesn't let go of Lance's hand though.

"Are you just gonna... Uh-huh. Yeah, alright." Lance sighs and leans his elbow on the arm of the
couch and props his head up in his free hand. "This is fine. This is normal."

Keith chuckles quietly, rubs his thumb in gentle circles against Lance's wrist. "Watch the movie,
Lance."

Lance make an odd wheezing noise deep in his chest, like all the air is being pushed out of him.
Keith squeezes his hand affectionately.

It's even more comfortable on Lance's lap, he's pleased to find. The movie is a quiet drone in the
background, allowing Keith to focus on Lance's breath and warmth and heartbeat, on the quiet half
laughs and indignant little noises he makes as the story progresses on the screen. Keith can't
remember the last time he felt so safe and warm. The pain and confusion of the bug bite a few hours
before are a distant memory, nothing but a heavy tiredness that lingers in his muscles. He's glad that
that whole mess didn't turn out to be anything serious.

Keith slowly nods off, completely content with the world.

"-thought I'd find you here."

The voice tugs Keith out of his doze, interrupting the soothing background noise of the movie, and he smushes his face back into Lance's lap with a grumble. He was comfortable. Hunk should go away.

"What else was I gonna do?" Or maybe not, if he makes Lance talk. Lance has the best voice. It's loud and cheerful and makes any room he's in seem more full and alive. Keith settles down again, content to listen.

"I dunno. Lock yourself in a closet until all this blows over?" Hunk chuckles.

"I wish. But you saw his face when I even suggested that. I can't do that to him."

"Yeah, that was... Something else. But you're just, I dunno, okay with this? Are you sure?"

"Hunk, I'm gonna be honest here. I am the farthest possible thing from ok with this."

There is silence for a moment.

"I mean. It could be worse? He could've looked at Pidge first." Lance shakes with suppressed laughter beneath Keith's cheek. It's nice.

"Yeah. At least this way you get a little bit of something right? Like all those teenage Alteans Allura told us about."

Another silence.

"Hunk, buddy. Those girls were idiots." Keith feels a hand bury itself in his hair and stroke through the strands softly. It's nice. He hums sleepily. "Why the hell would I want this. I finally have him looking at me like I'm worth something, have him all over me like I always wanted." Lance singsongs the last part, the notes dripping with bitterness. Keith frowns against his thigh. "And I have to spend every moment of it knowing that it's a lie, and he's only in- in "love" with me because a magic space bug told him he is."

Lance sounds... He sounds so upset. Keith pushes himself up and off Lance's lap, ignoring the twinge as his bitten cheek scrapes against denim, barely hearing Hunks startled gasp as Keith gets his knees under him. Lance reels back, shocked.

"How long have you been awa-"

Keith traps Lance's face between his hands, forces him to meet his eyes even as he blinks sleepily. "I don't need a magic bug to tell me you're special, Lance." He says firmly. Lance looks like Keith's slapped him. "I stopped thinking you were an idiot months ago. You're brave and funny and a great pilot and last week you shot a knife out of a Galra's hand from all the way across a shuttle hangar and it was the hottest thing I've ever seen."
He lets his gaze linger over Lance for a moment, taking in the wide, stunned eyes and scarlet face, making sure he doesn't look sad anymore. When he's satisfied, he smiles softly and leans in to press a kiss to Lance's burning cheek.

Behind him, Hunk makes a *hrk* noise.

Keith nods in satisfaction, then shimmies himself back down so he's laying with his head on Lance's lap, pulling his hand along with him and setting it back on his head. As though on autopilot, Lance begins stroking his fingers through Keith's hair again. Keith hums in pleasure.

There is silence for a moment, and Keith's eyelids begin to grow heavy once more.

"I'm just gonna- yeah, I'll- I'll be in the kitchen if you need me." Keith drifts off to Hunk's heavy tread retreating from the room.
The Importance of Bathrobes

Chapter Summary

Guys.
Eyugho did

MORE.

The world has been too kind to us this week.

Many thanks to those who sent in suggestions for tropes and fluff to pack this thing with. This chapter has several of them worked in, and lots more will be in the next one. Keep leaving 'em though, this magical journey is only just beginning. Also: LancePOV! Let's check in on our boy and see how his poor little heart is handling all this, hm?

Lance's head is still spinning. The movie has been over for ten minutes, credits and all. The title screen music loops insistently in the background, but Lance doesn't move.

I don't need a magic bug to tell me you're special, Lance.

Keith snores peacefully on his lap, and it's so unfair – he does those quiet, wheezy snores that are way more endearing than they are annoying, and every time Lance stops petting his hair he makes this frowny face that does things to Lance's stomach.

You're special, Lance.

One afternoon down, three to six more days to go. He wonders what horrible atrocity he's committed to deserve this. Maybe he stepped on a germ meant to become a sentient species on one of the planets they've visited. Maybe one of Blue's lasers that missed and shot into space kept on going until it hit a planet and vaporized someone's pet yalmor. Maybe he made fun of Hunk's motion sickness one too many times.

Maybe the universe is just cruel and evil and unfair – he should really just leave it to the Galra, because if this is the thanks he gets for sticking his neck out for it day after day he doesn't think it deserves to be saved.

The coms crackle to life overhead, startling Lance into looking up.

"Dinner time, Paladins! Get it while it's viscous!" Coran chirps. Lance can't even summon up his usual resigned disgust.

Keith shifts in his sleep and butts his head against Lance's thigh – Lance has stopped stroking his hair thanks to his distraction. Oh, and that's another unfair thing, apparently love turns Keith into a needy cat.

He frowns.
Because Keith "loves" him now. Lance isn't as shallow and oblivious as the others think he is, alright? Lance knows he's in love with Keith. He's known since he first watched Keith fly, back at the garrison, focused and driven and able to make a ship dance in ways that Lance never could, beautiful and proud in a way that Lance couldn't hope to touch. So he'd ranted and railed and convinced himself he hated Keith for it, and if he stared in class least he could pretend he was doing it out of anger instead of... other reasons. And it had actually almost worked, okay? He had reached a stage where he could get a genuine irritation going just at the thought of Keith's smug face. He deserved a medal for that level of self-delusion.

And then he'd been trapped in an enormous runaway space lion with him, and roped into working together to save a universe that some days doesn't seem like it much wants to be saved, and Lance is forced to spend his days fabricating a petty rivalry just to keep enough distance between them that he doesn't lose his mind.

Which would lead into Unfair Thing Number Three: Vindictive little bugs that convince Keith that the best possible way to spend his time is sitting in Lance's lap.

*I don't need a magic bug to tell me you're special, Lance.*

And also lying to Lance's face.

That bug needs to examine its priorities in life.

Lance shoves Keith off the couch and onto the floor, then hoists himself up and stretches as nonchalantly as possible while Keith scrambles and complains at his feet.

"Rise and shine, buddy! Dinner time."

Dinner is every bit as awkward as Lance should have expected. Keith manages to wait an entire two minutes before the lack of snuggles does him in. His chair makes a horrible scraping noise as he scoots it across the tiles, and everybody goes from pretending not to stare to completely unashamed staring as Keith slowly closes the two foot gap between himself and Lance.

"Bit drafty in your usual spot, Keith?" Pidge drawls, leaning on the table. Her shit-eating grin is still fixed as firmly in place now as it had been when Lance marched out of the med bay three hours ago. Keith pauses in his quest to link his arm with Lance's ("I need that hand to *eat*, man, stop that.") to blink at her, confused.

"No, why?"

"Oh you know." Her shoulders shake with silent laughter. "Just making sure the environmental systems aren't on the fritz. Carry on."

Lance shovels a spoonful of food goo into his burning face to keep himself from snapping. It's way too early in the blackmail bonanza to antagonize Pidge. Keith gives up on capturing his hand though, thank god. He settles for tipping himself precariously out of his chair to lean against Lance's shoulder, which is... Better? It's not as embarrassing at least? Lance can live with it.

There's a quiet click from Pidge's general vicinity that sounds suspiciously like a camera shutter.
Lance twists in his seat to look at Shiro, pointing his free arm at her in accusation.

"Shiro, come on, you said no blackmail!" He whines. "You saw! You saw what she did."

Lance swears that that's a smile Shiro hides behind a casual sip of his drink. "Saw what? I didn't see anything."

"Are you kidding me? Whose side are you on? You're supposed to be the adult here!"

"Hey!" Coran pipes up, looking extremely offended.

"Oh come now, Lance. I know this situation is.. unorthodox." Allura breaks in, "But taking it so seriously won't do you any good."

"I am taking this exactly as seriously as I- Keith, seriously, I need that arm." Keith has seized his opportunity to latch himself back on to Lance, tipping them both off balance and forcing Lance to catch hold of the edge of the table before they both fall over.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches Hunk leaning over a holoscreen with Pidge. The picture of Keith and Lance Pidge had taken a minute before is visible over the lip of the table.

"Aha! J'accuse!" He crows, waving an outraged hand at them. "Et tu, Hunk?"

Hunk jumps, sinking as low as he can into his seat. "I'm sorry! I mean- I didn't mean to- it's just that-" He whines dolefully. "I'm sorry, it's just a really good picture? She really captured your good side." He snags Pidge's wrist and turns the hologram so the rest of the table can see. He's right. Pidge has perfectly framed Keith's adoring expression to contrast with Lance's horrified distress.

Lance groans, pushing his plate away and dropping his head in its place with a thunk.

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Bed. Bed sounds like the greatest thing in the galaxy right now. Some rest, some relaxation, a hot shower, one of those awesome slimy purple spa masks the people of that tropical planet had given him a couple weeks ago. Some time alone behind a closed door, away from Keith and away from his insultingly unsympathetic team. Maybe a nice anxiety attack or two to purge this nausea from his system so he can sleep.

Yeah. Sounds good.

Lance escapes dinner as quickly as humanly possible, manages to make it out the door and into the hall before Keith can get out of his chair.

"Lance! Where are you going?"

Lance picks up the pace. He's not running. He is totally not doing anything that could be described as running away from Keith. Because that would be ridiculous, and completely lame, and Lance is a paladin of Voltron okay, he's a defender of the frickin' universe, he's faced down giant kaijuu style monsters, and fleets of ships outnumbering him a hundred to one, fought everything from angry mermaid thralls to sentient plant creatures, he is not running from his brainwashed, cuddly teammate. It's more of a brisk walk. A jog perhaps. Gotta stay in shape and all that.
Keith rounds the dining room doorway, expression panicked as he looks side to side down the hall.

"Lance?" Oh no. He's already been spotted. Keith's face lights up, and he makes a beeline right for him. "Lance! Where are we going?"

Lance... Yeah, okay. He runs. It's been a long, stressful day alright? He's not at his best.

He books it down the hall, ignoring Keith's startled exclamation in favor of hooking his hand on a corner and using it to swing himself around it at maximum speed.

"Lance! Wait up!" He can hear Keith's footsteps pounding after him, and it sounds like he's gaining on him, the bastard. He ducks his head and runs faster, down the hall, another corner, short flight of stairs, another hall, and... Yes! His bedroom door! He's gonna make it! He's home free! He's-

Struck from behind by a warm, solid weight. Lance goes stumbling the last few steps and ends up squished between Keith and the door, his cheek pressed uncomfortably hard against the cold metal.

"Why are we running?" Keith mumbles into the back of his jacket. He doesn't even sound out of breath, Lance is disgusted to note. He beats his forehead gently against the door a couple times.

"Exercise." He offers despondently. "Gotta get those daily steps in."

"We... Have a training room you know. There's a treadmill." Keith offers helpfully. That's... Actually news to Lance. Figures Keith would know, he practically lives in the training room.

"Right, that's... Thanks Keith." Lance turns around as best he can with Keith refusing to take even a single step back. "Maybe tomorrow though, you know, I'm actually pretty tired. Long day, I'm totally beat. Probably gonna hit the hay early, so if you wanna just..."

Keith squints at him. He's so, so close. His eyes aren't just blue, Lance realizes. He's got these little purple-grey flecks in them around the middle. It's unfairly pretty.

"All we did was watch movies." Keith snorts. "How can you already be tired."

Lance swallows and fumbles off to the side for the door panel. "All you did was watch movies. I had to carry your lazy butt off of planet roofie-bug and back to the castle."

"Roofie-bug?" The corners of Keith's eyes crinkle as he smiles. "Seriously Lance, it wasn't a big deal. I feel fine now."

"I'm-" Seriously, where is that open button? Keith's hand moves from where it's braced against the door to rest lightly on Lance's hip. "I'm not so sure about that, you know. Maybe you should go to bed early too. Just to be safe. Wouldn't want you-" Aha! The door slides open, and Lance executes a rather graceful hop-step backwards into his room, leaving Keith in the hall, windmilling his arms to try and keep his balance.

"Right, well, I'm off to bed then. Goodnight!"

Lance slides the door shut in Keith's face.

"Hey!"

It slides back open.

Lance closes it again.
Keith opens it again. Lance closes it. Keith opens it and shoves his foot over the threshold, preventing the safety sensor from letting it shut.

"I wanna come with you." He pouts. Lance smushes his face into his hands. Right, so much for the 'younger sibling method'. The door slam always worked so well on his little sisters. What hasn't he tried.

"Keith. I want you to think about what you're doing for a second here." Keith cocks his head, confused, and the resemblance to a puppy being put out on the mat for the night grows ever stronger. Lance beats down the twinge in his chest with a vengeance. "Look, have you ever slept in my room before?"

"Well... No." Keith's forehead creases as he thinks about it.

"And why is that, do you know?"

"I-" Keith actually folds his arms across his chest and chews his lip as his thinks. Lance does not stare at his lips, because that would be pathetic. "Because I didn't think you would want me to, before? But I didn't think you'd want me to touch you either, and you don't mind that. Remember? You said you were "All about the hugs. Whatever I want." And I want to sleep with you. So." He beams at Lance with all the innocent pride of a child who's certain he's just given the teacher the right answer.

Lance's jaw hits the floor as Keith trots past him and prances right over to his bed, sitting down on the edge.

"You- what do you mean you didn't think I'd want you to..." The door times out and slides shut behind Lance, cutting him off. "Ok, that's. There's no way you're gonna go back to your room is there."

"Why would I do that?"

Lance stalks over to his closet. So much for a minute to himself to get his head on straight. "Pajamas maybe? A toothbrush?"

Keith makes a face. "I just sleep in my clothes."

"You do not." Lance stops with his bathrobe halfway off the hangar. "That's... No, I'm completely unsurprised. Dude, have you even tried these robes? They're kind of the best thing ever. Also the slippers. Yours have Red on them, come on, you love Red."

Keith peers at the space-silk dubiously. "But we could get attacked. I'm not piloting Red in a bathrobe."

Lance sighs. Apparently there's some things even a mind-altering magical space bug bite can't change. "Keith, you need to relax. Seriously."

"Do... you want me to go get the robe? I can go get it." Keith's eyes unfocus for a second, clearly realizing he's just volunteered to leave Lance's presence. "... Can you come with me to go get it?"

Lance opens his mouth, an exasperated retort on the tip of his tongue, but stops at the last moment.

"You know what? Yes. We're gonna go get it. And the slippers. And then we're gonna relax. We are gonna relax so hard, you're never gonna be able to sleep in denim again."
Stupid Spores

Chapter Summary

I was nice today ok, you get a fifty/fifty split of fluff versus Langst, AND both of their POV's. I spoil you guys, seriously.

This is your fair warning. Uni starts on Monday for me. I'm gonna try reeeeeeally hard to keep an every other day update schedule but. Well. y'all know how it goes. But you also know, comments and shared ideas are really, reeeeeeally motivating. ;)

Finally: I'm an absolutely horrible person and have thus far forgotten to thank my lovely and patient editor, TheGrimKeeper. All praise and apologies be unto her, she's the only reason you're not slogging through a mess of incorrect its/it's and there/their/they're's.

"Hold still, seriously."

"But it's cold." Keith whines. The goo smeared across his nose bunches uncomfortably as he scrunches it.

"Just wait, okay. Trust me." Lance rolls his eyes and leans in to spread more goo down his cheek.

"Of course I trust you." Keith rolls his eyes, then glances back down when Lance's hand jerks slightly and ruins the even coat of purple Keith can see accumulating on his face in the mirror over Lance's shoulder. "I just don't get it. What does it do?"

"Look, if you want to have ashy space skin, that's fine by me. But if you want a healthy glow, the erasure of fine lines, and a restoration of elasticity, then you gotta put up with the goo. And stop wiggling your nose!" Lance strokes a finger down Keith's nose one last time, smoothing out the wrinkles in the mask, before turning around to fiddle with a small spray bottle on the counter.

"Wait, does my skin look bad?" Keith's stomach plummets at the thought. Does Lance think he looks bad? Is he not good enough? He should have seen this coming. Lance puts so much time and effort into looking nice, of course he'd think Keith is wrong for not taking care of himself the same way.

Keith mentally runs through the contents of his bathroom cabinet. One bottle of Altean hair care slime, one bar of harsh antibacterial soap, one hairbrush, and a smattering of mismatched hair ties. Oh god. He's no match for the neatly arranged self-care arsenal covering the entire top of Lance's bathroom counter. Lance is never going to love Keith. Lance is going to leave him because Keith is ugly and has ashy space skin.

"Oh ha ha, very funny. Like you've had so much as a single pimple the entire time we've been-" Lance turns back around, tiny spray bottle in hand, and promptly drops it. He fumbles for it three times before he manages to catch it, just before it hits the ground. "Keith, no, come on, you look fine, you look amazing, you look perfect, what did we say about the puppydog eyes?"

"But I have ashy space skin." Keith whispers, still wrapped up in existential horror.

"You do not. This prevents that. I am generously saving you from that fate before you are forced to confront it yourself."
Keith's whole body sags in relief. "Oh. Thank you, Lance." He says fervently, and offers him a grateful smile.

Lance seems to briefly forget what he's doing, blinking down at Keith with the spray bottle pointed aimlessly into space. Then his expression closes off, and he frowns and gestures imperiously with the bottle in the general direction of Keith's face.

"Right, so. Close your eyes."

Keith does so. He hears a squeak and feels a cool mist settle over his face.

"Okay, that should do it. Now you just--"

Keith's eyes snap open.

"It's warm."

Lance grins.

"Yup."

"It's *tingly*."

"It's great right?"

It actually is. The mask has warmed to a pleasant temperature that feels a bit like sunshine on Keith's skin, and tingles like fresh mint on his tongue. He stares up at Lance, shocked. "It is."

"See? Lance's space spa: best in the biz. Someday you're going to admit that I'm always right about everything, I swear. Wait, hey- hey." Lance bounces on his toes, looking completely thrilled with himself. "Keith. Am I right about everything, all the time?" Lance sets the bottle on the counter next to Keith and leans back, setting his hand on his hips and smirking expectantly. Keith's brain short circuits.

"You- you're....."

Lance is... More right about more things than Keith is usually willing to tell him - And Keith is still a little bit confused when he thinks about all of his interactions with Lance before today. Why had he been so quick to put Lance down all the time? He likes Lance. He likes his loud voice and his easy laugh and his silly grins and the easy way he pulls people closer to him. He likes the way Lance always tries so hard all the time, even when he's terrible at something, even when what he's trying hard at is pushing Keith past the fragile threshold of his temper. But Lance is not always... Lance is... -perfect- but reckless. -Clever- but impulsive. -Kind- but proud.

"Keith? Buddy?" Lance's voice brings him back to reality. He's leaned in close, inches from Keith's face. Dimly, Keith feels his left eye twitching. That's weird.

"W-o-w." Lance stretches the word out until it sounds like an entire sentence, then shakes his head and laughs. "You really fought that one, huh? If I can't get it out of you while you're mind-whammied, I don't think I ever will."

Keith blinks. "Mind... Whammied? What?"

Lance waves a casually dismissive hand at him and turns back to the counter to unscrew the lid to the face mask again. He dips a couple fingers in and begins to paint his own face. "Don't worry about it,
man. That was probably pretty low. We all know ninety percent of my ideas are terrible anyway, don't sweat it."

His tone is light, but Keith can see his expression in the mirror, bitter and resigned and a little bit sad. Keith's chest clenches painfully - immediately he hops down off his stool and pads over to him.

"Lance." Keith grips the loose fabric of Lance's robe sleeve and tugs on it. Lance looks up and raises a reflected eyebrow at him in the mirror, questioning. "Just because I don't agree with your ideas all the time doesn't mean they're dumb."

Lance closes his eyes and sets his hand back on the counter. "That's... That's real nice, Keith. Thanks. Look, I really need to finish this, okay? I can't let you hog all the-"

Keith wraps his arms around Lances middle and smushes his face into his back. "And I don't have to agree with you to love you."

Lance's breath hitches.

"Keith..." He breathes out slowly, deep like the air is being ripped out of him. "You almost sound like you actually- Oh my god."

He whips around, tearing himself out of Keith's grip and twisting to look at the back of his robe in the mirror, now smeared with the remnants of Keith's face mask.

"You absolute menace, look what you did. Now I'm gonna have to wash this."

Keith surveys the damage with wide, concerned eyes. "It came off. Does... Does this mean I'm still gonna get ashy space skin?"

Lance ruins his own half finished mask with an unpleasantly sticky facepalm.

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It's actually kind of late, by the time Lance has gotten the worst of the mess off his robe (and the counter, and Keith's robe) and supervises Keith scrubbing off the sad remains of his mask. He spares a passing glance for the shower, then snorts and exists the bathroom. Yeah, that's a minefield he doesn't have the energy to navigate tonight. Keith trots after him still prodding at his face, muttering about the residual tingling. Lance wasn't kidding about turning in early. His bones are tired at this point.

He sighs as he surveys the bed.

Lance has a big family. He's got literally dozens of brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and friends of the family that might as well be blood for all that anyone treats them differently, who all lived within a few blocks of each other back home. Half the time his house had been packed to the rafters with more people than were probably safe, if they were going to be picky about fire code adherence.

He can't even count the number of times he'd fallen asleep only to wake up up to Mirana crawling into bed with him because she'd had a nightmare, with Benita tailing blearily after her because Jonah was snoring again and she could hear it through the walls, and then would come Nicolas because
he'd heard Mirana get up and he could never bear to be left out and, well. Yeah. Lance is no stranger to people inviting themselves into his bed without his permission.

His bunk at the garrison had actually felt too huge and quiet and empty the first night he'd spent there. He'd been so relieved when Hunk was assigned to him the next day and filled the room with his snoring.

So, it's not really the concept of sharing a bed that's weirding Lance out. He honestly couldn't care less about that part. No, it's... It's the fact that it's Keith.

Keith "My Mullet Fills Lance With Equal Parts Rage and Jealousy" Kogane.

Keith, who Lance makes such spectacularly bad decisions around that he had flown Blue face down into the ground at top speed just because it seemed less aggravating then letting Keith win one over on him.

Keith, who Lance has tried so hard to hate because he is incapable of having anything but strong feelings for him and positive ones clearly aren't going to be rewarded.

Keith, who is currently convinced he is head over heels for Lance, and is almost certainly going to want to cuddle.

Lance briefly considers taking a minute to write out his Last Will and Testament, but dismisses the idea just as fast. Hunk knows he gets all of Lance's stuff if he suffers an early, cuddle-induced demise.

Lance gives one last longing glance at his bedroom door. He knows Keith would just chase him down anyway.

Well.

Nothing for it, he supposes.

"You ready for bed?" He waves towards the bunk. Keith nods.

"Yeah. I wish I'd gotten a longer nap earlier. That was nice."

"Well, you can always go sleep on the couch again if that's what floats your boat." Lance quips, pulling back the covers. Keith laughs, crosses his arms and cocks a hip, looks up at Lance through his eyelashes.

"You know that's not what I meant."

That... That was flirting. That was Keith actually flirting. Lance's stomach flip-flops. The list of Unfair Things is officially too long to bother keeping track of anymore.

He waves Keith over to the bed and makes his way to the lightswitch panel, hovering his hand over it until Keith has tucked himself under the covers.

"Uh. You good?" Keith nods. Lance hits the light. That's. That's, um. A very ominous darkness. He could swear his room in the dark was at least seventy percent less menacing this morning.

He makes his way slowly to the bed, feels for the edge of the blankets and slides in. Keith is actually pressed against the wall, he's surprised to find. He doesn't move the entire time Lance is settling in, letting him take all the blanket he wants and arrange himself comfortably without saying anything.
It's honestly kind of suspicious- oh there he goes. Keith politely waits for Lance to settle into stillness before squashing himself into any and all spaces surrounding Lance he can reach. An arm is thrown over chest, a hand graps the loose collar of Lance's shirt and curls into a fist. He tangles their legs together, lays his head on Lance's shoulder and nuzzles in against his neck, making a happy, contented little noise when he's satisfied he's found as many points of contact as possible.

"Goodnight, Lance." He murmurs. His lips brush against Lance's neck. "I love you."

Lance is proud of himself - he was prepared for that one. He doesn't squeak or stop breathing or anything. He's totally getting the hang of this whole brutal denial thing.

"Goodnight, Keith."

He doesn't seem to mind Lance not saying... Not saying it back. That's good, He doesn't think he can handle being puppy-dog eyed into "false" declarations of feelings. Even the best denial has its limits, he's learned that the hard way today. Hard to keep your emotional distance when your physical distance is - Keith shifts a bit, his fingers curling and uncurling, a slow drag against Lance's collarbone - approximately zero. Yeah.

Gradually, Keith's breathing evens out, and he relaxes into a warm, tranquil weight across Lance's chest. He's heavier than Lance expected. Really heavy, it feels a little bit like someone is stacking bricks on Lance's chest, one by one, heavier and heavier, his heart beating into overdrive trying to dislodge them - Oh. Yeah, he expected that. He chooses not to focus on it.

He's pretty sure Keith is sleeping now. He could probably move him; squish him up against the wall, stuff a pillow between them, roll himself to the edge and soak in the blessed relief of distance. He doesn't.

There's no one here to condemn Lance for being selfish.

He'll have to tell Pidge to look at the environmental systems tomorrow after all. Maybe she wasn't kidding about them being on the fritz - it's super dusty in here. Or pollen or something, maybe alien fungal spores. Can't have a ship with ducts full of spores, all getting everywhere and gunking up everyone's sinuses. What kind of cut rate enterprise are they running here?

Lance sniffs, scrubs the saltwater out of the corners of his eyes with the arm that isn't trapped under Keith, then reaches up to gently prise his shirt free of Keith's grasp. Almost immediately, Keith makes another grab for it, but Lance stops him, weaving their fingers together and setting their joined hands on his stomach instead. Keith hums in his sleep.

The burning in Lance's eyes returns with a vengeance.

Stupid spores.
A Single Long-Suffering Sigh

Chapter Summary

*drags herself in and collapses on the floor*

First week of school. 400 pages of reading, three poems, and a two page paper due by Friday. Is there like, a law against this? Send help. Pls.

Ugh. Either way, y'all get a chapter. Because I am never more productive than when I'm procrastinating. And also because I promised! And unlike a certain person in this chapter, I don't lie. Enjoy the team shenanigans, kiddos!

The next morning, Lance wakes to a pair of enormous indigo eyes boring into his own from a few inches away.

Once upon a time, before Lance was a Paladin, before he knew what it was like to be exploded and shot and stabbed and chained to a moon-tree and shaken around inside of a giant blue robot lion like an especially shouty maraca, this would have been perfectly fine.

Unfortunately, he does know what that's like, and instead of reacting like a normal person and just yelling or jumping or anything else non-lethal, Lance's body reacts without him really telling it to.

He's rolling before he's even really processed the circumstances beyond "strange person in my room", his hands locking around thin forearms and dragging his assailant with him off the bed, landing on top of them and pinning them to the floor in a tangle of limbs and snarled bedsheets.

The startled yelp sends him crashing back to reality, and he blinks blearily down at Keith, who he's pinning to the floor by his wrists. Keith stares back, eyes round. They're silent for a moment, until Lance processes what exactly he's just done, and jerks his head back with a horrified squawk.

"Oh Jesus, Keith! I'm so sorry man, I didn't mean to! Are you alright? I didn't-"

But Keith is laughing, head thrown back and eyes squinched shut, and Lance can feel it where their stomachs are pressed together, deep, shaking vibrations - and it's ridiculous, he is not even remotely awake enough for any of this, but Keith seems to think being attacked by a half awake crazy person is comedy gold.

"It's- it's okay, Lance." Keith finally manages to hiccup. He presses gently upwards with his arms, and Lance realized he's still holding him down and scrambles to let him go. But Keith doesn't pull away. Instead, he reaches up to drape his arms around Lance's neck.

"It's- it's okay, Lance." Keith finally manages to hiccup. He presses gently upwards with his arms, and Lance realized he's still holding him down and scrambles to let him go. But Keith doesn't pull away. Instead, he reaches up to drape his arms around Lance's neck.

"I get it. I think we've all been there, at this point. I'm sorry." He tugs, softly, and Lance is still too dazed to do anything but follow the motion, letting Keith pull his head down until their foreheads are pressed together. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you." Keith's thumb rubs soothing circles where it's pressed at the hinge of Lance's jaw, and Lance feels his pounding heart rate finally begin to slow.

"Yeah." He breathes. "I'm okay."
Keith laughs again - Lance can feel his breath against his cheek, and realizes a second too late how close they are - and reaches up to close the last of the distance between their mouths. It's brief, just a there and gone brush of warmth and slightly chapped lips, but it brings Lance's world to a screeching halt because *that should not have happened*.

"Come on," Keith says, cheerfully, as though he hasn't just obliterated Lance's mind in the space of a second. He hooks his leg behind Lance's and flips them over, ignoring the complaining *oof!* he receives in protest, then climbs to his feet and offers Lance a hand. "It's time for breakfast. We slept in, and you get cranky when you haven't eaten."

They scrounge up a quick breakfast in the kitchen. They had slept in a bit, yeah, and Lance grumbles to see that all the real food has been devoured in their absence. Pidge smugly salutes them with the last slice of pale green not-bacon when Lance shoots her a dirty look. He waves off Hunk's apologies for the previous nights dinner around absent bites of an alien fruit Keith shoves into his hand.

"What, pfft, me? Embarrassed? Hunk, buddy, it's like you don't even know me."

Keith leans against the counter next to him and bumps their shoulders together, making Lance jump. Hunk gives him a knowing look.

"Uh-huh. Yeah that's cool man, whatever you say. Just glad there are no hard feelings. Should've known you're way too cool to be embarrassed."

"Hey Lance, you've got- Here, let me." Keith grabs Lance's chin and turns him to face him, then swipes at the fruit juice on his chin with a gentle thumb. Lance squeaks.

"There you go." Keith pecks him on the cheek before releasing him. Pidge snickers around a mouthful of ill-gotten bacon.

"Hey Keith, I think you missed a spot." She calls.

"Where?" Keith blinks and reaches up for Lance's face again, frowning when he ducks away.

"You know, I think I've got it, really-."

"I don't mind-"

"I can get it myself, Keith-"

"But she's right, it's right there-"

"Hah! What's the matter Lance, I thought you're too cool to get embarrassed-"

Across the room, Shiro indulges in a single long-suffering sigh and a long drought of coffee before setting his mug on the counter with a dull click.

"All right, that's enough."

The melee, begrudgingly, quiets down.
"Don't think this gets any of you out of today's training." He says, turning to look each of them in the eye. "If you have enough energy to give Lance a hard time you have enough for the Gladiator. I expect you all on the training deck in ten."

Pidge and Lance immediately slump.

"Oh come on!" Lance whines. "Like Snuggleupagus here isn't hard enough to keep track of when I'm not also trying not to get stabbed?"

He shakes the arm that Keith is currently attached to for emphasis. Keith grumbles and winds his arms around Lance's waist instead.

"See? I think he's worse today!"

Shiro pinches the bridge of his nose. "We'll keep it light this morning, how about that?"

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Keith tries to focus. Really he does. He doesn't know what's wrong with him today - he loves training, loves feeling like he and the team are accomplishing something together. It's important to him to feel like he isn't just wasting time that could be spent making sure that he's ready the next time he faces Zarkon. He spends more time on the training deck than anyone else, and usually it shows.

But today...

He glances over Shiro's shoulder towards the firing range, where Lance is running one of the simulations Coran had programmed in for him.

"Pitchoo! Pitchoo!" He crows. Two of the flying drones explode in a shower of sparks and shrapnel, and Lance yells in victorious glee before spinning to meet the next wave.

He's flushed and panting from the exertion, tanned skin gleaming with sweat, expression focused with an intensity Keith's never seen on his face outside of combat, and all Keith wants in the world is to be over there with him, fighting by his side. They'd crush wave after wave of robots, range and melee, rage and precision, until the ground around them is littered with the smoking wrecks of droids and their hearts are pounding so hard with adrenaline that the need for any sort of outlet overwhelms them.

He imagines the grin Lance would wear as he grabs Keith and pins him against the wall, the sound their bayards would make as they fall to the floor forgotten, the cold of the wall against his back, the heat of Lance's mouth, the way he'd say his name-

"Keith. Keith!"

Keith tears his eyes away and rejoins reality. Shiro is waving a hand in his face. "You back with me?"

He nods, slowly, then flushes as he remembers he was supposed to be sparring with Shiro.

"I'm sorry. I just-" Keith's gaze flickers back towards the firing range. Shiro's lips press together as he fights a smile. He folds his arms.
"Lance?"

Keith nods. "Look at him, Shiro. He's so great."

Shiro covers his mouth and nods seriously.

They both watch as Lance takes the next batch out neatly, five shots and five kills. Keith whines. He knows he can't touch Lance while he's shooting. He could get him hurt, or mess up his scores, and Lance would be so upset. But they've been apart for twenty entire minutes. Keith is fairly certain he's going to go crazy from the itching need beneath his skin.

He rocks up and down on his toes.

Shiro raises an eyebrow, then sighs and claps him on the shoulder, shoving him towards the range. "Go on then, he's almost done."

He doesn't have to tell Keith twice. He skirts the edge of the invisible maze (accidentally distracting Hunk and causing him to smack into a wall) and takes off running. He skids to a stop at the edge of the firing line just as Lance pegs the last drone and his scores flash up on the holoscreen. Lance squints at them, pauses, squints harder, then reels back and throws his hands up with a disbelieving whoop.

"Holy quiznak, did you guys see that? I beat my best time by a mile! Tell me one of you saw-" He spins on his heel, his face lighting up when he sees Keith standing behind him. "Keith! Did you see?"

"I did!" Keith throws his arms around him and is delighted when the gesture is reciprocated. Lance spins them around in a victorious circle. "That was awesome!"

"Well of course it was. I'm not the team sharpshooter for nothing you know." Lance pulls back and flashes Keith his best grin, the terrible one that makes his teeth all sparkly. Keith's chest goes mushy. "Let's see any of you beat that!"

He snorts and winds his arm around Lance's neck. "Uh-huh. You know we can't. But maybe you'd like to beat my time on the Gladiator?"

Lance's expression sours. "Why you gotta rain on my parade, man?"

Keith grins, feels the corners of his eyes scrunch up from the unfamiliar gesture. He leans up to press a quick kiss to Lance's mouth. "Well somebody needs to keep you honest." He teases.

Lance makes a peculiar gak noise in the back of his throat.

From behind them there is the distinct sound of Hunk getting electrocuted again. "Ow!, Ow, ow, please tell me someone else saw that. I'm not going crazy right? That just happened."

"What? What happened?" Pidge calls from the overhead maze booth.

"Keith kissed Lance!"

"No way."

A flailing arm catches Keith in the stomach as Lance struggles to disentangle them.

"What, no, no he didn't!"
Keith gasps, betrayed. "Yes I did!"

"He totally did!" Hunk calls.

Lance buries his face in his hands. "How is this fair. What did I do to deserve this?"

"Tell me they're near a camera!" Pidge wails.

"Why would you say I didn't kiss you?" Keith yanks Lance's hands away from his face so that he can cling to them.

"Because- because I- Shiro!" Their intrepid leader is making his way over to them, looking very much like he would like to be doing anything else. He holds up his hands in the universal gesture for "oh hell no".

"Oh no, I'm staying out of this."

"Lance." Keith is whining, but he doesn't care, because why would Lance lie about this?

Lance stares imploringly at the ceiling. Keith squeezes his hand again. There's an awful choking feeling rising up in his chest, because Lance won't look at him, Lance is denying that he kissed him, and Keith doesn't understand why when the last two days have been so good.

"Keith, the eyes, I am absolutely not kidding about that."

Shiro coughs. Keith sees him double over and clutch his stomach out of the corner of his eye, but he has bigger things to worry about.

"I thought you were happy too." He whispers. "What did I do?"

"Dios mío." Lance groans. "Keith, you didn't do anything, I'm sorry okay?"

"But you lied."

"And I swear I'll never do it again okay?" He pulls Keith back into his arms, cups his chin and tilts his face up until their eyes meet. Keith feels the choking feeling in his chest recede a little bit.

"You swear?"

"On whatever you want."

Keith sigh, relieved, then gives in and throws himself at Lance for a proper hug. The hard edges of their armor clack together, but he doesn't care.

"Ok. I'll forgive you this time." His voice is slightly muffled against the crook of Lance's neck.

Behind them, a camera shutter clicks.

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After practice, as Keith is taking his turn stripping off his armor and hosing off in the sonic shower, Shiro corners Lance.
It's one of the great mysteries of the universe, Lance thinks, how just a dobash ago his helmet hadn't seemed worth taking note of, but now it's the most interesting thing in the room by a significant margin.

"Lance."

And wow, it's got a scuff on it! Can't let that stand, defenders of the universe can't go around saving people with a scuffed up helmet - it'd ruin all the celebratory parade pictures.

"Lance."

Gotta be a cleaning cloth somewhere around here right? Better get that taken care of right away, absolutely crucial paladin business like this can't be put off.

"Lance."

He flinches. He still doesn't look up.

"Lance, I-" Shiro sighs. "I think I should apologize. You'd been keeping him mostly away from the rest of us, I didn't realize he was that bad."

Lance buffs listlessly at the tiny scrape on his visor.

"Yeah well. He's fine. I only have to stick it out for another few days, right? Then we'll all have a good laugh about this later."

"That's not fair to you."

Lance snorts. "Then get Pidge to delete the pictures. You all seemed fine pawning him off on me yesterday."

"That was before I realized that you..." Shiro makes a frustrated noise, but the hand he lays on Lance's shoulder is gentle. "I didn't know. I'm sorry. We can work something out, have someone else watch him if it's too hard on you."

Lance's head snaps up, the helmet clatters to the floor. For a heartbeat he meets Shiro's gaze with saucer-wide eyes. Then, he feels a very well-worn grin stretch its way across his face.

"What? Shiro, my man, what are you talking about? That Gladiator get one too many good knocks in today?" Mayday, mayday, auto-deflection systems online. Lance's heart kicks into overdrive because Hunk knowing is one thing, Hunk knows things about Lance that his own mother doesn't know. He spends so much time with the guy he might actually have been even more upset if he didn't figure it out. But Shiro? His leader, knowing about his pathetic crush on the guy who can barely stand to be in the same room with him? Lance might as well write "Danger, Will Inevitably Break Down and Ruin the Team" on his forehead and show himself the door right now.

Shiro's scrubs a hand across the back of his neck. "I won't say anything to anyone else, alright? But I don't think this is healthy, if you really have feelings fo-"

"Feelings?! Hah, what feelings? It's Keith, I hate that guy. Total rivals remember? Arch nemesis. The only feelings involved are general annoyance and amusement at what a dork he's being."

"Of course. That's why you let him sleep in your bunk last night, because it was funny."

Lance's heart stops.
“Yeah, well. He's persistent, you know. He's a jerk like that.”

The hand on his shoulder squeezes gently. "The offer stands, Lance. You don't have to do this to yourself."

Lance says nothing.

The door to the shower hisses open, and Keith tumbles out and immediately drapes himself across Lance's back.

"I missed you!" He chirps.

Shiro gives Lance one last searching look before heading into the shower himself.
Guys, I am so, SO sorry. I wanted to update sooner, but my freaking KEYBOARD broke. Yeah, right after I started a fic and during the first week of bloody classes. It's an excellent metaphor for my life, honestly.

As an apology, have an extra long chapter, with an extra helping of fan service on top. And what's this, is that... Is that PLOT SETUP down there at the end? *eyebrow waggle*

Methinks it is. For those of you that requested our lovebirds down planet side and in their lions during this fic, get HYPED. See you in a few days, my lovelies~!

No matter what anyone says, Lance does actually learn from his mistakes. And yeah, while keeping Keith still and in one place in an effort to interact as little as possible had seemed like a good idea at the time, in practice it had ended in a very sleepy, very cuddly Keith and that had not been a Healthy Thing for Lance and his poor heart.

So, Lance figures. Option two: keep Keith busy enough that he doesn’t have time to hang all over him.

He yanks his shirt over his head and casts around for his jacket. Oh, it’s on Keith’s head, because of course it is. Where else would it be. He snatches it back, then snickers at Keith’s affronted expression, neatly framed by the mess the jacket had made of his hair.

“So, what do you say we go and visit our girls?” Lance says, shrugging on his coat. Keith rakes his hands through his hair, vainly trying to flatten it again.

“Our girls?”

“Of course! Hey I don’t know about Red, but Blue is a classy lady and deserves my care and attention.”

“Oh!” Keith’s expression clears. “Sure, whatever you want to do.”

Keith hops to his feet and hooks their elbows together as they make their way into the hallway and head towards the hangars. Lance shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Remind me to get a recording of you saying that later.”

Keith laughs. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Keith, you never want to do any of my ideas.”

“I do so! I come to every movie night. And board game night, even though Altean board games are weird. And every “family dinner” you make us sit down to.”

“Yeah, but the whole team goes to those. Shiro makes you.”
Keith shrugs. “Not after the first time.”

“Wait, really?” Lance misses a step and stumbles, but Keith sets a casual hand on his back to keep him from falling over.

“Really.”

“But- But you complain the whole time!” Lance says, pointing an accusing finger in Keith’s face. Keith frowns thoughtfully.

“Well, yeah, but… That’s what we do, right?” He looks uncomfortable. They come to a stop outside the door to the Lion’s hangar. “I like arguing with you.”

Lance stares at him, thunderstruck. “You… like it. When we argue.”

Keith digs the toe of his boot into the gaps between the floorplates. “Yes? I mean, not the real arguments, during battles or about strategy. But like, last week? When you and Hunk were arguing over whose country had better desserts? And Hunk said pisua and you said to-chi-noh de… de seelo?”

“*Tochino de cielo*.” Lance corrects automatically.

“Yeah that. And I’d never had either one of them but I sided with Hunk because I knew it would make you stomp around and wave your arms like a crazy person and it would be funny. I’m sorry.” He hangs his head. “I know it makes you upset.”

“I…” Lance doesn’t know what to say to that. He sort of understands what Keith is saying, in a weird way. There’s not much to do in space, and in a gigantic empty castle with only six other people in it, nearly any interaction is good interaction. He can actually think of a half dozen times in the last month alone where he’d sought Keith out and started an argument just to kill the boredom. “That’s… okay? I think? I mean I get it. It *is* kind of fun.”

Keith looks up, and he’s got that *smile* on. That tiny, soft, shy smile that does things to Lance’s insides. “Yeah?”

Lance feels a shiver go down his spine. “Yeah, yep, totally. Great time all around, I just love me a good recreational cat fight.” He slams a palm down on the door keypad and all but drags Keith into the hangar. This. This right here was exactly why he wanted a distraction. Because every time he lets Bug-Keith stand still long enough to talk, he says things that make Lance want to do something stupid.

Like kiss him.

Which would obviously be a terrible idea. What is wrong with him? Yeah sure, Lance, just grab your rival and plant one on him, that’s sure to go over like a house on fire when Keith wakes up from his bug-coma and realizes that you have a big gay crush on him.

Lance has to actually shake Keith loose from his grip on his arm.

“Nu-uh, this is my lion. You have your own, go cling to her.”

Keith gears up for a puppy dog pout, Lance can see it coming, put he puts the kibosh on it by spinning Keith around and shoving him at Red.

“Come on, I’m sure she’s missed you.”
“I suppose.” Keith sighs, trudging over to Red’s leg. Lance rolls his eyes.

“Hey, pretty lady. Did you miss me?” Lance coos, flopping forward to rest on the top of Blue’s foot. He squishes his cheek against the cool metal affectionately. He feels a warm rush of affection flow through his mind, like a river of maternal sentiment. He closes his eyes and lets himself relax a bit. He feels a question brush against his mind, and a smidge of concern. He sighs and opens his mind a bit more, shoving all his confusion and distress at her.

Keith. He thinks, plaintively. And that stupid Bug.

Blue plucks at the snarl of negative emotion, Lance can feel her smooth over the edges in a mental gesture that always reminds him of the way his mother runs her fingers through his hair when he’s upset.

He just keeps being Keith, but not Keith at all because Keith hates me and when he’s back to normal he’s never gonna speak to me again. What am I gonna do?

There is an answering purr of soothing sympathy, but underneath it is… Humor?

He gasps, affronted, and opens his eyes to glare up at the underside of her chin.

Blue! Are you laughing at me?

The undercurrent of amusement grows stronger, sliding unashamedly to the forefront of their mind.

“Blue! I came here for some compassion for my pitiable circumstances, and I get this. You’re the worst. I want a new lion.”

Keith’s laugh drifts over to him from behind Red, and Lance groans. That last bit had been out loud.

“Shut up, Keith. At least your Lion isn’t a filthy traitor.”

Keith wanders back over to stand a few feet away.

“That’s true. Red’s in a really good mood!” He smiles. “She won’t tell me what, but she’s laughing at something.”

Lance smushes his face into Blue’s leg again. “Gee, I wonder what.”

“No idea. She did ask if I could wash her today. Is that okay? It can wait until tomorrow if we have something else to do.”

Blue sends a wave of agreement at Lance, and directs his attention to her back legs and claws, where there is apparently a bunch of grass stains and dried fruit juice still stuck to her- a side effect of landing on top of a berry patch back on Planet of the Bugs. Lance frowns and leans around her leg to check the damage. Sure enough, there’s bits of grass and leaves and smears of berry-purple dulling the metal.

“Actually, Blue is all about that. Can’t leave these pretty ladies not lookin’ their best, can we?”

They shrug off their jackets, then lug over buckets and brushes and sponges and the enormous tins of everything-proof sealing goo that Pidge and Hunk had lost their minds over the first time they’d seen it. Apparently cleaning products that can survive space, lasers, and entering and exiting atmosphere haven’t been invented yet back on earth. Whatever, Lance is still gonna call it "Lion Wax™", no matter how many disgusted looks Pidge gives him.
"I still don't get how they can have a magic haunted castle with holograms and cryopods and little target practice robots thingies, but they can't make a lion wash."

Keith lugs over another bucket of water. It sloshes over the sides and onto the ground as he sets it down. "Lion wash?"

"Yeah, y'know. Like a car wash. But for Lions. Bunch of those big swishy brush things, and the rainbow soaps, and those giant hair dryer things all over the exit? Lion wash."

Keith giggles. Lance, very generously, does not give him shit for it.

"I'm just saying. We have an enormous castle, and that's great and all, but there's room for improvement. If my cousin can start his own car washing business over a summer, Coran can rig up something so that we're not washing magical hi-tech war machines with buckets and brushes. But noooo, "There's no substitute for good old-fashioned elbow grease, Lance". Uh, yes, there is, Earth's had it for like two hundred years!"

He spikes his scrub brush into the bucket for emphasis, then grumbles when he has to retrieve it, soaking his sleeve to the shoulder in the process. Keith laughs.

"Maybe if somebody other than you asked him, he'd do it. The rest of us think he's just messing with you."

"Oh, I see, so you're all in on it!" Lance lugs his bucket over to rest between Blue's back claws, on the side next to Red.

"Pidge thinks it's funny, and Hunk thinks it's cute Coran keeps trying to teach you stuff."

Lance scrubs the heel of his hand across his eye. "Of course they do. They're not the ones scrubbing down pods all day."

Keith bounds across the small distance between the lions to wrap Lance in a hug. "Hey, you know they only tease you because they care."

Lance squirms out of the hug as quickly as possible and gently pushes him back towards his Lion. Distract! "Thanks buddy, I know."

Keith beams and returns to Red. He dips his brush into the wax(TM) and begins to scrub. Lance follows suit. For a minute or so, there is silence.

"Hey, Lance?" Lance glances over his shoulder.

"What's up?"

"Can you... Talk?"

Lance blinks.

"Talk?"

"Yeah." Keith shrugs a shoulder, a faint blush dusting across his nose. "You know, tell one of your stories or something."

Lance's brush is paused a few inches away from Blue's surface, dripping all over the floor.

"Why?"
"I... Just like listening to you."

Lance's mouth hangs open, his throat works furiously, but no sound manages to make its way into the air. Keith. Wants to hear him talk. If Lance had needed any more proof that Keith is completely out of his mind on lovey-dovey bug venom, here it is.

"It's fine if you don't want to, I just-"

"What do you want me to talk about?" Lance cuts him off, turning back to his scrubbing as an excuse to hide his burning face.

"One of those stories about your family." Dios, Lance can actually hear the smile in his voice. "Those are always funny."

Lance clears his throat.

"Did-" Nope, voice still cracking. He clears it again. "Did I ever tell you about the time my brother tried to learn parkour to impress a girl at school?"

Keith makes a curious sound, so Lance launches into the infamous tale of the time Jonah had tried to do a wall flip and ended up with a broken collar bone and his head stuck in the neighbors hedges. He keeps his eyes on Blue, not looking up once. He drags it out too, and when he finishes he segues right into another one, and another (Jonah is absolutely terrible at parkour), until he's finished both feet and her belly, and even gotten the bits of leaf stuck between her claws. His lady has never been so clean. He feels kind of bad that he's only done this good a job so he doesn't have to look at Keith, who he's had busting a gut since the end of the first story.

"And that, of course, is when Mrs. Diaz came home. And there Jonah was, rolling around her backyard, covered in pond scum and trying to fish one of her prize koi out of his shirt!"

Keith laughs so hard he snorts. Like, ugly snorts, like he can't get enough air because he's laughing so hard. There's a hollow thunk sound, and it's enough to get Lance to turn around.

Sure enough, Keith is slumped against Red, clutching his stomach and trying to catch his breath. He's actually wheezing, there are tears in the corners of his eyes. Lance cocks a hip and crosses his arms.

"You gonna live?"

Keith wheezes again, but he nods. He looks up at Lance through his eyelashes - the ones all sparkly from tears of laughter. His face is bright red, and his eyes and nose are all scrunched up, and it should be the most stunningly unattractive thing that Lance has ever seen but of course, of course it's not because it's stupid, pretty Keith who couldn't manage to look bad if you dropped a building on him. Seriously, Lance has seen Keith get a building dropped on him and just walk away attractively tousled. It's ridiculous. Lance hates him for it.

...Lance kind of wants to kiss him.

He settles for throwing a sponge at him instead. Look, nobody ever claimed he deals with his emotions maturely.

The sponge hits Keith square in the forehead with a wet splort, then bounces off and lands on the floor between them. Keith looks at him through soaked, slightly soap-bubbly bangs, his mouth a perfect, shocked "o". He blinks. Twice.
And then he leans down to grab his own sponge and launches it at Lance. It hits him dead on in the neck, spraying droplets of soapy water everywhere and sending him stumbling back into his bucket, which tips over and spreads water and bubbles all over the floor. Keith's eyes gleam. Lance grins. This, at least, is familiar.

"Oh it's on, son!"

Lance scoops up a wad of bubbles from the floor and leaps forward to smash it into Keith's hair. What follows is the single most epic water fight Lance has ever had the dubious honor of participating in. Both of them end up completely soaked, covered in bubbles and Lion Wax™, rolling across the floor together in a desperate struggle to either shove a sponge down the others shirt (Keith) or to prevent this atrocity from happening (Lance).

"Keith, I'm serious. Think about what you're doing. Do you really wanna unleash this fury on yourse- Hey! You little rat!"

Keith gives up on getting the sponge down Lance's shirt and settles for smashing it into his face instead. Lance tosses it as far away as possible and tackles him again, straddling his hips and pinning Keith's legs to the floor with his own.

"You were saying?" Keith beams up at him, all white teeth and impish delight. Lance reaches over his head towards the last remaining bucket, fully intending on upending it over Keith's smug face.

"I was saying that you've woken the beast now. That's it, boy, I'm coming for your ass."

A peal of incredulous laughter freezes them both in place. Slowly, Lance looks over his shoulder, to where Allura is standing in the hangar doorway, a hand clapped over her mouth.

"What... What are you two doing?" She laughs.

Lance looks back down at Keith, then further down to where he is... Definitely sitting on him. He is sitting on Keith, soaking wet, covered in bubbles and Lion Wax™. In front of a princess. He scrambles off of Keith with a strangled yelp.

"Allura! Hey, we were just, um. We were..."

Allura raises an amused eyebrow, obviously daring him to finish that sentence.

"Washing. We were washing. Our Lions. That is what we were doing. Right Keith?"

Keith sits up. "I mean, we were. And then Lance threw a sponge at me." He side eyes Lance, grinning slyly. "Then we were having a water fight."

"You traitor." Lance throws up his hands. Keith shrugs, nonchalantly wringing out his hair. He makes a face at the amount of water that splashes to the floor.

Allura presses her lips together. "Of course. Well, I- I merely wanted to inform you that we had arrived at Alcyoneum. Keith, if I could borrow Lance for a moment?"

Keith narrows his eyes at her. "Why?"

She opens her mouth, then pauses thoughtfully before continuing.

"Oh goodness, Lance, you look cold. All of this water, you're going to catch a chill!"

"What? I'm not-"

"I'll go get towels!" He says, and rushes off towards the decontamination chamber. Lance stares after him.

"You made that look so easy." He complains. Allura waves a dismissive hand.

"They're usually the easiest to manipulate the second day. The bite has reached full potency by then. But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. The people of Alcyoneum are quite upset with us for not immediately landing and starting talks. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to put them off. We may be forced to go ahead before Keith is... Well. A bit earlier than we'd like, anyway."

Lance groans and gets to his feet, absently wringing out the hem of his shirt as he does. "Great. I guess I'll have to stay up here with him then."

"That's the problem. You can't." Lance raises his eyebrows.

"Why? It's just another planet that wants to join the Voltron Alliance, right? You don't need us for that."

"Ordinarily, no. However, Alcyoneum's population resides entirely underwater. For safety, and convenience, the Blue Lion's presence is required."

"Oh. Oh no." Lance shoves his damp bangs away from his forehead. "You're saying the one time you guys actually need me for something, it's while I'm stuck babysitting Mr. Cuddlebug?"

Allura smiles. He thinks it's supposed to be reassuring. "You seem to have things well in hand with him."

Lance says nothing, just gestures to the shambles the hangar is in. She clears her throat delicately.

"I... Will do my best to stall them."
Unsanitary Uses for Lions

Chapter Summary

Bam, the plot launches. And more Keith!POV. Actually I have a confession to make-this chapter got waaaaaaay too long, and a whole extra scene just kind of snuck in there? So you lucky ducks get a chapter today, AND a chapter tomorrow.

Oh, and as a complete aside- does anybody know how to get the endnotes on the first chapter to stop posting to the bottom of EVERY SINGLE CHAPTER? I'm stumped. And tech stupid. Pls, someone play Pidge for me.

The Alcyoneans do not take kindly to being stalled, it turns out.

Bright and early the next morning Lance and Keith are roused by a call for all the Paladins to meet on the bridge. Lance peels his face off Keith's shirt, staring blearily at the small patch of drool he's left there. It's way too early for this. Like, pre-space dawn. If space had a dawn. Space morning? He still isn't quite comfortable with the weird hybrid Human/Altean day cycle Pidge and Shiro had thrown together for them to all live by. Keith doesn't seem to mind though.

"Good morning." He says, gazing up at Lance.

"Murgh." Lance replies. He's rewarded with one of Keith's crinkly-eyed smiles and a short good morning kiss. His poor wrung-out heart and sleep deprived brain can't muster much more of a reaction than a pained sigh, unfortunately. He drops his head back onto Keith's chest. He can resume contemplation of the train wreck that is his life when it's not five in the morning.

Keith is having none of it though; he vaults out of bed and coaxes Lance to his feet, then chivvies him into his armor, handing it off to him piece by piece. All of Lance's pitiful whining falls on deaf ears.

"Come on," He groans, stretching a longing hand back towards his bunk even as Keith drags him into the bathroom and shoves a toothbrush into his mouth. "'Fi' mo' 'inutes."

Keith gives him a fond look and picks up his own toothbrush. "It might be important."

Lance spits into the sink, wiping his mouth with a disgusted sigh. He supposes he should find Keith's dedication to his duty, even under the Love Bug's influence, reassuring. Mostly he just finds it unfair.

"What's the point of you loving me if I can't use my powers for evil?" He complains.

He finds even less sympathy on the bridge. They're the last ones there except for Hunk. A harried looking Allura rushes past him on her way to the main display pad, glaring at him as she brings up the planetary holograms of the system they're currently in.

"You're late." She snaps. He raises an eyebrow at her.

"And you're cranky." He returns, sliding into his seat. Keith follows him. Lance raises an eyebrow and points towards Keith's console. "Uh, your chair is that-a-way."
Keith smiles slyly at him. "Really? I was sure it was right here."

And he plops himself down in Lance's lap. Lance feels his face burst into flame. "Uh, I'm not a chair."

Keith wiggles himself into a more comfortable position, slinging an arm over Lance's shoulder to help keep his balance.

"You're comfortable though." He grins, leaning up to peck him on the cheek. "And you're cute when you're embarrassed."

Lance squeaks. Shiro shoots him a stern look from across the room, but says nothing. Pidge adjusts her glasses, squinting at them and their decidedly intimate positioning.

"Is he worse?" She says incredulously.

"Eh?" Lance seesaws a hand at her, then rolls his eyes and wraps a steadying hand around Keith's waist when he wobbles and threatens to slide to the floor. "I think he's actually better than yesterday. He dragged me here instead of going for more cuddles, at least."

"You wouldn't have gotten up at all if I didn't." Keith pokes him on the cheek, and somehow manages to make a really irritating gesture seem like an endearment.

Coran bustles between them on his way to one of the auxiliary information consoles. "That's a good sign, actually." He calls over his shoulder. "Love Bug bites always tend to get worse before they get better."

Lance perks up. "So he might be back to normal soon?"

Coran shrugs. "It's difficult to say."

Keith grumbles as he wedges himself more securely between Lance and the side of the chair. "You guys are the ones acting "abnormal". I keep telling you, I feel fine."

The corner of Coran's mouth twitches. "That would be another side effect, actually. In fact, certain studies have reported-"

"Hey guys, sorry I'm late. I thought nobody would mind me stopping to grab some breakfast for us," Hunk arrives, carrying an armful of breakfast bars. They cheer, and the conversation is effectively ended as Hunk starts to make his way around the room to pass them out. Even Allura accepts one, taking a large bite and chewing furiously before getting their attention and bringing up a model of Alceoneum to hover in the middle of the room.

"Right, we're running quite short on time, so we'll have to keep this briefing fairly... brief." She gestures at the hovering planet above her head. "This, as you know, is Alceoneum. Its people, the Pterophyllae, have contacted us with the interest of joining the Voltron Alliance. Upon arriving, however, we have discovered that their reasons for wanting to ally with us were not altogether altruistic."

With a gesture, she zooms in closer to the planet, enough that Lance can see weird glowy lines scattered across the surface. To his right, Pidge makes an odd noise and leans forward in her seat.

"Why is their planet so unstable?" She asks.

Allura zooms the model back out, and makes a swiping gesture that sends even larger glowing lines
spidering around the sphere, sectioning off large chunks of the surface that look like giant puzzle pieces.

"Their planet is currently in the process of reversing its magnetic polarity. The result is an extremely volatile tectonic layer, which you can see here. While not as immediately fatal as it would be on another planet, due to the surface being ninety-eight percent water, their time is growing short."

Hunk snorts around a mouthful of protein bar. "Yeah, no kidding. I'm no geologist, but if what we saw back at the Balmera is any indication, this place is barely holding together."

"Precisely." Allura nods. "So, while I may be less than thrilled with their deception, we cannot simply leave them like this."

"But what are we planning to do?" Pidge frowns. "This is a natural process, they can't be expecting us to stop it. That's just not possible."

Shiro clears his throat. "They know. But the reason that they've held out this long against the Galra is because they've stayed hidden below the surface. They've asked us to give them protection while they establish a new colony on a neighboring planet. It's going to attract the Galra's attention, and the new colony won't have the resources to protect itself for some time."

"Exactly." Allura nods at Shiro. "Which is why they are eager to cement this alliance as soon as possible. Volcanic activity around their major population centers has increased drastically in the last few weeks."

"I still don't understand why we need to go down there, if it's so volcano-y." Lance speaks up. "Can't we just sit up here and keep watch while they set up a colony? We already know we're gonna help them."

Keith nods his agreement.

Allura kneads her forehead. "Yes, well. The reason for that seems to be a quirk of culture, and the reason that I've had to call you all here so early. They demand a formal meeting, a state dinner, negotiations, all the trappings."

She spreads her hands helplessly and gives them a sheepish smile. "So, we're going to a party."

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They all cram into the Blue and Yellow Lions, except for Allura and Coran, who trail after them in one of the castle shuttles. Apparently the Pterophyllae don't have the room for them to land five lions in the middle of their city.

Keith is uncomfortable at the thought of leaving the castle without Red. He even hesitates, standing there in the hangar as the others sort themselves into groups, until Lance calls out to him. He jumps and turns around, feeling a pit of guilt yawn open in his stomach. He'd actually been so worried he'd forgotten about Lance.

"Are you coming or what?" Lance asks, already standing halfway up the ramp into Blue's mouth.

He's inviting Keith into the Blue Lion. He's offering to let Keith fly with him. His heart thumps. He
hasn't been inside the Blue Lion since the very first day they'd left earth, back when Blue was doing more of the flying than Lance was. Now, he knows, Lance is a brilliant pilot, as much in tune with Blue as Keith is with Red. And he's asking Keith to fly with him.

Keith sprints over so fast he slips on the ramp and pitches backwards.

"Woah, careful." Lance scrambles back down the ramp and grabs one of his windmilling arms, hauling him forward. Keith lets the momentum carry him a little farther forward than necessary, slumping against Lance's chest and batting his eyelashes at him with a cheeky grin.

"My hero."

Lance snorts. "Maybe save some of that damsel act for being properly thankful the next time I save your ass in a firefight."

He shoves Keith upright, and they head into the Lion together.

Lance settles into the pilot's chair as though it's a throne, like he was born to sit there, then glances over his shoulder to where Keith is hovering awkwardly. Keith freezes. Is he standing too close? The Paladins never really go into each other's Lions. He doesn't want to mess Lance up, or throw off his piloting. Should he move farther away? Stand behind him? To the side? What will Lance be the most comfortable with?

"Uh, Keith? You alright there?"

Keith nods mutely. "Where, um. Where should I stand?"

"Oh! Oh jeez, now is when you get considerate of my personal space?" Lance glances around the cabin, clearly seeing the same problem as Keith, then sighs and gestures vaguely at his lap. "Do you wanna...?"

Lance laughs and shakes his head as Keith vaults over the arm of the chair and throws himself across his lap. Of course Keith wants to, what kind of question is that? "You know the last time there were two people in this chair I ended up chained to a tree on some backwater moon, and you had to chase down Blue for me."

Keith growls in the back of his throat. "That Nyma girl."

Lances chest shakes with laughter. "Hey, she seemed nice at the time."

Pidge groans as she shuffles up the gangplank and spots them. "You better not crash us into an asteroid cause you're too busy canoodling." She complains.

Keith frowns at her and winds his arms around Lance's neck.

"Lance would never. He's too good a pilot for that."

Lance squeaks. Keith frowns at him, concerned.

"You've been making that sound a lot, Lance. Is something wrong with your throat? Are you feeling sick?" He strokes his fingers gently down the side of Lance's neck.

"Nope, no, all good here." He snatches Keith's hand and holds it in his lap, preventing him from examining him further. Keith frowns. Now that he thinks about it, Lance looks a little flushed. What if he's picked up some alien illness?
Lance turns around to glare at Pidge.

"And who invited you? If you don't like my driving you can go ride with Hunk!"

"If only. Shiro said somebody needs to keep an eye on you two though." She shoves her glasses down the bridge of her nose and waggles her eyebrows at them. "Guess he wanted to make sure you didn't get... distracted on the way there."

Lance chokes. "We're not gonna - I would never - You! And your dirty mind!" He sputters.

Keith furrows his brow, confused. He doesn't get it. He looks to Lance for an explanation.

"Dirty...?"

Pidge cackles, crossing her arms and leaning casually against the back wall. "Hey, you've been getting pretty handsy lately. I'm just saying. No judgement."

Oh. Belatedly, the pieces slot together in Keith's mind. Oh.

In the Blue Lion? Keith feels his eyes glaze over at the thought. Out in space, with nobody to interrupt them or walk in. They could turn their communicators off and just... They both fit in the chair like this, or there's a side console that's a very convenient height in the back.

He imagines setting Lance on top of it, eliminating the small but frustrating height difference between them, Lance's legs around his waist, his fingers in his hair. They're in their armor, but everyone knows Keith appreciates a good challenge-

"Oi!"

He flinches back, scowling at Pidge and the fingers she's snapping in his face.

"I was kidding, jeez. That's so gross, Shiro and Allura would kill you if they found out you'd used one of the Lions to fu-"

"Okay, buckle up folks, next stop Alceo-whatsit." Lance says, yanking back on the throttle so hard that Pidge slides backwards into the wall as the Blue Lion launches itself into space.
Simmer Down, Cherry Bomb

Chapter Summary

*Deep breaths* Well. I made myself sad writing this one. But, hey! You guys don't have to be sad, because you get two chapters two days in a row, just like I promised. Ok maybe be a little bit sad. You guys are monsters, making me write all this Langst. Y'all are the ones that did this to my poor boy, not me.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to adhdklance for playing Pidge and helping me with my endnotes issue. I think I fixed it? I hope I fixed it.

And I feel the need to do a little announcement - a lot of you have asked me about whether or not there will be smut in this story. For several reasons, I really don't think I want to do that? I'd rather keep the rating low for something this fluffy and emotion heavy, first of all. Now, I might be persuaded to write a small oneshot set after the story ends with some smut if y'all are interested in that, but almost certainly not in THIS story. ESPECIALLY not while Keith is bugged out of his little mind- that is a dark dark grey area, morally, and I don't want to have to tag for dubcon. Thanks for your understanding on that.

But yeah, if y'all want me to throw together a few one shots after this segment of the story, drop a comment, hit me up, as always the table is open to ideas.

Alceoneum is actually the raddest place they've been in awhile. Lance is pretty sad it's all earthquakey and about to be destroyed.

Turns out, none of the "land" is actually land at all. The entire surface of the ocean floor is covered in enormous coral reefs, ancient megafauna that's died and hollowed out over millenia to create the pockets and towers and tunnels that the Pterophyllae live in. As the tides wash in and out the tunnels drain and the air pockets are replenished.

Half of the day the city peeks above the surface in a bone white skyline of enormous coral spires, and the other half the ocean rolls in and turns the whole place into space-Atlantis.

The tide is in right now, and their hosts lead them between the air pockets, up and down through tunnels filled with different levels of water, some only ankle deep, the others filled completely. It's super weird switching from walking to swimming and back again, but the Pterophyllae don't even seem to notice.

They're definitely not mermaids, not like Queen Luxia and her people. They actually kind of remind Lance of angelfish, like the ones that lived in the shallow waters off Veradero beach back home. They're colorful and slender, with glittering scales and willowy limbs that aren't quite arms and aren't quite fins, and enormous black eyes that they never seem to blink. They're still really pretty though,
in an extra-fishy sort of way.

The ballroom they're led to is enormous, and the coral that makes up the walls has been cut into intricate geometric patterns, with beams and columns carved out of the sides. Between vaulted arches, the walls are decorated with murals and mosaics made of colorful seashells and chips of something akin to sea glass, depicting seascapes and marine life in surprisingly realistic relief and giving the impression of windows looking out of the tower. It's also inside one of the pockets that have air, thankfully, so they can take their helmets off for the duration of the meet and greet. Lance has to stop in the doorway and gawk while the others filter around him into the hall.

"Holy crow, that is awesome." He whistles, ignoring the stares he attracts. The leader of their little posse - the ambassador, he guesses? Or heck, it might be the queen or the president or some other important title, he'd been too busy staring at the city to pay much attention - comes to stand beside him.

"I'm happy that you find our city pleasant." She smiles politely. Lance flaps a hand at her.

"Pleasant? Are you kidding me?" He scoffs. "You're selling yourself short there. I've never seen anyplace like it. It's beautiful." He tears his eyes from the carvings long enough to smile. Her eyes widen slightly, and the smaller, lacy fins that corona her head ripple briefly. Her smile turns more genuine.

"I am so glad you think so. And I am glad that our visitors are ones with such fine taste. It's good that it can be appreciated while it's still here." She reaches out to brush her fins across his shoulder.

Something plasters itself against Lance's back, and he jumps as arms slither around his waist.

"Yeah, Lance is great like that." Keith says, setting his chin on Lance's shoulder. Lance raises an eyebrow at his tone - Keith's compliments over the last few days have sounded a little friendlier than that.

The diplomat rears back, startled, and her head-fins flutter again. "Oh- My apologies. I did not mean any offense."

"What? You didn't cause any. Keith, what's gotten in to you? Don't be rude." Lance tries to twist around to glare at him, but Keith just tightens his grip, refusing to let Lance turn.

"I'm not the one who's being rude." He sulks.

"Keith!" Lance scolds. He struggles to pry Keith's arms off, but only succeeds in making him clasp his hands together across his stomach, strengthening his hold. He growls. Allura and Shiro are gonna kill him if they find out if they find out he's let Keith insult the maybe-Queen while their backs were turned.

Thankfully, (and confusingly) the diplomat just laughs and offers Keith a slight bow.

"I am very sorry, I did not realize he was yours. You need not be concerned at my coming between you, Paladin." She nods politely and backs away. Lance stares after her.

Didn't realize he was- oh quiznak, Keith is jealous. Keith relaxes a little bit as she takes her leave, allowing Lance to shove his arms away and turn around to face him properly. He sets his hands on his hips and leans in to whisper furiously.

"Seriously, dude?"
Keith scowls.

"She touched you."

"She- ugh!" Lance fists a hand in his hair, frustrated. Seriously, the one time he isn't actually getting his flirt on, and he's still getting shit for it. "Lots of people touch me! Are you gonna start mauling me to stake a claim every time Hunk wants to give me a hug now?"

Their armor clacks together as Keith forces himself back into Lance's arms and drops his head onto his shoulder.

"You don't need to hug Hunk." He grumbles. "I'll hug you."

Lance makes a face. Honestly, he should have seen this coming. Nobody is gonna be surprised to find out that Keith is the possessive type. The man has abandonment issues like a beach has sand, of course he's gonna be protective. Just look at how he flips out when anything happens to Shiro - he singlehandedly stormed a government base camp in order to rescue him. But Lance? He did not sign up for this, alright? He is a free spirit. He will not be pinned down. He- well, no obviously he's willing to be pinned down, in theory. He's not that kind of guy, okay, he's not a cheater, and his mom would flay him alive if she ever heard about him stepping out on his partner, but-

But that's not the point here! He didn't even agree to be monogamous in this case, alright, this is not a relationship he entered into willingly. The point is moot, because he and Keith are not actually in a relationship, and they never will be. So, there.

He swallows around the lump in his throat. Right, never mind. Relationship. Hah. What's the point of arguing? Keith won't give a damn what Lance does or who he does it with by this time next week.

He pats Keith halfheartedly on the back.

"Right, whatever you say, buddy." He can't quite keep all of the bitterness out of his tone. Keith pulls back to look at him, opens his mouth to speak, but honestly? Lance has had a little bit too much of the false concern over the last couple days.

"Let's just go enjoy the party, okay?" He cuts Keith off, plastering on a smile when he hesitates. "Come on, big fancy castle, big fancy party. Let's go tear it up."

Keith sighs, but he finally lets go.

"If that's what you want to do." He offers Lance a hesitant smile.

Lance tries to enjoy the party. He really does. The mood is actually pretty festive considering the reasons the shindig is being held in the first place. That special, uplifting mood that Voltron seems to inspire wherever they go is present in force.

The Pterophyllae don't seem crippling sad about their planet falling apart either, actually - apparently this isn't even their original homeworld, just the one they've been using to hide from the Galra for the last few centuries. The ones Lance talks to are just really, really grateful that they'll have a chance to get their people off world and onto a new colony safely. And, bonus, unlike half the planets they visit the food isn't too shabby, and the music is something that human ears can comprehend. There's snacks and drinks and awesome architecture and pretty fish people eager to make a good impression on them so that they'll want to save their people. Lance should be on cloud nine right now. It's just...

Keith. Who spends every second of the first twenty minutes stuck so close to him that Lance has
actually tripped over him like three times already. He finally has to pick up a drink just to have an excuse to use his arm freely. But it doesn't end there; Keith sulks and glowers whenever anyone speaks to Lance, regardless of age, gender, or relative fishiness. Lance starts up several conversations, only for the Pterophyl involved to gradually grow so uncomfortable that they make their polite excuses and leave. Not that Lance can blame them. He wouldn't want to stand there and make small talk while somebody stabs him with their eyes either.

Lance sighs as Keith frightens away yet another group of Alceoneans with his death glare, this time before they even make it over to talk to them. Lance grabs him by the wrist and hauls him over to the side of the room.

"Seriously? You can't even manage to make nice for five minutes?"

The drink in his hand wobbles when Keith presses in even closer to his side; Lance has to tilt it wildly to prevent it from spilling. He grits his teeth.

"They're all so- they're looking at you weird. I don't like it." Keith fidgets.

"Like what, like they want to have a damn conversation with me? I'm allowed to talk to people. You need to knock it off, seriously. You're gonna get us in trouble." Lance snaps. Keith flinches away, and it's almost enough to shame Lance into apologizing.

Almost.

Instead, he sets his drink on a shelf carved into the wall and doubles down.

"Look, you're supposed to be the one that's all about duty and protecting the universe. This is part of that, okay, and it's one of the parts I don't actually hate or suck at, so you need to chill and let me do this. Shiro's gonna kill me if he starts getting angry fish people coming up to him and complaining that the red paladin is acting like a sulky little kid!"

What started out as a tense whisper gradually grows louder, until Lance is talking loud enough to attract attention from passersby. Keith looks like he's about to cry. Not the puppydog-eyed crocodile tears either. Real ones.

"I-" He casts his eyes away, hunching his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm- I'm being ridiculous. I'm sorry."

He sniffs. Lance's anger drains away abruptly, leaving him feeling guilty and hollow.

"I- I know I don't need to be jealous. You're a good guy, you would never actually try to... You would never. I trust you." Keith rushes on, and Lance should stop him, probably, but it's... Keith trusts him? Something warm edges into his chest and settles in right next to the guilt. "It's stupid, and I'm messing up the mission like this. I just keep seeing them look at you and... And I get so angry. And I'm sorry what I said about Hunk, you two are friends, obviously you can hug him. I don't get why my head is all weird."

His eyes glaze over a little bit, eyebrows pulling tightly together like he's in pain. He's fighting the Love Bug bite, Lance realizes, but it looks like it's hurting him. Oh, god, Lance did this. He did this by yelling at Keith for something he can't even control right now. He's such an asshole.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. Calm down. I'm sorry I got mad. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. It's not your fault." He soothes, taking Keith's hands in his.

Keith's shakes his head.
"How is it not my fault? I should be better than this. I don't understand." He squeezes his eyes shut, and Lance can see tears gathered in the corners of his eyes, though whether they're from frustration, pain, or something else entirely Lance doesn't know.

"Oh Keith, babe, no." The endearment slips out almost without him noticing. He doesn't have time to freak out about it right now though, because Keith looks ten seconds away from a full blown anxiety attack. Lance looks around frantically and spots a small hallway a few yards away, tucked behind a decorative column. He throws an arm around Keith and pulls him over to it, waving off the Alceoneans who give them concerned looks as they go by. They duck behind the column and into the passage, which is mercifully empty.

"Come here." He murmurs, and folds Keith securely into his arms when he presses up against him. "Just breathe, okay? You're alright."

Keith nods miserably. His hair tickles Lance's cheek.

"I feel weird."

"I know. But it's okay. Just... Listen. I'm not mad, and you're allowed to feel however you want, okay? It's not your fault." Lance closes his eyes tightly. Fighting the Bug bite is obviously doing a number on him, he can feel Keith actually trembling against his chest. Lance feels sick to his stomach at the sensation. He holds him tighter, trying to stop the shaking. "Just breathe."

He strokes soothing lines down the small of Keith's back, where the armor is thinner. Long moments pass.

Gradually, Keith begins to relax, going still and evening out his breathing. Finally, he takes a shuddering breath and pulls away so that he can look up at Lance, setting a hand on his shoulder like it's anchoring him upright.

"You okay?" Keith nods. He offers him a watery smile, and it's clear he's back under the Bug's hold once more. Lance should be disappointed, but he's just glad Keith doesn't seem to be in pain any more. He reaches up to cup Lance's cheek with a gentle hand.

"Thanks, Lance. I don't know what got into me."

He leans up, slowly, and presses a kiss to Lance's mouth.

It's different from the others, the ones that he's surprised him with before. Those had been brief, chaste, almost playful. This one is slow and lingering; sweet and a little bit sad. It feels... Real. It feels like Keith really does love him, really wants it to be Lance calming him down in some weird coral castle a mile under the ocean's surface, like they're partners. Like a couple. Like it's the most natural, reassuring thing in the world.

Lance's chest constricts painfully, but he doesn't stop it. He doesn't even bother lying to himself this time. He's a terrible, awful person who's going to space hell, but he... he wants this more than anything. He pulls Keith closer, wraps his arms around his waist and just lets himself have this, lets his lips move with Keith's and takes just as much comfort from it as Keith does. He lets himself get lost in Keith's slow breathing, in the press of Keith's thumb against his cheek. For a single, selfish minute, he pretends.

When they finally pull away, Lance doesn't let him go far. He presses a kiss to his temple and closes his eyes, letting his head drop to rest on Keith's shoulder. He doesn't keep track of how long they stay like that, chest to chest and cheek to cheek, breathing together, leaning against the wall of a dark
hallway.

He could stay this way forever, he thinks. Funny, how he doesn't remember their first bonding moment, and now Keith probably won't remember this one - will hate Lance for it if he does. It's brutally unfair, and kind of a perfect metaphor for their relationship - always being ruined by something.

Alceoneum agrees, evidently.

The moment shatters as the ground beneath their feet gives a sudden heave, forcing them to clutch each other for balance as they stumble against the wall. There's a sort of reverberating crack in the earth around them, more felt than heard, and then a boom. For a heartbeat, everything goes still. Then, the sound of rushing water and screams flood out of the ballroom.

They look at each other, then as one they reach for their helmets and dash out of the hall.
Well, Shit.

Chapter Summary

This chapter is... Actually is almost entirely plot? I'm sorry about that, I know y'all are here for your dose of fluff or angst or whatever your poison of choice is. But fuck it, the universe doesn't come to a halt for personal drama, and I want to see Bugged!Keith in every situation and feeling I can possibly jam his poor innocent ass into.

Oh, and snap, I've never had to post a TRIGGER WARNING before, but there is one in here: Drowning, potential drowning, and side effects of being trapped underwater for a short time are all up in here. If that sets you off, it's honestly probably best if you skip all the way down to the second section, as marked by the usual <><><> page break symbols. I'll stick a short summary of what you missed in the endnotes for you, mmkay?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ballroom is destroyed.

It's utter bedlam - the Pterophyllae are running back and forth, shrieking, ducking into alcoves for shelter or fleeing the room as best they can around the toppling pillars and chunks of collapsing ceiling that rain down around them.

A crack runs the length of the room over their heads, a gaping hole like an upside down crevasse, and water is torrenting in, slowly filling the room. The roar of rushing water splattering against the tiles is nearly loud enough to drown out the screaming.

Lance feels his helmet seal around him automatically, and he glances to the side to check that Keith's has done the same. Their eyes meet, and he feels Keith's hand tighten around his.

"We gotta find the others." He says.

Lance scans the room for the rest of their team, tapping at his temple to activate the coms as he does.

"Guys, where are you?"

"Lance?" Hunks panicked voice crackles to life in their ears. "Oh thank goodness. You have to come quick, southwest corner, it's Pidge, part of the wall- I can't lift it and her helmet is stuck under there with her and the water is getting really-"

"We're coming." Keith cuts him off, already running for the corner where Pidge is trapped and dragging Lance after him. The water is already up to their knees, and each step is a struggle as they slog through, stumbling over the detritus hidden under the roiling surface. They haul each other over the debris as best they can, slipping and tumbling over broken tables and mounds of rubble. Once or twice an Alceonean stumble into them, sending them careening to the side in their haste to get out of the wrecked air pocket.
Lance spots Hunk in the far corner, by one of what used to be the large window mosaics; now the entire section of wall has collapsed outward, pinning Pidge beneath it. She's on her back, buried to the chest but seemingly uninjured, churning the water around her with her struggling. Hunk is trying to lift the edge of the stone to free her, but it's too heavy, refusing to so much as budge.

"Hunk!" Lance shouts, releasing Keith's hand and stumbling the last few feet to them. "Pidge!"

"Lance!" Pidge stops struggling for a second to shoot him a look full of desperate relief.

Lance is already kneeling on the end of the collapsed wall opposite to Hunk, jamming his hands under the lip and heaving. It doesn't move.

"Where's Shiro?" Keith has to shout to be heard over the pouring water. He joins Lance on his end, adding his strength. The wall still doesn't shift.

Hunk just shakes his head, still frantically trying to lift the slab. "I haven't seen him. We gotta-"

The world around them shudders again, and another section of the ceiling collapses with a groan. A second waterfall forms - Lance can actually see the water rising now, it's so fast. A chill grips his chest as he realizes the water is already to Pidge's neck. She shoves herself up on her elbows as far as she can go, her eyes wide with fear.

"A lever!" She shrieks, "Keith, your bayard-"

Keith is already moving, extending his bayard and jamming it under the slab, kicking a chunk of rock beneath it and shoving down as hard as he can. The rock gives, just a little, and Lance's heart leaps. He dashes back to Pidge and grabs her under her arms, pulling as hard as he can. She slides back a few inches, but it's not enough, it's not enough, her belt is caught or something, and she's having to tip her chin up to keep her face above the water-

"I can't!" Keith's voice cracks. "We have to try something else-"

"There's no time!" Hunk roars, and Lance locks eyes with Pidge just as the water closes over her head.

"No!" He screams, struggling to pull her out, just a little farther, anything so that she can get a breath-

And then Shiro is there.

"Move!" He bellows, his hand already alight with glowing energy, and Lance scrambles back as he cleaves the rock in two right over Pidge. It cracks in half, and Hunk is already heaving the much lighter slab upwards, Shiro moving to brace him, the water up to their necks now and Keith is diving beneath the surface to get to Pidge.

Lance follows, the screams and rushing water going silent as he dives. He helps tug a flailing Pidge out from under the lip, guiding her down and out from where her belt had snagged on a jagged crop of rock - she's still conscious, thank everything - then shoves her into Keith's arms and points to the surface. Keith goes, hauling her upwards as Lance turns and slithers under the rock. His helmet light flickers on, and the water is murky but it's enough for him to spot the flash of white and green wedged in where Pidge's feet had been, and he tugs, prises it free, tucks it under his arm and shoves himself clear. Shiro and Hunk let the chunk fall with a muffled boom that Lance feels more than hears as he kicks himself off against the ground and breaks the surface.

Keith is treading water with Pidge's arms draped over his shoulders. She's coughing against his chest, horrible, wet, wracking coughs, but the sound brings Lance endless relief because it means she's
okay, she's breathing, and he splashes over to them and shakes Pidge's helmet out as best he can before jamming it down over her head.

He see's Keith's eyes flutter shut with relief as the hiss of the seals engaging makes itself audible over the roar of the water. In the corner of his eye, Shiro and Hunk surface.

That's all the Paladins safe then, Lance thinks, the knot of panic in his chest finally loosening. He tugs one of Pidge's arms from its death grip on Keith and slings it around his shoulder. Keith gives him a grateful look - treading water in armor is enough of a nightmare when it's just your own body weight - and they spread her weight between them.

Lance jostles her lightly.

"How you doin', Pidgeon?" He says gently. She coughs again, then makes a face at the splash of seawater and spit across the inside of her visor.

"I'm- I'm okay." Lance feels her legs begin to kick weakly, helping to keep them afloat. "Thanks, you guys."

"That was way, way too close." Hunk says. His voice is thick, like he's holding back tears. "I can't believe the tower just collapsed like that. We need to get out of here."

They all look up at the ruined ceiling, only a few feet away now and steadily inching closer as they rise with the water.

Shiro nods. "Pidge, are your seals all green?"

"Yeah, they're-" She has to pause to cough again. They'll probably need to get her in the healing pods for a few hours to get the last of the water out of her lungs, or she'll have the mother of all chest colds in the morning, Lance thinks worriedly. "They all engaged okay. I can dive."

That's good, they need to get out of here. Allura and Coran are going to want to help with the evacuation and have them help recover anyone still stuck in the tower. The Pterophyllae can hold their breath for hours, apparently, but they still-

Lance chokes on a sudden realization.

"Wait, where are Allura and Coran? They didn't have helmets, we have to-"

"It's alright, Lance." Shiro soothes. "I got them both out and into one of the undamaged pockets. They're fine."

Lance sags in relief. "Thank god. Then let's blow this popsicle stand. This is the worst party I've ever been to."

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Keith leans against Lance, less affection and more exhaustion evident in the sagging line of his shoulders. The air pocket they've been led to now is something like a command center - Pterophyllae dash briskly back and forth, shouting into headsets and earpieces and typing furiously into the consoles that line the walls. The lighting is a dim blue, a little bit like Blue's cockpit, but the familiar
wavelengths fail to put Lance at ease.

He winds an arm around Keith's waist and looks at Pidge, still a little pale, even accounting for the low light washing her out. He doesn't think he's going to feel at ease again until he's off this collapsing wreck of a planet.

A few meters away, Shiro, Allura, and Coran are bent over a planetary display holo of Alceoneum with a couple of the Pterophyllae, their expressions grave.

Keith tucks his face into Lance's neck.

"I can't believe the entire place just came down like that." He murmurs. "If Shiro hadn't come back in time..."

Lance swallows, but doesn't reply, chooses the replace the memory at the front of his mind - of the wild look in Pidge's eyes as the water closed over her head - with the feeling of Keith's hair as he reaches up to stroke his fingers through it. It's slightly damp, but still soft. Keith makes a low, appreciative sound and slings an arm around Lance's hips. They stand like that for a minute, watching the controlled chaos ebb and flow around them, until Shiro beckons the rest of the Paladins over to join him.

"What's the word, O fearless leader?" Pidge chirps, her voice still slightly rough. "I'm guessing the planet's falling apart a little ahead of schedule?"

"You could say that." He offers a small smile.

"We miscalculated." A Pterophyl, one of the ones squinting at the planetary display they're gathered around, pipes up. "The interplate coupling between the disks nearest the capital was far weaker than we anticipated - they shouldn't have given so soon. The worst of the drift has started, and here-" He lets a finger trail down one of the glowing lines marked in red on the hologram, "The plate that we are on, has been forced beneath its neighbor. It's months before this should have happened. We'll be lucky to get the basic colony supplies we'll need to survive off the planet in time, let alone anything of cultural or scientific value."

Lance blinks at him, then glances over to Pidge and Hunk for an explanation. Pidge sighs, but it's absent of any of her usual dry exasperation.

"The tectonic plate we're sitting on just slid beneath the one next to it, and the sudden pressure pushing down on it is making it crack. So, there'll be more sea quakes, probably volcanic eruptions, massive thermal vents opening..."


Pidge nods. It's a testament to how worn out she is that she doesn't take the wide open opportunity to mock him. He actually wouldn't mind her mocking right now, if it meant she didn't look so run down and grey.

"What can we do to help?" Keith steps closer to the display to peer at it, but doesn't let go of Lance's hand.

Allura heaves a breath. "That, I'm afraid, is the problem. Our options are fairly limited, and anything we are able to do will only buy them time to evacuate the planet and salvage as many supplies as possible. There will be no saving Alceoneum."

"But there are options. We can do something to slow it down?"
If it weren't for the hand still firmly grasped in his, like an anchor, Lance would swear that this was normal-Keith, the one who's first and only priority is saving as much of the universe as will let itself be saved. He swallows around the lump in his throat, then squeezes his hand and is gratified when Keith instantly squeezes back.

Right, no time to be contemplating lines that blurry right now anyway - Hunk is talking.

"Well, is there anyway we can, I dunno, vent some of the pressure?" He gestures at the display. "If it's only the one disk we need to stabilize, that should be doable."

Pidge snorts. "We don't have time to drill through a plate a hundred kilometers thick. It would take weeks."

"Well, wait, I thought the tectonic plates were thinner along the ocean floor? I mean that's how it works on Earth."

"I don't know..." Pidge pauses and squints at the holo-planets, and then at the tech who had spoken before. "How thick is the mantle in the high-pressure zones? Say, here, here, and here." She indicates three spots in a rough line along the lip of the plate that's going under.

The tech blinks at her. "About three point seven decadons. You can't be suggesting..."

But Pidge has already shoved him out of the way and called up the measurements herself. "It's about five point three kilometers thick, on average. But half of that is dead coral and other soft materials, not stone. This is... It's actually doable."

Lance scoffs. "So, what, the plan is to go laser-blast holes in the planet? To vent the lava."

"Well, not exactly?" Hunk seesaws a had at him. "It would be more like making our own fault line. The pressure is already there, it's gonna go under, but we can decide when, where, and how it does. We could snap the plate along the edge of the trench - minimize the damage and then buy more time before the pressure builds and the plate slides under again."

Shiro leans his palms on the console and looks out at all of them.

"Pidge, Hunk, you're certain this will work? If it doesn't it might cause more damage than we prevent."

They look at each other and shrug. Hunk spreads his hands in a "what can you do?" sort of way.

"I mean, if we don't, the city will be wreckage in a week anyway? At least this way we might buy them enough time to get their colony supplies together and their people off-world."

Shiro holds his gaze for a long moment, then nods. "I'll ask the chancellor for permission to go ahead."

"Wait." Pidge holds up a hand, halting Shiro in his tracks as he turns to go. Her gaze is fixed on the numbers describing the conditions along the fault. "There's one more problem."

"And that is?"

"The fault is about seven kilometers deep."

Shiro purses his lips. "Are the lions able to go that far down?"

"Green definitely can't. And probably not Red. The Black and Yellow Lions have extra plating that
would protect them from being crushed but..." She shakes her head. "You wouldn't be able to move. And whoever goes is going to need to be quick, when the plate snaps you do not want to be anywhere near."

"What will happen?"

Her fingers flicker over the display, pulling up a cross section of the fault. "Well, we'd be cutting holes along most of the edge of the plate, sort of like the micro perforations in notebook paper that let you tear them out? That's several thousand kilometers, but it shouldn't take too long, the Lion's lasers are more than capable. Just until the plate starts to break on its own. But when it does, it's, well. It's an entire chunk of continent collapsing. Thermal vents, volcanoes, and, well it's water, so that much turbulence is a problem. You could get squished between the edges, or sucked down with the collapsing section."

She sighs and rubs at her shoulder, avoiding their eyes. "The Black and Yellow lions could survive the depth and get the job done, but they'd be slow. Maybe too slow to get out in time safely."

Keith furrows his brow. "But that would mean..."

Lance's skin crawls as everyone in their little group turns to look at him.

"Blue can do it." He whispers. He knows she can. After their run-in with Zarkon, after Lance and Hunk had been stranded underwater with the Baku-serpent and discovered Blue's extra abilities, he'd had Pidge take a look at her. Blue is literally made for the water, they'd found out.

She's built like a submarine, if a submarine were a giant space lion. Reinforced joints, double-plated hull around the cockpit and her internal workings, streamlined seals and minimal sharp edges, a specialized pressure compensator and air tank for sustained diving - she's meant to be in the water, and she's meant to be able to move there. At the time, Lance had thought it was a cool thing that Blue had all to herself, and good explanation for why Hunk and Yellow had been so useless and slow in the water even as Blue had performed at the best Lance had ever felt her. Now though, he's pretty sure he needs to have a talk with her about getting him volunteered for suicide missions.

"No. No way." Keith snaps. His grip on Lance's hand becomes bruisingly tight. Lance feels his bones creak in protest. "You can't just send him down there alone to go slice off a chunk of planet. Blue may be good in the water, but once that fault opens it's going to be all heat."

"Keith..." Shiro reaches out a soothing hand towards his shoulder, But Keith ducks away, putting his back to Lance's chest. Shiro sighs. "Keith, Lance can buy millions of people the time they need to prepare, and to escape. Without that time the colony will be so weak it won't last a week against the Galra, and we can't be there around the clock to guard it while they get their feet under them. Now, I'm not going to force him. It's Lance's choice. But we all have to respect his decision."

Keith growls, low in his throat. "He could get hurt."

"And if he doesn't go, thousands will get hurt."

"I don't care!"

Lance yelps as his back hits the sharp corner of a console. He hadn't even realized Keith had been herding him backwards, away from Shiro. He swallows.

"Keith."

Keith whirs around to face him, eyes black with fury. "Don't, Lance. Don't you dare."
Lance aims for a cocky grin, but he's pretty sure he falls short somewhere closer to a gentle smile. "Come on, Keith. Like I'm gonna miss the chance to single-handedly save an entire planet. You guys will never be able to stop me from bragging about this, alright, I'm making that rule now." He smirks over Keith's shoulder at the rest of the team. Their expressions run the gambit from proud to resigned to terrified.

"Lance, I swear if you do this-"

"You'll what, hate me forever? Never forgive me? Wait a few days, it won't matter anyway." Lance snorts and reaches up to catch the back of Keith's head, tugging him in so that their foreheads brush. The world narrows down to just the two of them. Keith's eyes, shining with fury and unshed tears of frustration, the softness of his bangs, the curl of his hair across Lance's gloved fingers.

"Listen, Keith. I'll be fine. I'm too stupid to die, you've said it yourself a million times."

"But I didn't mean it." Keith whines.

"And we do dangerous stuff like this all the time. You do this stuff all the time."

"But not alone!"

Lance sighs. They don't have the time to drag this argument out, especially not when the protesting is only coming from a nasty little Bug with the universes blackest sense of comedic timing. He strokes his thumb over the bug bite still visible on Keith's cheek, the little heart shaped bruise that caused all these messy feelings.

He's actually pretty grateful to it, for a moment. If it weren't for it Keith would be practically shoving him out the door and into his Lion without a thought for the consequences. It's nice to have someone care so much for a change. But still, gambling a planet on fake feelings is selfish, even by Lance's standards.

"Pidge, how much time would you say we have until the next sea quake?"

She glances over her shoulder at the display, then purses her lips unhappily. Her shoulders sag, but she meets his eyes when she responds, "For a big one? A couple hours, at most. If you're gonna go, it's gotta be soon. Like, within the hour soon."

"Righty-o then." In one (incredibly smooth) movement, he reels Keith back in, brushes back his bangs, plants a kiss on his forehead, then shoves him, hard, at Shiro, who catches him and locks his arms to his sides in an iron grip without missing a beat. "Guess I'll be on my way."

"Lance!" Keith shrieks, already struggling against Shiro's hold. "Lance I swear to god-"

Lance plonks his helmet back on his head and shoots Keith his best finger laser-guns on his way out the door.

"I'll be back soon, babe, don't wait up."

Keith's wordless roar of rage follows him out into the hall.

Chapter End Notes
If you skipped the first section: Lance and Keith leave the hall to find the ballroom collapsed due to the earth quake, with water pouring in from the broken walls. They rush off to find Hunk, who is trying to free Pidge from a section of wall that has collapsed on her. The other paladins manage to free her, but not before she spends a short amount of time underwater before Shiro manages to judo chop the wall off of her. They get her to safety, slightly soggy and a touch worse for wear, but very much alive and unharmed.
The Roast of Lance McClain

Chapter Summary

Ok, so- I promise, I really wasn't rushing this chapter to get it out to you after the cliffhanger? You've all been such darlings, concerned for my schoolwork and my health. But this chapter just kind of... Happened? Every time I sat down another 1000 words came out, I don't understand. It wrote itself and it did it in ten hours. Many thanks to Grim, my darling beta, for looking over it with next to zero notice.

Regardless, I guess you all get to reap the benefits, my marvelous children. Enjoy 3700 words of almost entirely dialogue and general snark, absolutely cliffhanger-free.

Oh, and Blue_Lily? It's not quite The scenario you described? But I loved the spirit of the line, so it's in here. Everybody give the lovely Blue_Lily props for her contribution to keeping this angst-train rolling.

Lance's skin crawls as Blue dives. The water grows darker with every passing second, the sunlight fading out until there is nothing but pitch blackness on his viewscreen. Blue's external lights flick on, but there's nothing around them but water, and he can see nothing except for a murky cloud in the shape of the beams.

"But he shouldn't have gone alone!"

A muffled crash sounds over the comm line, and Pidge swears in his ear.

Lance groans and leans back in his chair. Keith's tantrum isn't really helping the ambiance, if he's honest.

"Is he still fighting Shiro?"

"Yeah... He actually managed to get away from him a few minutes ago. It's kinda funny, the Pterophyllae are furious but they're too polite to kick him out."

He snorts.

"I don't actually know what he's trying to accomplish here?" Hunk asks. "I mean Allura took the shuttle pod back up the castle to get it ready to carry colonists, and Yellow is the only Lion we've got right now. It's not like he's gonna be able to go after you."

"He's all Bug-lovey, Hunk, I doubt logic is really factoring into it. It never does with the mushier flavors of human emotion." Lance can practically hear Pidge's exasperated expression.

There's another crash, and some more shouting, this time with Shiro's soothing tones mixed in.

"What does he keep knocking over?" Lance says, squinting into the darkness. Seriously, how deep could seven kilometers be? He's been sinking for ages.

"Box of colony supplies, couple monitors. One of the scientists, right after you left."
"You're kidding."

"Nope. The head seismologist has sent all non-essential personnel packing. It's a war zone in here. At least he hasn't gotten to any of- no, Keith don't you dare-"

The crash is much louder this time.

"Shiro, you gotta do something!" Pidge yowls. Lance winces and presses a palm to the side of his helmet at the volume.

Shiro says something, but he still doesn't have his comm on, and all Lance can hear is muffled yelling.

"Well of course not, that's part of the effect. Did you even read the data packet on the Love Bug I sent everyone, or did you just ask Allura to explain everything-"

Lance snickers. He'd totally just asked Allura.

"Ugh, look, he's not gonna calm down until Lance is back. The venom turns being near the fixate into a biological imperative, it is literally impossible for him to-" Another crash. "Oh for the love of- Just knock him out or something!"

There's a disapproving squawk from Shiro.

"Why not? He's gonna hurt himself at this rate. Look, just- Do you know how to do a sleeper hold?"

"Woah, woah, Pidge!" Lance cuts in. "Don't hurt him!"

"He almost broke my monitoring station, Lance. You wanna be flying blind down there?"

"No..." Lance sighs. "But knocking him over the head doesn't sound like a good option either."

"I'm gonna go with Lance on this." Hunk pipes up.

Pidge sighs. "Well unless any of you have a better idea-

"Actually!" Coran, true to form, is loud and clear despite his lack of headset. "I have just the thing. Now, try and hold him still, Shiro my boy."

"What are you going to..."

There is a final yell from Keith, a sound like a table being kicked over, and a triumphant shout.

"Got him!" Coran crows. "Right, I'll just take him to have a bit of a lie-down until he wakes up, shall I?"

"Did you just- Oh man that is so cool." Hunk gushes. "Lance, you should've seen, Coran just Vulcan nerve pinched Keith!"

"I did what? No no, it's an old Altean trick. Interrupts the flow of quintessence from the heart to the brain, knocks you right out."

There's some more explanation, but Lance suddenly has better things to do because the ocean floor has finally come in to view, rocketing up at him way faster than he'd expected. He yanks the throttle back and activates Blue's thrusters just in time to save them from a very messy splat, but the thud of impact as they hit bottom is still hard enough to rattle his teeth.
"Lance?" Hunks asks. "You good? Didn't find another man-eating sea monster did you?"

"No, it's cool. I'm good. I just hit bottom. Where to now?"

"You can start right where you are, actually. Here, let me just..." There is a pause as Pidge does whatever it is nerds do to provide tech support, and then a line of blinking arrows appear on his screen, over the top of a wireframe map of Alceoneum's sea floor. "There we go. You got it?"

Lance squints at the arrows. "Are these where I'm blasting?"

"Yup. Shouldn't need to cut all the way through. Just get down maybe fifty meters and then move on to the next one."

"Piiiiidge." He whines. "There's like fifty of these!"

"Yup." She pops the 'p'. "Better get going."

"Heroism isn't supposed to be tedious." He grumbles, but he pulls Blue up to hover a safe distance from the seabed and starts blasting. "How come when Keith saves the day he gets to do exciting things like explode ships and storm castles, but when I do it I just get to poke holes in rock for an hour? It's not fair."

There's a small click, and then Shiro's voice filters through the comm.

"Well, when you get back, you can take it up with him."

"Oh, hey Shiro. Is Keith ok?"

"He's fine." Shiro actually lets a little exasperation leak into his sigh. "Both he and his right hook are very much intact, thank you for asking."

"Aw, Shiro." Pidge coos. "Don't be like that, it's not Lance's fault his priorities are skewed."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Lance squawks.

"Oh please, we've all noticed that you haven't exactly been upset about Keith hanging all over you, eh lover boy?"

The throttle jerks in Lance's hand, and Blue rolls awkwardly mid-slice, turning the neat cut they'd been making into a jagged wound in the sea floor. She sends him a wave of irritation, and Lance closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, letting Blue take over piloting herself to the next marker.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He says evenly.

"Oh come on, I was there in the Lion on the way down here. He did not need to be in your lap for the whole flight."

Shiro coughs. "He was what?"

Lance bites back a curse.

"You want to talk about this now, Pidge? Really?"

He hears her scoff, a harsh burst of static in his ear, then winces when it turns into a coughing fit. Her lungs still don't sound so good. She recovers quickly, though, and barrels onward.
"Well, my favorite audience is a captive one." She jokes.

"Well, shame that yours is wasted, since there's nothing to discuss. I've just been... y'know. You saw the puppy dog eyes okay, I'm just trying to avoid that until he's back to his normal cranky self and I can give him endless amounts of flak for this whole-" The seabed quakes again as they begin the next cut, and Lance cuts off the laser until the shaking stops. "For this whole mess." He finishes.

Hunk sighs.

"Really, dude? That's the best you can come up with?"

"Hunk." Lance says warningly.

"Look, I kind of already told them."

"Hunk!"

"I'm sorry! But they put it together for themselves! You let him mack on you in the middle of the training deck, man, it wasn't subtle."

"I did not let him- Ugh!" He leans on the laser button extra hard, knowing it won't do any good. He's surprised when the laser intensifies anyway, roiling the water with a satisfying glow. Blue sends him a wave of soothing sympathy.

"Lance, keeping this hidden isn't doing you any good." Lance groans at Shiro's fatherly tone. "You're just upsetting yourself with the way you've been dealing with it. It isn't fair to you and it isn't fair to Keith."

Lance snarls and launches Blue off of a nearby cliff face, shooting towards the next marker.

"Yeah, and how should I be dealing with it? The guy can't stand to be around me even when I haven't been taking advantage of him being mind-whammied for three days. What am I gonna do, wait for him to snap out of it, and then right before he beats me to a pulp tell him, "Hey, hi, by the way, I know we hate each other and I've deliberately spent the last year being an utter dick to you, but I've kind of wanted to jump your bones since we were in first year at the garrison, so if you wouldn't mind not murdering me I'd like to take you on a space-date!""

The comm is silent for a moment after, save for Pidge's muffled laughter.

"... Alright, maybe don't say that." Shiro's tone is dry enough Lance half expects the ocean around him to metamorphose into desert.

Pidge laughs harder. "Since first year!?!"

Lance growls. "Yeah, yeah, yuk it up. My life is a teenage dramedy sitcom."

"I mean we knew that already, but- but first year?!"

Lance rolls his eyes and fires again. "Oh come on, if Hunk already told you couldn't you have finished laughing at me when I wasn't around to hear it?"

"He didn't tell us it had been that long!"

Lance swears, loudly, creatively, and in spanish, summarily ignoring Shiro's admonishment of "Language!"
"I tried to keep the detail to a minimum!" Hunk says. "I was trying to spare your dignity!"

"Lance doesn't have any dignity, Hunk." Pidge snorts. "You're fighting for a lost cause."

"Alright, that's enough." Shiro breaks in. Pidge takes a moment to quiet her giggles, despite them being interspersed with small coughs. Lance can practically see Shiro's put-upon expression as he continues.

"What I meant, Lance, was that you should try talking to him about it." He pauses. "After he's calmed down."

Lance lets Blue settle to the seabed for a minute, grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"Shiro, you and I both know how that conversation will go. He hates me. I kind of did everything I could to make sure of that."

"Lance... just... just give it a try, alright? I think you'd be surprised. I've been talking to Allura-"

"I knew it!" Pidge accuses. "I knew you didn't read the file!"

"I've been talking to Allura," Shiro goes on resolutely, "and apparently Keith hasn't been acting like a typical Love Bug victim."

Blue takes off again. They're about a third of the way through the trail of glowing dots lining their route. Lance sighs and puts his hands back on the controls.

"Yeah, I figured."

"You... did?" Shiro's confusion leaks over the headset.

"Well, yeah. He's been fighting the thing pretty hard now and then. I'm sure he'll be real proud of that when he snaps out of it." Lance rolls his eyes.

"Wait, when has he been fighting it? Any specific interactions that trigger it?" Pidge again, with full on "let me dissect your brain" science-voice.

He shrugs, then remembers a second later that they can't see it. "Like, when I said something he didn't agree with, or earlier today when I yelled at him for trying to pull the whole "jealous caveman boyfriend" routine. His ability to argue with me has definitely not gone away this week, let me tell you. The weirdo even told me he enjoys it."

It takes Lance a moment to register that the muffled laughter is Shiro this time. He rolls his eyes again. He's gonna pull a retina at this rate. "Oh, come on, Shiro, not you too."

"It's not-" Shiro huffs a few more times before clearing his throat and getting himself under control. "I'm not laughing at you, Lance, I promise. It's just- Allura was right."

"About what, exactly?"

"Lance!" Hunk breaks in sharply. "I'm starting to see stress fissures forming along your route."

Lance's eyes snap to the thermal display Hunk sends to his monitor. There aren't too many in front of him, yet, but...

"Gonna get toasty in here, I'll bet."
"Yeah. Be careful, okay? We've got everyone here braced for another sea quake when the plate collapses, but you're gonna be right there. When it goes, don't bother trying to swim away back to the capitol, just focus on getting to the surface and in the air as fast as you can." Hunk's tone is a little more worried than Lance is happy with.

"Roger that. And hey, relax. I've got no plans to be barbecued today. It'll be fine, Blue and I've got this."

"Yeah, I know, I just..."

"Yeah, yeah. But quit it. You've got better things to do than fuss over me. Like helping pack up the colony, or planning my "congratulations on saving a whole planet" cake."

Hunk chuckles. "I'll make you something real special, I promise. Ooh, maybe that cinnamon cake I made last Christmas, back at the Garrison? You stole the whole thing remember?"

Lance drools. "Oh man, how could I forget. Wait, is there cinnamon in space?"

"Well, no, but I did pick up something really similar last time we went to T’thiok. Y'know, that planet with the bug-bird people? And I think it'll taste pretty much the same."

Halfway along the route now. The next time Lance lands to start cutting, he finds a giant crack in the ground already there, still pouring sand into the depth. He swallows.

"I um, I think we can skip this one, Pidge."

More and more fissures appear as he inches along the path, and the ground starts to shake every time he finishes blasting.

"Be on your guard, Lance." It's Shiro who warns him this time. "When the plate drops, you're going to need to-"

"Yeah, yeah, head for the surface as quick as I can, I know." He groans. "I can do this, relax."

"I know you can. You're the only man for the job." Lance is going to pretend to himself that Shiro's faith in him isn't as soothing as it is. "But I'm still going to make sure you're as prepared as possible."

Aaaand it's his "dad voice" again. Soothing-ness gone. He sighs, checking the ticker embedded in the dashboard. He's been down here for nearly two vargas.

"Hey, has Keith woken up yet?"

Pidge groans.

"Oh my god, how."

"What?!" He squashes down the defensiveness in his tone as best he can. "I was just checking!"

"How." There is a soft thud, and Pidge's next words are muffled. Did she just... hit her head on the console? "How did I miss how totally gone on him you are?"

"He's actually done a pretty good job of hiding it." Hunk says cheerfully. "You should've heard him for the first year back on earth. Keith this, Keith that. Keith broke the sim record again, Hunk, Keith's hair is so stupid, Hunk, Keith got expelled, Hunk, what am I gonna do now without that ass to stare at in gym class."
Pidge and Shiro roar with laughter. Lance's face is burning so hot he's surprised it isn't lighting up the cockpit.

"Look, I'm sorry man but I've had to listen to it for years, and now I've finally got people to commiserate with."

"I can't believe you. My own best friend, a traitor."

"You know what, at this point I'll take that distinction with pride. It's about time you just got it out into the open."

Lance's mood takes an abrupt downshift, the ache that's been present in his chest for the last three days suddenly reminding him of it's presence. He barely remembers to pull back as the latest laser cut causes a rockslide.

"Yeah. At least I get a few days of not having to keep my mouth shut."

The others go quiet. It occurs to him that that was maybe a little more maudlin than he was going for.

"Sorry guys, didn't mean to bring the mood down."

Shiro starts to say something, but stops after the first syllable. Lance shakes his head at the darkness.

"Look, it's fine. Maybe he won't be that mad, maybe he will, it doesn't matter either way. Just, do me a favor? Don't say anything. It's not gonna change the way he feels. I mean, hey, it's my fault he feels that way. Lance McClain, master manipulator. And..."

He tightens his grip on the throttles. Does he even have a right to ask this? "Okay, I know it's really selfish. Like, damn, the audacity and all that. But maybe just let me have the next day or two, until it wears off? Like, not in a creepy way, okay. It's just... It's nice to have him care."

"Lance..." Shiro says, and Lance seriously hates the way he says it, like he's some pathetic bleeding heart that doesn't know what he's talking about. "He will still care, Lance. Even after."

"Yeah." Lance sighs. "I know. But it's not the same thing, and you know it."

None of them speak until he's on the final leg of his route. The fissures are everywhere now, and he isn't bothering to cut neatly anymore. He directs Blue in a strafing run, flying low over the seabed and dragging the laser down the whole way. The water around them is constantly trembling, and a dim glow is beginning to permeate the water from the widening thermal vents that split open beneath Blue's belly.

"Come on." He growls. "Just break already!"

When it goes, it's all at once.

The ground beneath is feet is there one minute, and the next the world is a yawning chasm of crumbling rock and churning water. He shrieks as Blue goes tumbling, and he can hear the others screaming over the headset, the sea quake must be hitting the city too, but he doesn't have time to worry about that because the water around him is suddenly boiling, and the water pressure is shifting too fast for Blue to get her thrusters underneath her.

The cockpit heats up as they go spiraling into the glow of the trench, heats up a lot, way too hot, and
he knows heat okay, he's from Cuba, he's suffered through days where it was a hundred and fifteen degrees in the shade and humid to boot, and that was *nothing* compared to this, he's pretty sure his actual blood is boiling-

He pulls back on the thrusters, smashes the boost button on the console in front of him, hears Blue roar into the abyss-

And suddenly they are rising, fast, way too fast, the pressure in his ears hurts like hell, but the relief as they hit cooler water is instant. A button blinks insistently in the corner of his eye, Blue telling him to do something, and he doesn't even question it, just slams his palm down on the light.

There is a hiss, all around him, and bubbles roil all around his field of view as cold air floods the cockpit-

He hears himself moan in relief; he thought he was actually gonna cook for a second there, but the pressure in his head is still building, so, still not great. But better! Enough that he can register the sudden brightness all around him, bright, brighter, way too bright, wow, the glare is actually searing his eyes now, ouch-

And Blue bursts free of the surface.

They... Wow. They actually made it.

Lance sags pathetically in his chair, letting Blue turn a few lazy loops in the air to burn off the inertia from their climb. He yawns as wide as he can, cracking his jaw, and hisses in satisfaction when his ears finally pop.

"Holy quiznak." He groans.

It's silent for a minute, and he should be worried about that but he's still trying to blink the spots out of his eyes, but eventually the comm crackles to life.

"Lance?"

He closes his eyes.

"That's the name, don't wear it out."

He has to pull his helmet off to avoid being deafened by the cheer that comes rebounding through the headset.

>~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~<

"Lance!"

Lance's legs are still a little wobbly when he stumbles out of Blue's mouth, enough so that when he hears the shout, he doesn't bother to keep walking and meet the speaker halfway. He just stands still and opens his arms to catch the bundle of white and red that bounds up the gangplank and throws itself at him.

"You did it!"
He laughs as Keith bowls him over, wraps his arms around his waist and lets gravity carry them both to the ground. They slide a little ways down the gangplank as his back hits the smooth metal plating, but it doesn't stop Keith straddling him and sealing their mouths together in a bruising kiss.

It's a long minute before Keith lets him come up for air.

"Don't you ever, ever do that to me again!" He growls, fistling a hand in the hair at the back of Lance's head, just tight enough to hurt.

"Aw, babe, were you worried?" Lance grins.

Keith gives him little shake. "I mean it."

"Ow, geez, is this any way to treat a hero?" Lance complains. Keith shakes him again. "Okay, okay! Next time I'll take you with, deal?"

Keith's face splits into a grin, smugness and pride and relief all rolled into one. He's so beautiful he almost hurts to look at.

"You had better." He murmurs, and reels Lance back in for another kiss.
Space Fluids

Chapter Summary

Alright, my beautiful, merciless children. I have to take a break from the Langst okay, my soul was withering away in sympathy. BUT, instead of crippling depression, you get another long chapter, and this time it is ENTIRELY FLUFF, and ENTIRELY KEITH. That's right, you heard it right here folks. Fluffy Keith. Fleeth, if you will. (you probably won't.)

That said.... Enjoy it while it's here, ok? Cause, um. *cough* This chapter is fluffy, but is gonna be the last of the fluff for awhile. It's endgame, people, it's SHOWTIME.

Chapter Notes

ALSO: Note the shiny new chapter counter up there. It's still tentative ok, I suck at sticking to an outline, but it shouldn't be more than a chapter or two longer or shorter than that.
ALSO ALSO: I've made this a series, if y'all wanna go ahead and follow/bookmark that. No pressure, just, I've decided that I'm having way too much fun writing these adorable shmucks that I just can't stop? And dude, who decided that fics always need to cut off right after they get together? I want to enjoy the fruits of my labor in getting these dum-dums to pull their heads out of their asses. So, yeah. Space adventures probably? Yeah. Gonna write some established relationship space adventures.

Keith feels... Strange, when he wakes up. Not bad, necessarily, just off in some undefinable way. Like his head is stuffed with cotton fluff, thick and heavy and making it hard to think.

He cracks his eyes open and levered himself up, one hand braced on Lance's chest, the other tangled in the sheets beneath him. Is he sick? Or is it a side-effect of Coran knocking him out yesterday? He's still upset about that - they'd sent Lance off into danger without a second thought, like they had no other choice, like the danger to one of their own didn't matter. Keith had been the only one to have a sane reaction to that madness, and they'd responded by knocking him out.

And now his head feels weird. Great. They're just lucky Lance had come home safe, or he would have torn the entire place down around their ears. Not like it isn't coming down anyway.

Beneath his hand, Lance stirs, and Keith's eyes automatically jump to trace his face. Something warm unfurls in his chest at the sight, at the way Lance's eyelashes flutter, and the way a small wrinkle appears between his eyebrows as he scrunches his face up.

Keith reaches out unthinkingly, tracing over the line and down the bridge of Lance's nose, smoothing it out. His eyes flutter open, and Keith abruptly remembers what happened a few days ago. He leans back a little.

"Good morning." He grins. "Please don't tackle me."
Lance huffs sleepily and reaches up to scrub at the corner of his eye. "S'your own fault."

Keith laughs softly. "It's my fault that your first instinct was to maul me?"

"I didn't maul you!" Lance complains, getting an elbow underneath himself and hitching himself up. "I- Oh, ow. Ouch."

A flash of pain crosses his face, and Keith sucks in a breath.

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt yesterday? I thought I checked- dammit, let me see."

"I'm fine- no, stop that. Hey, quit!" Lance bats away Keith's searching hands, capturing them in his own and clasping them together between them. "I'm just really sore, it's fine. Hey, maybe if somebody hadn't decided to body slam me instead of saying "hi" like a civilized human being..." He trails off, waggling his eyebrows meaningfully.

Keith seriously doubts that a hug had done Lance more damage than the multiple earthquakes and fall into a tectonic trench, (seriously, what had Pidge and Shiro been thinking?) but he feels a bit of contrition twinge in his stomach anyway. He rolls his eyes and brings Lance's hand up to his mouth, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

"I am very sorry that your fragile, delicate form was damaged by my affection. However will I make it up to you?"

Well, Keith didn't know Lance could even turn that shade of red. He snickers as Lance sputters and yanks his hand back. He starts at least three sentences and discards them all, finally settling on an accusing finger pointed at Keith's face, and:

"You!"

"Me." Keith agrees, raising an eyebrow.

"You- Ugh." He crosses his arms and turns away. He's precious.

"Aw." Keith coos. "You're adorable when you pout."

"I am not pouting! Or cute!"

"Oh, I'm very sorry, you are ruggedly handsome when you pout."

Lance's answering sputter has Keith laughing so hard he almost falls off the bed, and Lance has to catch him. Keith takes advantage of the moment, both of them dangling half off the bed, to sling an arm around Lance's neck and kiss him.

The weird, stifling feeling in his brain is completely forgotten.

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The immediate danger to the colony has passed, but there's no telling when the tectonic plate Lance had cut down will shift again, and the Alceoneans are scrambling to get their colony together as quickly as possible. Allura and Shiro have agreed to allow them use of the castle, as extra cargo and personal transport, for the time being. This means that all of them are being enlisted in helping the
Pterophyllae with anything they need to get their cities squared away as quickly as possible.

Pidge immediately volunteers to help with data collection, consolidation, and storage. She looks like she's practically drooling at the thought of getting her hands on the combined data of an entire civilization.

Hunk takes cargo bay duty, getting everything packed away as neatly and safely as possible for transit.

Coran assigns himself to the decontamination chamber, declaring that none of those "nasty little sea-germs" will make it past his watchful eye.

Shiro and Allura, of course, will be helping with logistics, and handling any SNAFUs with personnel or the Alceonian government.

Keith learns all this over breakfast, while only half paying attention. He's much more interested in the weird little coral fruits that the Pterophyllae had given them, which look a little bit like swirly orange grapes. He doesn't know what they're called, but it doesn't matter, because Lance seems to love them.

More importantly, Lance grumbles and flails at Keith when he tries to steal them off his plate, which is very, very funny, and very, very cute.

"Keith!" He hisses, slamming his arm down between them like a barricade when Keith makes another grab at them.

"What?" Keith uses his most innocent tone, his eyes as wide as possible, then makes another attempt to snake a hand past Lance's defenses. He gets swatted with the back of a spoon for his troubles. "I'm not doing anything."

"Yes you- you are stealing my food, you little thief."

Keith spreads his empty hands out. "Stealing? Nope, haven't got anything, see?"

"That's right, you don't!" Lance crows, lifting the plate out of Keith's reach. "Because your wussy sneaking attempts are no match for my incredible defense."

Keith darts a hand out, whip quick, and just manages to snag two of the little fruits as they roll off the edge of the plate. He pops one into his mouth and grins, the fruit tucked safely in his cheek. Lance slams the plate down, heedless of the rest of his breakfast rolling over the edge.

"Oh you son of a- Mmph!"

Keith pops the second fruit into his open mouth, feeling his thumb brush against Lance's bottom lip. Lance chews and swallows automatically, then glares at him.

"I can't believe you. Who even are you." He complains.

Keith swallows his own bite of fruit, then leans up to press a quick kiss to the corner of Lance's mouth.

"You're right." He says, nonchalant. "These are really good."

Keith looks up as Shiro clears his throat. His gaze sweeps from Lance to Keith and back again, and he pinches the bridge of his nose.
"Lance, Keith, if you're finished?"

Lance coughs and sits up straighter in his chair. "Finished with what, we weren't doing anything." He says too quickly. Keith snickers, and returns the dirty look Lance shoots him with a bright smile. Shiro sighs.

"Right, as I was saying. I don't think we need either of you in charge of a task. Why don't you just wander around and see what needs to be done, help the Pterophyllae out where you can. And please for all our sakes, try not to cause another incident like yesterday." He looks at Keith meaningfully, and he's confused for a moment before he notices the light bruise across Shiro's jawline. Oh right, the Alceonean engineer he'd accidentally knocked over with a chair he'd been trying to throw at Shiro. He clears his throat.

"Yeah, I'll- I won't do that again."

"Hey, you guys need any help over here?"

"Oh, Paladin Lance!" The Pterophyl perks up, leaning against a nearby cargo crate. "Yes, actually, your timing is excellent. All of these need to be taken up to your castle, but I don't know where they-" He suddenly seems to notice Keith, standing behind Lance uncertainly. His head fans ripple unhappily. "Oh, P-Paladin Keith, I didn't see you there. You know, on second thought I don't need to bother you with this, I'll just ask, um- over there, yes."

He sidles around the crate and vanishes. Lance sighs and side-eyes Keith.

"I think you've done it Keith." He says conversationally, reaching absently for Keith's hand as they turn and meander back up into the castle from the hangar they're docked in. "I think you've managed to make an entire planets worth of people terrified of you."

"I have not." Keith scoffs. Their clasped hands swing between them, and Keith uses them to gently tug Lance out of the way of an anti-grav transport a Pterophyl is pushing into the castle. Lance hmms in thanks. "I haven't even done anything to them!"

Lance snorts and holds up his free hand, lifting one finger. "Uh, well you insulted one of their highest ranking council members cause you thought she was hitting on me." He lifts a second finger. "And then you spent the entire party yesterday snarling at anyone who came near." A third finger. "You demolished one of their central communication hubs during an epic temper tantrum." A fourth. "And you threw a chair at one of their lead scientists."

Keith tries to glower at the hand being waved in his face, but the laughter in Lance's eyes is just too contagious. When did he become such a complete pushover for this man?

"Alright, alright." He snorts, grabbing at the hand and lacing their fingers together. They come to a stop near one of the loading bays. "Maybe they have a right to be mad."

Lance blows out a breath, ruffling his bangs. Keith reaches out to fix them, and he bats his hand away.

"Quit that, it's fine. For real though, I don't think any of them are gonna let us help. You're like,
public menace number one now."
"Well, what do we do now then?"

Hunk looks relieved to see them.
"Oh thank god you guys, you're lifesavers, seriously. These guys don't seem to understand the concept of "traveling light", if you know what I mean."

Keith wheezes as he and Lance are picked up in a crushing hug and lifted off the ground, and feels a brief twinge of annoyance that Hunk hadn't even asked before touching Lance-

No. No.

Lance made it very clear how he feels about Keith thinking like that. It's Hunk for pity's sake, he hugs everyone. Something must show on his face though, because Lance shoots him a look as Hunk sets them down.

Keith shrugs apologetically, then sidles around and wraps his arms around Lance's back from behind so he doesn't have to see Lance's disappointed face. He feels Lance's shoulders rise and fall in a silent sigh. The shame is already bubbling up in his chest when Lance reaches up and folds his arms across his stomach, right over Keith's. He feels him squeeze gently.

The knot in his chest loosens instantly - Lance isn't mad.

He takes a deep breath in and out to dispel the last of the tension, then rests his chin on Lance's shoulder. Hunk doesn't seem to have noticed any of their little exchange, he's already launched into an explanation of the Alceonean's terrible organization skills, gesturing wildly at the infinite labyrinth of cargo boxes piled around them. Keith toys with the hem of Lance's jacket and tries to listen while Hunk explains what he needs from them.

Something about checking the display on every crate, logging it at the terminal Hunk keeps waving to, and then stacking it neatly on top of the others using the space equivalent of a forklift. Space-forklift. Keith giggles. He's clearly spending too much time with Lance if he's starting to put "space" in front of every word.

Lance turns his head and peers down at Keith as best he can out of the corner of his eye.

"What's so funny?" He whispers.

"Space-forklift."

Lance snorts, and dissolves into quiet laughter; he has to take his hand off of Keith's to muffle it in his sleeve. It just makes Keith laugh harder.

Hunk turns back to them, blinking confusedly.

"What's so funny? What'd I miss?"

"Space-forklift!" Lance gasps, and Keith has to hide his face in the crook of Lance's neck in an
attempt to quiet himself.

"I- yeah, I guess it is? I mean, it's not a perfect comparison but, yeah. Basically a space forklift."
Keith shifts so that he can look at Hunk with one eye. He's scratching the back of his neck, confused.
"Why is a space forklift funny?"

"Because Keith said it!" Lance cackles. He wipes a bit of moisture from the corner of his eye. "He always gives me shit for calling space stuff "space-stuff", and now I've got him doing it! This is a victory against Lord Buzzkill himself!"

Hunk snorts. "Come on Lance, he's not a toy. You've got to put him back the way you found him."

"I'm not - if anything he'll be thanking me for expanding his vocabulary and bringing joy to his life. A space-forklift is obviously superior to a regular forklift, come on!"

"Laaaaaance." Hunk warns.
Keith lets go of Lance and looks back and forth between them. "I'm confused."

Lance looks back at him. "Don't worry about it, dude." He chuckles. "You'll get it in a few days."

Keith furrows his brow. He doesn't like being brushed off like that. Actually, this has been happening a lot lately, now that he thinks about it.

"You keep saying that. "Wait a few days", "wait until next week". You keep talking like you know something I don't." Why does everyone keep talking like Keith isn't in the room? Like he's a child who's listening in while the adults are talking. Now that he thinks about it, Allura and Shiro have barely spoken to him the last couple days, and Shiro had given him his orders this morning like he couldn't be trusted with a larger task than just wandering around.

The heavy cotton feeling around his brain has suddenly returned with a vengeance, but it almost- it sort of hurts now. A lot. He presses a hand to the side of his head with a hiss. What is that? There's something nudging at the back of his mind, something wrong, he just can't figure out what-

"Woah, woah, easy." There is a gentle hand around his wrist, pulling it away from his face, and he jumps. His vision seems blurry, and he realizes that he's tearing up a bit from the pain. He peers blearily up at Lance.

"My head hurts."

Somewhere to the side of them, Hunk sucks in a breath. Lance sends him a vicious glare. Why...?"

"You're good, come here." Keith lets Lance lead him over to a small crate and settle him down on it. The fluffy feeling in his brain doesn't recede, it only grows stronger as he lets Lance wrap his arms around him. "Breathe. This happened yesterday too, remember?"

Did it? Keith can't recall, it's so hard to think through the fuzz...

Lance has gotten a bottle of water from somewhere, one of the crates maybe, and he passes it over, keeping his free hand around Keith's shoulder the whole time. Keith takes a shaky sip. The cool water is nice. Lance is so nice, taking care of him like this. Lance...

He looks at Lance, who sends him a reassuring smile.

"Better?"
Keith blinks. It- actually is. The pressure on his mind has vanished completely.

"I- yeah. Yeah I'm good now," Lance smiles again, and it does weird mushy things to Keith's heart. Lance is so good to him. He wipes the damp away from his eyes. He feels totally fine now. Maybe he needs to go to the med bay, do a scan...

Lance doesn't seem concerned though. He gets to his feet and holds out a hand for Keith, who takes it automatically and lets himself be pulled to his feet. Well, if Lance isn't worried it can't be that bad.

"Is he... Okay?" Hunk asks. Keith looks over at him.

"I feel fine now. I don't know what that was."

Hunk narrows his eyes at Lance.

"You said this happened yesterday too?"

Lance coughs. "Yeah. I told you about it, remember?"

Hunk's expression clears. "Oh. Oh. Okay." He clears his throat and smiles at Keith. "Well, I'm just glad you're fine now. You still good to help out?"

Keith nods.

He notices Hunk sending him one last concerned look, but dismisses it as he and Lance wander over to the edge of the crate-maze and begin their task. Hunk worries about everyone too much, it's what Hunk does.

Keith can totally see why he was worrying about getting all the cargo counting done though. There are already well over a thousand containers in the bay, ranging from crates the size of moving boxes to massive shipping containers twenty feet long, and more are arriving every minute as the Pterophyllae come and go with anti-grav transports loaded so heavily they almost scrape the ground.

He tries to keep his mind on the task at hand, dutifully standing by the console and logging the serial numbers and content descriptions that Lance calls out to him. Eventually, they run out of containers visible from the console, and Lance disappears behind one of the large shipping containers.

"Serial 115-7, MRE's." He calls. His voice echoes oddly in the enormous bay, so that Keith can't actually pinpoint where he is. That's... Keith doesn't like that.

He abandons the console and slinks across the empty space between it and the crates. Hunk doesn't look up from his data pad, too busy accepting another delivery.

"Serial 237-5, pre-fab housing." Keith follows Lance's voice through the stacks of boxes, until he spots him through a gap in the crates. He's leaning over a stack of smaller ones, totally focused on the small lettering scrolling past on the label display. He's barely a few inches away, easily reachable through the space Keith is looking through.

"Serial, um... 178-3, medical supplies. Well, that's kind of vague..." Lance calls out the number, then trails off, muttering to himself.

Keith feels an evil grin stretch over his face. Well, Lance has certainly shown that he finds pestering people funny.

He reaches through the gap and prods Lance in the side, just hard enough to make him jump, then
withdraws as quickly as he can. He hears Lance's sneakers squeak against the floor as he whips around.

"What the- Keith?"

Keith stays silent, and begins sneaking around the stack of boxes he's hiding behind, rounding a corner.

"Seriously, was that you, or are we transporting ghosts in one of these? Because we've already been through that whole spiel, and I'm so not doing that again."

He takes a corner, craning his neck around it to see Lance peering through the hole he'd just been hiding behind. He smothers his laughter in the palm of his glove, then carefully tiptoes up behind Lance, just as he's straightening up and shaking his head in disgust.

"Great, totally ghosts. I hate ghos- Eek!" Keith sneaks up and jabs his fingers into Lance's sides, then ducks the reflexive swing Lance takes at him as he jumps a foot in the air and shrieks.

"Oh you dirty rotten son of a bitch!" He swears. "Get over here you-"

Keith ducks away, cackling, and retreats. He runs back around the alley he's just come from, and ducks into another narrow space between the boxes. He hears Lance round the corner and run past him.

"Oh there is no way you just gave the Lanceinator the slip, boy. I will find you. I will hunt you down. There is no earthly pow- uh, spacially power that can save you from me!" Keith shakes his head, still keeping a hand over his laughing mouth, and creeps around again, using Lance's ranting to orient himself.

Another gap a few feet wide, right next to a fork in the path that Lance is peering suspiciously down. Perfect.

"I mean it, you had best get back here before you make life harder on yourself. It's not gone be pretty when I- Aiyeel!" Lance gives another satisfying shriek, reaching out to grab at Keith as he dances away. He misses.

Unfortunately, Keith is laughing too hard too see properly with his eyes all scrunched up, and he misses a smallish storage pod leaning against one of the biggest shipping boxes. He catches his foot on it and trips. It takes him just long enough for him to get his feet back under him for Lance to snatch the back of his jacket and yank him off balance again. They go stumbling against the side of the large box, feet tangled together, both of them laughing too hard to keep themselves properly upright.

"You tripped!" Lance crows, grasping at Keith's shoulders and howling with laughter. "I can't believe the great Keith just tripped over his own feet like a little kid!"

"I did not! It was that box! That one right there!" Keith points accusingly at the offending box, now sitting forlornly in the middle of the alley.

"Uh-huh, a likely story. Just admit it, Keith, I won't judge you." Lance smirks. He's still shaking with laughter, cheeks dusted with red from his breathlessness. His hair is a mess, sticking out wildly around his head, and he'd be mortified if he knew - he's always so fussy about his appearance - but Keith loves it. He looks wild. He looks happy.

Keith really can't do anything but kiss him.
Lance's eyes go round for a moment before they close, but he lets Keith turn him and press him against the side of the crate, lets him slide a hand under his jacket to the small of his back and press them closer together.

It's a bit messy; they're both still giggling a little bit and it's hard to kiss right around the smiling, but Keith wouldn't have it any other way. Lance makes a small noise in the back of his throat as Keith gets a hand into his hair, then laughs again - Keith can feel the small puff of air against his lips. He thinks his chest might explode. Has he ever been this happy?

Keith finally manages to get himself under control a little bit, enough to get the worst of the grin off his face and kiss properly, and Lance seems to have finally gotten there too, though his chest and shoulders shake a little bit every few seconds, Keith can feel it beneath his fingers. It's still a little bit sloppy, and it occurs to Keith that neither of them have really had much practice, but they can fix that. Keith is more than willing to fix that, and they have all the time in the world.

"Hey guys, have you seen any of the crates labeled- Oh come on, seriously?!

Well, all the time in the world later. Not so much right now.

Lance jumps back, banging his head on the metal siding of the shipping box with a wince and a burst of angry Spanish.

"I wasn't- we weren't-"

"Yeah we were." Keith snickers, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. They most definitely were. Hunk looks nauseous.

"Okay, I really, really cannot have you doing that in here. There is way too much to get done, and I don't want to have to explain to the Council why there's mysterious bodily fluids all over the supplies they trusted me with."

Lance yelps. "There are no bodily fluids! No fluids of any kind! Geez Hunk, what do you take me for?"

Hunk raises a stern eyebrow. "Spit is a fluid, bro."

"I..." Lance slumps against the crate, still rubbing the sore spot on the back of his head. "Okay, how about we just, um. Go find something else to do?"
Well, I guess it's a good thing the stupid chapter counter isn't working, because chapter twelve got so out of hand I had to split it. Might have to split it again, actually. Who knows at this point, the damn thing has a life of its own now. Who needs appropriate blocking and concise chapters with cut offs that make sense, amirite? Not this girl.

For real though, this was the longest I've gone without updating, and I didn't want you to have to wait any longer. So, here we are. Next one will be up in a few days, gods willing.

So, you guys get off easy with one more chapter before the pain starts. Little bit of Langst, little bit of fluff and fun. You kids have fun now, and try not to trip over the tattered remains of my poor narrative flow on your way in.

That had been a screw-up of epic proportions.

Lance knows this, and worse, Hunk knows this. The disappointed look he had given Lance on the way out had made that very clear. He squeezes his eyes shut, feeling the self disgust bubbling in his stomach like acid.

What the hell does he think he's doing, kissing Keith like, like that? The fact that Keith had started it doesn't matter, it had gone too far. Way, way too far. Enjoying Keith being nice to him was one thing, not stopping him from shoving his tongue down Lance's throat was another thing entirely. Chaste little good morning kisses could be explained away. Making out against a supply crate for five minutes? That absolutely could not.

Even if Keith had been-

Well. Who knew Keith could be fun? Keith is like, the anti-fun, most of the time. Lance can count on one hand the number of times that he's seen the guy just cut loose and play around. It's amazing when it happens though.

Something squeezes in his chest as he remembers those times. Like with the squishy asteroids, how Keith had laughed so hard he'd sent himself spinning through the vacuum and Shiro had had to grab him by the ankle to keep him from careening off and crashing into the ship.

He feels Keith tug on his hand.

"Lance? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm-" He begins, the automatic urge to deny kicking in before he really thinks about it. But then he stops himself. He's never gonna be able to live with himself if he doesn't do something to make Keith back off a little bit. He can't just keep letting him... Yeah.

"Actually no. I'm not."

He sighs and pulls on Keith's hand, tugging him to a stop in the middle of the hallway.
"Look, we need to not do the kissing thing."

Keith blinks at him. "What?"

"No more kissing, you heard me. That is not a thing I'm down with anymore. No more smooches. None of that. Strictly safe for work." Lance puts more conviction into his tone this time.

"But... Why? Did I do something wrong?" Of course Keith looks crushed. Lance had expected that, and he heads off the puppy dog eyes before they can gain steam.

"No, no, you didn't. It's just, um. It's a little much, a little fast, y'know?"

Keith very obviously doesn't know. He's looking at Lance like he's grown a second head.

Lance clears his throat and tries again. "Okay, how about this? I'll make you a deal. Three days. Okay?" At the rate the bite is wearing off, there's no way Keith won't be back to himself in three days. "And if you still want to kiss me then, you are totally welcome to do so."

"I don't- why three days?" Keith squints at him. "That makes no sense."

Think fast, McClain.

"Uuuuuh because in three days we should be done moving the Pterophyllae to their new colony, right? Things will have calmed down, we won't be freaking out Hunk and the others. I mean, you saw his face. I think we just need to relax a little, take things slow."

Keith still looks skeptical. "You were fine with it ten minutes ago."

Lance sighs. Well, let it be said, he'd tried fighting fair. His puppy dog eyes are nothing compared to the weaponized sadness-beam that Keith can produce, but he does his best.

"Okay, I know I was. But just, do this? For me? It would make me really happy." He pours all the angst into it that he can, thinks of sad kittens and of Hunk when the spice cabinet runs low and of the look Keith will give him when he wakes up and realizes what Lance has done.

Keith melts. Lance feels a little stab of pride at that; it looks like his puppy dog eyes aren't so bad after all.

"Alright," Keith concedes. "If that's what you want."

Lance breathes a sigh of relief and lets Keith go back to towing him towards the server room. His conscience isn't cleared by any means, but at least he can say he did some kind of damage control.

But Keith's steps are slower now. He'd been practically bouncing when they'd left the cargo bay, a self satisfied smile fixed firmly in place. Now his feet drag a bit, the line of his shoulders reads dejection. Lance sighs and tugs him to a stop again. Why does Bug-Keith have to make doing the right thing so hard?

"Hey, we're still good, right?" He asks. "You know I'm not upset with you. It's just a personal thing, not your fault."

Keith bites his lip and looks up at him through his eyelashes. He's not crying, and it's not the puppy dog eyes, but Lance still feels the sadness in them like a kick in the chest.

"Are you sure?" He says.
Lance uses their still-joined hands to pull him in closer.

"Come on, man, of course." He offers Keith a smile. "I don't think I'm actually capable of staying mad at you when you're like this."

Keith frowns.

"I don't want you to be uncomfortable. I thought you were happy."

Lance's stomach flips. His gaze flickers away, and he tugs Keith in for a tight hug, burying his face in that stupidly soft mullet so that he doesn't have to look him in the eyes.

"I am happy."

"Holy quiznak."

Lance gazes up at the massive crystalline columns that line the server room in neat rows, stretching off into the hazy distance that obscures the end of the room. There's thousands of them, each about two stories tall and thick enough around that Lance would have trouble getting his arms around them. It doesn't look like any kind of server room Lance has ever seen before.

Lance presses closer to Keith's side, away from the columns. He really doesn't want to know what would happen if he broke one.

Pidge pokes her head out from around one of the rows on the far right, squinting in the steady glow that the columns emit.

"Oh no." She narrows her eyes.

Her voice is still the smallest bit raspy, but she looks and sounds infinitely better than she did yesterday- Shiro had popped her into a healing pod the second they'd returned to the castle. She hadn't even protested. She seems to be back to her normal state of scarily intense über-nerd now though, thank everything.

He squashes down the image of her panicked face that keeps trying to embed itself behind his eyelids and offers her a cheerful wave.

"Um, hey Pidge. Nobody's got anything for us to do, so we thought we'd come see if you needed anything."

At his side, Keith lifts a hand in greeting.

Pidge's eyes flicker over her shoulder, then back at them. She seems to wage a short internal battle with herself, before her shoulders slump and she sags against one of the pillars.

"Okay, you guys can help. But don't. Touch. Anything. Do you hear me?" She jabs a finger at the air in their general direction. "Nothing. And no funny business. If you break even one of these mainframes hundreds of yottabytes of data get lost, understand?"

Lance raises a confused eyebrow and trades a glance with Keith. "How much is a yotta-whatsit?"
Keith looks just as lost. He shrugs.

"How much is- " Pidge lifts her glasses atop her head and scrubs at her eyes. "It's a lot. Like, entire civilizations worth of data, a lot. Which means don't break, don't touch, don't anything that I haven't told you to, or there won't be enough left of you for Hunk and Shiro to bother holding a funeral for. Got it?"

Lance swallows and nods hastily.

"Got it. Loud and clear. Best behavior."

Pidge levels one last withering look at them before turning back down the row. She gestures for them to follow.

"Right, then get your butts over here."

Lance would feel slightly ridiculous about making sure not even the hem of his jacket brushes against the crystal pillars, except Keith is doing the same thing.

Pidge leads them on a more or less straight path through the columns, her slight frame stark and easy to follow against the glow. Towards what feels like the general center of the room, the rows halt, opening into an empty square a few meters across, with a large console in the center. The console is round, with chairs arranged around it and sets of buttons and ports scattered across its flat ringed surface in what looks like separate workstations.

Pidge plants a hand in the small of Keiths back and shoves him towards it.

"Sit," She says.

Keith sits. Lance takes the seat next to him and peers dubiously down at the blinking buttons and lights. It looks straight out of Star Trek, and definitely not like something he should really be touching.

Pidge kicks a box over to them, letting it come to rest in the space between Lance and Keith's feet, then bends down and rummages through it, coming up with a handful of flat, blue... Things. That's the best Lance has got, descriptor-wise. They're sort of shiny? He guesses? But not really. Sort of pearly actually.

"These," Pidge says, brandishing the whatever-they-are's at them, "Are Alceonian data chips. I've got several thousand of them that need to be uploaded to the castle storage systems so that we can act as a temporary hub for them until they can build their own on their next colony. All you guys have to do is place them on the uplink pad-" She presses the data chip to a flat circle on the workstation in front of Keith, "Wait about thirty seconds... And the castle will do the rest."

The chip flashes and the circle turns red and beeps.

"Then you just toss it in the complete box," she pitches it into another box resting against a pillar a few feet away. "And do another. So simple even you dunderheads can do it."

Lance leans over a bit so that he can peer into the box. There's... Yeah. There's thousands of them. He looks back up at Pidge.

"Oh I see." Lance narrows his eyes at her, knowingly. "Get Lance and Keith to do the really boring stuff for you. And what are you gonna be doing, huh?"
She crosses her arms and leans down. Lance refuses to move backwards, because he is not a chicken, and he is not cowed by a fifteen-year-old girl half his size.

"I will be reinforcing the firewall so that none of their files corrupt ours, scanning each bit of data for viruses as it comes in, coordinating with the head of every archive on the planet, and accepting more deliveries as the archives send them in. Then I thought maybe I'd kick back with a little umbrella drink and have the two of you fan me with palm fronds."

That's... That's not a smile. Lance knows what a smile looks like. What Pidge is doing? That's just bared teeth.

He moves back. Just a little bit. He's still not afraid.

"Unless you want to switch? I wouldn't want you to be bored."

He clears his throat.

"Nah, I-" His voice cracks unpleasantly. Pidge's not-smile turns feral. "Nah I'm good. This is, y'know, super important work. For the good of the lovely people of Alcor, I'll scan their little chippy-thingies. We got this, right Keith?"

He looks over at Keith, who is a filthy traitor, because he's covering his mouth and trying not to laugh. He still nods, though.

"We've got this, Pidge."

Pidge (finally) leans out of Lance's personal space, and scoffs.

"It's honestly impressive that he's *still* the responsible one."

She turns away and disappears back into the glowing mainframes like some kind of creepy nerd ghost.

Keith frowns. "Of course I'm the responsible one."

His affronted tone is a balm to Lance's wounded pride.

They set to work with only minimal grumbling, mostly from Lance. They both reach into the box and pull out a handful of chips, spreading them across the work station. Lance sighs as he presses the first one to the upload disk or whatever it was that Pidge had called it. Thirty seconds for every chip. Thousands of chips in the box. That's... A large number of minutes, divided by sixty... To some elusive number of hours, smaller than the minutes but still frighteningly long.

"We're gonna be here forever." He groans, letting his face tip forward to smush against the smooth surface of the console. The chip in his hand beeps, and he pitches it towards the complete box without looking. He picks up another and presses it listlessly to the pad. "We should have gone and asked Coran for work instead."

"Or neither. We could have just gone to the training deck or something." Keith says glumly. He's scooted his chair as close to Lance's as it can go and still let him reach the the scanner. Lance looks blearily up at him.

"No, Keith, no. You mean we could have watched a movie, or played a video game, or raided the kitchen, or literally anything but do more work." He makes a face. He thinks the effect is ruined by how his cheek is squished up against the console top. "Even your slacking off is exhausting."
Keith smiles and pitches his beeping chip at the 'complete' box. Lance turns slightly to watch it go; it soars over his chip, lying on the floor in front of it a few feet short, and lands neatly in the box.

Lance frowns. His next chip he makes sure to aim a little better. It still falls a little short. The third one pings off the side and slides back towards their feet, like it's mocking him. Next to him, Keith tosses another right into the center of the box.

"Seriously?"

Keith looks up.

"What?"

The next toss bounces against the column the box is propped against and ricochets to the side, skittering off between the mainframes. Lance swears. The hand Keith presses over his mouth does nothing to hide his laughter.

"You're throwing them too hard." He says, reaching over, but Lance bats his hand away and glares.

"Oh no, I don't need your advice. I'm the sharpshooter, I can throw a stupid computer chip into a box."

Keith's lips press together into a wobbly line, but the corner of his mouth still tries to twitch upwards. Lance throws the next one softer. Just a little bit though, it's not like Keith now what he's talking about. Finally, the chip lands dead center of the bin, clinking against its fallen comrades. Lance slouches back in his chair.

"There, see? Just needed a warm-up."

Keith sends another in after it, then quirks an eyebrow at him. He grins, slow and sharp.

"First to fifty?"

"Oh you're on."

Lance does not win first to fifty. Nor does he win first to seventy-five, one hundred, or one hundred and twenty-five. It's close though, and that isn't just his ego talking. By the time Keith sends chip number one hundred and fifty clattering on top of the pile, Lance is only eight behind.

Their competitive natures ensure that neither of them back down, or get bored, at least. It turns what should have been a soul-crushingly dull job into something fun. Lance is actually surprised when he glances at the ticker embedded in the console and realizes that almost two Vargas have passed.

Pidge has wandered by once or twice, obviously making sure that they haven't broken anything yet. She'd dropped off a new, smaller box of chips each time. Lance stares glumly down at the pile. They've barely even made a dent in it.

Keith twirls a chip idly against the work surface.

"Best out of two hundred?"

"You sure about that?" Lance picks up a fresh chip. "Wanna risk that title? All or nothing dude, come on."

"I don't think my title is in any danger." Keith rolls his eyes, but he smiles.
Then he flicks the chip he'd been twirling into the box. Over his shoulder. Without looking.

Lance's chip bounces off his forehead and rolls to the floor.

"Hey!"

"Show off! Cheat!" Lance throws two more at him. "Witchcraft! Black magic!"

Keith's laughter echoes loudly between the columns. He raises his arms to shield himself as Lance pelts him with chips. "Well which is it?"

"All of them!"

Keith takes advantage of Lance reloading to grab his own handful of ammo. The return fire takes Lance in the nose, and he yelps, throwing an entire handful blindly in Keith's direction.

He receives his own chip-shower in return. They lock eyes when he straightens up. Both of their hands are empty. Lance darts his gaze at the box of chips sitting between them.

"What the quiznak do you think you're doing?"

The shout comes just as they both duck and make a grab for the box. Lance's movement stutters for just a second, but it's long enough to throw him off.

He sees stars as his head collides with Keith's. The box tips over, spilling chips everywhere. They wash around their feet like a shimming blue tide.

Pidge thunders out from between the mainframes at full speed, then screeches to a halt when she nearly steps on a smattering of data chips.

Lance hisses and claps a hand to his rapidly swelling temple. In his peripheral vision, Keith clutches at his nose.

"No funny business I said! Is it so difficult for you morons to keep a lid on it long enough to do a simple task? Look what you did!"

Lance looks.

There are data chips scattered everywhere, all across the room, tucked behind pillars, drifting across his and Keith's shoes. It's kind of the exact thing Pidge told them not to do.

Right, damage control mode.

"Aw, come on Pidge, we didn't hurt them! We'll pick them up, no harm no foul."

Pidge reaches down and picks up one of the chips at her feet. It sparks slightly due to the crack down the middle.

"You have one minute to remove yourselves from this room before I remove you from it in pièces."

Lance grabs Keith's hand and makes a dash for the door.
"Right, so, let's not go near Pidge for a couple days."

Keith nods vigorously.

"I don't think we'll be allowed in the server room ever again."

They walk in silence for a minute, wandering the castle halls aimlessly. Lance holds up a hand and counts off on his fingers.

"Okay, so Pidge has kicked us out. Hunk has very politely kicked us out. The Pterophyllae don't want our help. Aaaand... There's no way we're gonna be any use to Allura and Shiro if the Pterophyllae run at the sight of you. What do we do now?"

He looks at Keith. Keith shrugs.

"Coran?"

Lance sighs.

"How do I always get stuck helping Coran clean stuff? It's like the universe is trying to tell me to give up being a Paladin and pursue a career as a janitor."

Coran is way too happy to see them.

"Boys! Here to help? Excellent timing!"

They've barely entered the room before Coran throws an arm around both of their shoulders and steers them forwards towards the decontamination chamber.

Behind the glass separating the control booth from the chamber, a swarm of Alceoneans are stacking boxes and sliding heavy crates into place.

"Yeah, we-" Keith tries, but Coran cuts him off, shoving a bundle of magnetic straps into his arms.

"Here you are. We've been so terribly busy, and it takes ages to show each one of them how to use the mag-locks in the floor whenever they come in. I need you two to pop round into the chamber before each cycle and belt down the goods. Otherwise they float around and bang into the walls. A varga ago one of the poor fellows didn't do it properly and an entire crate of antique pottery got broken!"
"Okay, but how do-"

Coran places a firm hand on Lance's back and propels him into the chamber before he can finish talking.

"No time for that, quickly, this way. We've got another ten shipments waiting outside already! Oh, excuse me, pardon me." Coran weaves his way between the Pterophyllae as they finish stacking the last of the crates and retreat to the exit. "Right, now all you have to do it take one of the mag-bungees, like so, and just..."

Lance and Keith watch as Coran tosses the straps across the box and swiftly attaches the ends to the magnetic anchors in the floor.

"Like so. Easy as falling off a Kinyelk. And then make certain you clear the room before the decontamination cycle starts."

They're steered back out and around to the control booth. The chamber fills with decontamination mist, then water, then a blast of air in short succession.

"There we are! Any questions? I've got it set to a five minute cycle right now, for efficiency, so you'll need to be quick about it."

Lance exchanges a glance with Keith, who smiles incredulously at him and shrugs.

"I... Think we're good?"

How hard can it be, right?

Alright it's a little harder than Coran made it look. The first time they don't get the mag locks to engage properly, and the harness releases, sending the crates floating around the room and banging to the floor with a thud. Coran winces at the crash.

The second time they don't get it tight enough and a couple of the smaller crates float through the loose straps and roll across the floor when the fans turn on.

The third time, Lance is determined to get it right. It's just magnets, alright, they shouldn't be that difficult to use. He's been sticking magnets to things since he was two and his mom got him a set of animal magnets for the fridge, so he'd have something to do while she cooked besides pull on her pant leg and ask for a snack. If two-year-old Lance can make a replica barnyard out of a zebra, a monkey, a lion, a macaroni picture, and his older sisters report card, then adult Paladin Lance can get a stupid crate to stay stuck to the floor.

Keith laughs beside him as they kneel in front of the latest batch of crates, trying to get the magnets to engage, and Lance realizes that his internal monologue hadn't been all that internal.

"I don't think lions are usually considered livestock." Keith says with a teasing grin.

Lance flushes.

"It was supposed to be a cow!"

"A cow." Keith raises an eyebrow.

"I was two."

Keith laughs again. Lance rolls his eyes and pushes himself back up, wincing as his knees pop.
Three cycles and his joints already hate him. He doesn't bother kneeling down as he fixes the next bungee in place, opting to bend at the waist instead. He'd rather have a sore back tomorrow than knees that click when he walks.

Behind him, Keith makes an odd noise. Lance glances over his shoulder at him, then raises an eyebrow at his wide eyes.

"What's up?"

Keith tears his eyes away from whatever he's looking at to meet Lance's eyes. Slowly, he grins.

"Nothing." He says innocently. "Just a good view from over here."

What? Lance blinks at him for a moment, confused, then follows Keith's gaze as it wanders back over to-

Oh.

Belatedly, Lance realized that the way he's bent over has his ass in the air, directly in Keith's line of sight. He feels the tips of his ears burn.

"Well." He manages, clearing his throat and pasting on a grin. He wiggles his hips a little bit and snickers when Keith's face goes red. "Looks like you get decontamination and a show."

Behind them, Coran taps on the glass.

"Thirty seconds, boys."

Lance groans and goes back to fixing the magnet. He's just gotten it to click into place when he feels a sharp pinch on his rear.

"Hey!"

He whirs around, straightening up and slapping a protective hand over his disrespected posterior. Keith is looking in the other direction, the picture of innocence except for the sly side-eye he gives Lance.

"What? I didn't do anything."

"You! You-"

"Yes, Lance?"

"You!"

"Me." Ooh, that smug grin! Who does he think he is, going around and pinching people's butts?

"Ah, gentlemen..." Coran taps on the glass again.

Lance rounds on him, waving the hand that's not occupied with protecting his backside's virtue at Keith. "Coran, did you see what he did!"

"Well, yes, but you really need to-"

"He grabbed my ass!"
"Only a little."

"How do you only grab someone's ass a little?"

"Like that, obviously."

"That's not even an answer-

They both jump as the chamber doors seal shut with a hiss of compressed air. Lance glares at Keith.

"Oh now look what you did."

Keith's reply is cut off by a blast of sanitizing spray.

Lance despises the decontamination chamber. It's all harsh chemicals and dry air and it's total murder on his skin. They should add a lotion shower or something to the end of the cycle, seriously. He's gonna need double the moisturizer tonight.

He glares balefully at Keith as he holds onto one of the mag-bungees so that he doesn't float away during the rinse cycle. At least they managed to get it right this time, and the crates don't so much as budge.

Keith shrugs, nonchalant, and touches down gracefully as the tank drains, because he's a jerk like that.

The cycle finally finishes with a blast of air to their faces. Lance swipes at his damp hair and makes a face when it sticks to his forehead.

"That thing is the actual worst." He whines, stomping out of the chamber the second the door slides open and making a beeline for the towels stacked up on a shelf behind Coran's console.

Even Keith can't make decontamination chamber hair look good, Lance notices with satisfaction. He has to slick it backwards just to be able to see his way to the door.

"What's the matter, Lance?" He snorts. "I thought you liked water."

He reaches out for a towel, still wrestling with his hair. Lance takes pity and shoves one at him, then sighs when he just drapes it over his head and scrubs. It's like Keith wants a tangled rats nest on top of his head.

"That," He says firmly, "is not water. It's chemicals and spite, forced through a hose. It's not even the right color.

Keith emerges, damp and fluffy, from beneath his towel. "It's water. Water is clear."

"Water is lots of colors, Keith. You are but a poor desert hermit, so I don't expect you to understand." Lance says loftily. He rubs at his hair carefully, in sections, pausing to comb his fingers through it every so often. He winces at the raspy texture the sanitizer has left it with. Healthy oils, Alteans. Learn about them.

"I've seen water, Lance. Occasionally in large quantities, even." Keith says drily.

Over Keith's shoulder, Lance sees Coran turn and give Keith an odd look. He waves Lance off when he raises a questioning eyebrow at him. Lance shrugs and looks back at Keith.

"Look, if you've never been to Varadero, you've never seen real water. On a sunny day it's the bluest
thing you'll ever see in your life, right after the sky. My family lives in Santa Marta, we went to the beach all the time. Blue sea, white clouds, blue sky, white sand. That's real water."

"I didn't realize that a tiny island on earth has a monopoly and the entire universes good water."

"Earth has better water than the last ten planets we've been to combined." Lance sniffs.

"We're sitting on an ocean planet!"

"I stand by my statement."

Keith throws his towel at him. Coran snags Lance's towel out of his hand before he can return fire.

"Alright, none of that. Back to work!"

Lance grumbles good-naturedly and follows Keith back into the chamber, where the Alceoneans are already moving the next load of cargo in.

Keith shoots Lance a fond, lingering look as he kneels to start attaching the next round of straps.

"What?" Lance squirms under his gaze.

"It's just..." Keith shakes his head. "It's like you were born to be the Blue Paladin. When you talk about earth ninety percent of it is about how much you miss the rain, or the ocean, or showers with hot water instead of sound waves. And you spend more time in the pool then the rest of us combined."

Well, that just makes Lance sound like some kind of weird fish man. He shrugs and takes the strap that Keith hands him.

"I dunno, man, it's just what I miss. My family was always just... Water people. Barbecues on the beach, spending the summers making trouble on the boardwalk, my older cousins teaching us to surf..." He trails off. His older cousins are at college now. He was supposed to be the one to teach Mirana and Gwen the basics this summer, when he was back from the Garrison on vacation. He'd promised them. He wonders who's going to teach them now. Oh quiznak, what if it's Jonah?

He shakes his head and goes back to fixing the bungees. There's no way they'd let Jonah teach them. Gwen is six, not stupid.

"You always look like that, when you talk about home." Keith says quietly. His smile is soft.

"Like what?"

"Like... All fond and nostalgic. Wistful, maybe?" Keith makes a vague gesture at the ceiling. Lance shakes his head again. There Keith goes, saying things that normal people just don't say. Somebody should really be embarrassed on his behalf, since he's clearly not going to have the proper response himself. He shrugs and moves onto the next mag-lock.

"Well, usually I'm telling you about all the good stuff. It's easy to forget the things that drive you crazy back home, all the way out here. Like, I'm usually telling you about how cute my cousin Nicolas is, or the dumb stuff Jonah gets up to. I leave out the bad stuff."

"Like what?" Keith frowns.

"Like, I dunno. Like the time Nicolas puked grape juice all over my new shoes after I'd worked all summer to buy them. Or the time Benita brought a snake home, and it got out of the shoebox she
was keeping it in and we couldn't find it for two days until it turned up in my bed and bit me on the
ass, and Jonah made were-snake jokes for like a month.” He scowls at the memory. The little brat
hadn't even been punished since his aunt had been out of the country on business at the time.

Keith makes an odd face. "I think that's the first bad thing I've heard you say about your family."

"Oh, dude. I have so much more. So much. Especially about Benita. Aunt Josie is the sweetest
woman on the planet, I have no idea how she gave birth to an evil hellspawn like Beni. And my
sister, Gwen? She's cute and all, but that's kind of the problem. She's got all my aunts and uncles
wrapped around her finger, so she never gets in trouble for anything. I still don't know how she
managed to convince Uncle Max that it was me who drew all over the walls in his guest room. And
Jonah, don't even get me started in him. Older brothers are basically the worst thing in existence."

They finish with the straps and go back out into the control room, but Keith isn't looking at him.
Lance bumps their shoulders together, confused.

"Keith?" He says.

Keith shakes his head, keeping his gaze fixed on the swirl of sanitizer visible through the glass. "At
least you have an older brother."

"Oh come on, we all know Shiro is yours in all but name." Lance purses his lips, thoughtful. "We
could trade. You can totally have Jonah; Shiro's way cooler and way less likely to get me yelled at
by my mom."

Keith- woah, okay, Keith is glaring at him. Lance has almost forgotten what that looks like, and what
a mistake that was.

"You should appreciate your family, Lance. Not everybody gets one."

And now Lance kind of feels like a dick.

"Keith, you know that's not what I meant." He says. Aw quizznak, is this why Keith keeps wanting to
hear stories about his family? Because he doesn't have any of his own? The second they get back to
earth, Lance is gonna drag Keith straight to his house and shove him at his mom. The guy'll have a
plate of cookies and a hand-knit sweater in his hands inside of five minutes, and adoption papers
shoved at him within the day. Less, if he turns on the puppy-dog eyes. Then Keith can know exactly
how obnoxious it is to have little kids clinging to his legs all the time and a grandma who calls three
times a week like clockwork and leaves passive aggressive voicemails if he doesn't answer.

"Come on, dude, I can love my family and still call them jerks."

Keith rolls his eyes and moves to turn away, only to shudder to a stop. He hisses and presses a hand
to his forehead. Lance's heart skips a beat. Belatedly, he realizes that Keith shouldn't have been able
to glare at him at all.

"Oh no, shit, Keith-"

Lance isn't entirely sure where Coran comes from, but he ducks neatly in between Lance and Keith
before Lance is able to take more than two steps to him.

"What's the matter, number four? Got a bit of a headache?"

Coran whisks Keith over to the chair in front of the workstation, sitting him down and arranging him
like a ragdoll, pushing gently on his back until his head is between his knees.
"Just breath, son, that's the way. Overwork, I suspect. Been running all over the castle." Coran keeps patting his back as he turns to shoot Lance a sharp look. He keeps his tone light. "Has this happened before?"

Keith nods, his face hidden behind his hair. Lance mirrors him.

"Yeah, he-" He clears his throat. "It happened earlier today in the cargo bay, and yesterday at the party."

Coran's expression closes off. He gives Keith's back a final pat and crosses the room to Lance, calling over his shoulder, "Stay there a moment, Lance and I are going to get you some painkillers out of this cabinet here."

Keith just nods again, keeping his hands pressed to the sides of his head.

Lance tries to backpedal, because wow Coran looks scary intense right now, but Coran is too quick for him. He reaches out, whip quick, and closes a hand around Lance's upper arm. Lance has no choice but to let himself be dragged across the room towards a few storage cupboards set into the wall.

Coran leans in, and lowers his voice. "It won't be long now, if this has already happened multiple times. I expect you've noticed him acting a touch more like his usual self, yes?"

A pit opens up in Lance's stomach. He nods. Coran sighs and lets go of his arm.

"Alright then. I'd be surprised if the effects last the rest of the day, in that case. Keith's a stubborn lad, not much of a shock he's coming around a touch ahead of schedule." He turns away and opens up the cabinet, extracting a small first aid kit. Lance watches as he opens it and selects a small box.

"Do you- Is there-" Lance cuts himself off, frustrated, before trying again. "What do I do?"

He can't keep the note of distress out of his voice. Coran puts the kit back in the cabinet, then reaches out and sets a hand on Lance's shoulder.

"Keep him calm and quiet. He should snap out of it on his own soon enough. Aside from that, there's not much to be done."

Lance drops his gaze to the floor, scuffs the toe of his shoe against the base of the cabinet. He doesn't really want to look Coran in the eye when he asks, "Yeah but... what do I do?"

He drags his eyes back up to meet Coran's. He doesn't know what he's expecting. Cheerful reassurance, maybe, or a clap on the back and an admonishment to buck up. Instead, Coran's expression is surprisingly kind. It's the same look he wears whenever Allura brings up King Alfor, or when Shiro has one of his episodes.

"Lance, my boy. I doubt the situation is as dire as you're predicting." The hand on his shoulder squeezes gently. "Don't think the rest of us haven't noticed how conflicted you've been, the last few days. I suspect Allura will want to have a little talk with Keith after he gets his head back on straight."

Lance huffs. "I don't think Allura is gonna be able to convince Keith not to murder me. Or to ever speak to me again after this."

Coran just snorts and shoves the box of painkiller tabs into Lance's hand. "You'd be surprised. Now, off you go. You've helped enough here for the day."
Keith doesn't put up much of a fight when Lance tells him that they're under orders to take it easy. Lance doesn't need any more confirmation of how terrible he's feeling, after that. Their ships very own workaholic practically jumps at his suggestion that they just go watch a movie.

Keith holds out his hand, and Lance takes it wordlessly, leading him out of the bedlam of the lower decks, where the Pterophyllae are still scurrying about, and up into the quiet of the deck the Paladins have claimed for their living area.

This time, Keith doesn't follow him when he goes to pick a movie, instead settling quietly on the couch to wait. The pain meds Coran had dosed him with either haven't kicked in yet, or don't seem to be doing much. Keith is still squinting like the light hurts him, curled up with his head resting on the arm of the couch.

Lance selects something that looks like it won't have a lot of shouting or explosions, and pauses to dim the lights on his way back to the couch. Keith sends him a grateful smile and manages to open his eyes a bit more, scooting down the couch a little bit so that Lance can sit down on the end of it.

Reaching out so that Keith can tuck himself under his arm is an almost automatic motion now, and Keith presses in without a word, settling against Lance's side and bussing his cheek against his shoulder affectionately. The movie starts rolling. Lance doesn't even catch the title; ten minutes in when he has to yank his wandering attention back to the screen he gives up and looks back down at Keith. His gaze is vacant too, fixed somewhere on the opposite wall, far from the holoscreen. Lance moves his shoulder, just a little bit, to get his attention.

"Hey," he says quietly. "Are you feeling any better?"

Keith shakes his head, the movement small. Lance sighs. This whole thing is pretty unfair to Keith, when it comes right down to it. Getting bitten had looked like it hurt, and now getting un-bitten seemed pretty painful too. Not to mention the four days in between with zero control over his own actions and a scumbag teammate taking advantage of his cuddliness. He reaches out to thread a hand through Keith's hair, still the slightest bit damp from the decontaminant. He scratches lightly at his head, wondering if it will help. Keith had certainly seemed to like it when he had done it before.

Sure enough, Keith stretches out his neck a little in a silent demand for more like some kind of overgrown cat, then melts against Lance when he obliges. They stay that way for a quiet moment, almost peaceful. Neither of them is watching the movie.

A long minute later, Keith speaks up.

"Thank you."

Lance looks down at him, feeling a half smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "I'd rather you didn't thank me. Dudes don't thank other dudes for petting their hair."

Keith lets out an amused little huff, but shakes his head again. He shifts, propping himself up so that he's no longer leaning against Lance, instead looking up at him from barely a few inches away. His eyes are huge in the dim light.

"That's not what I meant." He says.
Lance lets his hand drop from Keith's hair. "What do you mean, then?"

Keith catches Lance's now free hand and twines their fingers together. Absently, Lance marvels at how it had only taken a few days for that to stop feeling strange.

"Thank you, for the last few days. It's been really nice, being with you all the time."

Lance's heart compresses in his chest, the sinking weight there bearing down on him again.

"You don't need to thank me for that either." He avoids Keith's gaze.

"But I want to." Keith squeezes their joined hands. "I can't figure out why we weren't doing this before."

"I have a few ideas."

Keith rolls his eyes fondly at Lance's bitter tone. "Well, of course I know why."

What? Lance's eyes snap to Keith's face. Keith shrugs. They're close enough together that Lance can feel the movement where their jackets brush together.

"I mean." Keith's tone is sheepish. "Up until a few days ago, I was always so mad how easy you are to love."

Lance's mouth goes dry.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Keith shrugs again. "Well, it's just. You're always picking fights and stuff, and making fun of me, even though you're so nice to everybody else. I always got so mad about it, but I could never really hate you." He laughs, quietly. "I don't think it's actually possible to hate you? You get along with everybody."

The familiar tide of guilt rises up in Lance's chest, pressing in on his lungs. He feels his breath go shallow. It's actually kind of impressive, he thinks wildly, how the Love Bug can even effect memories. His laugh sounds high and nervous, even to himself.

"Um, I think you're getting me confused with Hunk. Y'know, big guy, basically a human teddy bear, incapable of walking into a room without getting a hug and a new friend?"

Keith snorts. "I think I can tell you two apart, thanks. Hunk's a good friend, but come on, he's not the one that brought the team together."

Lance blinks at him. He has officially lost the thread of this conversation. Is this part of the Love Bug bite wearing off?

"I kind of wonder if any of us would even talk to each other without you." Keith continues. Lance feels like he's frozen in place, trapped by the warmth of Keith's hand and the heavy weight in his chest. "Outside of training or Voltron, anyway."

"I think you'd have managed basic human interaction without me, Keith." He manages to say.

Keith just shakes his head. "No way. You remember when you first started movie night? We were a mess."

How could Lance forget? It had been right after Sendak, and the Balmera. It had been the single
worst week of Lance's life. Allura was exhausted from healing the Balmera, Hunk was miserable from leaving Shay behind, Keith had been doing nothing but hole himself up in the training deck and run drill after drill, and Pidge had thrown herself into the search for her family so completely that none of them had even seen her in days.

Lance had been exhausted, homesick, and still sore from all of the exploding and being shot at that he'd done that week. He hadn't even thought about it, when he'd-

"You sounded the alarm." Keith snickers. "I still can't believe you did that. The look on Shiro's face when he figured out that it was you was priceless."

"I just wanted something normal! And there was no other way to get everybody in a room together all at once." Lance complained. "Look, I wasn't exactly at my best, right then."

"I know." Keith soothes. His thumb rubs soothing circles into the back of Lance's hand. "None of us were. That's what I mean. We needed it."

"You threw your helmet at me." Lance deadpans. Keith grins.

"You sounded the emergency alarm, and then showed up in your pajamas, of course I was mad." Lance squirms, but Keith continues on. "And honestly, I was still upset that you had forgotten about our bonding moment, after Sendak."

"Seriously?"

"Well, yeah. You hurt my feelings, Lance. You'd been down my throat the whole week before, and I had no idea why, and then we actually worked together like it was the easiest thing in the world and I... I thought things would be different, after that. But then you went and forgot about it, and went right back to shouting at me all the time. And I know-" He cuts the beginnings of Lance's rebuttal off, "that you were in a coma, or whatever, and that's a perfectly reasonable reason to forget, but-" He shifts uncomfortably.

"I was still upset. And then you had the gall to call us all together for some stupid movie night, and Shiro actually went along with it instead of getting mad at you."

"I still can't believe he made everyone go put on their pajamas and everything." Lance smiles fondly. "Hunk almost left on the grounds that there was no popcorn, I think you were out of the room for that."

Keith turns Lance's hand over and absently begins tracing lines down the inside of his wrists. Lance shivers, then feels a flush crawl down his neck when Keith looks up and smirks at him. "But you made him stay. You got everybody all in a room together, and made us watch a terrible movie, and Pidge and Hunk dissected everything that happened on screen, and Coran got offended whenever they made fun of it, and Shiro tried to keep everybody from fighting but gave up when you started throwing pillows at me." The smirk softens back into something warm and fond. "I don't even remember what I said to make you mad."

"You said that you liked the Star Wars prequels." Lance whispers. Keith beams like Lance has given him some kind of gift.

"You remember." He says wonderingly, then shakes his head. "Yeah, that was it. Anyway. It was... It was fun. I had fun."

Lance remembers everything about that night. It had been the first good thing the team had done together that didn't have anything to do with Voltron, Keith's terrible taste in movies aside. It had
been the first time they'd really started to feel like more than just people who'd been thrown into a terrible situation together and had to make the best of it. The first time they'd felt like...

"It was the first time we'd actually felt like a family." Keith says, then immediately drops his gaze to their hands. "I mean. What I imagine a family would be like. I know I complained a lot. I'm sorry about that. But I was glad when even Pidge and Allura said that it should be a regular thing."

"I guess, what I mean by all this is, it was you, Lance. You're the one that made us into something better than just teammates. You're the one that gets Pidge to stop working and go eat. You're the one that gets Allura to smile when she's upset about something. And that's why I was never able to hate you even when you were a total jerk."

Lance tries to swallow the lump in his throat. It's not real, of course. He knows that, knows it's just the Love Bug venom reaching in and recoloring Keith's memories until they're all rosy and pleasant. But it's so hard to stop himself from pretending. The weight on his heart is crushing, hairline cracks forming under the pressure. Why now? Why did Keith have to pick now, when he's so close to being himself again, to try and have this talk?

"You wanna know something?"

Lance didn't realize that it was possible to want something so much and so little at the same time.

"Do you remember, at the end of that first movie night? When it was over, and I got up to leave, I was almost out the door when you called me back. You were sitting on Hunk like he was some kind of throne or something, in the middle of an argument with Pidge, I don't remember about what, but you stopped, and you called me back, and you actually smiled at me. It was only the second time you'd ever done that, and the first time was when..." He coughs. "Well, you don't remember. Anyway, you said "Hey, Keith. Your broody ass had better be back here next week, no excuses.""

Lance holds his breath. He remembers, that, yeah, but why...?

"I think that's the moment I fell in love with you."

No.

Keith stares off into space. His eyes are soft, and his hand squeezes Lance's gently. It feels like a lighting bolt to Lance's heart.

"It's ridiculous, I know. We'd barely even had a conversation that didn't end in shouting, before that. But," He shrugs, "I just couldn't help it."

Please, no.

"Stop." Lance's mouth moves without his permission.

Keith's gaze snaps back up to Lance's face, and then he recoils. He yanks his hands away from Lance's and shoves himself up to kneel next to him on the couch. He reaches a shaky hand towards Lance's face.

"Lance? You're- you're crying. Are you alright?"

Sure enough, Lance can feel the warm drip of tears sliding down his cheek. He curses and swipes viciously at his eyes, sitting up.

"Oh god, I'm- shit. yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine, just-" A sob tears its way out of his chest, bringing a fresh
wave of tears with it. Keith makes a low sound of distress. "Quiznak. I'm just please, stop."

"What did I do?" Keith whispers.

"Nothing!" Lance hiccups. "Nothing, I just, let's not talk about this anymore. I get it, okay. You think you love me, that's g-great, I just can't- damn it." The tears aren't stopping. Everything he's held in for the last few days, everything he's tried so desperately to keep a lid on is spilling out of him. What's wrong with him, seriously, that he couldn't have lasted a few more hours? Why couldn't he have just-

"Lance, why, what did I say? I-" Keith's panic cuts itself off as he gasps sharply, doubling over, and Lance should be helping him, but he just can't, he can't okay, he's too busy scrubbing at his face trying to get himself under control, and all he was supposed to do was keep Keith calm and he couldn't even manage that.

Keith makes a low, choked-off noise, then slowly, slowly looks up.

The eyes that meet Lance's are clear of any sort of love or affection. All that's left is a hazy sort of confusion. Has Keith always looked at him like that? Pained and upset and a little bit mistrusting? Keith blinks, his gaze sharpening slightly. Lance feels the void where the love used to be like a hole in his own heart.

"Lance?" He says. He straightens up, squinting, dazed, fingers still pressed to his head.

"Lance, where... What am I...?"

No. No, now?

There is a long, terrible stillness. Then:

"Oh god." Keith whispers. "Oh no."

Lance's heart breaks.

"Welcome back." He chokes.

And then he runs.

Chapter End Notes

Eh? Eh? Now you all can stop guessing about whether or not Keith was still under the bites influence or not, and starts guessing about WHY he was still acting like himself. The other members of Team Voltron certainly have some guesses.

*evil grin*

Alright, from here on out chapters are gonna come a bit slower, because I want to take my time and wrap these poor boys issues up right. I'm gonna shoot for two a week? One at minimum. This crazy train will definitely have come to a stop by the end of October at the latest, and that's only if midterms kick my ass harder than I'm anticipating.
Oh my loves, I'm so, so sorry. I was so fixated on rushing headlong into the last chapter that when I finally wrote it and let myself breathe... I slammed into a crushing wall of writer's block. I 100% did not mean to leave you for this long on such a massive cliffhanger. I am scum. I am so sorry. But I didn't want to force myself through it and give you something subpar just to have something to post. I'm still not happy with this chapter, if I'm honest, but I can't wait any longer. Forget puppy dog eyes, sad and incredibly polite comments are my kryptonite. So, I'm sorry if it's not as good as last chapter, but here you are. My apology is mushy-gushy hurt/comfort to soothe your wounded souls.

It's not like waking up. There's not that much of a transition, and there's no warning before it happens.

One moment, everything is perfect. His headache isn't important, really, what matters is Lance, and his fingers tangled together with Keith's. The fuzzy feeling that's been pressing more and more heavily on his brain with each passing hour doesn't matter, not when Lance is looking at him like he's the most important thing in the universe, like he can't tear his eyes away.

In the space of a heartbeat, everything goes wrong.

"Stop." Lance says, and so the world does.

The gentle warmth in Keith's chest evaporates the moment he turns and sees the tears just starting to spill over and track down Lance's cheeks. It's wrong, and Keith doesn't understand, they'd been laughing and talking about happy things just seconds ago, but nothing about Lance's expression is happy now.

"Lance? You're- you're crying. Are you alright?"

He hardly notices pushing himself upright, but he does notice the way Lance flinches away when Keith reaches out to him. He waves him away, frantic, and reaches up to swipe violently at his eyes.

"Oh god, I'm- shit. yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine, just-"

Lance is not fine. Keith feels his blood go cold when Lance shudders, his chest heaving. What did Keith say? He'd- he'd only told Lance that he was happy, he was trying to thank him for being so kind, for being so good to Keith. He doesn't understand.

"Quiznak. I'm- just please, stop." Lance rasps, his voice thick. Keith obeys, keeping himself back and away, hovering uncertainly. He wants to touch so badly, to comfort, but he doesn't know how, doesn't know what to say, doesn't even know what's wrong.

"What did I do?" Keith whispers. He doesn't understand.

"Nothing!" Lance hiccups. "Nothing, I just, let's not talk about this anymore. I get it, okay. You think you love me, that's g-great, I just can't- damn it."
Keith rocks back on his heels, stunned, as Lance dissolves completely into a sobbing mess. The pressing feeling inside his skull hits him in full force, and suddenly he knows with total conviction that this isn't right, that he is missing some crucial detail. Lance knows that Keith loves him, Keith has told him over and over the last few days, shown him in every way that he knows how - was it not enough? Why would Lance not believe him?

Keith knows that he's not the best at this, that he's been making it up as he went along, but Lance had seemed- Everything had seemed like it was finally going right.

"Lance, why, what did I say? I-"

His mind races, turning over the last few days as quickly as he can, searching for some clue about what he's missing, about what he's done wrong. Things are good, or they were good, they've been good for- Three days.

Is that all? That can't be all, that's crazy, what changed, what happened, what-? His mind reels, trying to slot the pieces together into something that makes sense, but the memories sieve through his grasp like sand - he can't catch hold of them, like something is preventing him from thinking clearly.

He gasps as the stifling feeling inside his head becomes unmanageable. He doubles over, pressing his palms to his eyes as lights burst behind his eyelids, and he tries to speak, to tell Lance that somethings wrong, but-

When it happens, it's not like waking up.

The pressure just... lifts away all at once, leaving behind a pounding headache and the harsh rasp of his own breath in his ears.

What was that? For a moment, the room tilts on its axis, like the artificial gravity has malfunctioned, and Keith looks up with no idea where he is or what he's doing.

Then Lance sobs again, and he comes crashing back into himself. He blinks, and the world snaps into focus.

He is kneeling on the couch in the media room, a few feet away from Lance, who is bawling his eyes out because Keith has just blurted out the entire pathetic, messy story of how he fell in love with him back when they barely knew each other.

Lance, whom Keith has just spent the last few days practically forcing himself on.

"Oh god." He hears himself say. "Oh no."

He can't move, can't do anything but watch impassively as Lance's breath halts in his chest. He can't even begin to decipher the look on his face, somewhere between relief and horror and despair, none of which match the watery smile Keith is offered in the next instant.

"Welcome back." Lance says. His voice breaks on the last syllable.

And then he is gone, leaving Keith alone in the room with nothing but the sound of his retreating footsteps.

Keith gets to his feet, his gait unsteady as he crosses the room. His mind is empty, numb beneath the pounding in his skull.
He stumbles to the waste basket and retches.

Lance keeps running. He can't keep track of where he's going, not when the world in front of him is still a blurry smear through the tears that just won't stop, no matter how much he scrubs at his eyes. It doesn't matter though, all that matters is getting far, far away. Far enough away that he never has to see that look of utter horror on Keith's face ever again.

God, what had he been thinking? Keith is going to hate him; must already hate him. And he knew how this would end, he always knew it, and somehow he still let himself be carried away in his stupid, pathetic fantasies, let himself believe he could just play happy couple with someone like Keith for a little while with no consequences.

His chest hitches with another sob, and then another when his breath catches on the stitch in his side. He stumbles taking a corner and reaches out to grab blindly at the wall. He swipes at his cheeks again and keeps going.

He doesn't know where he is anymore, doesn't care enough to pay attention, so when he suddenly slams into something warm and solid it's all he can do to stay upright and catch himself. He stumbles back a few feet and blinks, dragging his sleeve across his eyes again so that he can look up at-

"Hunk." He croaks. His breath hitches again. Hunk stares at him, and dimly Lance realizes that he must be a blotchy, tear-soaked mess. Hunk reaches out a cautious hand towards him.

"Lance? Holy crow, Lance, what- Oof!"

Lance throws himself at his best friend before he's consciously decided to do so. Automatically Hunk's arms fold around him, and Lance buries his face in his shirt and cries like the giant baby he is.

"Lance, what happened, are you okay? Where's... Oh. Oh no. Aw, bro."

Hunk squeezes him, hard enough that his ribs creak in protest. Lance just sobs harder, leaking tears and snot all over Hunk's vest. Hunk rubs his back soothingly.

"It's okay, man. You're gonna be fine. Just give me a second okay?"

Lance hiccup. He feels Hunk shift, hears a small click and a beep.

"Pidge? It's Hunk. I need you to- Yeah, no, I know you're busy but this is really- Pidge. Pidge. Pidge would you just- Keith is back, Pidge." Somewhere, Lance's body finds a fresh supply of tears. There is a moment of silence, broken only by Hunk's deep sigh and Lance's wracking sobs. "Yeah, I've got him. So, I need you to call Shiro, and then meet us in the- Yeah. Yeah, like we discussed. See you in a bit."

Another beep, and then Lance feels a gentle hand cup his chin and lift it up.

"Can you make it to the kitchen with me, buddy?"

Lance sniffs pitifully, but nods.
"Then come on. I've got you."

Lance lets Hunk prop him up and guide him gently down the hall.


Keith's hand shakes as he fumbles open the door to the bridge. Shiro looks up immediately, and almost drops his tablet when he sees Keith leaning unsteadily on the doorframe. Behind him, Allura draws in a sharp breath.

"I apologize, councilwoman." He says politely to the Pterophyllae he'd been speaking to on his view screen. "I'll need to call you back."

The screen flickers out of existence, and Shiro is across the room with his hands planted on Keith's shoulders before he can even finish crossing the threshold to meet him.

"What happened? Where's Lance?"

Keith swallows, twice, tasting bile. He can't meet Shiro's eyes.

"He ran." He manages finally. "As soon as I... I don't know where he is."

Shiro stills.

"I see." He says carefully. His eyes sweep over Keith, taking in his rumpled clothes and unsteady footing. "Well. Welcome back."

"Welcome back." Lance says, voice cracking, eyes filled with tears.

Keith makes a pained noise in the back of his throat and flinches away, ducking out from beneath Shiro's grasp.

"That's all you have to say? Welcome back? After everything I did?" He finally looks up at Shiro, and feels his stomach twist itself into knots at the sight of the bruise still shadowing his jaw. "I- I attacked you."

His voice cracks.

"Keith." Shiro begins, shocked.

Behind them, Pidge's face flickers into being over Allura's console. She looks worried.

"Pidge." Allura acknowledges. "Is this important? We have a slight situation going on at the moment."

"Yeah, actually. I need you to find Shiro and tell him to hunt down Keith. He's himself again, and who knows what he's gonna do before someone finds him."

The leather of Keith's gloves squeaks in protest as he clenches his fists. Of course. They're right to try and keep tabs on him, after everything he'd done, after everything he'd said-

"He's already here, Pidge." Shiro speaks up. Pidge looks relieved.

"Good. Hunk's taking care of Lance, so he should be okay. I'm going to head up there myself. Keep
away from the kitchen for now, alright?" She disengages the connection without waiting for an answer.

Shiro and Allura trade looks, and then Allura nods and gestures towards the door.

"Go. I can handle things for now."

Shiro places a firm hand on Keith's back and sweeps him out the door, ignoring his protests. They only go a short ways, down a few doors and into one of the small antechambers that dot this level of the ship, no doubt once places for meetings or breaks or the other activities a bustling palace had required. Now it only contains a small table, a scattering of lightly upholstered chairs, and the withered remains of a potted plant.

"Sit." Shiro says. Keith starts pacing instead.

"Did you even try and stop me? Everything that happened and the best you could come up with was pawning me off on Lance?"

Shiro sighs and chooses a seat for himself.

"I know you're upset, Keith, you have every right to be. But before you blame Lance, just let me-"

"Blame Lance?" Keith stops pacing and turns to stare incredulously at Shiro. "Are you kidding me? What the hell kind of person do you think I am?"

Shiro pauses, mouth open. "I... What?"

"You remember then." Shiro sounds surprised. "Everything that happened? Shiro, he spent the first day trying to run away from me. He actually ran, and I hunted him down like some kind of rabid animal!"

"You remember then." Shiro sounds surprised. "Everything that happened?" He leans back in his chair, deceptively casual. Keith knows that look. It's the one Shiro gets when he's treating Keith like he's a bomb about to go off.

Keith hates that look.

"Which everything? The one where I managed to make an entire alien race afraid of me? Where I attacked my teammates, injured innocent bystanders, and spent four days forcing myself on a guy who can't stand to be within five feet of me? Yeah, I think I remember!" Keith kicks one of the empty chairs as he paces by, sending it rebounding off the wall with a crash. "All of that, and you just stood by and let it happen! Why didn't you do anything? You could've locked me up, or shoved me in stasis, anything but just let me-"

His voice breaks. He turns away and kicks another chair.

"Keith, I didn't just-" Shiro takes another slow, deep breath. "Lance asked the rest of us not to interfere. He said he didn't mind. You didn't seem to be hurting anyone, and Coran assured us that you were no danger to yourself or the rest of us."

Keith's blood turns to ice in his veins. He whips back around.

"Lance... asked you not to do anything."

"He did." Shiro watches him carefully, like he's waiting for Keith to put something together.

Keith's anger drains away all at once, swallowed up by the black pit of guilt in his gut. He shuffles
over to the last chair standing and sinks down into it. "Of course. Of course he did."

He puts his head in his hands. He thinks he might be sick again. "That would explain it, I guess."

"Explain what, exactly?" Shiro's tone is cautious.

Keith shakes his head, but doesn't look up. "The... The first day. He kept trying to get rid of me. He kept asking me to leave, or if I wanted to do anything else somewhere away from him, or... He actually ran away, at one point. I chased him down. He tried to shut me out of his bedroom but I just... wouldn't take no for an answer. I thought it was some kind of game. After that he just... I guess he gave up. Maintained the illusion for me, even when I was practically crawling all over him."

He tips his head back and lets his hands fall to his sides, staring at the ceiling. He blinks, and all he can see behind his eyelids is Lance. Lance, tense and frozen as Keith wraps his arms around him like an octopus. Lance, breathless and panicked as Keith presses him up against his bedroom door. Lance, eyes wide with terror as he pins Keith to his bedroom floor, half awake.

"Wait, you think Lance just acted along with you? With the bug bite?" Shiro sounds slightly strangled.

Keith lets his head roll along the back of the chair until he's meeting Shiro's eyes.

"It's Lance, Shiro." He says.

Shiro blinks, uncomprehending.

Keith sighs. "It's Lance. The most nauseatingly good-hearted person on the ship. To everyone except for me, until now." Because Lance may be the most egotistical, loudmouthed, self-centered jackass Keith has ever had the misfortune of meeting, but Keith has seen him move heaven and earth to make his friends smile, seen him take explosive blasts and laser fire in the name of keeping them safe. He never would have thought that that care would extend to him, though. And all in the name of what, keeping Keith from being sad?

He shakes his head, remembering the crushing feeling of abandonment and despair that had threatened to consume him every time Lance had brushed him off, while he was still under the Bug's influence. Maybe a little more than sad, then. Still, he knows Lance would have done the same thing for Pidge, or for Hunk.

"Keith." Shiro says slowly. "Are you sure the bite has worn off completely? There might be side effects, or."

"Yes, of course I'm sure!" Keith snaps, jumping to his feet again. Is Shiro messing with him, acting like Keith still doesn't know his own mind? "If you're not going to take me seriously, then I'll just-"

"Woah, easy, that's not what I meant."

"Well what else could you mean? You're not an idiot, I know you've picked up on my-" Keith grits his teeth. "feelings, for Lance. I'm not that good an actor, and it's been nearly a year."

Shiro's eyebrow rockets upwards. "That long?"

The glare Keith sends his way could peel paint.

"I just didn't want to assume." Shiro says, raising a placating hand. Keith snarls and goes back to pacing.
"Not that it means a damn thing now, or that it ever would have. I spilled the whole messy story to him, and at the end of it he told me to shut up and ran out the door like his ass was on fire! The second I snapped out of it, he was gone. Couldn't get away fast enough. I guess four days of pretending like being around me didn't make him sick was all he could take." Keith kicks the last chair over and watches with satisfaction as it spirals away to rest in the corner. The room is quiet for a minute, the only sounds Keith's rasping breaths, the only motion his heaving chest.

"Why." He says finally. He makes a vain attempt to swallow the lump in his throat. "Why did you let me anywhere near him, when I was like that?"

A film of tears crawls across his field of vision as he stares Shiro down, and he blinks it away furiously. Shiro gets to his feet and takes a cautious step towards him.

"I didn't realize that this would happen. I'm sorry." He says. "But I think you're still a little bit confused about what actually happened. And I'm... fairly certain that Lance didn't run away because he thinks you're some kind of stalker."

Keith's jaw drops, incredulous.

"Confused. You think I'm confused." He spits. He turns on his heel and stalks out the door.

>\\\\\\<<

"Alright buddy, never let it be said that I wasn't prepared." Hunk smiles softly as he deposits Lance gently into one of the kitchen chairs and bustles over to the fridge. "I mean, I was kind of hoping I'd be able to bust this out for a happier occasion, but we could all kind of see that this wasn't gonna be easy on you."

Lance has resigned himself to the steady stream of tears leaking from the corners of his eyes now. He makes a cursory attempt to scrub at his cheeks every now and then, but the sleeves of his jacket are already soaked through. Hunk turns away from the counter long enough to drop a dry cloth in front of him and wrap him in another quick hug.

Lance sniffs and wipes it across his face, then shrugs his arms out of his damp coat sleeves, leaving the jacket wrapped around his shoulders. He pulls his knees up, resting his feet on the edge of the chair like a child. His head is already starting to ache from all the crying.

"Alright, here we go."

Hunk sets a bowl in front of him, filled with something blue and grainy looking.

"What's this?" Lance croaks. He doesn't really feel like eating - he's too wrung out and raw to feel much of anything anymore, but he reaches out and picks up the spoon anyway.

"I know it's probably not exactly like your abuela makes, and, yknow, I hadn't had it since two summers ago. And it's space ingredients, so I kind of had to fudge a few of the spices, but I think it's pretty close?" Hunk drops down into the seat next to him and slings a comforting arm over the back of Lance's chair. Lance takes a bite.

It's rice pudding.
Somehow, Hunk has managed to exactly recreate his *abuelas* rice pudding. In space.

Lance just manages to swallow before he's bawling again, and he doesn't know where his body keeps finding more tears to cry, he feels like he's drying out, but there it is.

"Oh no, Lance, come here, man." Hunk wraps him up again, and Lance lets himself be dragged into his best friends lap.

Pidge finds them like that ten minutes later; Lance draped across Hunk's chest like a soggy dishrag, snuffling pathetically into his shoulder. It feels like he might finally have cried himself out.

"Hey, loser." She says softly. "How you holding up?"

Lance sits up and grabs the cloth Hunk had given him. He blows his nose with a loud, gross *honk*, then offers her a watery smile.

"Oh, you know. Not so bad for the scum of the earth. Scum of space?" He trails off, still sniffing a bit. "Scum of the castle, I guess, would be the most accurate..."

"Oh no you don't! Nope, nuh-uh." Hunk says. He picks Lance up and drops him back into his own chair, shoving the spoon back into his hand. "Not gonna let you do that. Eat your pudding."

Lance obeys, dutifully shoveling another spoonful into his mouth. It really does taste just like *abuelas*. He tears up again.

Pidge hovers uncertainly halfway between the table and the door for a moment, before she makes a decision and marches determinedly over and to take the chair on the other side of Lance.

"Please tell me he's not the whiny, self blaming kind of crier." She says, propping her elbow up on the table and dropping her cheek into her hand.

Lance narrows his eyes at her, mouth full of more pudding.

"Unfortunately." Hunk says, nudging Lance's elbow with his own. "Even when he doesn't have any reason to be. Especially then, actually."

Lance swallows and turns to huff at him. He sees what they're doing, and it's not what he wants right now. "Except you might have noticed that I have plenty of "reason" to blame myself right now, because this is *all my fault*.

Pidge raises an eyebrow at him. "Did you make the Love Bug bite Keith?"

"Well, no, but-"

"Did you have some kind of crazy grandmaster plan to get him to hang all over you? Was all of this on purpose?" Hunk joins in.

"No, but that's not the-"

"Did you jump at the opportunity to make Keith your adoring servant?"

"No, but I-"

"Force him to follow you around?"

"No-"
"Lock him up in your room and have your wicked way with him?"

"Pidge!"

Lance drops his spoon into his bowl and spins around to gawk at her.

Pidge snickers, briefly, then sighs and exchanges a look with Hunk over Lance's head. Her expression turns somber.

"Look, Lance. If this is your fault, then it's kind of on us too." Hunk says.

Lance blinks at him, slowly. "In what universe?"

"We were too busy laughing at you to realize what was happening. Which actually sounds even worse now that I say it out loud." Pidge pauses and frowns down at the table for a moment before continuing.

"We didn't know that you- Well, okay, Hunk knew. But then he told us, so that actually makes it worse? Anyway, the point is that we really shouldn't have just dumped Keith on you like that." She reaches over and claims Lance's spoon so she can steal a bite of his pudding. "It wa' a 'erk move."

She says around her full mouth.

Lance shakes his head and slouches further back into his chair.

"Look, I appreciate it, guys, but this is on me. I was selfish, and I let myself get carried away. None of you are to blame for that."

"Except for we totally are. Lance, you- you even told me how upset you were, on the very first day, and I bailed on you." Oh no, Hunk is tearing up now. That's not fair, Lance just stopped crying. Pidge groans, but gets up and grabs another towel to toss at Hunk.

"No, come on." Lance says. "I asked you guys to leave it alone."

"Yeah, after everything was already a mess." Hunk points out, dabbing at his eyes.

"Just, shut up and let us apologize, Lance. This probably could have been avoided if we weren't such jerks." Pidge cuts off Lance's reply with a glare. He wavers for a second, then gives in. If it makes them feel better, he guesses it's fine.

"This is the most aggressive apology I've ever gotten." He complains, stealing his spoon back.

Hunk sweeps Lance back into another crushing hug. "We just want you to know that we got your back, buddy. None of us blame you. And I'm pretty sure that Keith won't either."

Lance can't help the gutted expression that steals over his face at the mention of Keith's name.

"I... don't think it's gonna be that easy."

Pidge and Hunk both look at him.

"What actually happened?" Pidge asks. "When he woke up?"

"He... " Lance shakes his head. "You should've seen his face when he snapped out of it. Like I'd stabbed him or something."

Hunk pats him on the back soothingly. "He'd just gotten back into his own head again. I'm sure once
he's thinking a little more clearly, and Shiro's gotten to talk to him, he'll calm down."

Lance remembers every kiss, every fond look, every little touch and liberty that he'd taken or let Keith take over the last few days, and feels the sharp shards of the broken thing rattling around in his chest dig into his lungs.

"Yeah." He says. "I'm sure it'll be fine."
Okay look. Did I take a long time to post? Yes. Am I sorry? ...... No. Because my professors hail from the dark ages, and the CUMULATIVE MIDTERMS that I was given have erased everything from my mind except exhaustion. And melodrama, I guess, but I'm pretty sure that that's just woven into my soul. Either way, I don't have the energy for apologies. I expended the last of it on this chapter.

Anyway, yeah. You.. may notice that the chapter count went up again. This is because I completely reworked the ending. Look it's better this way okay just trust me. Pls don't be mad. This is way better. You'll get more klangst. You guys like klangst right?

Keith has had some bad days in his life. The day he woke up to the news that his only friend had died on a frozen moon light years away from home, for one. Being kicked out of the garrison for punching the teacher that had insulted that friend hadn't been a great day either. Discovering that he, at least in part, belonged to the race that had single-handedly consumed the universe in a horrific, oppressive regime? Not his best.

Somehow, exiting his room the next morning to a small mound of his belongings heaped outside his door manages to jump this day to the top of the list.

Keith stares at it for a moment. His bathrobe is there, freshly cleaned of beauty mask residue and wrapped around his Red Lion slippers. The small duffel bag Keith had packed his clothes in is there. When he zips it open, he finds them clean and neatly folded. His toothbrush is nestled in one of the side pockets, with a note attached to it. He thumbs it open, forcing himself to breathe evenly while he reads.

Lance asked me to bring all your stuff back to you. I think I got it all, but let me know if I missed anything okay?
-Hunk

The paper crackles in his fist. He kicks the entire pile backwards into his room and shuts the door without looking at it.

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The room goes silent when Keith enters the kitchen. Hunk pauses in the middle of buttering his toast, knife poised awkwardly in the air. Pidge and Shiro break off their conversation to look over at him. Pidge had been in the middle of an expansive gesture, her arms wide, and the sudden halt of motion nearly sends her toppling off of her perch on the counter.

"Um. Hi Keith." She says. Her eyes dart to the side, where Lance stands motionless at the counter like a startled rabbit.
A chime breaks the tension, making them all jump, and two pieces of toast pop up from Hunk's makeshift toaster across the room. Lance grabs them, hissing when he burns his hands, snags a hydration pouch from the counter next to him, and makes a beeline for the door.

"Okay nice talking to you all it's been a lovely breakfast, good team bonding, but I'm just gonna take these and go get an early start I'll meet you in the cargo bay okay Hunk? Okay buh-bye."

The hem of his jacket brushes Keith's hip when Lance dashes past him. He doesn't react, too stunned to do anything he wants to, anything he should do, like turn around, or call Lance back, or run after him and apologize-

But Lance is gone, the doors swishing shut after him. Lance... Ran away from him.

Everyone's eyes snap to him. He swallows.

"What?" He snaps. His arms fold, his shoulders hunching in defensively, and he knows it shows them exactly how shaken he is but his body completes the motion before he can think better of it.

Hunk coughs and gets to his feet, trading a look with Pidge. She sighs.

"Isn't that exactly what we told him not to do?"

Keith stalks to the counter and snatches up a plate, shovels eggs and not-bacon onto it with furious movements. Some egg tumbles off the plate onto the counter. He bares his teeth at it.

A hand claps over his upper arm, and he jumps. He twists around to look at Hunk, spilling more egg in the process.

"You okay, buddy?"

Keith blinks at him, slowly.

"Peachy." He deadpans.

Behind them, Pidge makes a hideous, drawn out snorting noise. Shiro pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs.

The tension pops like a soap bubble. Hunk flushes, but grins and flaps a hand at her good-naturedly.

"Shush, you. You know what I meant." He rolls his eyes and pulls Keith's plate out of his hands. "Give that here, you're getting eggs everywhere."

Keith lets himself be ushered to the table and pushed down into his usual seat. Hunk turns back to the counter.

"I saved you some pancakes." He beams at Keith, lifting the cover off of an inconspicuous plate tucked away next to the stove. Pidge squawks indignantly.

"You said there weren't any more!"

"No more for you." Hunk says blithely. He piles Keith's plate with the fluffy disks and sets it in front of him with a flourish. A tap on his shoulder makes Keith turn around.

"Here." Shiro presses a mug of hot tea into his hand, and Keith accepts it automatically. He raises an eyebrow and sweeps his gaze over each of them in turn.
"Uh. Thanks, but you don't have to-"

Shiro cuffs him gently on the side of the head, cutting him off.

"Be quiet and eat your pancakes." He says.

Keith looks up at him, remembering their fight yesterday, and the way he had stormed out. A flash of guilt sweeps over him, and he chews his lip, trying to force an apology into his gaze. Shiro smiles and leans against the counter behind him, raises his own mug back to his lips. His eyes are soft over the rim, and a little bit amused.

Some of the tension leaves Keith's shoulders. Yeah. Shiro knows how Keith is when he's upset. Still, he'll have to find some way to apologize properly later. The bruise on Shiro's jaw is gone, he must have found time to duck into the healing pods for a few minutes, and Keith is selfishly glad that he won't have to look at that particular reminder of his insanity again. He raises his mug in a small salute and takes a drink of his own before turning his attention to his pancakes.

"We missed you, dude." Hunk drops back into his seat and grins at Keith. "It's good to have you back."

"I didn't go anywhere." Keith protests. He reaches for the syrup and liberally douses his pancakes, not stopping until the purple goo is pooling at the edges of the plate.

"Unless you count La La Land as a place." Pidge snickers.

"The real you." Hunk amends.

The rest of breakfast is... normal. They linger at the table longer than they normally do. The team does a good job of keeping Keith distracted, and Hunk keeps piling food on his plate until he has to pick it up and hide it under the table to keep him from filling it again. It's not until Shiro gently reminds them that they all need to get back to work helping the Pterophyllae that the little party breaks up.

Keith lingers to help Hunk clean up, accepting Pidge's sharp poke to his side and Shiro's one armed hug as they make their way out. He hands Hunk each dish one by one, watching as he loads them into the weird Altean dishwasher, then helps him cover up the leftovers. When they're done, he heads for the door.

"Hey, Keith?" Hunk calls after him, his head still stuck in the fridge as he tries to fit the container of scrambled eggs into the overflowing shelves. Keith stops in the doorway and gives him a questioning look. "I'll try and talk to Lance, okay?"

Keith's hard-won good mood evaporates instantly.

"You don't-" He clears his throat. "You don't have to do that."

Hunk frowns. "No, I will. We kinda thought you'd be mad? But that's obviously not what's going on, and I told him not to pull his avoidance thing but he's trying to do it anyway."

"Don't." Keith shakes his head. "It's his right. Look, you guys don't know what the last few days were like. I don't blame him, honestly."

Hunk straightens up so he can see Keith over the refrigerator door. "Keith, come on. You guys need to talk, I think there's some serious miscommunication going on here. He thinks that you-"
"Just leave it, okay?" Keith snaps, then instantly feels guilty at Hunk's crestfallen face. He sighs and turns back out the door, offering Hunk an awkward wave over his shoulder. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Yeah." Hunk says quietly. "See you."

Keith only sees Lance once for the rest of the day.

Keith does his penance the only way that seems fitting: Helping Coran in the decontamination chamber.

It's not that Keith dislikes Coran. It's just that his stories are both incredibly weird and incredibly boring. And also.....

The way that Coran fills the silence with useless, cheerful words reminds him so much of Lance that it makes Keith's chest ache. He does his best to tune him out as he heads into the chamber for the first round of boxes.

The entire process is quicker without Lance there to distract him. It's the strangest feeling in the world to have muscle memory for a task that you remember more like a dream sequence than real life. His memories from while he was bitten are clearer now - Shiro had been right about him being confused right after snapping out of it - but they still have a surreal quality to them that makes it feel like it wasn't really him living them.

They're distant, too, and he has to sort of focus to remember. They come in flashes. Lance, red-faced and laughing as he tries to explain why a lion is an acceptable substitute for a cow. Lance, glowering at him as they float through the rinse cycle. Lance, bent over the mag locks, ass in the air, and his own hand reaching out to-

Keith bangs his head against a nearby crate. He grabbed Lance's ass. Like some kind of creep in a skeevy meat bar.

Coran's thirty-second warning snaps him back to the present before he can spiral completely into remembrances of Lance's furious face, red with embarrassment. He jams the last bungee into place and all but flees from the decontamination chamber.

"Hey, Coran? I just got a message from one of the Pterophyllae's foremen saying that they're missing some containers? Did you get a crate with the serial number- Oh."

Keith snaps to attention, pushing himself off the wall where he'd been leaning while he waits for the decontamination cycle to finish. Lance stands in the doorway, holding a tablet. His eyes are locked onto Keith.

For a long moment, they stare at each other.

Then, Lance looks away. He clears his throat pointedly.

"Serial 583-9." He says. He crosses the room and shoves the tablet under Coran's nose. Coran hesitates for a moment, gaze shifting back and forth between Keith and Lance. Keith feels frozen, his feet stuck to the floor. Lance doesn't look at Keith at all.
"Coran?" He says.

Coran sends one last concerned look Keith's way, tugging at the end of his mustache, before giving Lance his full attention. "I don't believe so, but let me check the logs."

Lance gets what he needs from Coran and leaves. He doesn't once look at Keith.

Keith never moves. He watches Lance go while still trying to dislodge whatever is blocking his throat, preventing him from speaking.

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The gladiator lands a solid kick to his solar plexus and dances backwards again, distancing itself from the vicious swipe Keith takes at it in revenge. His movements are growing sluggish with exertion, and have been for the last half hour, but he welcomes it. Maybe if he wears himself out thoroughly enough, he can actually get some sleep tonight.

In the corner of his eye, he spies movement, a fluttering sweep of white and blue in the doorway. It distracts him just long enough for the gladiator to sweep his legs out from under him. He hisses in pain when his back impacts the ground, and he's too slow to get his blade up in time. The tip of the gladiators spear brushes the hollow of his throat.

"End simulation." He growls. The gladiator shatters into pixels. He climbs to his feet.

Delicately, Allura clears her throat.

"I was hoping I could speak with you."

Keith looks back at the now-empty training room, then sighs and nods. His bayard collapses back into itself.

"Of course. What'd you want to talk about?"

She shifts nervously, the movement at odds with her normally composed demeanor. Keith walks off of the sparring floor, towards the small pile of his belongings stacked against the wall.

"It's... I felt that someone should make clear to you the precise nature of the Love Bug's bite. I realized that no-one had explained it to you properly since you, ah. Returned to yourself."

Keith pauses in the process of bending to pick up his water bottle. "Oh. No need for that. I remember the explanation you gave everyone on the first day. I remember everything."

If he snatches the bottle up a little harder than strictly necessary, Allura doesn't point it out.

"That's part of the problem. That first explanation was slightly... lacking."

Keith raises his eyebrows at her. "Lacking how?"

"Well, we didn't feel the need to explain the different ways it affects people depending on the circumstances." She wrings her hands nervously. Keith gestures at her with the bottle, inviting her to continue. She sighs, then abandons the pretense of formality and slumps down against the wall, sliding to the ground so she can sit.

"There was a girl named Lamaea, a few years older than me, who lived at court with her mother, one of my fathers chief engineers. She was one of the girls who helped smuggle that Love Bug into the castle in the first place. Each of those girls had a reason for wanting that Bug, but she in particular wanted to use it to solve a dilemma she had."

Keith blinks. He hadn't been expecting a story. He takes a long drought of his water, gesturing for her to continue with his free hand.

"She had two suitors. Caiem, and Dorin. They were both handsome and well-mannered, both had made their intent to court her clear, and she was struggling to choose between them. So she thought that she would-" Allura rolls her eyes. "'try them both on' and see what she thought."

Keith snorts disbelievingly.
"Yes, well. I never said that she was a nice person. Regardless: Lamaea got both of them bitten and bonded to her in short order, and then set them against each other in a contest to impress her. Now, Altean courting is... complicated, even at its most transparent. But at its heart what matters most is intent. Dorin performed ideally. He brought her flowers, sang her poetry, showered her in compliments and trinkets, all of that sort of..." Allura gestures aimlessly at the ceiling. "romantic drivel."

"Caiem, however, confused her. He acted much as he always had. Of course, he still cooed and adored and refused to leave her side, and still panicked at anything that threatened to get between them as all the Love Bug's victims do, but his gifts were laden with meaning. His songs weren't the empty templature that Dorin and the rest of the bitten suitors spouted, that could have been interchanged and used to woo any maiden in the court. They were unique and spoke to their friendship, and how well he knew her. And while he of course couldn't bring himself to say a bad thing about her the entire time, he still teased her and made jokes, still acted as himself, just more... uninhibited. Unafraid."

There is a quiet thump as Keith's back hits the wall. He slides down to sit next to her, though his gaze refuses to leave the floor.

"When the bite wore off, Dorin was mortified by his embarrassing behavior under the Bug's influence. But Caiem-" Allura's cheeks flush. "Well. The reason I know this story is because the ending happened in full view of the whole court. They were out in the gardens sitting on a fountain, and everyone was staring because Dorin was storming up and down between the flower beds, shouting about how Lamaea had betrayed his trust and made a fool of him. And when he had exhausted himself and stomped off to nurse his wounded pride, Caiem turned to Lamaea, plucked a flower from a nearby bush, and tucked it behind her ear. And he said, 'Well. I meant all of it.'"

Keith feels something squeeze behind his ribs. He traces the seam of the tile nearest him with an idle finger.

"You see, the Love Bug isn't very well named. It's bite creates a feeling more like... Let's call it infatuation. However, if the victim already carries genuine feelings for the one they imprint on... Well, the bite can't create true love. But it can make you act on it." She smiles, staring wistfully off into space. "Lamaea and Caiem had a lovely wedding. Coran cried."

The room seems deadly silent after Allura stops speaking. Their quiet breathing echoes loudly in the empty hall. Keith swallows past the lump that's appeared in his throat and speaks, hating how rough his voice sounds.

"And you're telling me this story why?"

The look she gives him is pitying.

"Don't play the fool, Keith. It doesn't suit you."

Well. She's got him there.

They are quiet for a long minute, each contemplating the far wall, until Allura pushes herself to her feet and smooths her skirts. She brushes her fingertips over his shoulder as she passes him on the way to the door.

"My question for you then, is why are you here, and not with him."

Keith doesn't turn to watch the door slide shut behind her. Instead he gets up, picks up his bayard,
and returns to the Gladiator floor.

"Computer. Run melee combat simulation level seven."
Chapter Summary

*Bounces*
Okay loves. This is my favorite chapter in the whole fic. This is the one. I wrote it all in like a sitting and it was so easy and I'm just so happy with how it turned out? And that hasn't happened for like a month. I'm so excited okay, just read it. Tell me what you think. Go. Shoo. Why are you still reading this?

This chapter now has **ART!** A million thanks to Cyyaanide-Art for my first ever just-because fanart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for **notes**

Shiro finally manages to catch Keith an hour before touchdown. Keith freezes beneath the unnecessarily firm grip that clamps down on his shoulder, turning guiltily to meet Shiro's eyes.

"Hey, Shiro. Can this wait? I need to go help Hunk in the cargo bay." He takes a step back, gaze darting behind him towards the lower decks. Around them, the Pterophyllae wash past like a lost, uncoordinated sea, shouting back and forth, trying to find their assigned landing posts. Shiro smiles at him, but there's an edge to it that Keith doesn't like.

"Actually, I have a different assignment for you." He says. He shifts his hand down between Keith's shoulder blades and propels him out of the crush and into a mostly empty hallway. The few Pterophyllae milling around give Keith a few wary looks, but otherwise ignore them.

Keith shrugs off Shiro's hand once they're clear.

"Okay, what am I doing then?"

Shiro pulls a tablet from behind his back and hands it to Keith. "I want you on the planet after we land, sorting the supplies as they're unloaded."

Keith squints at the manifest in his hands. Endless strings of numbers and serials scroll by.

"Don't they have a foreman for this?"

"Oh, they do. But I thought it would be easier if someone who knew how the ships system logs work helped out, just to make sure there are no issues." Shiro waves a breezy hand. Keith narrows his eyes at him suspiciously.

"And besides." Shiro continues. "Lance will be helping you, so it should be simple."

Keith briefly loses his fine motor control, and has to scramble to snatch the tablet out of the air before it hits the ground.

"What?"
Shiro drops the pleasant facade. He rocks back on one heel and folds his arms, expression serious.

"Keith, you can't keep avoiding each other like this." He scolds, and Keith feels a rush of outrage. This is exactly why he'd been avoiding Shiro, because Shiro is a world class meddler who can't keep his nose out of other people's business.

"I'm not avoiding him!" Keith snaps, hunching his shoulders. "He's the one who runs out of the room every time I walk in!"

"Are you telling me that you've actually tried having a conversation with him?"

"How? He won't give me the chance! And if he doesn't want to talk to me, that's fine. It's fine." The toe of Keith's boot thumps angrily against the tile. Shiro raises an unimpressed eyebrow at him.

"It's fine?"

Keith flushes, angry and red. "Yes. It is. Because this isn't between anybody but me and Lance, and if he doesn't want to talk, then I'm not going to force him."

Shiro takes a slow, deep breath, reaching up a hand to rub at his temple, and Keith flicks his gaze up to the ceiling in exasperation because this man may be his best friend but he is also a drama queen.

"Keith." Shiro starts. Keith crosses his arms, defiant, and waits. Shiro watches the motion, and something thunderous peeks out from the depths of his eyes.

"Keith, you look me in the eye and tell me that you and Lance will be able to form Voltron like this."

The retort that Keith had already settled on the tip of his tongue dies instantly. Shit. Shiro senses his weakness and goes in for the kill. His tone is quiet, even, and brooks no argument.

"You and Lance are going to work this out. I cannot have a team with members who run away or shut down completely when the other walks into the room."

The tips of Keith's ears burn.

"So." Shiro claps him on the shoulder. "You'll report to Coran as soon as we touch down, and then you and Lance are going to have a long, pleasant day working together. Do I make myself clear?"

Keith nods, but his expression is mutinous.

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The planet the Pterophyllae have chosen for their new colony isn't ideal. They'd had pretty short notice, honestly, and since they don't have wormhole technology it couldn't be too far away. Apparently there hadn't even been a planet with a habitable ocean on it for five solar systems in any direction.

Lance has spent so much time hopping between civilizations and space stations and settled planets that he'd kind of forgotten just how much of space is nothingness and inhospitable death.

This planet is mostly in the nothingness category. The entire surface is dry and hot, covered in scruffy grasses and anemic little trees, split here and there by enormous crevices and canyons, not a
drop of water to be seen. Coran had laughed at his baffled expression when they’d broken through the atmosphere, and pulled up the scans the Pterophyllae had taken of the planet.

The entire planet is made of a softish sort of rock, like soapstone, and over millenia all of the water had worn through the surface and created a huge network of tunnels and caverns and underground rivers. Nearly all of the planet's moisture is underground, in sea-sized aquifers. The Pterophyllae are planning on building their colony under the surface, right on the line between the caverns and the water. It's pretty cool, actually, when Lance gets down there and sees the main cave they've selected.

It's the size of a World Cup football stadium, the kind that seats ten thousand people, and the center is split by a massive underground lake. The lake is warm, and ringed around the edges with rainbows, like the hot springs Lance had seen in Yellowstone Park when his family had gone on vacation there when he was little. It's no ocean, but the Pterophyllae seem happy enough with it.

Tunnels and caves branch out all over the cavern walls, leading off into who knows where. Coran warns him against exploring any of them - the tunnels are deep, winding, and labyrinthine. If anyone gets lost it could take hours before they can get a BLIP pod launched into the right place to pick up their signal, and scans have indicated that there are unknown fauna living in the lower levels.

The little substation they set up for him, by the ramp down and near one of the cavern walls, is nice too. Well, okay, it's a nice change of pace from the cargo bay and his bedroom, which are the only two rooms Lance has really seen for the last three days since he's been-

Okay, yeah. Since he's been avoiding Keith. Lance hasn't really earned the right to pride in the last week. But what good is talking to him going to do? Lance knows that he fucked up, he knows that he's creepy, advantage-taking scum, he knows that he deserves the punch to the face he's undoubtedly going to get when Keith finally pins him down. And every time Lance manages to catch even a glimpse of Keith, the look on his face is just...

Lance had expected anger. He'd expected shouting and fury and maybe the pointy end of a sword somewhere painful. But every time Lance has seen him, Keith just looks... gutted. And Lance can't handle looking him in the eye when Lance knows he deserves every bit of that betrayal.

A Pterophyl taps him on the shoulder, and Lance straightens up from where he'd been leaning against his console, slapping on a smile. He checks the tag on the anti-grab transport the guy is pushing - 943-7, cultural artifacts - and points him across the cavern, towards the area marked off as storage. When the Pterophyl is gone, Lance feels something scurry across his boot. He jumps, stumbling back and looking down.

It's a salamander. Sort of. It's got too many legs - like eight legs, and its feet are shaped like weird little suction cups - but its got the tail and the smooth, slimy skin even though the skin is bright cotton candy pink, and its got big dark eyes and fancy frills on either side of its head, and it's... really really cute.

"Hey there little guy." He smiles at it. It perks up at his voice, looking at him. It tilts its head, then drops its mouth open. It looks kind of like it's smiling back. Lance coos and squats down so he can get a closer look at it. "Aw, look at you! Gotta be a pretty good choice of planet if the neighbors are this friendly, huh?"

He holds out a finger towards it, letting it sniff at him. It makes a little kyik sound at him, halfway between a chirp and a click, and presses at the tip of his finger with its nose. Lance feels his insides go gooey.

"Lance, my boy!"
Coran's voice somehow manages to echo in a cavern this large, and the little salamander thing darts away between a few crates. Lance tches in disappointment.

Lance straightens up to greet Coran, though, then freezes when he catches sight of who's with him. His smile turns brittle.

"Coran. Hey."

Coran ambles up to him, propelling Keith along beside him with a hand around his shoulders. "Got an extra set of helping hands for you."

Keith winces at the enthusiastic shake Coran gives him. His eyes meet Lance's for the barest moment before they're back down, looking at the floor.

"Wow, um, thanks Coran, but I think I've got this on lockdown. I'm sure there's a ton more people that could you the help." Lance tries. Coran gives him a piercing look, never dropping his jovial smile.

"Afraid not. Allura and Shiro were very insistent that you needed the help."

Lance groans inwardly. He told them, he told them to leave it alone, over and over again, and now they've done the socially acceptable equivalent of locking Keith and him in a room together.

Coran takes a brief moment to show Keith how to use the console interface, and then very conspicuously takes his leave.

Keith and Lance don't look at each other, just take up positions at their separate consoles and continue directing the steady stream of transports that flow down the ramp towards them from the castle on the surface. Once or twice, during lulls, he catches Keith staring at him out of the corner of his eye. He keeps his head down and focused on the work.

And on the salamanders. Plural now, and apparently the first one he'd seen was a runt because some of them are easily the size of small dogs. They cling to the cavern walls, Kyiking and blinking down at him with their big eyes. Keith gives them wary glances now and then, but otherwise ignores them.

They seem really interested in the boxes, and the tools scattered around the checkpoint. Lance has to keep shooing them away when they try and bite at the console platform with their weird gummy mouths. He can't even bring himself to be mad at them; it's a good distraction from Keith's eyes on the back of his head.

"Okay." He sighs, picking a shoebox-sized salamander up off his console and setting it gently down on the ground. "You guys are really cute, but you can't be up here."

As if in answer, there's a metallic clanging sound, and a salamander rolls out of one of the crates behind him, gnawing on a section of solar panel. It's the biggest one Lance has seen yet, about the size of a beagle, and he raises an eyebrow. The cute is kind of lost the bigger they get. Also, these things don't seem at all afraid of people, and that's gonna get pretty annoying for the Pterophyllae pretty quick.

"Hey, gimme that!" He says, going over and reaching out to tug the solar panel out of the salamander's mouth. Keith glances over his shoulder at him, but he's in the middle of checking in a large transport and has to look away again almost immediately.

The salamander lets the panel go, leaving Lance with a hunk of slightly chewed, slightly slimy glass in his hand.
"Seriously?" He complains. The salamander ignores him, choosing instead to rush by him and pick up the scanner from Lance's workstation.

"Hey!"

The salamander chews the scanner thoughtfully for a moment, then scampers off towards the cavern wall. Lance yelps and dashes after it.

"Hey, no, come on I need that!"

The salamander ignores him. Lance chases it. It makes it to the cavern wall and crawls into one of the tunnels, turning a corner almost immediately. Lance follows, hot on its heels. Suction cups. Whatever.

"Get back here!" He yells.

Behind him, Lance hears somebody shout, but he's almost caught up to the little thief, and he puts on an extra burst of speed. The lights on his armor flicker on as he follows it down a fork in the path and the last of the light filtering in from the main cavern fades away.

The salamander thrashes when he manages to grab it by the tip of its tail, and he can't keep a grip on its slimy skin. It tugs him off balance on the uneven cavern floor, and he goes rolling down a slope and crashes down into a shallow pool of water. Neat rings of rainbow sediment, thousands of years old, roil into a cloudy mess as he scrambles to get his head back above water.

"Are you kidding me?" He pushes himself up onto his hands and knees,slicking his hair backwards to stop the water dripping from his bangs into his eyes. The salamander is sitting on the other side of the pool, Kyik-kyik-kyiking at him. He narrows his eyes and lunges at it, just managing to hook his fingers onto the scanner at the cost of landing on his belly in the water. The salamander tries to scuttle back but Lance has got a grip now, and a round of extreme tug-of-war begins. The salamander fights desperately to reclaim its prize, and Lance does his best to get back onto his feet while not letting go.

Finally, Lance manages to get a leg under him, and he plants his kneecap into a divot in the floor and heaves. The scanner pops free of the salamander's mouth with a nasty wet splotch, sending him toppling backwards into the pool again. The salamander chitters unhappily as he jumps to his feet.

"Yeah!" He crows, holding his prize over his head like a trophy. "Take that you little thief!"

The salamander kyiks petulantly.

His moment of triumph however, is ruined by a glob of salamander spit sliding off the scanner and landing on his head.

"Ew." He reaches up to wipe it off, but only succeeds in smearing it down the side of his head. "Oh that's just nasty. You got your vengeance, buddy, happy now? Now I'm gonna have to... " He pauses, scrubbing at the spit glob again. It- it burns. Really bad. "Oh quiznak, shit, you little rat-!"

He drops the scanner into the pond and drops to his knees so that he can dunk his head into the water, scrubbing furiously at the slime until the stinging pain on his scalp fades away.

"You were supposed to be cute little friends!" He moans, looking over at the salamander with a betrayed expression. "And instead you're- woah. You're... everywhere."

The entire pool is ringed with salamanders. They crawl across the ceiling, and down the walls, and
swarm the banks until all that he can see is a sea of slimy pink backs crawling towards him, ranging from the size of a banana to the size of a large dog. Suddenly, they don't seem even remotely cute.

"Lance!" A furious voice echoes out over the cavern, and suddenly the scariest thing that Lance has ever seen is two thousand salamanders turning as one, like they've choreographed it, like some kind of horror movie, to stare at Keith.

Keith stands motionless at the bottom of the slope that Lance had just fallen down, eyes large and round as saucers in the harsh light of his armor.

"Lance." He says. His hand twitches towards his thigh, where his bayard is stored. "What the fuck."

Lance disappears. One minute he's right behind Keith, having some kind of bizarre conversation with the gecko-things that this cave seems to be infested with, and the next he's gone. Keith turns just in time to watch a flash of white disappear into one of the tunnels in the cave wall.

He's off running before he's even consciously decided to do so. What does Lance think he's doing? They'd all been told specifically not to go wandering off into the tunnels, and what does Lance do? And now Keith has to go find him before he can get himself lost or killed or break a leg falling down a crevasse or something.

"Lance!" He shouts, his voice bounding oddly off the walls. "Where did you go?"

Unfortunately, the tunnel branches off almost immediately into different paths, one sloping up, the other down. Keith scans the floor for any sign of which way Lance had gone, praying that he'd at least been smart enough not to go-

"...Down." A boot print in the sediment at the bottom of a puddle points down the left hand path, the one that slopes down into darkness. When he hits the next fork he gets lucky. Lance's voice echoes up to him from the right.

"...ou little rat!"

He turns and follows the sound, shouting again in the hopes that Lance will hear him, then has to slow down when he almost slips on a sharp decline in the floor. He picks his way down the slippery slope carefully. A sudden movement halts him, and he looks up to see-

Lance. Soaking wet, covered in silt, standing in a puddle, completely surrounded by a veritable army of geckos. And the geckos are all staring at Keith.

"Lance." He says slowly, reaching for his bayard. "What the fuck."

The corner of Lance's mouth twitches into a nervous smile.

"I um. I made friends?" He tries.

"With geckos?" Keith summons his bayard. The flash of light startles the geckos, and a thousand angry kyik noises ricochet off the ceiling. Lance flinches. He's completely surrounded, and Keith sweeps his eyes over every shadowy corner of the cavern, trying futilely to find some way to get him
out of the pond without setting off the geckos. "What are you even doing down here, you heard Shiro and Coran-"

"They took my scanner!" Lance says plaintively. His hand sketches an aborted gesture towards a dark rectangle sitting just under the surface of the pond. For the first time in days he meets Keith's eyes, and Keith's stomach plummets at the poorly disguised fear he sees there.

Keith chews his lip, examining the cave around them. It's hard to see, with just their armor lights, but there's at least three more tunnels that branch out of this area, not including the way they'd come. The ceiling is covered in sharp clusters of stalactites, which in turn are covered in more geckos.

"That's... okay. Okay." He sidles down the last of the slope, then takes a steadying breath. The geckos skitter backwards, away from him. Okay, he can work with that.

"Keith, what are you doing?" Lance splashes towards the bank, then recoils when the geckos close ranks, hissing when he comes near. "Oh come on, we were friends like five minutes ago!"

Keith ignores him, focusing on making his way through the crowd. They part around him, letting him pass, until his feet touch down on the bottom of the pond. He slogs over to Lance, who's staring at him like he's lost his mind.

"Keith, what the quiznak. Now we're both stuck." Keith moves towards the bank again experimentally. The geckos hiss and close ranks the same way they'd done for Lance, but at least now they're not separated. "We're both going to be killed by angry salamanders and they're gonna drag our bodies down into the depths of their creepy murder caves and the others will never know what happened to us."

"You're starting to sound like Hunk." Keith scowls, turning to face him. "They're just geckos, we can get out of here."

Lance throws his hands up, startling the geckos nearest them. "Okay first of all, they're salamanders. Secondly, they have some kind of crazy acid spit, so I don't really want to see what happens if we try and swashbuckle our way out of here." He pauses for a moment, then adds more quietly, "Thirdly, they're salamanders. What the fuck."

Keith's jaw drops. Is he kidding?

"Are you kidding?"

Lance shakes his head. "No, I got some on my skin, and-

"Not that!" Keith cuts him off. "Are you serious trying to start a fight over what to call the alien monsters that want to eat us?"

"I-" Lance starts, then shuts his mouth with a click. He glares at Keith, lifting his chin defiantly.

Something inside Keith snaps.

"Alright." He hears himself say. "Alright, fine."

Lance stills. His eyes go wide and wary. "What?"

"I said 'fine'. Let's fight. You know what? I get that you're avoiding me, I get that you're mad at me, but this is seriously the way that you want this to go down?" Keith stomps towards him and jabs a finger against Lance's chestplate, the geckos all but forgotten in his rage. "The first conversation
we've had since last week's ridiculous clusterfuck, and you want to fight about geckos. Fine. You know what? They are geckos." He jabs at Lance's chest again, making him stumble backwards. Behind him, a gecko hisses and snaps its teeth at them. Keith doesn't miss a beat, leaning around Lance just long enough to bare his teeth and hiss right back before he's in Lance's face again.

"They are geckos, Lance, there were a million of them living in that godforsaken desert the same as I did for a year, and they got everywhere, and they crawled into my boots all the time, and I looked them up because I was trying to figure out how to get rid of them, and they are geckos." He jabs again, and Lance smacks his hand away only to lean right back into Keith's space.

"They're not! Geckos don't live in water you moron! Salamanders do!" He fires back. "And what the heck is wrong with you, starting a fight right now?"

"I'm not the one who started this! You did! And Geckos can live in the rainforest, they live everywhere!"

"The rainforest is not an underwater space cave! And you started this, I didn't say a word. I kept my mouth shut just like you're always asking me to!"

"Oh, you've done plenty of keeping your mouth shut this week. The one time I actually need to talk to you, and you can't even stand to be in the same room as me. Is that why you're down here, Lance? Was getting eaten by geckos really better than being within ten feet of me for one day?"

"For the last time, they're quiznaking salamanders!"

"Geckos!"

"Salamanders!"

"Geckos!"

"Salamanders!"

A final, hard shove from Lance sends Keith toppling backwards. He lands on his ass in the pond, right next to an angry gecko who rears back before lunging forward to bite him.

Lance darts forward, grabbing his arm and yanking him backwards. The gecko's teeth close on empty air and Keith splashes down yet again, in the middle this time.

"Are you trying to get me-"

"Shhh!" Lance cuts him off. Keith opens his mouth to protest again, but Lance claps a soggy hand to his mouth.

The geckos are chittering, Keith finally notices. Every one of them, even the one that had nearly bitten Keith, and it fills the cavern in a deafening crescendo. Lance hauls him to his feet, and they put their backs to each other as the geckos begin to press in closer.

They stop all at once, leaving the two of them in a tiny circle of water barely a meter wide. The cavern goes silent. Lance's panicked breathes are loud in Keith's ear.

Then, from the tunnel they'd come from, a horrible, bone chilling hiss emanates. A massive bulk detaches itself from the gloom at the edges of their circle of light and slithers down the slope they'd descended. Its suction cups are tipped in enormous claws that click dully against the cavern floor as it advances. The soft pink skin is covered in huge, overlapping plates of chitin. The back, joints, and
the frills on its head are tipped in sharp-looking spines. Its teeth are long and pointed, like a mouthful of knives, and when it opens its mouth to hiss at them again, they drip with what Keith can only assume is the venom Lance had mentioned earlier. It halts a few feet away, towering over their heads. Its spines brush the tips of the stalactites high above their heads.

Keith hears Lance swallow.

"Hello, sala-mama." He whispers.

It roars. Keith grabs Lance by the collar of his armor and hauls him backwards, turning and activating his jet pack. They lift off and fly awkwardly over the ring of geckos, nearly impaling themselves on the stalactites, before crashing back down on the other side of the cavern. The giant gecko monster roars again, so loudly that the cavern trembles. Lance is on his feet and yanking at Keith's wrist immediately, dragging him towards the nearest tunnel.

"Go go go go go!" He shouts. Keith goes.

They take off down the tunnel, slipping and stumbling on the uneven surface. Lance keeps his grip on Keith's wrist, and they use the point of contact to keep themselves upright.

Behind them, the sound of tiny suction cup feet swarming over stone is deafening. The giant roars periodically, shaking the tunnels, and they can hear the scratching noises its claws make in pursuit - how is it so fast? Lance makes the mistake of looking back. His stride falters, Keith has to reach over and haul him back to his feet before he takes Keith down with him.

"Mother of god." Lance pants. "We're gonna die. This is it, we're going to be eaten by a giant alien salamander and I thought if Voltron got me killed it would at least be a cool death, but this isn't cool at all!"

"How are you still talking?" Keith snaps.

Lance sends him a frantic, furious look. The tunnel forks again, and he tugs Keith to the left, down the smaller one. Keith's heartbeat picks up as the world around them narrows. "Really? You complain that I talk, all the time. Then you complain that I don't talk, and now-"

"I complained that you've been avoiding me! We can't do this, okay? We can't fight like this, there's no way that we can form Votron when you-"

"Oh yeah, everything has to come back to Voltron, just like it always does, because God forbid any of us feel anything if it means we can't form Voltron!" The path forks again, and once again Lance drags them down the smaller path. Claustrophobia presses down on Keith - the tunnel is only a foot or so above their heads now, why does Lance keep-

There is a thud, and then a frustrated bellow behind them. The giant... must have gotten stuck. Lance is almost clever, when he's not being an absolute asshat like he is right now.

"It's not just about Voltron, okay? You'd know that if you would let me get anywhere near you!" Keith snaps, then ducks when the cavern ceiling takes a sudden dip. He pulls Lance down with him before he can brain himself on the overhang.

Lance is clearly running out of breath, his exhales are coming in harsh gasps now, but he still keeps talking.

"Well excuse me for trying not to- shit, look out!"
The world beneath their feet drops away into blackness. Lance activates his jet pack before Keith does, and he grunts when his arm is nearly yanked out of joint. They sail ungracefully to the other side of the crevasse.

They roll when they hit the ground, tumbling into the far wall. This time it's Keith who looks back, squinting into the darkness. For a moment there is nothing, then the tunnel they'd come from erupts with a torrent of geckos. The crevasse doesn't phase them, instead they run up the wall and to the ceiling and continue swarming towards them.

Lance hauls him to his feet again, grabbing his hand instead of his wrist this time, and they pick a tunnel and keep running.

"Well excuse me," Lance continues, "for trying to avoid you when every time you look at me it's like I've murdered your firstborn and stolen your Lion and chopped off your awful mullet all at the same time!"

"Are you- you're such a dick!" Keith picks the tunnel this time, moving towards the larger ones. Every tunnel heads downwards now, leading them deeper into the planet's crust. "I never claimed to be good at apologies, alright, and I know you get some kind of sick kick out of being mad at me for stuff I can't control, but you can't even hang around long enough for me to at least attempt to say I'm sorry?"

"To say what?" Lance is forced to slide onto his knees to avoid a stalactite that nearly takes his head off when they round a bend. "Are you- I don't... What?"

Keith pulls him smoothly back to his feet and slows just enough to let him recover his balance before they run again. Is he really going to try and dance around the issue just to make Keith squirm?

"To say I'm sorry!" He growls.

"For what?!"

"For-" Keith bites back a curse. "Are you really going to make me say it?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess I am because I have absolutely no idea what you're talking ab-

"I'm sorry that you had to put up with me!" He roars. "Quiznak, is that what you wanted to hear? I'm sorry that you had to listen to me spill my guts about all of my stupid feelings for you, I'm sorry that you had to deal with me climbing all over you when you can't stand to be around me, I'm sorry that you had to hear all of the ridiculous things I think all the time!"

Lance stops running.

Except, they're going top speed down a wet, uneven surface, and his sudden cessation of motion send both of them toppling to the ground in a painful sprawl. Keith somehow ends up clipping his chin on Lance's shoulder; he swears as stars explode across his field of vision.

"Lance." He groans, pushing himself up on his knees. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Lance is staring at him with round, shocked eyes, and Keith, not for the first time in his life, is certain that he's fucked this apology up somehow. They don't have time for this though - the suction cup noises are growing louder once more, and he clambers to his feet and grabs Lance's hand again, heaves him upright.

"Lance, we have to go!"
Lance doesn't say anything, but he moves when Keith starts pulling him back down the tunnel and that's good enough. At least Keith has more breath for running, now that he's not wasting it shouting at him. The ground keeps sloping downwards, and Keith keeps choosing the widest tunnels at each fork, left, right, right, left, left, right, left... until they burst out into a massive cavern.

Lance shrieks and plants his feet into the ground, just in time to keep them from running off the edge of the path and into the underground river that's thundering past them, taking up the entire center of the cavern. It's huge, Keith can't see the other side, but what he can see is the crevasse that splits down the center of the ceiling, sharp-edged and fresh, by ancient cavern standards. He trades a look with Lance, who clearly sees it too. There's no time to psyche themselves up. They back up to the edge of the cavern wall, then run at top speed towards the bank, throwing themselves off and blasting their jet packs.

The river is even wider than Keith had feared, and they almost don't make it. He touches down on the other side, just barely, and throws himself forward. He lands hard on his elbow and gasps at the pain, but Lance hadn't quite made it and the momentum Keith gives him is just enough to send him toppling forward safely onto the bank.

In unison, they roll over onto their backs to watch the geckos that come pouring out of the tunnel and swarm across the ceiling.

"Come on, come on." Lance pleads. Keith holds his breath.

The geckos stop, confused, at the crevasse. A few of them crawl upwards, into it, but none of them come back out on the other side. As they'd hoped, it's too wide for the geckos to cross. Lance flops backwards onto the stone, exhausted, but Keith nudges him in the side, and tugs him once more to his feet, nodding towards the much drier stone against the far wall. Lance follows him, until their feet touch dry-ish ground and he collapses flat on the rock.

"That's it." Keith says. He collapses back against the cavern wall and slides down, wincing at the scrape of his armor against the stone. "That's it. Shiro was right. We are talking about this."

Lance nods miserably. The roar of the river is loud in the backdrop. "Yeah. Yeah we should probably do that."

Chapter End Notes

Eh? Eh? They got there!!!
*waves pompoms*
Look at our boys! I'm so proud of them!
It was like pulling teeth to get them here okay? Like at one point the entire plan for this chapter was "Allura gets sick of their shit and locks them in a room". I was desperate. And then this chapter just dropped into my lap, fully formed. TheGrimKeeper? You wonderful person you? You know this chapter was like half you, right? 'Cause it was. Thank you dearie, you're my favorite.
Alright guys, look. Season four exists. I can acknowledge that and still completely ignore it. For those of you who are as shook as me by the flagrant disregard for our darling boys' character hard work and character develop last season, fear not, I'm going to be a child about this and refuse to write anything in this 'verse that pertains to it.

Except maybe Matt. Matt can stay.

Anyway, the final chapter will be up tomorrow! Yes that's right, tomorrow(!), along with the first chapter of this fics sequel. Yes, that's right, sequel! It's gonna be called Pidge's Razor, and if you want to see these uncomminicative idiots bumble their way through every space cliche I can think to throw at them, I'll be very, very happy to have you.
/end shameless plug.

They lay there for a few minutes, an unspoken agreement that they need a brief reprieve to get oxygen back into their blood streams before tackling this nightmare of a conversation. Lance's lungs feel like they're on fire. His throat feels raw, dry. He eyes the river, still roaring past them, and thinks fondly of the scanner that could have told him whether or not it was drinkable, now sitting mangled in a pond somewhere far behind them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Keith follow his gaze.


"Yeah." Keith rolls slightly so that he can summon his helmet from his armor. The movement is slow and pained, and Lance feels a private, petty burst of satisfaction - at least he's not the only one whose muscles feel like they've been through a taffy puller.

Keith puts the helmet on and taps the comm link button, then immediately slumps back down against the wall.

"Anybody there?" He says. Lance sighs and summons his own helmet, jamming it on so that he can listen to the other end of the conversation.

"-ello? Keith?" The audio is weak and crackly, but perfectly audible, and Lance breathes a quiet sigh of relief. Three cheers for hyper-advanced Altean technology.

"Heyyyyy, Pidge." He says.

"Lance? Where the heck are you guys, Coran's been looking everywhere for you."

Keith catches Lance's eye.

"Yeah, Lance." He says tiredly. "Where are we?"

"Um." Lance begins. He supposes that in some small way this could actually be considered his fault.
Mostly, at least. Sixty percent his fault. "Okay, so you have to promise not to get mad."

It's amazing how Pidge can make a silence sound so unimpressed.

"No I don't."

Lance groans and grinds his hands into his eyes. "Okay, yeah, that's fair."

"Just spit it out so she can get us out of here." Keith says, tilting his head back against the cavern wall and closing his eyes.

". . . Out of where?"

Lance shifts uncomfortably. "Alright, so you know those salamander things that are all over the main cavern?"

"Geckos." Keith coughs. Lance shoots him a venomous glare.

"I think they're newts, actually." Pidge says, tone dripping with irritation. "What about them? They're obnoxious, they've been trying to steal supplies right out from under us all morning."

"Newts." Keith mouths to himself, and his expression is such a bizarre mixture of rage and affront that Lance can't help the hysterical little giggle that escapes him. Keith flicks a bit of loose stone at him; it pings harmlessly off of his thigh.

"Right, so the salamanders are nasty little thieves like you said, but they looked so cute and harmless I didn't really, um," Lance clears his throat delicately, "y'know, think that it would be a big deal to sort of chase one down into the cave system when it stole my scanner?"

Pidge sucks in a breath, and Lance can practically taste the condemnation that's about to be unleashed. He scrambles to get the rest of the story out before she can lay into him.

"So I followed it down and while I was trying to get my scanner back a whole bunch of them sort of surrounded me and it was super creepy, but then Keith showed up and got himself trapped by them too so it's not just me that's dumb you have to yell at him too-" He deflects another pebble.

"And while we were arguing about, um, how to deal with them? A really, really big one showed up. Like, ten feet tall, looked like a boss monster off of Killbot Phantasm. And actually, woah."

Lance pauses to look at Keith again. "We weren't even that far from the main cavern, if there are more of them it's really, really not safe in there."

Keith looks shocked; clearly this has only just occurred to him as well.

"Someone should definitely figure out how to deal with that. Anyway, so we kind of made a.... fighting retreat. Except it was blocking the way we'd come from? So we had to run deeper into the caves to get away from them and long story short we have absolutely no clue where we are please come save us before the deathmanders find some way to get to us."

There is a long silence. So long that Lance wonders if the connection has cut, or Pidge had finally gotten disgusted enough with him to turn off her comm.

". . . I should leave you down there." She says finally. "I really should."

"Pidge." Keith sighs. "Can the shame wait until we're back at the castle?"
"Shame waits for no one, Keith, especially not for two idiots so breathtakingly stupid they did literally the only thing they were told not to do and nearly got themselves killed by newts."

Keith's mouth shuts with a sharp click of teeth. Pidge groans, and the sound of typing starts up in the background.

"Right, do you have any idea where you went so I can narrow the search radius?"

Lance taps his helmet, bringing up a compass on his visor display and checking the direction they'd come from. He thinks he remembers a few more right turns than left....

"Southeast-ish?" He says, looking to Keith for confirmation. Keith nods.

"Yeah. And we're sitting by one of the major rivers, if that helps." He adds.

Pidge hmmms. "Alright, sit tight then. You dunderheads can't have gotten far, shouldn't take more than an hour or two to- wait."

She cuts herself off sharply. "Holy quiznak."

She clears her throat.

"Four or five hours, I mean. Maybe all night, who knows, you two should settle in. Really get comfortable, you know, you could be there for awhile. Who knows how-" She snickers, low and dark. Her voice is thick with amusement. "Who knows how long it'll take."

Lance's jaw drops. "What? No! Pidge! You were about to say two hours, what's wrong with you?"

"Pidge." Keith breaks in. The red flush that washes over his face is stark in the colorless cave. "We're talking, alright? We're... It's fine. Just leave it."

Lance's eyes widen. Oh. Oh that little gremlin.

"Piiiidge." He whines. "Come on, we could seriously get eaten down here."

"Don't be such a big baby." Pidge's smirk is audible. "I'll see what I can do. You kids play nice now!"

The beep of Pidge disconnecting from the comms sounds, leaving the two of them alone in the cavern once more.

"That little shit." Lance says incredulously.

They lapse into silence, sudden and crushing. So, this is it, then. Now they have to talk. About Lance being a creep, and Keith being delusional. Cool. Lance shifts, forcing himself to sit up, and hisses when his cooling muscles twinge at him.

"So." He says, propping himself up against the wall, a respectful and not-at-all awkward three feet away from Keith. Keith tenses.

"So." He says.

Lance takes his helmet off and sets it to the side. Keith does the same.

"Okay." Lance says. They might as well be civil about this while they can. "So, do you wanna start, or should I?"
"I..." Keith looks like he's swallowed a salamander. "I guess I should."

His whisper is barely heard over the rush of the river.

"Okay." Lance says. "So-

"I meant it." Keith blurs. Lance's eyes widen. Even in this, Keith is painfully direct. "I'm sorry. I know that you didn't want any of this, and I know that-"

"Woah, whoa." Lance cuts in. "What do you-

"This isn't going to work if you won't let me talk!" Keith snaps. Lance throws out an arm in an exasperated gesture, then immediately regrets it when his abused joints scream in pain.

"Then stop talking crazy! Back there in the tunnels, when we were running, you were acting like-"

Lance stops. He takes a deep breath, chooses his words carefully. "Keith, are you absolutely sure the bite's worn off?"

Keith's expression goes blank.

"Because, you aren't making any sense. Nothing you did while you were bitten was you, you know that right?" Lance continues. He feels sick, the bubbling pit of guilt that he'd pressed down long enough to deal with the salamanders is back in full force. He wills himself not to throw up. "You didn't have any choice, I get that. You have literally nothing to apologize for. It's me that..." He swallows, tasting bile. "It's me that should be apologizing."

He rakes a distracted hand through his hair, feeling it stand on end with residual dampness in the wake of his fingers.

"And I am. Apologizing. That's why I was hiding from you, I guess, because I'm not stupid enough to think that an apology is enough, but you deserve it anyway."

Lance fiddles with the seam of his greave, plucking at the ceramic. A little bit of sand has gotten under the plating - an excellent distraction so he doesn't have to see Keith's face when he says-

"Oh. Oh no. You still think it was the bug."

Lance's heart stops. He looks back up.

"Come again?" He says faintly.

"Holy shit." Keith breathes. "You're an idiot."

And then he's laughing. It's not a good laugh. It's ugly and heartbroken, and it makes something behind Lance's ribcage twist in sympathy.

"Keith-" He tries, reaching out, but Keith ducks away. He meets Lance's eyes, and the bitterness there takes his breath away.

"Lance, the bug didn't make me love you. All it did was make me honest about what was already there."

The world tilts.

"What." Lance manages. All of the air in the cavern seems to have disappeared, and Lance can't breathe, because what Keith's saying doesn't make sense, it can't make sense unless-
"I love you." Keith says. It doesn't sound anything like those words are supposed to. It sounds like an ending, like a condemnation. "Now, and before. I know that's the last thing you want to hear from me, but there it is."

Lance struggles to get the world upright once more, to get his feet back underneath him. Keith barrels on. His tone, his eyes are steel, but he clenches his fists, folds them in his lap in a poor attempt to hide the trembling that draws Lance’s gaze like neon.

"Look, it doesn't matter."

What.

"You don't have to do anything about it, I've got it under control."

Hang on.

"You wouldn't even have found out if this hadn't happened, so-"

No.

"You love me?" Lance bursts out. The mesh of his gloves stretches taught across his knuckles. Lance forces himself to look away, to look up at Keith's face. Keith stops, blinking at him. His expression goes flat.

"I can't believe you." He says, scowling. "I told you the entire story and you don't even believe me."

"You love me." Lance says again.

Keith's eyebrows draw together, furious. "Yes, okay? Can you just-"

Lance lurches forwards and seizes his wrists, kneels in front of him and stares into his eyes, like he can find the truth there.

"So, everything you said, during. That was true? About Star Wars, and family, and about when you...?" He stops, unable to bring himself to finish, not daring to hope that much until he's certain. Keith's eyes go round, pupils shrinking to pinpricks despite the surrounding darkness. For a moment, there is no sound but the river behind them and the drip of water off the stalactites.

Keith's eyes flicker with something dangerous, something wild. He licks his lips. Lance can feel his pulse where his fingers are pressed to the thin mesh of Keith's bodysuit, fluttering like a bird, far too fast.

"Yes." Keith whispers.

Something splinters inside of Lance, like a damn breaking, like a door being kicked down.

"Holy shit." He breathes.

And then he's crying. Again. He might have actually spent more time crying this week than not.

"Lance!" Keith squeaks, an edge of panic in his voice. "What, I don't-"

"You jackass!" Lance blubbers, swiping at his eyes. "I can't believe you. This whole time! This whole time! And I'm so freaking sick of crying, this whole week it's been nothing but crying, like a leaky faucet, just constantly." He hiccups. He doesn't even have sleeves to wipe his face with.
"Why didn't you just tell me?" He wails.

Keith is looking at Lance like he's a bomb about to go off.

"Be-Because you hate me?" He tries. Lance's gives him the best 'you are an idiot' look he can muster while bawling like a baby.

"I don't! I just pretended to because you were a stupid, pretty, overly-talented snob who was too good to talk to me back at the garrison!" Lance jabs a finger into Keith's chestplate. "Every time I went near you you were all "get out of my way, cargo pilot, I'm too cool for you", and I hated you so much for it but I couldn't even do that properly because I was too busy staring at your ass! So I figured, if you thought you were too good for me, then I'd just get better at you to prove that you weren't. Except I never could, because you're amazing at everything and I could never catch up, and then you had to go and make everything worse by not even remembering me, so I guess maybe I hated you a little bit? But only because it was either that or mope around all the time from the constant rejection!"

Keith ignores the finger jabbing into his sternum, too busy looking like he's been pistol whipped to retaliate.

"You... were too busy... what?" He stammers. He shakes his head, like he's forcing himself to focus. His bangs fall over his eyes, and he brushes them back impatiently.

"Then... Then why did you run away? This whole week, every time I walked into a room you ran. I thought you didn't want to be around me because you- you ran away! You tried to shut me out of your room, you told me not to kiss you, why the hell did you...?"

"Uh, excuse me? Because I was trying not to be a creep? You weren't yourself! At all! And you know what, I'm still a creep, you were completely out of your head and I let you--" Lance breaks off and casts his gaze down at the stone. He starts again, keeping his tone careful and slow.

"I ran away, because I let you go way, way too far. And I was out of line for that. I shouldn't have let you kiss me. Or sleep in my bed. Or any of the things I did. But I let you, because..." He sighs.

"Because I was selfish, and I wanted to. I thought you would be mad." He pauses, squinting at a pebble near his knee. "You... should be mad."

Keith shrugs, and he looks so helpless it almost makes Lance want to laugh.

"I'm... not?" He says. He sounds lost. "I don't think I can handle being more upset right now."

They stare at each other. Keith looks so forlorn, hair still damp and bedraggled from falling into the pond, eyes confused. Lance knows he must not look much better with his face red and blotchy from crying. His knees are starting to hurt from kneeling on the hard stone. For once, Lance doesn't know what to say next. What do you say when you've just found out that your rival whom you've been pathetically in love with for three years returns your feelings?

_Dios_, Keith returns his feelings.

Keith loves him. And he loves Keith. Which means....

"Holy shit." He says. "I love you."

Keith gasps, a sharp intake of breath. His eyes snap up to meet Lance's.
"I love you, and you love me." Lance barely recognizes his own voice, it sounds so shocked, so hopeful. "We're in love."

Keith is still staring at him.

"We're in love." He echoes faintly.

"So then, what do we do now?" Lance starts to wonder, and then he doesn't have the mental capacity to wonder any more, because Keith is in his lap and the back of his head is impacting the wall.

He hisses in pain, and Keith's breath washes warm over Lance's lips as he whispers "Sorry". His hand reaches up to cup the back of Lance's head, protecting it from the stone, and that's all the warning Lance gets before Keith kisses him.

It should, by all rights, be a terrible kiss.

The back of Lance's head hurts, he's definitely going to have a bruise there, next to the light acid burn from the salamander thief's venom. They're both cold and wet, and the ground they're sitting on is even more so. Every muscle in Lance's body hurts from the running and falling he's done, and there's an uneven chunk of rock digging into his calf. He'd probably trade an arm for a bottle of water right now, he's so thirsty. He should have a million more important things to worry about than the warmth of Keith's lips on his, contrasting the cold of the cavern, or how soft his skin feels when Lance sets a hand on his cheek and pulls him closer.

Somehow, it still manages to be the best kiss Lance has ever had, infinitely better than every kiss last week combined, because this? The real deal. No guilt involved. Lance is actually... allowed to have this.

The look in Keith's eyes when they break apart is strange. It's so much like the one Lance had grown accustomed to, while Keith was bitten. The love, the adoration - that's familiar. But there's exasperation there too, and an apology reinforced by the thumb that brushes over the lump on the back of his head, that tells him this is real. This is how Keith actually loves. The world mists over, forcing him to pull a hand away and scrub at his eyelids so that he can see again. Keith looks awed, thunderstruck. His thumb brushes absently over Lance’s damp cheek.

"Okay." Lance jokes, forcing down the lump in his throat. "That's a good start."

Hours later, Shiro and Pidge make their way out of the tunnels. Shiro is leaning over her shoulder, attempting to read the display on the tracker she's holding when she halts in her tracks - he nearly slips on the wet ground trying not to walk into her.

"What wrong?" He starts, "Did you-?"

An elbow to the gut cuts him off neatly, and he follows the finger Pidge points along the bank.

"Oh." He says.

"-and I'm sure you know how this one ends." Lance's voice drifts down the cavern towards them,
just audible over the river. The boys are propped against the wall, bayards forgotten on the floor next to them. Their legs are tangled together, Lance has an arm around Keith's waist. Keith is leaning against Lance's side, listening to the story.

"I walk into the backyard, and there's Jonah, covered in lipstick, tied to a tree with every jump rope we own, and Mirana and all of her friends are dancing around him like a bunch of cannibals!"

Keith buries his face in Lance's neck and howls with laughter, shoulders shaking. Lance beams, looking much too proud of himself for something as simple as making someone laugh.

Pidge nudges Shiro's arm. "Pay up."
Well. This is it. I do not even know what to say, guys. I've never actually finished a fic before. I totally wouldn't have finished this one, except for all of you were so wonderful? Just completely wonderful, all of you people who commented, and tracked me down on tumblr, and speculated and left critiques and everything else under the sun that gave me the confidence to keep writing.

To my lovely, wonderful beta TheGrimKeeper: you da bomb, Bunny Mom. But I've already told you that a thousand times ;) 

Special thanks to the brave souls who commented on every. Single. Chapter. You know who you are, and I unconditionally adore you.
EXTRA special thanks to SPN-Daydreamer, who left novels in every comment and who let themselves be dragged into the madness of the other fic I have in progress, and to NedrynWrites, who is in possession of some witchcraft that let them be among the first person to read every single chapter. Seriously Nedryn: How? It made me smile every time.

This fic has officially been sequeled:
If you're the type to content themselves with a happy beginning, farewell, and thank you. If you're the type to want to watch the entire story play out, join me Here to see what comes next.
Also, come visit me on tumblr! I'm lonely and need people to squeal about things with.

Keith doesn't really see Lance, after they get back to the surface. They're whisked immediately back into the castle, and their team wastes no time giving them a lengthy lecture on how disappointed they are (Shiro), how they should know better than to hunt the local wildlife without proper permits (Coran), and how inconsiderate they were for abandoning their duties (Allura), before sending them off packing to shower, and eat, and in Lance's case spend an hour in the healing pod to make certain that the geckos venom hadn't done any permanent damage.

It's strange.

The last two weeks of Keith's life have revolved around Lance, first through the unshakeable need to be around him, and then the inability to be around him. It's jarring, now, to realize that he has a choice.

He hovers uncertainly in the center of his quarters that evening, equidistant between the bed and the door.

He could go to bed if he wanted. He could choose to stay here, wallowing in the odd limbo state that
he and Lance have been left in thanks to the day's events. He could sleep, and wake up tomorrow and go to breakfast and see Lance there, sitting in the chair next to him and filling the room with meaningless, soothing chatter. That wouldn't be bad. It would be normal, easy. A return to the status quo that Keith is so desperate to get back to after this emotional maelstrom.

It... doesn't feel right, somehow.

One day alone in a cave hadn't been enough, apparently, to untangle the snarl of uncertainty that sticks stubbornly behind his sternum. It's a blur of adrenaline, exhaustion, tears and relief and clumsy, frantic kisses and the stories he'd asked Lance to tell when they were too wrung-out to contemplate tackling more subjects of weight. Finally being on the same page had been enough, for a little while. The knowledge that Lance loved him was enough.

Keith looks at the door, absently worrying at his knuckles with the thumb of one hand; a nervous, fidgeting gesture.

Lance loves him, and that's good, that's what he wanted. Keith just... doesn't know what that means.

What do people do, after the big confession scene? His dad's John Wayne tapes and the Hallmark movies on public access television have left him woefully unprepared for everything after this point.

He takes a deep breath, lets it out slow.

What does he want?

He turns away from the door, away from the bed, and walks to his closet. The red robe is there, shoved in a ball at the back where he'd thrown it three days ago. He picks it up, shakes it out.

Keith thinks he knows.

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Lance frowns down at his skin care supplies, arranged neatly on his sink top like a loyal, acne-fighting army. It's quiet, nothing but the background hum of the castle's workings surrounding him. The hubbub from the lower decks, of the Pterophyllae as they bumbled around the unfamiliar castle, is gone. It had been a comforting sound during his self-imposed exile, keeping him from going out of his head from the quiet.

The quiet shouldn't bother him now. Everything is... Fixed? Is that even the word? He and Keith are good now. He's not hiding from anyone, he could take a stroll anywhere he wanted and it wouldn't matter. If they met up in the halls, coolio. No big deal. Everything is aces.

Sort of.

Lance sighs and turns away from the sink, taps the panel to turn off the bathroom light as he leaves. He can afford to skip a night of his regimen.

He glances at the door during his short trip across the room. He could talk to Keith, if he wanted. He could. It's not like they'd left things on a bad note, when Pidge and Shiro had finally turned up to rescue them from a soggy, salamander-infested death. Things had been good. They just... Lance hadn't realized until they were standing in the castle, halfway through a lecture Lance has heard a
dozen times before, that they hadn't really discussed where they went from here.

He knows Keith... loves him. Wow, Lance may never actually be over that. He knows that Keith was more than willing to kiss him. But if there's one thing that Lance's endless string of shallow flirtations has taught him, it's that that doesn't mean anything. Keith might not even be willing to commit much beyond that. Keith is a loner, he's skittish around people. Lance isn't dumb enough to assume that Keith will be okay with Lance calling him his boyfriend.

He pulls the drawstring on his robe, tugs it off and hangs it neatly on its hook next to the closet.

Does Keith... want a relationship? He can't really picture Keith on a "date" with him. Candelit dinners and flowers don't really seem like his speed. How do you even date in space, stuck in a castle with five other people who don't really understand the concept of privacy? Dinner and a movie isn't an option, out here. Where do they even start?

A series of images rise unbidden to the front of Lance's mind: Keith tucked up against his side, Lance's fingers carding through his hair while they watch a terrible Altean movie on the couch. Keith covered in bubbles, trying to jam a sponge down Lance's shirt. Keith perched on Lance's sink, wrinkling his nose while Lance smooths a face mask over his jaw.

That's... That wouldn't be so bad, right? Would Keith hate it, being that way all the time? Being together like that? How much of that had been the bite, and how much had been Keith himself?

Lance makes a face while he pulls back the covers on his bed. They're going to have to talk more, aren't they. He's really tired of talking about his feelings. God, what if he ends up crying again? He's kind of over the whole crying thing. It's already going to be a nightmare to get the bags under his eyes to go away, after this week.

A quiet knock startles him out of his thoughts, and he turns to look at the door.

"Come in?" He calls, straightening up.

The door slides open with a quiet hiss, revealing Keith. Lance blinks. Scratch that, not just Keith.

Keith in pajamas, and his robe. With a pillow tucked under his arm. And a very determined expression.

Lance's heart stutters a few times, like a motor struggling to turn over, before it kicks into overdrive.

"Uh, hi?" He manages. Keith flushes, his lips pressing together. He meets Lance's eyes steadily.

"Can I sleep in here?" He says.

All Lance can manage in response is a strangled wheezing noise. Keith is wearing the Red Lion slippers too. He hates those slippers; the bottoms aren't grippy enough for him.

"I just thought, since..." Keith pauses and clears his throat. "It was nice, before. And since you said you- I thought this would be okay now. If it's not, that's fine. I can go back to my room."

"No!" That manages to get Lance's brain to reboot. He practically flies across the small distance between them, stopping awkwardly a couple feet away from Keith. "No that's fine. You can sleep here."

Keith looks back up at him. He exhales sharply, harsh lines of tension Lance hadn't noticed before bleeding out of his shoulders.
"Yeah? I know we didn't really talk about..." He trails off uncertainly, looking up at Lance through his eyelashes. It's so unfairly pretty.

"About, um. What next?" Lance tries. Oh no, the talk. He isn't ready, he isn't prepared. What if Keith doesn't want this? What if he wants to just stay friends. What if-

He gives himself a mental slap. No. That's stupid, Keith is here. He clearly wants something, cuddles at least, which, yes, Lance can work with that. Maybe with time he can talk him around to something dating-ish, to a relationship. This is already way better than he expected.

"Yeah. That." Keith nods, making a face. His nose scrunches up, crinkling like a disgruntled cat's. Lance kind of wants to kiss it. "I've never had a boyfriend before, so, I don't really... um."

Keith's eyes widen, and his train of thought appears to derail completely. He blinks twice, slow and stunned, and it takes Lance a second to realize it's because of the massive grin that's taken over his face without his permission.

Boyfriend. Keith said boyfriend. Keith is his boyfriend, and that means that they're dating.

"Lance?" Keith says, and then squawks in surprise when Lance practically tackles him into a hug. "Aw, Keeeeith!" Lance coos. "Gold star. Cuddles are a crucial component of good boyfriending!"

Keith huffs.

"I will absolutely leave if you make fun of me for this." He warns, but his arms tighten around Lance's waist anyway. Lance thinks his chest may explode from all of the fuzzy feelings swirling around in there. Boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Keith pulls back a little, and Lance lets him go so he can bend down to pick up the pillow he'd dropped during Lance's affectionate assault.

"Aw, come on." Lance chirps, practically floating over to the closet to hang up the robe Keith hands him. "Let me have this. I thought you'd be the cranky, don't-touch-me kind of boyfriend."

Oh wow, saying it out loud is even better. Boyfriend.

"I-" Keith flushes again, pausing in the middle of toeing off his slippers. "I guess I thought so too. But I remember while I was... It was nice."

Lance can't really help the happy little wiggle that makes his way into his walk as he prances over to the lightswitch panel. Keith rolls his eyes, but he does a bad job of hiding the smile that tugs the corner of his mouth upwards as he tosses his pillow onto the bed.

Lance waits for him to crawl onto the mattress and scoot over against the wall - his usual side, Keith has a usual side of Lance's bed now, holy shit - before he hits the lights and pads back over.

"You good?" He says, blindly feeling for the edge of the sheets. Keith hums in response, and Lance feels the covers pull up and away, Keith holding them back so he can slide under them.

There is a short, awkward pause while Lance settles in. Keith hasn't moved. Then, he hears a sharp, deep breath, and the bed dips a little bit as Keith bridges the gap between them. A warm weight drapes itself across Lance's chest; Keith's arm. Soft hair tickles his cheek, and a warm puff of breath
ghosts against the side of his neck when Keith's head settles on the pillow next to him. Lance is glad for the darkness. It means he doesn't have to hide the soppy grin he knows must be on his face. He shifts a little bit, sliding his arm a under the pillow, around Keith's shoulders.

"Goodnight." He says. Keith doesn't answer right away, and Lance is just turning his head to ask if everything is alright when the hand on his chest shifts, trailing up his neck to the side of his face, cupping his cheek. His breath catches in his throat, and then there are a pair of soft, chapped lips on his.

It's warm, slow, sweet, not demanding anything more from either of them. Keith pulls away when it's too hard to continue, impeded as they are by Lance's inability to control the smile forcing its way back onto his mouth.

"Goodnight, Lance." Keith whispers. Lance can hear the fond smile in his tone. He tucks himself back in against Lance's side. Another deep breath.

"...I love you."

Lance gives up and tightens the arm around Keith's shoulders, pulling him tighter against him, ignoring the startled gasp as he rolls and dives back in for another kiss.

"I know." He smirks.

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